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## Litmag 1990-91

University of Missouri-St. Louis

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# Litmag

1990-1991

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University of Missouri-St. Louis





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## The 1990-91 UM-St. Louis Literary Magazine

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\* \* \*

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*Jamie Rhodes*



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## To Daria, Past and Future

*The moon has lost her memory.* - T.S. Eliot

### I

Little girl, look at your hands.  
Find not your space to grasp the dirt  
That grows from the ground  
(Else you set yourself slinging mudpies  
It all slips simply, through the fingers)  
But live the candle, burning with a suicidal heart  
And see the blood  
Trickle and repeat in reappearing spots  
Like birthmarks or leech holes or street lamps  
And grasp your pug-nosed, pig-tailed, freckled days  
To somersault in the sun.  
These cast no reflection into the shadow world  
Where your name blinks neon, again.  
So, be not haunted by remembrance, or obligation, or  
The screaming chaotic breath of tomorrow.  
Wash your sores  
See the blood no more  
Mend the cut with the nighttime air.

My child, live a little  
Pull your hands out of time  
And rewind  
The pathos that blossoms in a tender mind.  
There is such a beauty in it!  
So run along  
The moon is soon passing  
And the taste does not remain.  
The blemish of living  
Does not stall, stale, or strain  
The realness of moments.

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I held you in my arms once  
I gripped your blushing hands  
There was a newness in that dying  
Like a pigment lost in your subtle crying  
A secret canting that spilled itself down my soul  
I whispered then in your ears  
The remembrance  
(Smelling the fullness in your hair  
As we danced  
Held together by all the earth  
Falling away  
And leaving a balance  
This grand waltz.  
Was there as much silence  
In that hall  
As in my memory, now,  
Of you?  
Oh, come again . . .)  
Yes, I whispered.  
You were a newborn child  
And I was alone in the world.

## II

There was a woman in my life  
(Apples are never bitter, only tart  
Red and whole)  
She left a footpath  
Through my propped up public heart  
And I never knew the trees could seem so young.  
Yes, we were young and together  
And the clock seemed not nearly so fierce  
And I knew myself more madly then.

(It was a deft god who placed woman in the sky  
With the snake's gag  
And the loyalty of stars  
And she



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---

Shining outside of the framework  
Of the structure of these days  
Held solid by the soiled sun.  
I reached for it all.)

Spaces for the oxygen in my fibres  
In a vacuum, they sucked and sang for company  
And I found her there  
Where we had courted  
Step to step with nerves and hands and mirrors  
And we danced.

III

Lust came to me on a comet  
One boldfaced day, I'll deny it  
I'll deny my body is of this earth.  
We were wed and welded into bed  
And you said  
That there was an empty space inside of you  
Leftovers from the dead  
It grew  
And there, I found myself  
And there, I grew too.  
Were you hungry in the night  
Or had I lost you, sight from sight?  
Oh Daria, sweet and serpentine,  
This is that which we, as humans,  
Are born to do  
Make more birth and death  
Assemble our flesh into more flesh  
That is the core of the world you bit into.  
In the fetid pain of one long morning  
When you left me  
You did not cry out.  
(Never feel  
You were lost at sea.  
Never know

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---

This is all we were meant to be.  
Never claim  
Illegitimacy.)  
She was real.

IV

Why am I here, breathing  
And you there, growing  
Away? Stuffed deep into memory's fading green  
It cannot touch me now.  
It is found in a stone's sigh.  
Where am I? But lost  
In the brightness surrounding us all,  
The child wandering far from my call.  
Here, there is  
An echoless voice  
Only I hear or feel in my ears  
Filling my mind  
Like a space of sunlight in the seconds  
Of my receding days.  
A lonely chance to see beyond  
The death of light  
And know its spent heat on my face  
And taste the heart of the summer  
With salty lips  
Which smack of recognition  
Of half-filled days gone by  
And find the gleam of godhead  
In a lion's eye.

Here, I find myself  
I am walking naked (without you)  
I am knowing serenity beyond body (but not finding peace of mind)  
I am growing into my legend.

---

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V

Wheels are purring  
Onward  
Away from lost souls  
Away from tombstones  
Away from that false green  
And the child on my lap  
Is all I find left of her memory  
Small beauty, untouched dewdrop  
I cling to, in your lace  
With callous dirt on your face  
Look at your hands.  
I see them white and vibrant  
And simple  
All things my mind will not forget  
And my mouth can never swallow again.  
Play awhile.  
We will wash later, in the night.  
Your hands are not feeling my pain.  
Your eyes are not seeing the reflection  
They give to me.  
Your days are not burying  
My thoughts, my memory.  
You are not leaving me behind.  
The moon cannot touch me now.

*Christopher Lauer*

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## Untitled

The clock of my life  
Is set  
And has been ticking  
Yet it is only now  
That I have turned to face it  
And learned what time it is

*Steve Finazzo*

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## Jaded Rosary

Connemara marble,  
And shamrock designs.  
Sterling silver,  
Celtic cross,  
And a gold chain,  
The two to join.  
"St. Patrick,  
Pray for us."  
It's broken now,  
A link destroyed,  
Prayerful hands,  
Gripped too tight.  
And I must ask,  
Was it a strong necklace,  
Of comfort and faith,  
Or a chain link noose,  
Made to strangle doubt,  
And kill imaginings?

*Kevin Hosry*



---

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**your name is a longing**

when  
maple trees are ember under ash  
dusk leaf skin  
and luminous  
yellowgold heart

and (like the scattershot of pebbles  
rattling a sleeping window)  
the wind, earthtang and damp  
done with patience  
shuffles and lets fall  
the brown shining hands  
pinking edged ovals  
mottled stars  
and prickle-pointed rounds

onto the winter-tilting  
drowsy earth

*Diana Harvestmoon*

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---

**rabbit shudders  
back to life  
and leaps**

nearly to be swept away  
by your hunger  
caught in the delicate  
peach fuzz of your kiss  
the tremble of your hand  
possessive at the nape  
of the neck

nearly to be  
drawn under  
in your constrictive  
sightless  
empty grip

*Diana Harvestmoon*

---

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## January View From I-44

The trees' long icy fingers,  
twisted in prayer,  
reach toward a low leaden sky  
in frozen supplication  
and hardened hope  
for spring.

*Mary Alice Dultz*

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## Do You Remember, Too, Dad?

While fat braids bobbed 'round my sunbrowned face  
In time with my swinging legs under the green kitchen chair,  
You sat patiently, and listened to my eager voice  
As I read aloud about David and Ann while sitting there

You smiled at me with pride, and picked at your petrified supper  
Too dry from being warmed so long on the Sultan tray,  
But you never complained; it was the only way  
It could be for a father who worked while his children ate

Their own meals, and scowled at the funny-smelling greens.  
But now you were here for me and siblings David and Ann,  
Watching us play together on paper and  
Teaching me how to jump over the really big words and  
Teasing me about the purple beans  
As you ladled them from the pan;  
("Purple's the tastiest color in the rainbow," you said.)

When we finished off your meal and my lesson fun  
With a song and buttermilk party for two, a happy six-year-old  
Skipped off to bed with her homework done  
And her father's affection tucked safely in her red schoolbag.

You departed from this world when I was all grown up but  
So in love with life that your spark of laughter never left me;  
But if you could return, look for me and my bobbing braids  
Still sitting and swinging my legs  
In the green kitchen chair,  
Reading my primer, and waiting eagerly there.

*Mary Alice Dultz*

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## Water Overwhelming

"and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

I wade in your full female fathoms,  
Solely my head above lunar swellings,  
Eyes casting a line to the Rock  
Housing light, a mystical siren crossing  
As salt distills me of rain clouds.

My body hung on the surface tension.  
Beneath your depth caresses a weariness,  
Deep green gossamer intertwining my ribcage  
Rooted down to the wettest womb where transparent  
Shrimp illumine and human hearts dissolve.

Conceives the drowning dream of life's stream  
Of consciousness as a string of pearls,  
Rising bubbles mere gasp upon the surface,  
Whispered eulogy becoming the breeze,  
Salt stinging a cheeky child castle building.

To submerge in that celebrated sea-change,  
A barnacle umbilicaled to menstrual moon tides,  
Breathing through you via the aquatic kiss  
That holds starfish in accord to coral red  
Against the rippling-rip of diffusive Sheol.

So should one strain to walk in water  
Or close eyes to Light's riveting ray,  
Longing to loose self in Mystery's nautilus,  
To drink from the cup without rim or reason;  
A lasting breath of baptism, sleep tendrils.



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That salted flesh torn by shifting sands  
Feeds multiplying fish, five toes as bleached  
Bones glow like embryos, the spirit dissolving,  
Weaving along the waterway toward the sheer  
Rock, spraying the rainbow is born.

*Wes Morgenthaler*

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## Lonely Mary

### I

Imagined lonely Mary today  
Rocking in her filthy flat,  
    ashtray full of butts,  
    Billie Holliday 78s, metallic & scratched,  
    on the phono repeating  
    & again . . .

Never saw her much,  
Brought her a pint & some pennies  
    -- when I thought to --  
& she'd tell stories,  
    the Great Depression  
    & etc.

### II

'Course they didn't find her  
Until the neighbors complained --  
    the mechanical reruns of the phono,  
    and the smell,  
    oh god & etc.

The paper printed a blurb  
    page 10.  
'Cops had to pry the bottle from her & etc.,  
    & etc.

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III

Imagined lonely Mary today.  
amen, & etc.

*M. Ogle*

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## Where the Sidewalk Ends

Someone I knew from work  
Died.

They told me  
He fell asleep at the wheel;  
Not intoxicated, just  
Dead.

Danny . . .

He exuded  
Sincere expression,  
Laughter, care,  
And other priceless  
Gifts . . .

Over coffee and cigarettes  
We'd share small talk-  
    Happenings at the bar  
    Tedious class assignments  
    The hassles of work  
    Shallow vows to quit smoking.  
Then, before the doors closed,  
Warm, absorbing hugs  
Goodbye.

Once he attempted salesman skills  
Offering the ladies at the office  
Designer colognes  
At non-designer prices;  
Just like Danny,  
Always into something  
New.

---

---

A memory most vivid-  
From across the desk he read  
His favorite childhood poems  
Where the Sidewalk Ends  
His eyes, meteoric  
Singing smile surrounding  
So alive  
As if he were reciting them  
For the first time  
Ever.

He gave his time  
and enlivening effort,  
Unknowingly  
Weaving strands of innocence,  
Enthusiasm, and eagerness  
For life.

Danny . . .

Painfully snatched  
From a world  
He brought life to,  
Never  
To return  
So that I may know him better,  
Love him a little more;  
Forevermore  
Just an acquaintance.

This is where the sidewalk ends.

*Laura A. Torode*



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## Ode to a Snooze Alarm

Thou steadfast, bedside savior of early morn,  
Stifler of audacious alarms and clanging chimes,  
Snooze Alarm! thou canst thus extend our morning dreams  
More sweetly than our rhyme:  
What blind, fumbling digits grope about thy shape?  
Be they thumbs or fingers or both?  
In darkness or by light of newborn day?  
Return us to Slumber for it is waking we loathe,  
Thwart the buzzer! Halt the bell!  
Recall the Sandman! Forestall the dawning day!

Sleep is sweet, but to snooze is sweeter still,  
A respite before the inevitable rise,  
From warm bed to tread tile bathroom chills,  
To wash the Sandman from our eyes.  
Blissful Slumber, behind our eyelids, thou canst not leave  
Sweet dreams unfinished, thou wouldst not dare  
Leave dreams in limbo, 'tis a waste,  
For Snooze Alarm hath granted us reprieve  
From waking, therefore make winged haste  
To save those visions waking hath not impaired.

Ah Snooze Alarm, modern Morpheus, no more do we dread  
Oversleeping. For thou art tried and truly  
Unfailing, reliable, unwearied,  
Forever releasing buzzer to buzz anew.  
But when at last at waking this Slumber shall cease,  
As Work awaits and Duty calls,  
Thou wilt remain, after we rise and go,  
Our friend, to whom thou say'st,  
"Snooze now, wake later - that is all  
Ye need do in the morning, and all ye need to do."

*Dale Denny*

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## Hoka-hay

Talk to all the people in the world  
and is this what you would say?  
Would you like to play?  
Would you pray?  
Would you ask them all to be good  
and say Hoka-hay?  
and cheer them all on their way.  
Would you say live healthy,  
live long, live hard, you all may.  
Yo, people live and let live.  
Use what you need and  
replace what you can give.

Oh, what to say, what to say.  
Have two children,  
hoka-hay.  
Could you say to them,  
live, love, and peace, it fits  
like a glove.  
Talk to them all.  
Oh, what to say  
like talking through a human wall.  
Oh, what to say,  
talk to one it is  
like playing in the hay, all,  
Hoka-hay.

*Henry J. Oughton III*

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## Just Because

I throw black licorice against a downtown  
steel building and when the policeman asks me  
Why?

I say, "Because I'm here and so is the building and the  
licorice, and because existentialism, I believe, was  
developed as a form of torture, and because the parallel  
postulate in Euclidean geometry can't be proved, and because  
a politician is a pillar of our society, and because  
Big Business is trying to steal my individuality, and  
because spring only lasts three months, and because warm  
breezes are so welcome in the pit of winter, and because  
peace on earth will only be seen in gold and green,  
and because Christmas is sacred commercialization,  
and because every seemingly altruistic event is categorized  
by a money-making scheme, and because 5% of the people own  
95% of the wealth, and because people think they need money  
before they can smile. And besides, I'm free and I  
choose to do it; so why not  
throw black licorice against a downtown steel building?"

The policeman put away his billy-club,  
grabbed the licorice from my proud hands,  
looked at the shiny, monstrous building,  
cowering man below,  
and he joined me in tossing  
black licorice against a downtown building.

*David Cirillo*

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## Picasso Called Me

Picasso phoned ME the other day  
and told me I suck as an artist.

I said, "Pablo, baby, I'm not a painter."

He said, "I know."

I said, "Pablo, I don't like all the eyes in your painting."

He said, "I know."

I said, "Pablo, I don't paint. I can't paint."

He knew.

I looked at the phone and thought of his movements,  
the way he shed a bright light on modernism,  
the way he pulled, uprooted, the way we look at art,  
and I thought about Pablo's non-conformity,  
his breaking free from tired, old chains of art,  
and I said, "Pablo, I'm not a painter."

He said, "Me neither. I'm an artist."

I said, "I know."

He said, "An artist isn't a painter, and a painter isn't an  
artist."

I said, "What?"

He said, "An artist is a creator, and a painter is a  
coward."

I said, "I see."

He said, "Remember this before you do anything artistic."

He hung up.

Picasso phoned me the other day.

He told me I suck as an artist.

When he told me, I suddenly was more of an artist.

And I only have two eyes.

*David Cirillo*

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## Refrigerator

the hungry growl of  
the refrigerator--

empty

*David Cirillo*

---

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## Potato Head

Rigid and immobilized he stands-  
Cloned and mass-produced;  
Famous for his interchangeable facial features,  
Switch an eye for an ear.  
Stick his foot in his mouth.

This vegetable stabbed with the features of man  
can lose his senses with the sweep of a hand.

You with the mutant profile!  
My amusement lies in  
rearranging your eyes, ears, and mouth.  
I have paid the price-  
charged it to my credit,  
Bought the right to make you  
a victim of my "creativity."

Switch an eye for an ear.  
Stick his foot in his mouth.

*What?*

*No resistance?!*

Has he not will of his own?  
Or is it instead held hostage  
within a plastic skull?

*Jennifer Doll*



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---

## Identity Crisis: "Otherness"

Colored

Black

Afro-American

Negro

of native

African, not American,  
descent.

A nigger is still a "blackie,"  
a darkie, and a spade,  
wallowing in the self-hatred and  
pity our oppressors have made. I  
look at the old "black and whites,"  
my people seen dumb as tar, and  
black as night,  
and the reels seem to represent a  
distant time.

Black pride & "Afro" power were  
not yet at their prime.  
But the underpinnings and stirrings  
felt were just beginning, at their  
roots, to be spent. And I realized  
that the look in their eyes  
was the same focus on my prize--  
theirs, too; and my cries  
had blended into the sea  
that their tributaries had created.

Weighted  
by the burdens that they had started  
to carry, and had hoped to lift.

Miffed  
by "the dream deferred" that never  
exploded. Then, drawn to the films  
of the perception, I noticed

---

---

the deception of me and mine.  
Everything was not fine.  
I had been robbed of my  
culture by EuroAmerica,  
under the guise of the American Dream.  
For a piece of the apple pie,  
(Mom, baseball, hotdogs, and Chevrolet),  
a dark continent, it may seem,  
but apartheid stole my homeland;  
this American slavery  
no "peaches and cream" either.  
My tears dripped with the drops  
of precipitation on the  
participatory pavement. When  
the effects finally settled,  
the "struggle still continues,"  
and I knew my brain to have been  
fully meddled  
with, and "washed" of its  
identity in "otherness,"  
brainwashed with a European  
culture that was not mine,  
and Consciousness lost  
that was mine.  
Such that I wot not  
who I was and am, or  
who I will be.  
I am black in a world  
white to me,  
and white to the  
black world.  
Black and white.  
White's ugly blackness.  
That's our plight.  
Because which, wrong,  
not right, it's not  
"them and me," but  
"us-- and we."

---

---

"Fear of a black planet"  
still "spooks" the nation.

*Sheri Bayne*

---

79 A.D.

god is a two-lane highway of color  
stitched across the back of a butterfly  
caressing the air  
over Mt. Vesuvius  
on the eve  
of  
the destruction.

*Robby Marquess*

---

---

## Natural Elegy: In Response to Exxon

carnival oil slick  
mixed with rain water  
plugged in by the frolicking light  
on the cool concrete street.  
a shit-brown worm  
drowned in its lust for the colors.  
now contracting and ejaculating  
life from its poisoned flesh,  
scratched from the teeth of cement,  
it writhes on in final agony.  
purpling and coiling  
it screams -  
no death, not yet.

*Robby Marquess*

---

---

## The Realization of Childhood Gone

a boy sneered past an  
old couple

handicapping

their way  
to nowhere

his shoelaces  
dancing in his wake

*Robby Marquess*



---

---

## In the Hallway

the incessant click of heels,  
burdened by the shape  
of a female's weight,  
passes by with ignoring thoughts,  
discomfort.  
self reflection  
and disappointment linger in the air  
like wading bands of cigarette smoke.  
she smiles to think i  
or anyone else is watching her  
in an animal way.

a young woman  
talks on the phone  
between crisp crunches of a 15-minute apple.

the elevator visits  
with a bing of hello and the spreading of its  
doors sexually,  
wanting to be used.

thumps and skidding of footwear defeat the flight of stairs.  
their trod indicate the  
quickened rush or  
nonchalant roam  
these halls are frequented to.

voices mix  
growing into  
vines of conversation around the ceiling.

---

---

the sounds of climax  
like a movie soundtrack  
(the orchestral parts  
you wish weren't there).

*Robby Marquess*

---

---

## Tragic Restroom

wet, polished, chrome,  
plumbing fixtures  
and stained porcelain bowls  
with black sticky lips  
for crapping.  
the floor drinks  
misguided streams of piss  
under the stare of four-lettered graffiti,  
and her phone number.  
one roll of toilet paper  
sleepily hangs -  
plump, crisp, white perforated sheets.  
the mirror has your blemished secrets,  
or crusted burgers smeared across it  
like the shit on the wall  
in the last stall.  
smell the perfumed urinal pucks  
drunk with your stare  
and urine.  
a man in the first stall has to lean over  
to hold the obnoxious door shut.  
he coughs to disguise the plops of his turds  
or his farts.  
next to him are the empty jaws  
of the toilet paper rings  
grinning tragically.  
[COUGH].  
[FART].

*Robby Marquess*

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## A Birth of Injustice

So the others can dream on empty stomachs and dirty sheets she  
bites her tongue bloody  
and to make up for the destroyed two she mouths Hail Marys into the  
chilly dark

Outside on alien streets the white whirls too heavy  
when you're a little drunk

Alone with his mother my father is born  
She bites the slippery cord and he spends his life screaming (and laughing)  
at the injustice.

*Jeanne Blum*

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## Big Men Wear Brown

I have a friend,  
Dave Dworkin, he says,  
but I know  
he's really  
Wally Walrus.

His apartment has windows  
on all three sides,  
and as you sit  
on his brown velvet  
couches,  
you can watch  
three sides  
of Washington.

He has a brother,  
although he doesn't know it,  
who lives in St. Louis  
and designs  
rocket planes.

Brown shirts hang  
in neat stripes  
from his closet,

and I helped his wife  
not long back  
pick a brown  
    knit  
    tie.

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God meant for big men  
to wear brown.

*Elizabeth Sims*



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## 'Night, Dallas

Evocative is  
listening to the urban night  
the sound is static  
like lightning in a cloud  
a penny rolling into a gutter  
street people vying for  
a place to rest.

Birds call to one another  
shocking some small  
nesting place  
a home transient  
plucked up in the dead  
of all places  
this sterile city-  
the moon frowns upon it.

This wild, abandoned era  
struggles for a place to sit  
and watch people  
simply touch  
to find some small measure  
of love-  
as for me  
one night of sleep is enough.

*Catherine J. Stewart*

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## Cara Nonna

You wanted to see us all marry  
But you couldn't wait for me.  
I was out shopping -  
at your advice, Cara Nonna.  
Shopping for a man.

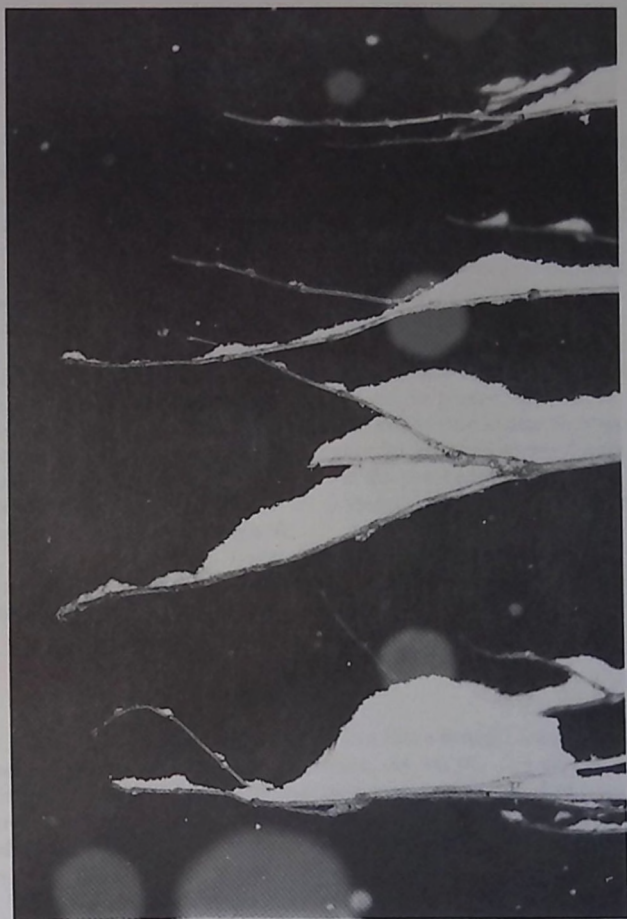
I watched you with Grandpa  
Fussing over his sheets in that sterile bed.  
The nurses never did it right.  
You had 65 years -  
you knew exactly how it should be.

I had know words for you  
As you bent over his coffin  
Was 65 years just the blink of an eye?  
It came down to just one thing  
making sure he had his hat.

How will I start  
Now that I've finished shopping?  
You aren't here.  
I can do just one thing -  
make sure he has his hat.

*Candace Carrabus Rice*





Rochelle Kapnick





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## Arlee And I: A Lullaby

*Kevin Linden*

It is autumn evening. Arlee and I are on the back porch, sitting together on a cushioned bench, with a quilt thrown loosely over our shoulders. The moon is not quite full but gives off enough light that I can see the colors of the asters along the back fence, though they seem less vibrant than usual.

There is enough light, also, for Arlee to read by. She reads aloud. She has a gift for it; Lord, she does have a gift for it. Part of it is her ability to sense completely the mood of an evening, and part of it is the qualities of her voice, the tone and timbre and inflection; all together, it becomes magical. She has a way of making whatever she reads seem so integral and necessary that it becomes difficult to imagine, for example, the very existence of this autumn evening, of the porch and the yard and the garden, of the stars, even apart from the sound of Arlee's reading. If authors could hear their works being read by Arlee, I swear they might cry for joy upon seeing the way she walks their words around the pin oaks and the yew hedges, through the hawthorns and the periwinkle and the close-cut grass, and then offers them, clear and sparkling, to the night air.

I look up at the moon. I was mistaken; it is full. Caught in that momentary lull between waxing and waning, its most luminous instant, it bathes Arlee and me with its laving light.

\* \* \*

This image plays through my mind now like a dream. I try to freeze it there in order to hold off that other picture, the one of Arlee moving away from me, higher and higher still, but the image shifts. I can feel the movement, I know where it will lead, but I cannot stop it. I kneel by the bathtub, dip my hand into the water, all the while trying to hold on to that autumn night, but then it is gone.



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\* \* \*

Near our house there is a park filled with great, quiet expanses sectioned by tall trees. Somewhere near the middle, a high stone wall divides the park. On the other side of that wall is a place where people go, men and women in equal numbers, where I go, where Arlee goes, to be touched.

It is not Dionysian; there is no squirming pile of bodies embraced in raucous, anarchistic celebration. There is only the sweet, sad meeting of two strangers who shed their clothes and lie together under the night sky. Several times Arlee and I have met there, quite by accident, and have made love to each other in the cool grass, but always as strangers.

\* \* \*

Aside from those chance encounters on the far side of the stone wall, Arlee and I no longer have sex together. It is Arlee's decision, though I concur almost immediately. I have faith in Arlee; she is my eyes and my heart. She makes me understand that sex between lovers is as the hue of asters in the moonlight, a reflection, diminished, of some greater vibrancy, and so we abandon it, that between us we might discover the purer color of our love.

There is something else, though. A particular evening of lovemaking, long before we begin to visit the park. Arlee seems withdrawn, and when I press her for the source, she has difficulty explaining.

"I don't know," she says finally. "It's too good. The stillness afterwards. Listen; it's like death somehow. I can't stand it. I can't stand watching us die."

I think I know what she means. It is what I mean, now, when I speak of passion and despair as though they were one.

\* \* \*

The day following the full moon, that final autumn moon, I take the day off to manage a few small repairs around our house, and so I am waiting for Arlee when she comes home. I meet her at the door and take her coat. She looks tired and pensive. She sits down without saying anything and closes her eyes.

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"Bert was here today," I tell her to try and cheer her up. Bert is a handyman with a penchant for odd stories. Arlee and I have come to think of him, in a playful way, as a kind of diviner. We like to pretend that his stories are full of obscure meaning. Whenever he comes to the house, I pass on to Arlee whatever he says, and the two of us invest it with all sorts of metaphysical insights. It is a harmless irreverence, and Arlee is particularly good at the game. She can construct whole philosophies, sometimes, out of single phrases.

"He said he was working over at the university hospital last week on one of their big walk-in freezers, and that it was filled with bodies . . . how did he put it? . . . 'Strung up like they were so many sides of beef.' Transients, he said, bums. He said the hospital just cuts them up and ships their parts all over the country." Arlee looks up at me with a weird expression, and I can tell she is not in the mood to play.

"It gets better," I say hoping to pique her interest. "I made some kind of joke about it, and he got real serious and he said, 'It's not so funny. Don't kid yourself; those people never get buried.'"

Normally this would be just the kind of pithy phrase that would get Arlee started, but when I asked her what she thinks, she just shrugs her shoulders. She stands up, gives me a quick kiss, and walks into our bedroom. A few minutes later, I hear her in the bathroom, filling the tub.

\* \* \*

When we first contemplate buying our house, it is the bathtub which sells us. Though it is modern in the sense that it is set into the floor instead of resting on little iron feet, it possesses most of the charm of an old tub. The hot and cold water handles are shaped like pudgy silver crosses, and the spigot is long and gracefully curved. The tub itself is white porcelain, but it has been stained over the years with so much hard-water residue that its color has become more of an off-white, like the natural color of limestone, so that the tub, too, seems to be of nature.

"It's divine," Arlee says, though she is not one to use such words gratuitously. "It's huge; you could float in it up to your neck without so much as bending your knees."

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\* \* \*

I walk through the bedroom to the bathroom. The door is closed, but I can hear Arlee in the tub. In spite of our pledge of celibacy outside of the park, there are certain moments when a purely carnal desire for Arlee does well up in me. Often it is at moments similar to this one, when Arlee is bathing, and I am on the other side of the door, listening to her sounds. I imagine her floating, her eyes sleepy, the very tips of her nipples breaking the surface of the water. I call to mind an image of her pubis: the lips of her vagina, parted ever so lightly from the warmth and motion of the water, surrounded by that miniature forest of black hair, each strand individuated and swaying softly in the current. More than once I have stood outside the door with this image of Arlee in my mind and the sound of her bathing in my ears.

\* \* \*

I knock on the door and walk in. I see immediately that she has been crying. She makes a furtive attempt to hide her face and to wash away the tears with handfuls of bath water, but I have already seen. I sit on the edge of the tub and massage the back of her neck.

"Want to talk about it?" I ask. She shakes her head.

"It's nothing," she says. "Really, there's nothing to talk about. Nothing happened or didn't happen. It's a bad day is all. It's a really bad day."

\* \* \*

There are mornings, even then, while Arlee is still with me, when I open my eyes and am immediately overwhelmed with a sense of panic because I have left the liquid world of my dreams. The bed beneath me, no matter how comfortable it had felt when I had first lain down in it, has overnight grown hard as granite. The walls seem close and oppressive; awake, I can no longer dissolve them, as I might have only a moment ago, with a wish, nor send them tumbling with a single breath.

On such mornings, I usually try to escape back into the dream world. I close my eyes as tightly as I can, and I attempt desperately to will my way back, but desperation is the very thing which prevents return.

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When Arlee finishes her bath, we decide to go for a walk. The sun is just beginning to set, but there is yet light. The air is still and the neighborhood is quiet. We walk. From where we pass the park, we can see the stone wall. Neither of us comments. The wind picks up a bit.

We walk. Arlee seems to be feeling better. She smiles occasionally. We stop in front of an open field, and I slip my arm around her waist. In the field the leaves are doing a mad dance, tossed first one way then the other by the now boisterous wind. They turn circles, shoot up into the air, pause momentarily as if catching their breath. We stand watching them for a long time.

"Do you suppose," I say after a while, "That the leaves have any say in it?"

"I don't know," she answers lightly. "What makes the wind blow?"

"The rotation of the earth. And convection -- warm air rising, cool falling."

"Does a tree here instead of there give a certain wobble to the rotation?"

"Perhaps."

"And when a tree, through its leaves, exhales, is its breath either warm or cold?"

"One or the other, I suppose."

"And do the leaves of a tree, by casting shadows, cool air that might otherwise be warmed by the sun?"

"Yes," I say.

"Yes," she says. "Yes," and she gives a laugh as melodic and as delicate as the sound of shattering crystal. We turn and walk on.

\* \* \*

I'm not sure how Arlee gets ahead of me. I stop, I suppose, and turn to take a final look at the leaves. Something about them has struck me, and I want to tell Arlee. I call her name. There is no reply. I look around, and it takes me a minute to spot her; by the time I do, she is already halfway up the hill. She is moving in the wrong direction, away from the park, away from our home. She will turn around, I think; she will come back down, but she keeps climbing higher and higher. I call her name again, more loudly this time.



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Arlee stops. She pauses. Still, she doesn't turn. She raises her hand. It is not a wave exactly; certainly it is not a summons. It is more as though she is testing the breeze -- as a boatswain might -- measuring its direction and heft. And then she is moving again, sailing still higher into the night. Before long, she crests the hill and is gone.

Just over the spot where Arlee disappears, the moon begins to rise. It is waning now, though only slightly, and I must look at it a long time before I detect the missing sliver of its edge and notice the peculiar, oblong shape of its outline against the night sky.

\* \* \*

I test the water once more before I climb into the tub. I float a moment, motionless, to allow my body to adjust to the temperature. Arlee is right; floating this way is divine. I feel nearly weightless, surrounded by a warmth so devoid of texture, I cannot tell where it begins and my body ends.

I slide down in the tub so that my head, too, is under the waterline, and I listen to the secret sounds of our house. I hear the creaking of wooden, arthritic joists and the screech, somewhere, of metal on metal.

After a while I begin to wonder whether I will bother to surface for breath, or if I might simply remain here, under the water, and wait. I open my eyes. I can see the lights overhead, fuzzy and indistinct, and I try to imagine what it would be like to watch them slowly fade.

I remember, now, what it is I mean to say to Arlee in that first instant I call her name. It has to do with the pauses the leaves seem periodically to make. It is a question, really; I wonder if those pauses might not, after all, have some purpose, some meaning -- like the lulls between ocean waves, without which the waves themselves would have no definition. I suppose it is of no consequence, especially now, yet as I lie here encased in this disembodied warmth, I am wondering what Arlee might say; and despite the emptiness of the only answer I have, that I will never know, the question itself buoys me somehow. I rise to the surface. I stand for a moment, dripping water, then reach for a towel and begin drying myself.

I move through the bedroom and into bed without turning on a light. I lie awake, then, for what seems an eternity -- but in the darkness, who can say really?

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## Shallow in the Mud

*David Cirillo*

I started my post high school days by getting a job at Wal-Mart and dating a few busty women. Wal-Mart worked out all right, but the women wouldn't go all the way on the first date so I dumped them figuring, what's the point? I considered trying a steady relationship where sex wasn't the main objective, but I pissed on the idea. Physical satisfaction was the only way to really live.

Really live. That's what I was going to do, really live.

My parents decided "to better themselves" and return to college to get degrees.

I got myself my own apartment.

I had numerous physical activities planned with women.

I was ready to really live.

But my plans went limp due to unwilling female bodies. Women didn't want one night stands. Six months of continuous failures told me that the one night stand idea didn't work, and so I decided to test my two night stand plan. The two night stand plan called for one non-physical date followed by sex on the next date. I tested this plan on Desdemona.

"What's a Desdemona?" I asked her.

"It's my name, silly."

Silly? I dig chicks who call me silly. Silly, goofy, whatever. I dig that. It means the woman is easy. As soon as Dezy called me silly, I planned on an easy conquest.

"Did you call me silly?" I asked her.

"Yes I did, silly."

Two sillys. This was going to be easier than in my fantasies.

"Was that a good silly or a bad silly?" I asked. Foreplay.

"It's a good silly, silly."

Three sillys! This was getting serious. Silly was my own personal aphrodisiac. I hear silly and I reach for a prophylactic.

"Hey, baby," I said, feeling rather fertile, "why don't you and I have ourselves a little date?"

"All right," she said. "Where do you want to go?"



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"Let's grab a bite, baby." I wondered what she thought about me calling her baby.

"Sounds good to me," she said.

"Let's go -- baby."

"Why are you calling me baby?"

"Because it's cool. It means I like you and you are cool."

"Does it?"

"Yes, baby." I had no idea.

We ate dinner at a fast-food place, and I think she expected something fancier. I ordered hoards of food for myself because I heard women like big eaters -- of course, I only ate about a third of what I ordered. Then we went to a nice ice cream parlor and naturally, I had to order the biggest banana split on the menu. Desdemona ate my leftovers, and I wondered if she knew what ice cream meant. Sex always follows ice cream. Always. I invited her back to my apartment.

"I don't know if I should go to your apartment after our first date," she said.

"Come on. We'll go back to my place and have some fun."

"That sounds sleazy."

"Would you like to join me for un cappucino at my place? Is that better?"

She laughed but went home with me.

My pad was a bit messy and I made her wait in the hall while I threw the dirty underwear under my bed. As I ran across my room, I stepped on my friend's Walkman, but I didn't care because I had myself a woman. Then I heard her whine that she wanted to come in and see the apartment. That made me angry so I made her stand in the hall while I sat on the couch, popped open a soda, and made cleaning noises like crumpling up paper and straightening magazines. I finally let her in.

"Neat apartment," she said.

Call me silly, call me silly.

"I wish I had my own apartment," Dezzie continued. "I like freedom."

"Likewise."

"You don't have much furniture."

You don't have much furniture -- SILLY!

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

'Cause.

"You're silly."

Yes!! I know I'm silly, but I'm getting something tonight.

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We chatted, we drank my soda, we popped on the tube. She was hot, very hot. Those blue, velvety eyes! Baby. BABY! What I'm gonna do to you, you little tramp!

"Well, I'd better be getting home," she said.

What? WHAT?

"Don't look so disappointed. Mom expects me home in fifteen minutes. I had fun, really. Can you walk me home?"

I said, "Yeah, baby," but thought, "What happened to our quickie?"

"May I have a kiss tonight?" I asked when we reached her doorstep.

She kissed my cheek and rushed inside. Big deal! Then I remembered this was my two night stand plan and I perked up. I called Desdemona the next day, after I lied and told Wal-Mart I was sick, and asked her out again.

She wore a mini-skirt on the next date. It's impossible to wait for sex until after dinner when a woman wears a mini-skirt. We'd be in the restaurant and all I would think of is how, in a fancy restaurant, I could slide my hand up that mini-skirt.

"Sir," the maitre d' would say, "what would you like for dinner?"

"Can't ya' see I'm working on it?" I'd answer irately, lifting up the tablecloth revealing my hand stuck in her crotch.

We never got to dinner because I decided to make my move now. I kissed her before we left for dinner. She didn't fight back, and I let my hand roam.

"Uh, what are you doing?" she asked.

"You called me silly."

"Get your hand out of there."

"Now baby, don't fight it."

"I'll scream, you jerk."

"But you called me silly."

"I want to go home."

I took her home. I'm not going to force a woman. But that ended that relationship.

A pattern emerged the next few years. I dated a woman, tried to get some sex, was turned down, and moved on to the next woman. Three years passed in which similar patterns occurred and only a few times did I actually sleep with a woman. It was a very dry and disappointing period for me, and I began to wonder if I was too oversexed. I figured the reason I needed sex so bad was because I had overactive hormonal efficiency. See, overactive hormonal efficiency, as defined by me, is where the sperm are so fertile and so active that they are dying to go to work. This increases my sex drive, and

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I need sex more than most people. Anyway, when I turned twenty-one, I figured my string of bad luck would come to an end because I could legally purchase alcohol. In retrospect, that was rather faulty logic, if indeed there was any logic in that reasoning. At age twenty-one, I decided a two week stand was the optimal time period before I started pushing for sex. I would get a woman to like me, then I would go for the score.

Pam was the first on the two week plan. We had dinner at my place, and she didn't tempt me with a mini-skirt. If she had worn a mini-skirt on the first date, the two week plan would have been tossed -- those legs would have been on my mind all night.

"This is a wonderful apartment," she said.

"Thank you," I said. This was really nice. I liked not having sex on my mind whenever I was with a girl. This relationship was going to work.

"So what's for dinner?"

"I threw on a couple of burgers." How polite of me. I was a gentleman. And sex wasn't even close to my mind. This was a special moment.

"Oh, I smell them. They smell wonderful."

Just like your perfume.

"I was going to wear shorts tonight, but it got cooler than I expected." Shorts? Short shorts?

"And these jeans are so tight; I need to go shopping and get some new ones."

They are awfully tight.

"Do I smell potatoes? I love potatoes."

Me too.

"I love them with lots of butter."

"Butter. YES!" I finally bellowed.

"Are you all right?"

I couldn't fight it. All that talk about potatoes and butter and legs and tight places -- it was too much. "I think I need a cold shower."

"A cold shower? Why?"

'Cause you're turning me on, you hot woman.

"Why do you need a shower?"

"Um, I had a hard day at work and I stink."

"Well, a little sweat never hurt anyone."

SWEAT. I'm going to make you SWEAT, baby.

"You are a silly person," Pam said.

SILLY!! I know what I'm getting tonight!

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We ate dinner, I thought of sex, we watched television, I thought of sex, we kissed goodnight, I grabbed her butt.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm grabbing your butt."

"I know that, but why?"

"Because you are one hot potato."

"I'm leaving."

She left. I sort of missed on the two week plan.

I tried immersing myself into my work at Wal-Mart in order to forget my woman problems. I asked for a sixty hour week instead of a forty hour week, and for a few weeks I actually showed up for all my hours. At work, so I would keep my mind off women, I tried to rip off some customers. When I gave them change, I'd purposefully give them less change, and if they caught me I'd apologize profusely and everything was all right. However, woman after woman continued to come into the store, and after a month, I decided to forget ripping off people and start trying to score with women again. Failure after failure followed.

All these failures may have driven me crazy if it wasn't for my friend Thomas. We talked about women, jobs, life, friends, the future -- things I'd never talked about with anyone else. Thomas thought about life, questioned religion, had a conscience, and was generally a good guy.

"You've got to learn to take the good with the bad," Thomas always told me. And Thomas was always there to get me through the bad. In fact, a couple times, I called Thomas out of a deep sleep around 3:00 a.m. to help me with my problems. He never seemed to mind.

After a particularly long dry spell without a date, I hated everything. I was upset with women and hated my life more each day. I called on Thomas.

"Thomas, man, I don't really see the point of living. I used to live for women, and now I can't even get a date. What's the point of living?"

Thomas practically screamed at me. "What's the point of living? My God, you should just be happy to be alive. So big deal, you haven't had a date in awhile. There are so many things to live for besides women and sex. You need to get out and discover them." Then Thomas took me out for a brew. With Thomas around, I never got too depressed.

After the fiasco with Pam, we talked about my values.

"You need to get some values," Thomas said.

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Because you don't have any. You're pretty shallow, the way you look



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at life."

I looked at Thomas. He had never told me I was shallow before. I assumed he agreed with my woman-chasing values. I was shocked. I was quiet.

"Listen, buddy," Thomas continued, "when we talk, I see there is more in you than a sex-oriented, shallow, skirt-chasing jerk. I see that there is something real, and not everything is artificial about you."

What the hell was he talking about? It sounded important, but I didn't understand.

Thomas then said, "The reason you have problems with women is because you just want to use them. No one wants to be used."

He was probably right.

"I don't think you respect women at all," Thomas added.

"I respect women," I confessed, "I just can't control myself around them."

"You mean you choose not to control yourself because you don't respect them."

I finally understood what he was talking about. I'd heard about psychological things like this. Freud probably would have had something interesting to say about me.

"I think you should think about what you are doing and why. Why do you want to use women? Just think for a change."

Thomas was tough on me, but I understood what he said. I had never thought how my actions would affect others.

But when Thomas moved two months later, I was alone and devastated. I quit thinking about things and put my faith in my old valueless life. I wanted Thomas around to help me cope with and understand life. I didn't have a girlfriend or "real" friends, and Thomas was the only person I ever *talked* with.

Then I met Mary. When she first showed up, I thought about what Thomas said about my values and decided to treat her like a girlfriend instead of a sex object. I was looking for a new best friend, a new companion, a new soul.

After about a month of dating though, I mutated into the sexual monster I was in the past. Mary and I had become good friends and thoughts of going steady with her had crossed my mind. But I wanted sex. I fought these urges the best that I could, but my desires overrode my common sense. We went to dinner, returned to my apartment to watch a movie, and held hands.

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I kissed her. I had kissed her before; after all, we had gone out for a month. But this was our longest, most sensual kiss. To me, it meant I could get past kissing and work on other things.

Our mouths pushed together. I massaged her back with both my hands. I squeezed her butt. My right hand slid to her hip, then down her thigh, then back up her thigh. She stopped me.

"Don't ruin it," she said.

"I can't help it. I want you."

"I like you, but I don't want to sleep with you."

"How 'bout we just fool around a little?"

"No. Damn. Thomas told me you were impossible, but I didn't believe him."

"Thomas?"

"Yes. Thomas told me you were a really nice guy, but a little oversexed. What guy isn't? He asked me if I'd at least go out with you and see if I liked you."

"Do you?"

"I did."

"I didn't know Thomas did that for me."

"He did."

"I'm sorry. I hope you're not too mad."

"Control yourself and I'll be all right."

I never had a woman say she liked me for who I was instead of my physical stature. This was the first time I respected a woman. She was independent, and I wasn't used to that -- but I liked it. I would control my urges with this woman.

A month after that incident, I lost control and tried to get under her shirt.

"You know what your problem is?" Mary asked. "Everything that means anything to you is physical. Your car, your apartment -- sex."

Our relationship cooled; she said she wanted to give me time to put my values in place. I couldn't think about values. I wanted to be with Mary. I waited by the phone for her to call, but she never did. I broke down, called her, and begged her to give me another chance. She said she'd give me another chance. After I hung up the phone, I couldn't believe I had begged a woman who wouldn't sleep with me to take me back.

Another four months passed, and our six month anniversary approached; it was getting ridiculous, this no-sex policy. That control I worked so hard to maintain escaped. I grabbed her breast one day while we watched "Rambo."



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"Will you cut that out?" she asked.

"I can't. I've never dated a girl over a week without getting in her blouse."

"I need to take you somewhere. There's only one way I can help you realize how shallow you are acting."

She drove us to her parents' home, and I suddenly realized that I had never been to her home. Maybe she wanted our first time to be in her parents' affluent home. If this is the only way she knows to help me, I'll go along with it. Then I started feeling bad for pushing Mary. I had tried to get sex from her for months and failed. Now, when it appeared I was getting what I wanted, I wavered. I realized I didn't think of Mary the same way I did other women. She wasn't a sex symbol, but a friend.

We walked up to her door and she knocked. I guess she didn't have a key.

Then someone answered.

A bunch of Indians!

Not like the Sioux, but from India. What was she going to teach me? Cow images flashed in my mind, as India always reminded me of sacred cow dung.

We walked into the room, and I discovered that Mary's parents weren't home. I was introduced to the Indians; there was one adult and two children. I was confused. Mary talked to the adult, who was a nanny to the children, and laughed with the two children. The girl was nine and her brother was three. Suspicions about Mary crept into my mind. Did she pop in on Indians regularly, or was this just especially for me? Were she and her parents spies for India? Why does India need spies?

Mary chatted with the nanny, and clearly they had chatted before today. I couldn't understand the nanny because her English was choppy. Besides, I was preoccupied with the occupations of the two children.

The little girl was teasing her brother with an American doll. She pretended she would give him the doll and as soon as he grabbed at it, she pulled it away. This game continued for ten minutes -- I timed it -- before the boy wanted to move on to another game. And the girl was ready with another version. This time, she gave the boy the doll, then playfully wrestled it from him. After that, she danced around with the doll. When he started crabbing, she gave it back again and they repeated the same routine for another twenty minutes! I was appalled! How could that boy be having so much fun? I concluded that other country's children were more easily amused than American children.

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I hadn't noticed, but Mary watched me as I watched the children, and she smiled at me.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked.

"Hell if I know. This is very silly," I said. Hey, I heard the word silly and wasn't aroused. Just then, the girl took the doll and quickly ran in circles around the little boy and he laughed hysterically. He acted as though he had never seen anything so funny in all his life. The girl picked him up and twirled him around and around, and entertained him as though it was her only desire.

"They weren't always happy," Mary said.

"Why not?"

"My family brought them over from India. Their parents died and they weren't very happy there, but they seem to have taken a liking to America."

"How long have they been here?" Why was I interested?

"A couple of months, but they aren't totally adjusted to America."

"Maybe they shouldn't get so comfortable if they'll be going back to India," I said logically.

"They're not going back," Mary said. "My parents have adopted them." Whoa! I figured her parents would have just sent a few bucks so they could have milk and bread. But adoption!

Mary walked toward the boy. I believe she called him Johnny, although that wasn't his Indian name. Mary went into the kitchen and returned with a can of vanilla pudding. Mary's eating habits were strange, I thought. She held the pudding in the air, and I questioned her showmanship. Then I looked at Johnny. He eyed the pudding and looked scared, like someone was going to pull it out of Mary's hands before she could give it to him. When Mary offered me the option of feeding the boy, I declined. But when she insisted, I decided I'd feed him to keep myself busy.

Mary handed me the pudding and the boy thought she had given it to me to eat. His eyes teared up. I took him on my lap and spoke English to him. He must have thought I was an idiot.

I opened the vanilla pudding and his big, brown eyes shot open. Their hugeness, roundness, and innocence held me, and I forgot my purpose -- of which he soon reminded me by simply pointing at the pudding. I filled the spoon with pudding, slowly pushed it towards his mouth, and when he tried to eat it, I pulled it back. This didn't get the same laugh as when his sister pulled the doll away from him, and I decided to offer him the pudding again. I pushed the spoon towards his mouth, and he got it this time. He ate much faster than I've ever eaten -- as though someone would take the food away.

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His round eyes -- I couldn't get over how round they were -- seemed to thank me the whole time. His eyes never left mine. He was hungry, hungrier than I had ever been. His was grateful -- for the pudding, for food. I realized that I had never fed anybody in my whole life. I always took, but never gave.

When we left, Mary looked at me; her eyes were blue and round, but not as round as Johnny's. She smiled at me again.

"So, did you have fun? Was it a different experience?" she asked, her voice tender and soft, and seeming to know my answer before I uttered it.

"Yes," I admitted.

I've never seen hunger in any eyes like Johnny's. His brown eyes, dark hair, dark complexion, and innocent face showed fear, hunger, coldness, sickness, and worry; but there was also hope, intensity, and love -- all of which grew stronger each day.

I continued to date Mary. Her face seemed more beautiful each day, and her smile would always remind me of the time I first fed Johnny. I admit that Mary is a special person -- the best I've ever met. Before her, I had always looked to women for sex, and in general, people were mine to use. But Johnny taught me about life, and showed me I couldn't live life by thinking and living only for myself. Feeding him that one time showed me something I would never have believed; I was shallow. But luckily, I was pulled out of the mud, saved from my own shallowness, and now I am able to really live.

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## The Bureaucratic Blues: Our Other Anthem

*Mark Boatman*

Hallelujah! There would be dancing in the streets tonight! I had just tried my own case in small claims court and won. As I floated out of the courtroom, carried on the wings of righteousness, the clerk directed me to the second-floor office where I intended to claim my recompense.

The elevator descended past the fourth floor, and I contemplated the fat law school scholarship I would doubtless be awarded when word got out. Passing the third floor, I debated the possibility that the Bar Association, on hearing of my triumphant oration, would waive the exam and allow me to set up practice immediately. Reaching the second floor at last, I strutted into the Circuit Clerk's office to claim my money.

"I've just won my case and I'm here to-"

The clerk's Mona Lisa smile stopped me dead in my tracks. "Um-hum," she said with passionate disinterest, "Now fill out these forms . . ."

"No, y'see, I just wo-"

". . . and then we will execute the garnishment, which will expire in ninety days and . . ."

Okay, so I won't get the money today.

". . . then the interrogatory answers must be . . ."

The what?

". . . filed within ten days after that, at which time it will . . ."

I began to get the feeling she had made this speech once or twice before.

". . . take a week or two to receive the check from the bank and then we will forward your judgement to you."

Oh.

Ninety plus ten plus . . . How could a simple bank transaction take three and a half months?! As it turned out, my indignant response was in error. It didn't take three and a half months at all. It took six.

Is it any wonder bureaucracy is not well thought of in our country? Who hasn't had a run-in like this; a form-filled, procedure-powered monolith that seems to exist for the sole purpose of inhibiting whatever you are trying to accomplish? It is the sad truth that the once honorable profession of public



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service has become the dearth of the very public it is charged with serving.

Bureaucracy, in fact, has become the longest four-letter word in our language. Webster puts it concisely: "Bureaucracy" is "government officialism or inflexible routine: see also RED TAPE." Or how about: "Bureaucrat . . . one who follows a routine in a mechanical, unimaginative way, insisting on proper forms, petty rules, etc."

Case in point: when was the last time you heard a father proudly proclaim, "My son is going to be a bureaucrat"? Susie might become president, or Johnny a nurse, but never, ever the B-word.

Of course, we ignore the fact that 99.9% of our encounters with bureaucracy end in success. The garbage gets picked up, the mail delivered, the license renewed. If truth be known, the bureaucrats probably have a better success ratio than the rest of us. For example: Of your last ten appointments, how many were you actually on time for? Do you always brush your teeth for the full three minutes? How about your checkbook? Does it balance every month?

Life is full of small failures. So why do we insist on lambasting a less-than-perfect public sector? Drum roll, please! Enter the Theory of Social Bureau-Bashing, stated as follows: "The deliberate and verbal denigration of public institutions and employees occurs in direct proportion to the frequency of unproductive oral interaction within a society." In lay terms, bureaucratic failures -- that pernicious, pugnacious point-one percent -- make for much better 'cross-the-fence fodder. Can you envision a society without bureaucratic failure? Boring. Snoring. Nothing to talk about.

Here's George Q. Public, taking out the trash: "Hi Bill! Say, how about that garbage collector? Hasn't missed a day in seven months." Snooze city. With riveting openers like that, the art of conversation would deservedly die, and civilization with it.

So, in the spirit of preserving civilization, we push onward, making the best of the public sector's low failure rate. On the radio and in the papers, our selfless devotion to bureau-bashing has become a national past-time. In the backyards, the offices, the taverns of Americana, each of us has patriotically preserved our repertoire of B-bungles for such moments when speak we must, though there be nothing to speak of. Rude clerks, long lines, computer foul-ups; each holds a place dear in our hearts, waiting to be taken out and exercised (exorcised?) when verbal intercourse and social unity are threatened by extinction.

Consider the following scenario, a potential first-level threat to society as we know it:

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One lovely evening you are a guest at a rather large, formal dinner party. Seated immediately to your right is some guy named Cadwaller, who is wearing an orange paisley tie. Cad-babe is sporting a "Nuke The Whales" button on his lavender lapel and insists on loudly belaboring Lyndon LaRouche's presidential qualifications in a stuffed-shirt tone that would make Thurston Howell III proud. Judging from the reactions of the other guests around you, World War III is about to break out. Should you:

- A. Stuff your socks in Cad's mouth?
- B. Demonstrate your ability to yodel while drinking a glass of rose'?
- C. Attempt to perform A and B simultaneously?
- D. As a diversion, spill your rose' on his tie and risk creating an even more offensive color?
- E. None of the above?

Pick E. For the sake of world peace, your best bet is to sing out your latest version of the B-blues. Within moments you and Caddy will be singing the bureaucratic blues, to the delight (and relief) of all present. And the results of your quick-mindedness? Due to an anonymous tip-off, Cads will be investigated by the IRS, CIA, EPA, and the PWMWSR (People Who Make Whale Sound Recordings), whereas you will become a requisite at all future social functions. Having a common dog to kick unites the most unlikely people.

I wonder though, if the dog is the one who really deserves kicking. We may well be preserving the art of conversation for future generations; however, his moaning and groaning among ourselves accomplishes precious little in actually improving the things we complain about. We are complaining to the wrong people.

It is ironic. Our society consistently achieves some of the lowest levels of political participation among all Western democracies, and yet, letting our voices be heard is the foundation of our socio-political system. When we speak across the backyard fence, and not to the rude clerk, or the alderman, or at the ballot box, we cheat our system of its life blood. If not our voices, whose shall fill the void?

Bureaucrats and politicians are, after all, just people -- people like you

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and me (and, yes, Cadwaller) -- with feelings and egos, wanting to be thought well of. We the people (sound familiar?) hold the power -- the power of approval. As we encounter the people who govern and administrate our country's day-to-day business, we can reward them, commensurate with their effort, with the power of a single voice, millions strong. A ballot cast, a letter of complaint, a kind word of acknowledgement; these are the bits and pieces that cumulatively make democracy function.

In another time and another land, a king rode through the city unaware that he was buck-naked. Wicked advisors had duped the king into believing he wore the finest of garments, invisible only to himself. As he rode, his subjects were silent, embarrassed and ashamed, until a child, not knowing any better, cried out, "The King has no clothes!"

Children haven't changed much. They freely speak their minds, and always at a volume calculated to ensure an audience of all persons present. I remember standing in the checkout lane waiting to purchase a gallon of milk while my daughter explained to everyone in the store, in precise medical terms, the difference between boys and girls. After a few of those red-faced altercations, we parents make it a priority to teach our children what is socially appropriate speech. But as adults, giving voice to our own thoughts is much more than a matter of mere propriety; it is a matter of responsibility. We must tell the king.

I'd like to report that I wrote to the Governor about my difficulties with the Circuit Clerk's office. I'd like to say that I spoke up and made a difference. But I didn't. Ironically, the solution to my problem of bureau-bungling came from a bureaucrat herself.

Six months after the quickly-fading euphoria of that day in court, a wonderful woman named Laura Belle Scott ended up with my file. In one week, Laura Belle accomplished what the system hadn't been able to do at all: she got me a check and closed the case.

But she did something more important on that cold, January day. She reminded a cynical citizen that a part of making things work right is acknowledging when they do work right, as well as when they don't. A few days later Laura Belle's supervisor received a letter which read, ". . . Laura Belle Scott gives a new ring to the words 'public servant'." In a small way, with a small voice, maybe I, too, made a difference.

How about you?



