

Fall 2011

Fiction Fix 10

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COVER
BY JJ CROMER

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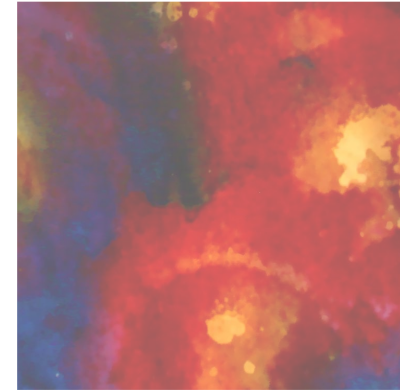
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Dear Readers,

It's really fun being an editor. Twice a year, we get to present these bold issues and say: *Look: what remarkable stories and artworks!* The works presented here span the spectrum, and we hope that you enjoy reading them as much as we do.

What may not be immediately obvious from the physical (or digital) covers of a literary journal is that it is a *living* object. A journal is a part of the story of the lives of writers, readers, and editors, which extends well beyond the first and final pages, and which is a part of a national and global conversation of contemporary literature.

In this issue, we launch our first annual *Gypsy Sachet Award*, recognizing creative cover letters and bios, in part to remember that storytelling is a living and human process. We are delighted to offer our readers this unique glimpse of the treasures that pass through the hands of editors.

Love,
April

Nesting

by Lindsay Oncken

He liked to toss her name around and feel its resistance on his tongue. It had legs, like a good wine; the Ls would linger, her name full-bodied and swimming beneath surface tension. “Lily,” he said. He thought maybe he loved her, the way her hair slashed across her face on windy days, the violent edge of her jaw. She slipped through crowds like a city carp; he could never quite reach out and touch. Sometimes he liked to imagine that she would catch his eye, wink and say, “Boy, Jake, the people here move much too fast. Let’s catch a train somewhere, just you and me, what do you say?” He always said yes and then she was off again, tail fin beating a beckon behind her.

He first saw her on the T, crumpled between two enormous men, her shoulder blades fanned out like plates of armor, swaying and slight in the heat.

That was the only time he ever spoke to her. He stood and gestured toward his own seat, and she nodded, her eyes lifting into a courteous smile. She said, “Thank you.” He nodded back, feeling a blush crawl up his neck to settle in his temples. “Of course.” He turned away, dodging the glare of one of the large men, feeling an uncomfortable heat beneath his arms. Two stops later she squeezed out the door, and he memorized the cross-streets and the way her sad eyes crinkled at the corners when she turned to wave.

The buildings breathed out the morning, most days. The Charles slipped through the city, sleepy and forgotten.

He was a tall boy, his parents used to tell him angular, with a thin mouth that rarely betrayed his thoughts. He used to spend hours reading in their bright sunroom, swimming through the text, the shimmering pools of ink. Often he imagined the way the words settled into the paper, the finality of it, and sometimes he held his books under running water to watch worlds swirl down the drain. He could have been a writer, had he the patience for it. Imaginative, cunning, his mind traveled and danced with a lethal sharpness.

It was the details, perhaps, that made it easier to love her. The things he picked up sank like hooks into his skin.

Once, Jake left her a dress just like one her mother used to wear. He had found a photograph of her and her mother on the sidewalk; it had

slipped out of her purse and fluttered to stick in a grate behind her. For the next few days he’d studied their frozen faces, their trapped smiles, the rough landscape in the window and the framed photograph of a fish skeleton behind their matching curly heads. She looked good in blue, he decided; it gentled her frame and held her in place, smoothed her outline with the softness of water. He wanted to give her something that reminded her of home.

When she found the dress on her stoop she didn’t hold it up to her body and twirl like he had hoped. She looked up at her door, then darted a glance over her shoulder to ask a nearby tree, “How in the hell?”

He was hurt. He shot her scathing looks over their morning coffee, the room full of strangers. Even in his mind, they didn’t speak for weeks.

It was the nature of their relationship, though, that he felt an apology was never needed. One morning he spotted her reading a novel in a small café, and he sat awhile adoring the wild way her eyelashes fell down across her cheeks: perfect, like a hundred tiny black tusks. “I forgive you,” he said quietly, and he could have sworn the corner of her mouth twitched up in a private way, a silent “Okay.”

He had been in one relationship before. It was college, and the girl was nondescript and angular, muscled and aggressive when she kissed him. They were a pair of wasps circling in a sharp, useless dance. To him it was a year of discomfort and shared meals, a sort of laziness passing over that held them in place. She was not surprised when he drove away from her. She had told him many times, “People pass over your face like shadows.” This was true, but he was fascinated with the change in light, the glimpses that added up to a nothing that was briefly brilliant. He lost focus. He just couldn’t find people. They were swaddled tight within themselves, and he wanted only a touch.

Lily gave his life color. She swam through the outlines, gave faces to the faceless. Hers was a shadow that lingered.

He started tailing her a few days after the bus encounter. He went to the same bus stop every morning, at roughly the same time, and watched the doors open, waiting for a brief glimpse of her lovely face. At first he wasn’t planning to follow her; he was just going to try and hear her speak again, maybe say hello. What he *really* wanted was to ask her inane, personal questions, like how often she washed her sheets or whether she liked her orange juice with pulp. It had occurred to him to introduce himself or simply invite her to dinner, but as the days went on, as the hours of waiting boiled through his body like a heatstroke, he started to feel a sort of pressure

on the back of his eyelids. An intense need to know, to see for himself. His knees shook while he watched the wheels do somersaults.

The fourth day, she stepped out of the bus and it felt as though his ribcage was a swinging door and she had fallen through.

She made a sharp left, hardly glanced in his direction, and walked with purpose away from him.

He got up to follow, working hard to envision tapping her shoulder, smiling at her, telling her his name. Block by block, turn by turn, those plans settled deep into his abdomen and burst into a cold resign. His pace loosened and he lingered, suspended between staying and going.

He knew, of course, that following her would make him seem insane. He knew it would only indulge a darker side of him, and he knew that he should just walk away. But he couldn't. He would try to explain this to himself for months, but that was the only thing he could ever think to say. There was something about her, or something about him. He just couldn't.

His feet fell heavy, tugged along; the sidewalk arched up to meet his strides.

There are things she finds hard to identify.

Why so many people insist on driving cars through the city, for example. Why she finds it so difficult to really see or hear anybody. Why she can't go on a run without feeling like there's a string tied between her and some other place, like the taut line of her childhood tin can telephones. The buildings have distinctive gazes, pupils illuminated with the morning's watery color. She feels watched all the time. The clerk at the supermarket looks at her strangely when she walks out.

It is distant, uncomfortable. She often wonders if the years are as capable of travel as they seem.

Lily grew up in a small house in Alabama, where lawns would tiptoe to the edge of the water and sip. She used to sit on her front porch and watch heat lightning that shattered the sky, brilliant lines framing the night's cracking grin. There, the humidity was a houseguest.

Her mother was a small woman with floral dresses and dusty rooms that Lily liked to explore. They would dart across the wood floors, slide on socks in the winter, stand with arms tied like ribbon and smile for her father's old camera. Her mother had often told her about the cobblestones and buildings tucked close like old friends, had shown her in old diaries how

Boston had given her handwriting a distinctive lean. "It will tire you," she told Lily, "in the most wonderful way." Growing up, Lily never trusted the complicated shapes of northeastern states. She liked the country's mid-section where land was spaced out and rectangular. As she got older, she learned to live with these things: the winding river borders, the way streets seemed to breathe her in and hold.

When her mom got sick, they picked the best hospital in Boston and left Alabama behind without hesitation. Almost immediately she found a small job at an insurance agency, answering phones and scheduling appointments. It was passionless and bleak, an empty slate her life could build on. She made cubicle friends and paper clip statues, and accepted quietly that this was her new home.

Her tiny kitchen is briefly caught in a brilliant haze, the sun extending handshakes toward her window. She watches the people far below, registers only a muddled watercolor of urban life, and turns to pour a glass of orange juice, no pulp.

This morning her mother called her. Her voice is weakening. The past few weeks have been rife with strained conversations, doctors rattling out words like *hippocampus* and *degeneration* that get caught in her teeth. It seems altogether likely that her mother will soon forget the old house, the water's edge, the elusive snakes; when she pulls out those memories, the light rests on her mother's skin like a thousand insects that would scatter if Lily reached out to touch.

She grabs her things and opens her door to the breaking day. The sun makes streamers through the buildings.

There is a small café around the corner where she goes for her morning coffee. She's found that her life is framed by routine, so similar in shape to the square blocks and buildings. Coffee, then work, then lunch in the same deli every weekday afternoon, an hour at the hospital, more work, and a long walk home. She generally avoids buses because of the heat and unwelcome closeness. Besides, the walks allow her small swells of time to let her mind wander, usually backward; she finds odd stoops, benches, trees to sit by and remember. Her days are strung with more days to revisit, bright and spaced out like paper lanterns.

She has become exhausted by the shape of memory.

Sitting at her favorite table, Lily opens a newspaper and orders a

Lily grew up in a small house in Alabama, where lawns would tiptoe to the edge of the water and sip.

large coffee. She is only dimly aware of the people around her. A man nearby moves and in her peripheral vision it looks almost like a beckon. A waiter sets down a large steaming mug and she glances up to observe the buzz of a society addicted to caffeine, the faces of sharpened city buzzards. It is a culture that does not draw her the way it had her mother. Looking up, she meets the intent gaze of a man a few tables over, and he lets his eyes glance down her shoulder and away. She sips her coffee, wonders how anybody really registers anybody else with so much distraction, such short time.

Briefly it occurs to her that her isolated life is unhealthy, and she dismisses this notion with a slight fluttering of her fingers, as though she is throwing up her loneliness like bits of confetti.

On the way to work, she kneels down to pick a small flower sprouting between buckled sidewalk. She tucks it into the pocket of her blouse, knowing it is probably just a weed, hoping her mother will not feel the need to say so.

She returns that evening with weight in her shoulders. On her porch sits a small stuffed bear. She picks it up without thinking and walks inside.

The city creeps and chatters like mice within the walls.

She felt okay walking into the hospital earlier that day. The dandelion's yellow petals drooped a little. When she walked into her mother's room, she saw her perched on the windowsill counting cars in the street. Turning briefly, her mother said, "Oh, hello Mama," and resumed her childish game.

It was almost automatic for Lily: in her body a clicking sensation, the feeling of years translated, a costume sliding over. She said, "How are you today, Ellie?" and set the flower on her bedside table. Lily's mother shrugged, murmured a quick string of numbers, and shrugged again. "I can't figure Billy out," she said. "I think he likes me, but I just don't know."

Billy was a nurse on their floor, young, handsome. He came in to check on Lily's mother from time to time. Lily made a sympathetic clucking sound, nodded, let out a vague, "Oh, boys."

"Have you checked on the casserole?"

"Yes, Ellie."

"Good. I'm starving."

For a long time Lily's mother sat with her face to the city, eyes childlike and intrigued by the world spread below. Her fingertip tapped the glass, her mouth shaped the things her brain chose to register. The walls

were white and to Lily's left was a picture of a sailboat fighting angry waves. Lily wasn't much for science, but at times like these she wanted to know the exact combination of time and genetics that had brought her mother to this—thirteen again, fitting the world into numbers and color.

After a while, Lily's mother turned and smiled. "I think I have some homework to do, maybe I—" She moved to stand, and Lily hurried to help her to the bed. As her weight settled into the mattress, Lily's mother looked around, briefly wild, and focused once more on Lily's face. "Lillian, darling," she said, and her face relaxed back into the same wizened form Lily was used to.

Lily exhaled. "Hi, Mama."

"Do me a favor. That jar of frogs? Get rid of it. They're starting to stink."

Another clicking sensation; Lily was herself again.

"Yes, of course, I will."

When she was young, Lily and her mother would sit very still on the lake's shore and count the number of times they saw snakes' heads bob over the surface of the water. She had been told many times that they were more afraid of humans than humans of them, and this thought gave her a strange thrill. Lily loved the game, relished the way evening air made the snakes more daring, the thrum of mosquitoes come thick as humidity. The land became hers, and she loved the pulsing wildness of the place. She would sit for hours watching minnows in shallow water slide through one another, then set off leaping through grass to watch waves of tiny frogs that would envelope her feet. She often caught the frogs in glass jars, gave them each family roles, kept them in her room until they died and she found another family to love. Her mother smiled, bristled her hair. Together they would eat breakfast under a weeping willow and admire its graceful grief.

How strange, the landscapes in people. How strange the way they never really leave us. She watched her mother act out scenes from another life.

"You've finished patching that hole in the attic?"

"Yes, Mama."

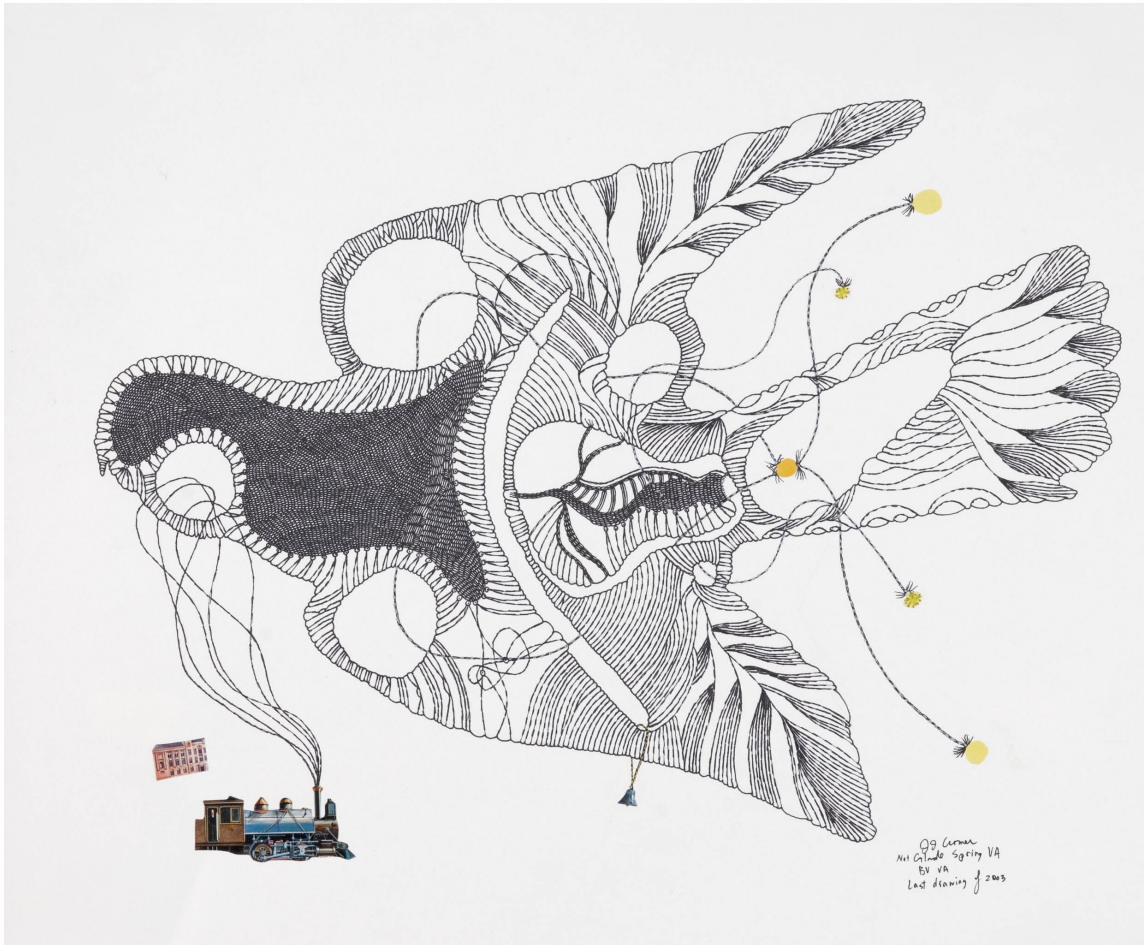
"Good, good. I'll be damned if I let those critters in the house again. Oh, and we must do something about that wasps' nest in the chimney; it's an absolute hazard."

"We'll take care of it, Mama."

There was a pregnant silence. Lily concentrated on the way the air made her ribs fan out, in, out again, like a pair of injured wings.

The nurses had told her that her mother kept old photographs in a box beneath her bed. At night she would take them out. Sometimes she remembered Lily's face, and sometimes she didn't. She told her daughter once, on a lucid day, how awful she felt that Lily wasn't a permanent fixture in her mouth, that her tongue hadn't memorized the patterns of calling her name. It killed her, she said, eyes welling.

This was Lily's understanding: long ago scientists discovered a fleshy seahorse in the brain, curled and sleeping around other unnamed structures. A horse, a sea monster, slippery with history. Doctors showed it to her in



sketches, pointed out the small bumps where memory and emotion entangle, the maps of experience.

But her mother couldn't think of memory as an isolated spot, something that can deteriorate or be lost; it needs to pull through blood vessels and be *felt*, she insisted, and on her worst days she sent the nurses away with loud cries that there was absolutely nothing wrong with her heart, so why was she here? "Fascists! Pigs! Empty goddamned white coats, the lot of you!" Those days, she remained framed in her window, unmoving, a shadow.

"Now, Lily," her mother said, and Lily glanced up at the change in tone. Her mother looked sternly at her. "Please tell me you have done something about that boy."

There was a pause. Lily's breath caught, gills in a fishing rod. "Which boy?"

Her mother sighed, rolled her eyes. "Oh, Lily, don't treat me like I'm an idiot. They keep me here like I'm crazy but I *know* what's going on, and he's dangerous, you know he is." She fixed her daughter with a pointed stare. "There are things that can be done, you know."

Another pause. "He isn't dangerous, Mom." She turned to the window, feeling uncomfortable.

"Then what would you call it?"

"I don't know. Infatuated." She ran her finger along the sill, stared at the tops of peoples' heads far below and wondered what it would be like to be caught in the air, sliding down toward so many hairdos. She turned back around. "If he were going to do something he would have done it by now, wouldn't he? Besides, he gives me nice things. Flowers. I don't know." Her mother tilted her head with disapproval, and Lily shrugged. "I just don't see why anything needs to be done about it right now, if he's posing no threat."

"You want to wait until he poses a threat?" Lily's mom raised her eyebrows. "You're smarter than that, honey. You keep these things around your house like they're from an old boyfriend or something, but they're not. It's sick."

Lily crossed her arms, felt her eyelashes brush her cheeks.

"It's probably just about sex," her mother said.

"Mom! It isn't."

For a long time they sat like that, the air between them compressed and twisted, feeling exactly like mother and daugh-

ter should for the first time in a while. There was a strange feeling in Lily's stomach, like a cellar door falling open, and after a while she looked up and said, quiet, "He's the closest thing I have to a friend here, though, Mama. I know it's crazy." She took a breath. "I miss the snakes. Do you remember the snakes?"

Her mother had been staring at the ceiling fan. When she looked at Lily, alarm crossed her face like headlights passing over a wall and her eyes darted away, back again, and then settled into a hesitant recognition.

"Julie?"

Color escaped Lily's cheeks. Julie was the primary nurse. Lily crossed the room and rested her hand on the doorknob.

"Julie, honey, before you go, would you get this weed off the table? It's not really a suitable decoration, wouldn't you agree?"

Now, stomach warm with an acute emptiness, Lily sets the teddy bear on the kitchen counter and lets her body sink into her bed. The air feels stale to her. She wonders how much time she actually spends in her own apartment. Through the wall, she hears a young couple fighting about flower arrangements for their upcoming wedding, and she allows her mind to slip into a familiar daydream: her body, arms spread, chest smacked with solid air, watching the sidewalk slip closer.

She stands. It's not so much a longing to die as an aversion to living.

She listens to her heart knock at her ribs.

The things he's left her have special places in her apartment. At first, she was unsure of what to do with the attention. It never scared her, exactly; to her he was just another snake testing its boundaries. She enjoyed watching him grow more and more bold, and for a while she felt a little like a charmer coaxing him out of a wicker basket to dance. It was almost amusing, the way he nosed his way into the details, the bold way he inserted himself in forms unexpected, yet his cowardly refusal to move past the fringes.

After a while, though, it was more about company. Being cared for. He seemed to know the things she needed. A few boxes of chocolates when her mom started mistaking her for her Nana. A nice pair of winter boots when the snow came in blankets and she realized Alabama hadn't prepared her for this much cold. A picture frame when she got homesick. A dress that inexplicably looked exactly like one her mother used to wear. Flowers on the occasional ordinary day. He seemed perched on the edge of her world, content to watch and provide, unwilling to participate. She allowed him to cozy into her structured life, and he never moved past his own

boundaries.

Often it occurred to her to search for his face in the crowds around her. She never did, though. She couldn't see the point. It didn't matter.

She turns to the teddy bear. "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

The teddy bear's black eyes reflect the dull glow of lamplight.

With a sigh, Lily moves to put on a cup of coffee. Her mother would shoot her a look for that—"Coffee before bed?"—but that, too, doesn't matter, and she watches the water trickle through the filter. The smell makes her think of a life years past, and she wants to call her mother and ask her, again and again, "Do you remember—?" Her hand grips the counter's edge. "Do you remember, Mama?" she says aloud. She tried to go looking for frogs, once, but the city had scared them off, even by the river. Her knuckles are turning white. In one fluid motion she throws a mug, hard, at the wall, and it leaves a sizable hole and shatters on the ground. "Fuck you, Mama!" she shouts, but she doesn't mean it.

The teddy bear looks skeptical. Lily breathes. The mug makes small clinking sounds, and is still.

She is rattled with the knowledge that nothing can ever be regained.

Quiet, Lily crosses to open her shades to the night. Evening air spreads like liquid amber and the people far below look like insects, trapped and twitching and golden.

Jake stands in the rain, hitting his heel against an abandoned apartment's fire escape. A few people walk by and glance in his direction, eyes suspicious under wet hoods. He gives them a nod. The rain pools in the collar of his jacket. He shifts his weight from one leg to the other, waiting, a dull ache squeezing in his temples. Through the sheets he can almost see himself at twelve years old, holding pages under running water. So many years ago. A few times he looks to his feet, half-expecting to see himself run off his skin, circling a drain.

It's been days since he's seen Lily, and his insides have started to tremble with the weight of not knowing.

He looks up at the peeling blue door, the empty porch. The rain, somehow, makes her apartment look smaller. He thinks for a moment that he would give everything he owned just to see a light in the window.

The last time he saw her was in a deli near her work. She was chewing her sandwich with measured movements, clenching and unclenching her

jaw in a strange sort of rhythm. When he saw her face he felt a hollowness in his chest. She had been visiting the hospital more and more frequently, he knew, often leaving long after the city had made its brilliant transition into night.

He would follow her home, those nights—not for the same reasons he used to, but because he was concerned by her slow steps, her movements controlled, the way her head was permanently bent toward the ground. She would stare at the pavement, the smears of city lights so much like wet paint.

When Lily left the deli, she did not take her usual route home. She walked, pace steady, through throngs of commuters. He hung back to give her space. It was not uncommon for her to disappear in a crowd, and when he lost sight of her he decided to double back and wait at her apartment. It was a bright day, and the streets felt more alive than usual. A woman selling jewelry under a small tarp reeled him in with a grin and asked, “When’s the last time you bought your wife something special?” Food vendors assaulted him with free samples, businessmen walked brisk in the sunlight and said, “Good afternoon.” When he turned the corner onto Lily’s street his chest felt buoyant. He picked a stair on the porch of an apartment across the street from hers and busied himself with a crossword puzzle, glancing up occasionally to see if she was home. Whoever she had been visiting in the hospital was probably not doing well, he reasoned. It would explain her behavior. He was proud of her commitment to others. He daydreamed—the two of them waking up in yellow morning light, the way he imagined her hair would make brown puddles on her pillow. He was relaxed. It would be okay.

He waited outside all night. She did not come home.

He went to his own apartment at the first crack of day and slept a few hours, uneasy with worry. It felt as though his insides had come unknotted. That morning when he went to the café she was nowhere to be found. He stood outside the hospital for hours. It was as though she had disappeared, a whisper escaping the city’s teeth.

The days passed on slow streams.

He moves, now, feeling the water in his ears. A woman on the third floor puts on an old jazz tune that sails down with the rain, buzzing, probably vinyl. He crosses to Lily’s apartment. In the window he sees darkness, and on it, an image of himself: eyes red-rimmed, dripping wet, locks of hair stuck to his forehead like fat leeches. He wraps his fist with his jacket and draws back. He checks that the street is empty and then thrusts forward;

with a sound almost like a wind chime, the window bursts around his arm. He ducks inside, dodging the shards. Water swings in and spreads on Lily’s hardwood floor. He doesn’t bother with a light. His steps are cautious, silent, and in the kitchen he finds pieces of a broken mug on the tile which he gathers gingerly and drops into a trashcan.

Jake straightens up and looks around. The shadows are long, lean, almost curious the way they reach for him. A stuffed bear stares. The rain is making tracks into the house. A bouquet of tulips he gave her is wilting on the counter, the heads dipped like horses kneeling for water.

By the river, the air is thick with moisture. Lily can feel the rain sliding through her clothes, pooling in her shoes and the hollows behind her collarbones. She sits on a park bench and watches the Charles crawl toward her. Her eyes are steady on the water’s ecstatic surface.

She spent the past two nights on a hospital couch, watching the nurses watch her. She could feel their pity, and she detested their soft eyes. Julie came over and gave her a pat. Her mother’s lucidity was fluid, rushing away in streams, and the workers were eager to let her know how brave she was for being there. To her the word meant nothing. Her bones felt tired. Many times her mother had been terrified of Lily’s presence, her eyes widening as she curled into herself, the color slowly draining from her mind, and Lily had begun to think of her as Eleanor. A woman in her own right, an embodied clean slate. They were something like strangers. Lily often imagined her love for her mother sticking to her insides like moss.

She became mildly attached to a soap opera they featured in the waiting room.

In the cafeteria she watched family members drained from holding tightly to lives that were pulling away. She envied them. At least they would be left with nothing, no tethers, no confused shell. The daydream morphed: her mother, sliding on air, the hem of her hospital gown winking up. Lily stabbed at her chicken nuggets.

At noon she left with the intention of going back to her apartment. The clouds were knitting together then, sky preparing to swing open. There was no lightning, and she decided to blame this on the city itself. People around her were bobbing along with their umbrellas. A man with a gold tooth tried to give her a flyer for a comedy show. Taxis made slick sliding sounds, sent puddles leaping like tiny waves of frogs. She stepped over

the shoes of an elderly man propped against dirty red brick, a cardboard sign at his feet. Gutters spit out dirty water and garbage bobbed along like steamboats. She found, after a while, that she was not going home. The city pulled her along, her shoulders leaning under its weight, and she smiled when the rain soaked through to cool her skin.

A strip of green and sidewalk lined the river, benches positioned along the grass so Bostonians from one side could sit and admire the concrete landscape of the other. It was an impressive spread, Lily thought. She sat as the first drops of rain licked down her arm.

Now the cars behind her seem too quiet, and a woman passes on a bicycle with a whimpering toddler strapped into a small seat behind her. Lily listens to the air dip near her ears, imagines the whole of Boston seeking shelter. On her thigh a raindrop sits upright, perfect and unviolated. She is proud of its fearlessness.

Somewhere far off, thunder tumbles through the clouds.

On the shore a garter snake slips in and out of the shallow water. It is casual, letting its tail drag through the grass before wriggling into the Charles again, and when Lily looks at it nothing registers for a few moments. It seems to bow to her, and she feels something warm in her chest. She thinks of the lake, tests the weight of the memory. Perhaps it is heavier now that it is hers alone, but she isn't sure; all she can feel is the whip of humidity, the veins of lightning cracking open the air, the thrill of seeing another head slip over the surface. She imagines her mother, the old blue dress, the way wind lifted her hair into a salute. Lily smiles and her shoulders loosen. Water pushes over the snake's head and it makes a curve toward her. She leans over and the snake looks at her, tongue flickering — playful, as though imitating the river itself.

Without warning she begins to laugh. It is a full-bellied sound, and the people walking nearby glance at her with irritation.

She slips out of her shoes and when the tears slide down her cheeks they mix with the raindrops and she keeps laughing.

She is running and when the lightning finally comes it is one bright flash that illuminates the whole sky—different from what she remembers, as though all the bright veins of her childhood have split open. The river sends a shock through her body and she runs, still, her limbs slowing as the current begins to carry her into the city, the tips of her hair grazing the surface like a thousand tiny heads.

The Gift of Time

by *Elabzar Rao*

Ellen Zivkin gave her husband a pocket watch for his thirtieth birthday. It was not something that Paul particularly needed. Like most people of his time and place, he could get a digital readout of the hour from a number of devices. However, Paul was an active admirer of things from the distant past. The house that he and Ellen lived in, which in spite of its cleanliness always smelled of mildew, served as a gallery for his profuse collection. Wooden and bronze statuettes and other bric-a-brac densely populated the furniture, most of which was solid and shapely and previously owned for more than one generation prior to his own. Though a computer sat on the mahogany desk in the spare room, Paul still listened to a valve radio that had to warm up after clicking on one of the Bakelite knobs, he still wound up a phonograph that echoed music through a big brass horn, he still watched television shows on the glass tube of a refurbished console, and he still read from the browned, musty pages of early edition books. Thus, Paul thought the old watch was remarkable even before he ever used it.

Shortly after tearing away the gift wrapping and opening the box, Paul's deep-set eyes beamed at the small but heavy piece of antiquated mechanics that he had dug out from the folds of crumbled newsprint. As he delicately turned the timepiece over in his fingers, watching the light travel through the baroque etchings on its silver case like a stream of clear water split into an intricate maze of tiny cracks, he felt again the familiar pleasure and sense of purpose from inheriting what someone had spent long, intimate hours crafting. Ellen shared these feelings, though it was mostly because she could perceive them in her husband. A dark-haired, baby-faced woman with sympathetic eyes and a frequent yet genuine smile, Mrs. Zivkin took as much interest in people as Mr. Zivkin took in the objects once made by them. Thus, it was Paul's face that she focused her attention on while he carefully splayed the watch's hunter case about its hinge as if he were shucking a fresh clam that he wished to somehow keep alive. When the timepiece was open, Paul studied the calligraphic Arabic numerals that seemed to float behind the shining crystal lens of the dial like slivers of wet ink. Then, noticing the absence of a maker's name on the face of the watch, he closely examined an inscription on the inside of the case lid. The lettering, which

was of a style similar to nineteenth century script, simply read: To change time, pull crown upwards and turn clockwise only.

Responding to the sudden furrow in her husband's brow, Ellen explained that the keeper at the curios shop, where she had purchased the watch, had told her that he was the recent link in a chain of dealers who had failed to trace the origin of the article to any kind of reputable business or individual. While such anonymity had initially made Paul as curious as the others, he was not disappointed by the lack of reputation, as he regarded himself not as a collector of names but of craft. Thus, he was genuinely pleased by the gift his wife had bestowed upon him and thanked her with a kiss as she ran her smooth fingernails up the back of his cropped hair. And later that night, the couple made love in the kind of slow, exploratory way that they used to when they first began sharing a bed.

The following morning Paul and Ellen awoke to the beeping of a digital alarm clock, which, on account of its usual silence, was one of the few pieces of technological modernity that Paul tolerated in the house. The Zivkins drank instant coffee and ate granola bars between the bathroom and the trip to work. Ellen, a third-grade teacher, drove the car to a public elementary school far outside the city, while Paul took a bus across the river and then a subway train to his office in the financial district, where he carried out administrative work for an international business firm. The first thing Paul had to do when he arrived at his office flat on the thirty-third floor of a glass skyscraper was to prove he was there. This usually simple task of signing in was done on an employee time clock terminal mounted to the first post in a row of supports that stood along the center isle of the flat, dividing the symmetrical landscape of cubicles like a reflection. Paul typed his personal identification number on the keypad of the terminal and pressed the IN button. Square, flat letters on the digital display read: EMPLOYEE CLOCKED IN. Then Paul reached into the side pocket of his pants and took out the watch that his wife had given him the night before. There were other clocks in the office flat, but none so accurate as the atomic time clock used for payroll. Its digital screen now read: 8:42 AM. Paul opened his pocket watch. The delicate hands of the dial were scissored to 8:41. In keeping with the instructions inscribed on the inside of the watch case, Paul gently pulled up the serrated knob and turned it clockwise until the hands of the dial pointed to 8:42. But when he looked up at the employee clock again, it had by then changed to 8:43 AM. Paul turned the crown on his watch again, just a touch. Then he looked up at

the employee clock again. It now read: 8:44 AM. Paul turned his watch to 8:44. The atomic clock now read: 8:45 AM. Paul now thought to turn his watch to 8:46. But after he did this, the employee clock read: 8:47 AM. He then very slowly turned the knob of the watch while keeping his eyes on the employee time clock. The last digit of the employee time clock changed one after the other, and it occurred to Paul that someone was playing a joke on him. He looked about the office. The heads of employees he had not noticed when he first arrived were bobbing in and out the tops of the cubicle walls, but as usual, no one was paying attention to him. Paul put the back of the watch against his ear and heard only the softest ticking within, like that of an insect steadily leaping from one blade of grass to another. Then he leaned past the side of the post so he could clearly see the wall at the back of the flat. Near the top of the wall was mounted a row of five analog clocks, four of which were set to the different time zones of major cities in other parts of the world. Keeping his eyes on the five clocks, he turned the crown of his pocket watch. The hands of all the wall clocks rotated in sync as if by remote control. Paul tried this from different positions within the office and with the same results until he found himself back in front of the time clock terminal, whereupon he felt someone's hand slap him on the back. He turned to find Mr. Davis, the office operations supervisor, standing behind him. The stout, broad-faced sexagenarian in a dark blue suit sternly informed Paul that he appreciated him staying late but could not pay him overtime. Paul smiled and nodded enough for Mr. Davis to move on, and then he looked to the employee time clock again. It read: 6:36 PM. His own watch showed 6:35, but he dared not bother to change it again. Instead he typed his personal identification number into the keypad of the time clock terminal and pressed the OUT button. The digital display above the keypad read: EMPLOYEE ALREADY CLOCKED OUT.

When Paul returned home from work that evening, Ellen asked him what they should order for dinner. Having convinced himself that he was not well, Paul told her he was not hungry. And while Ellen later ate pizza in front of the television, her husband lay supine across the cracked leather of a worn Chesterfield sofa in the living room as he tried remembering the lost hours of the day. He could somewhat recall sitting at his desk in the office flat and looking at the computer screen as his fingers tapped the keys; but that being what he always did, he could not be sure if this was that day or any of the previous days at work. Filled with troubling thoughts, only occasionally interrupted by Ellen gently placing her slender hand over his forehead to see if he had a fever, Paul remained on the sofa until he joined

his wife in bed.

The following morning, however, Paul felt he was fine and told his wife so. He and Ellen had their coffee and granola bars together. Then they kissed and wished each other a good day. Ellen drove off in the car, and Paul walked to the bus stop down the block, where others had already gathered in silence. The bus came and took him and the other commuters out of the neighborhood and over the bridge. Paul and some of the other passengers ejected from the bus when it stopped beside a subway station. They all flocked downstairs, were churned through the turnstile, and blended into a new, larger group of others waiting for the train.

The train came and opened its line of doors, but it was already too crowded. Paul looked at an illuminated clock that was hanging like a sign from the cement ceiling above the platform. He still had plenty of time to get to work, so he let the train pass and waited for the next one. While waiting for the next train, he took out his pocket watch. It pointed out 8:07. He looked up at the hanging clock dial—its own hands pointed to 8:09. He wasn't sure how accurate the train station's clock was, but he decided to set his watch to its time. With a hollowness opening in his stomach, he pulled out the knob on his pocket watch and turned it clockwise until the sharp tip of the minute hand pierced the fourth dot after the 1. Then he looked up at the hanging clock—it now advertised 8:11. So Paul set his own watch to 8:11. But the hanging clock now showed 8:13, and another train was waiting at the station with open doors. Paul let the train rattle past and turned his watch all the way to 9:00. The hanging clock now showed 9:02. He closed his watch with a sigh, slipped it back into the side pocket of his pants, and squeezed into the next train that had already appeared.

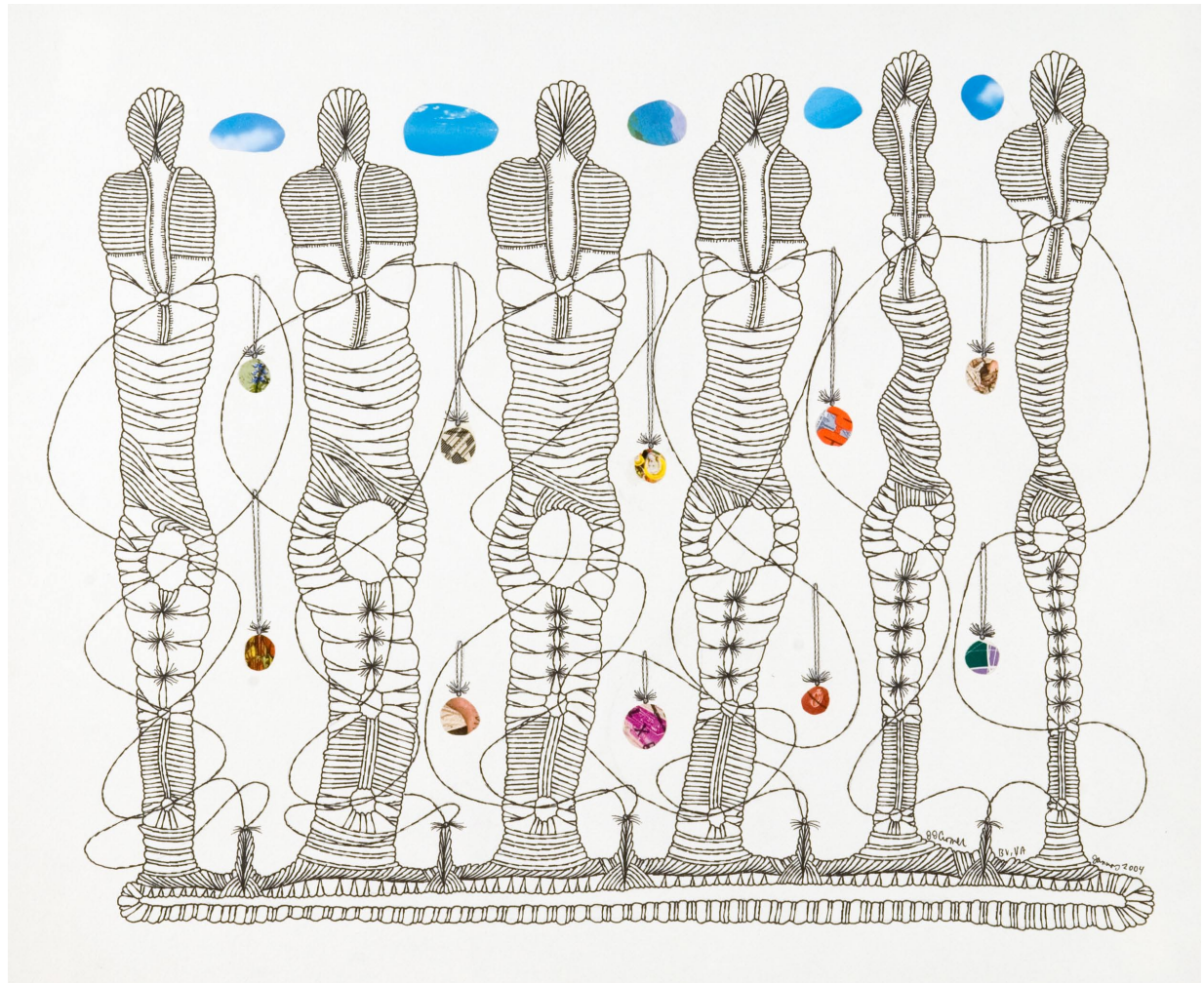
When Paul arrived at work, the office flat already seemed wide awake. Freshly groomed heads peeked over the walls of the cubicles while the taping of keys and the rolling in and out steel drawers mingled with the automated sounds of beeping, humming, and ringing. Paul went straightaway to the employee time clock terminal and signed in at 9:43 AM. He took out his pocket watch and flipped it open. The watch showed 9:42. Paul stared closely at the face of his watch, deciding what to do next, when he suddenly heard a man loudly clearing his throat. Paul turned to find Mr. Davis standing before him again. The supervisor knitted his bushy gray eyebrows and suggested that he get a new watch. Paul apologized for being late and then hurried to his cubicle.

He sat at his desk and booted up his computer. When the monitor brightened in his face, Paul stared blankly at the screen for a moment.

Then he took his watch back out and swiveled around in his chair to face the row of five clocks on the wall. He opened the watchcase and pulled up the crown. As his thumb and forefinger slowly began rotating the knob on his watch, the hands on all the wall clocks once again turned clockwise at the same rate as the hands on his watch. He stopped turning the crown when the clock that was set to his time zone showed 1:30, at which time he turned back around in his swivel chair to find that a document he was supposed to work on that day was not only displayed on the monitor screen but nearly finished. Paul tried to remember working on the report. With the estrangement and vagueness of recalling a dream, a series of blurred images flashed though his mind—his fingers typing on the computer keyboard, returning from his usual lunch at a fast-food restaurant that was around the corner from the office building. This activity could have happened any day, but the proof of it being that day was now staring Paul in the face. He gazed at the monitor until a smile crept over his glowing face. Then he looked at his watch again, and with his top teeth biting into the bottom of his smile, he turned the knob clockwise until the hands of the watch pointed to 6:00.

As usual, Paul left the office a little after six o'clock. On his way to the subway station, he stopped at the foot of a towering art deco building that had a large, bronze clock face built high into its terracotta facade. Paul took out his watch, and as he effortlessly turned its small knob, the colossal minute hand of the building's clock quickly swung around a full revolution. A moment later at the subway station, he turned his watch ahead minute by minute until there was a train stopped beside the platform. Then, while he was standing in the crowded train car, he wound the watch forward until he found himself standing in the bus. And while riding on the bus he moved time until he was sitting across from Ellen at the dinner table, watching her rake out a pile of rice from a Chinese takeout carton.

The following day Paul turned his watch ahead after he caught the bus, after he boarded the subway, and then after he arrived at work. The day after that, he simply woke up and cranked the watch hands around until the sun set. Save for the vaguest memory of an indistinguishable day, he felt as if he had never even left his home. The weekend came quickly, and he



and Ellen decided to take the car to a place they knew by the shore. When they got stuck in highway traffic, Paul took out his watch and turned its crown until he and Ellen were walking over the wet sand with their pants rolled up and their shoes in one hand. Every morning of the following work week, Paul set the watch ahead to the evening so that it felt as if he had not left his home in five days. And by the close of the following weekend, he just turned the hands of his watch until the next weekend arrived. Soon,

all of Paul's days felt like hours, his months like weeks, and his years like months. He no longer felt the wait of work or travel or even simple errands. His watch moved him quickly through the post office, the DMV, the supermarket, and anywhere else with a line. He also turned the hands of his timepiece through dental work and any other medical appointments. And

The temperature in the bedroom suddenly dropped, and the sun rose from the west, casting a pale light through the closed but diaphanous curtains of the window.

if he had trouble sleeping, he would wind the hands forward until the sun rose. Once, when he had jury duty, he advanced his watch until the defendant was pronounced guilty of vehicular homicide. He felt a little ashamed then, as if he were cheating his way out of what others had to endure. But he reminded himself again that many other people carried devices such as cell phones,

laptops, video games, music and movie players; and like them, he was simply passing the time.

However, Paul stopped using the watch a short decade after receiving it as a gift. Ellen, who was now thirty-five years old, had discovered she was ill. A biopsy had been carried out on a lump she discovered in her left breast. The small bit of tissue that had been vacuumed out of her though a needle proved to be malignant. The tumor was surgically removed, but some of the cancer cells had already escaped into her bloodstream. She began chemotherapy treatments and stopped teaching. Paul drove her to the clinic each week and anxiously waited there until her appointment was finished. No matter how long the days now felt, he decided they could not have been long enough.

After two long years of chemotherapy, it began to appear that the treatments could not kill the cancer cells faster than they were multiplying. Drawings and get well cards from former students continued arriving in the mail as faculty members from the school Ellen had taught at visited her bedside at home, where she now remained for the entirety of each day. She was also visited by some members of a church she began attending not long after she quit teaching. Though it was not something he grew up with, Paul sometimes joined them in holding hands and praying over his wife. Then one night a Hospice nurse took the stethoscope off her ears and softly announced to Paul that his wife was now waiting for him in Heaven.

Paul had Ellen's body taken by plane to her old hometown, where she was buried in her family's cemetery. After the funeral, he spent five days

at the house of Ellen's parents before returning to the city. Though Mr. Davis had told him to take all the time off he needed, Paul went back to work immediately after he returned. He worked quietly and methodically in his cubicle day after day without taking any time to wander the aisles or gossip with the other employees. And when he returned home it was to an empty house, where he ate alone and waited for the light of morning to return.

Then came Paul's forty-third birthday, which was his first birthday without Ellen. He went to work that day as usual and returned home in the evening. For a while he sat on the edge of the bed with the lights off. Then he turned on one of the bedside lamps and slid open the bottom drawer of the nightstand, where he had left his pocket watch. Paul took out the watch and turned the silver case over in his fingers as if he were examining the old gift for the first time. Then he gently split the case open, whereupon he noticed that the watch was still ticking, though he could not recall winding it in the last three years. Paul glanced over at his alarm clock, which sat beside the tassel-shaded lamp on the nightstand. Then he stared a moment longer at the face of his watch before finally pulling the crown up. Pinching the knob tightly, he began forcing it counterclockwise until he heard something inside the timepiece crack. He glanced at the alarm clock again. The square, red numbers of the digital display read: 8:33 PM. His watch pointed to 8:32. There came the sound of something akin to the grinding of glass as he continued turning the knob of his watch counterclockwise. But nevertheless, the minute hand followed, moving its way from 8:32 to 8:31. Paul looked at the alarm clock, and his heart skipped a beat. The digital display now read: 8:32 PM. Trembling now with fear and excitement, Paul turned the crown until the hands of his watch pointed to 8:25. The alarm clock now read: 8:26 PM. And when he wound back his watch all the way to 5:00, the numbers on the alarm clock followed as the temperature in the bedroom suddenly dropped, and the sun rose from the west, casting a pale light through the closed but diaphanous curtains of the window.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the alarm clock, Paul began continuously turning the crown of his watch counterclockwise. All the while, the glowing red digits of the alarm clock rapidly flickered down from one number to the next, as the light in the room wavered between dark and bright, and the temperature rose and fell and rose and fell, over and over again. Even when his hands grew stiff with pain, Paul kept on turning back the hands of his watch as blurred visions flooded his eyes—the insides of crowded buses and subway cars, the computer screen at work, other employees trying to get his attention, the empty house, a man's face wilting in the medicine cabinet mir-

ror of his bathroom. Then memories of Ellen, clear and bright, flashed into these visions until her fleeting image slowed into an enduring moving picture, eclipsing whatever else that could have otherwise been seen or heard.

Though Paul now grew very tired, he kept winding back his watch, seeing that the alarm clock followed every turning of the hands. However, time itself was not turning back but rather moving ahead faster than ever before. For the alarm clock, along with every other clock in the world, was not regressing minute-by-minute but advancing twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes for every minute that Paul turned the hands of his watch back. Yet Paul did not lose his faith. Even just before the watch fell from his wrinkled hands to the hardwood floor and stopped its ticking, he believed he was about to see her again.

The Gypsy Sachet Award in Letters and Biography

Anna Pennington

letter

Hello,

My name is Anna Pennington. I never know what to say in these things, it's like a first date. I feel like I'm spending the entire time making doe eyes and secretly trying to impress you. I work with kids, at-risk kids. Kids who have intense emotional or behavioral problems. (Does that show you that I'm a good person? Are you secretly beguiled by my obviously caring heart?).

Sorry I always get so weird in these things, I start with such good intentions and next thing I know I'm four beers in and telling you I think your pretty. So pretty. Trying to be witty but coming on too strong. Thank you for your consideration and I promise, if rejected, no late night phone calls where you have to patiently explain that it's not me it's you...

All the Best,
Anna Pennington

James Claffey

biography, by DeWitt Brinson & James Claffey

A master of French Letters, James slipped out of Ireland one night when the moon turned a lonely ball shade of blue. He has never chanced back. His compass points toward the future; his glass' bottom points toward the sky; and his bluebird eyes are two wars poignant, flitting for an avocado branch. The moon still dangles beneath like an unused homeland. James' letters are renowned for their firmness and girth of meaning. Like an Irish Elephant, he has not forgotten his many lost loves and he flies close to the rim of the world maintaining a mighty hold on his thick quill pen.

Clarence Young

letter

A professor told me writing must include a gift. I've tried writing by those words for over 20 years. Probably the only reason I'm sane and honest.

Joe Kilgore

letter

I'm submitting a story for potential publication in your magazine because I find your title particularly engaging. I can only hope you'll find my story the same.

Fiction is a bit of a drug, isn't it? I suppose one could overdose on it, though I'm not sure anyone would want to be found naked and alone in a seedy room, the open pages of a collegiate anthology flapping in the breeze of an open window. Of course it seems one will do just about anything for fame these days, so perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps the next tabloid headline will scream "Famous model found dead atop an open issue of *Fiction Fix*." We can dream, can't we?

If you like my story and want to know more about me and my fiction, you can visit my website, www.joekilgore.com That way I don't have to drone on about my writing here. Did I mention the story I'm submitting is entitled *The Voice*. And it's 2000 words. Ergo, the name of the file. Just didn't want you to think I wrote it in 2000. No one wants to read old stories these days. Though I find the best ones seem to be that. Old, I mean.

Thanks for your time and consideration. There's really very little else we can give one another, is there?

Fiction Fix

Marty Correia

letter

Dear *Fiction Fix*,

I am a fiction-writing lesbian husband living in the East Village with arts activist Kate Conroy, my spouse of 15 years. My bio used to include our geriatric dog, Lu, but she died last year. I also used to mention drinking lots of Single Malt, but kidney stones have me sipping seltzer nowadays. Luckily, as I get more boring, my writing seems to get more exciting. Right now, I am writing a novel about three generations of magicians from Bridgeport, Connecticut, complete with a kidnapping and counterfeit cash.

My work has appeared in small literary journals and I have read at Blue-stockings Bookstore and Dixon Place. Previous work experience related to my writing career include jobs as a cab driver, synagogue janitor, phone sex salesperson, candle factory line worker, dry cleaner, and Easter bunny.

Please consider the attached short story for publication in *Fiction Fix*. This story, *The Space Between*, is an excerpt from my novel, *Divine Corners*. I chose this excerpt because it fits best with what I have read on *Fiction Fix* and the excerpt is a stand-alone piece that can be consumed without causing that empty feeling one can get when taking just a bite of something bigger. Please feel free to bring me any editorial suggestions. I welcome criticism and take it very well.

Thank you for your consideration. Please don't worry about me with all those jobs. I've worked for the same place for five years now and it's a stable job. See? I told you I am getting more and more boring.

Sincerely,
Marty Correia

Alex Miller

biography

I'm an editor at a small newspaper in the hills of Tennessee. I could use a vacation.

Brad Hall

biography

Brad Hall is a substitute teacher. He wears a beard to hide his true identity as a beardless person.

Lauren Liebhaber

letter

My name is Lauren Liebhaber and I am a rising senior at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. I am an English major with a concentration in creative writing. I am sending along a copy of a story I wrote for a fiction class taken my junior year about a family from the perspective of a kitchen table. Though I have classified it as fiction I derived the inspiration from my own, very large and very colorful family.

There are certain aspects of a house that truly make it a home, like a front porch with a rocking chair, a play room, or in my case, a kitchen table. We often neglect to realize just how integral these things are to our daily lives and how they enable some of our fondest memories. This is the idea I have explored in my attached story "Table Talk." I hope that this story will make people stop, if just for a moment, and consider that it's not about how much you possess that makes you rich or your life, fulfilled. It's about what you do with what you have. It is understanding that what makes a house a home is not the things in it but the memories and experiences attached to them. By this standard even the poorest man could be the happiest homeowner.

As an aspiring writer I cannot express how proud I would be to have my work featured in a publication as respectable as yours.

I can be reached by cell phone at xxx-xxxx or by email at lrlieb08@stlawu.edu

Best Regards,
Lauren Liebhaber



The Girl in the Yard

by *Brandon Bell*

Rye woke at a diagonal, legs aching not from work or exercise, but sleep, how thrilled he was to be thirty. He unkinked himself from the sheets and started his Sunday routine more leisurely than normal since Erin, his wife, had taken their son to her parents' house for the week. Heading downstairs to the bathroom, Rye passed the landing window, in which white flesh scraped the corner of his eye. Three steps later, he doubled back to the window to look at the naked girl asleep in his yard.

Face pressed to the glass he took in the girl's gleaming white side, left leg kicked like a baseball pitcher winding up. It was Sam, teenage daughter of the Elders, across-the-street neighbors with silver hair to whom Rye could relate only when exhausted. When her ribs expanded, he realized she could've been dead, dumped in the yard raped and strangled.

"Bitch," he said of Erin. She was three hundred miles away, leaving him to deal with this mess. He ran downstairs, tightening the belt of his robe until it dug into his soft sides. In the living room he stalled at a window view of the girl's breasts. Moral duty spun him from this sight, primal awakening nipped by feigned disgust.

"Jesus H., Erin," he said, pedaling into the pink summer morning. Instead of going to the girl, he went next door, home of Helen Smutz. The widow answered Rye's knock with a frown on her sun-leathered face.

"What?" she asked. Always a delight.

Rye, a nail biter, fought the urge to gnaw his fingers by curling his hands as if he had cerebral palsy. "Can you get my back on something?" he said, hoping to sound young, as he saw himself. "But you gotta keep it hush, feel me?"

Helen smiled at this invitation to conspire. "What can I do to help?" she said, opening the door all the way.

"There's a girl," he nodded toward his yard, whispering, "the Elders' little one? She passed out in my yard. But hold up—she's kind of in like a casual state. I had nothing to do with it. I don't even know why she's there, I swear."

"She's in her skivvies?"

"Yeah, but worse. She's butt-assed naked, if you follow."

"Doesn't surprise me much. I told Ellen she had no business getting pregnant, old as she was. She and Mitch can't stay up later than eight without nodding off. You should thank god she graduates this year. Raising a little man ain't easy when there's a delinquent running around all hours with her ass hanging out. If your boy asks for a telescope, you better believe the moon in the sky ain't the one he'll be using it to watch."

"Alright, I think—"

"He'll use it to ogle little missy's booby parts."

Rye couldn't fight off his fingers any longer. He ripped at his thumb, speaking with a splinter of nail floating in his gums: "Yeah, alright, but I really need you to help me on this."

A blistering smile fell over her face. "Of course, dear," she said, shoving Rye toward home. "Let me handle it. Don't you let this fester even a second in your head."

He ran home, first stop: toilet. Lifting the lid, taking aim he caved to one last peek at Sam. But when he reached the window, Helen was leading her out of the yard. He could only see their ankles, for a plaid comforter covered them both like nomads of another world hiding from the sun.

He neglected yard work for online porn and cold showers. Neither cleaned his head of the girl. Taking care not to gawk at her body had left him to wallow in felonious imagination. He would never act on such thoughts; he simply hated his wiring for making him want to, and for making him so different from Erin. His wife believed in an invisible hand of love that guided kindred spirits to one another. Fly open in front of the computer, the hand of lust ruled over love. For why else would Rye blow an entire day emptying himself into wads of toilet paper.

He slept on the couch in case she returned. And she did, a sight through cracked blinds, naked on her back, palms skyward in the mercy position. Plastered to the window, he tested himself to look no lower than her chin, proudly blurring her shape in the edge of his vision. Until he heard the banging of garbage men tossing trashcans. Her body was shielded from the street by only a neat row of hedges. In minutes the gruff men would rattle up and devour her. Dressed in yesterday's clothes, Rye grabbed a blanket from the couch and set out to save her. Holding the blanket as a privacy curtain, he tracked his forward movement by watching his feet shish through the grass. For a second he looked out for the garbage men, a distraction that

ended in tripping on the girl's ankle. Their twisted bodies and the blanket set the scene of a profane picnic.

"I didn't see anything," he assured her, blindly giving her the blanket. Her shower chemical scent sent Rye out of his head. After she wrapped herself, he permitted himself a peek: the blanket opened at her feet like the ruffled skirt of a Christmas tree, and the freckles on her shoulders begged his fingertips to connect them. "What do you think you're doing?" he snapped, quashing his illegal hunger with unsustainable authority. As with Oliver, he felt self-conscious when disciplining, like a sellout to the kids. He

After she wrapped herself, he permitted himself a peek: the blanket opened at her feet like the ruffled skirt of a Christmas tree, and the freckles on her shoulders begged his fingertips to connect them.

turned good cop: "Are you okay? How's your dad? Helen thinks he can't keep up."

"I, um—"

"Nope, fuck it. No sweat.

Keep the blanket." He clamored home, humiliated by his age. For an hour he paced the living room, trying to slow his heart, monitoring the now empty patch of grass. He needed to go to work, but

would never survive eight hours chained to a desk, not after his brush with Sam.

I crave excitement, he told himself, *I need mystery*.

He was horny.

Unable to fake a sore throat, he emailed-in sick to work. He remained at the computer to create a Facebook account. The frustrating "find friends" search pulled up unending pages of Sam Elders, most of them guys a thousand miles away. When he finally clicked a thumbnail for a Sam that could've been the girl in the yard, he was greeted by a blockade page that pretty much said: "Sam must grant you permission to spy on her." He pounded the desk, cursing CNN for overselling Facebook's lax privacy standards.

Conceding that electronic stalking wasn't for him, he decided to take the old-fashioned approach and stalk women in real life. Off to the grocery he went, in search of lonely housewives, ready to fill the extramarital void left by the disappearance of milkmen. Although it was a workday morning, the grocery was packed. He had to park by the far away marquee that announced second-run movies shown at the adjacent discount cinema. *Avatar* (No 3-D). *New Moon*. Passing through the automatic door, he scored a smile from a woman with broad hips and a soft stomach. When her pace slowed, his feet stuttered, unsure if he should stop until she did.

"Hey girl," he said, the best he could do.

"It's Denise, Erin's friend?" she said.

Sbit. He tried to wipe away his lecherous grin, but it was too late.

Loudly she gulped back an accusation: Tiger Woods, out trolling. "What're you doing, out shopping?" he asked.

She nodded, stabbed, "How's Erin?"

"Fantastic. Oh yeah. We should have you over some time."

"Okay, maybe. I'll give her a call."

"Great. I hope you do." He would have to craft a defense for Denise's forthcoming accusations, but that would come another day. He retrieved a prop shopping cart and pushed it into the store, continuing his search, weaving around elderly men and women and randomly entering the frozen food aisle. *Baby, you're so hot, you might melt all this stuff*. Gray-topped geriatrics clogged the floor with slow stuffed carts. He soon learned why.

"Remember shoppers," announced the overhead speaker, "today is senior citizen's day. Everyone over sixty-five gets five-percent off."

Son of a bitch. The store was crawling with old people. Rye was the only person too young to qualify for the discount. In the chip aisle, a man and woman with carts nuzzling noses, nodded at one another's long windedness. Rye knew old people were cheap, but the discount couldn't have been the sole reason they were at the store—senior day was a singles club for the elderly. Rye pictured them peeling off their clothes, rubbery skin on skin like latex gloves rolling off.

He decided to bury this image by, what the hell, shopping. He grabbed a bag of mixed nuts and salted sticks, Coke, frozen pizza, a twelve-pack of toilet paper. Jimmy Buffet was wasting away again on the overhead speakers. Rye returned to the registers and, entering lane ten, lined up behind a woman with blonde hair. Finally he had found someone near his age. Without moving a muscle she acknowledged him, giving a come hither invitation while keeping watch of the prices beeping on the checkout screen.

Rye slapped the soda, pizza and mixed nuts on the conveyer belt, balking at the toilet paper. *Everybody wipes*, he told himself, *but I'll be damned if I confess such a filthy habit to this woman*. As if for Rye's benefit, she casually sang along with the song. "But I know," she said, pausing with Jimmy Buffet and centering Rye in her sights, "it's my own damn fault."

Lust had always turned Rye crazy. College springs, when girls broke out skimpy shorts and tops that covered only inches of skin, he lost all control of his sweat glands and motor skills. Today it made him backhand the woman on the arm. She grabbed the smacked spot, ready to laugh if given a

reason to. No reason came, for he didn't know why he had slapped her. He could only mutter "my bad" while squeezing out of the lane, fleeing the store and leaving the groceries behind.

"Yeah, you too," Rye said before flipping his cell phone shut. Under the back porch light, he sat at the patio table and watched the empty side yard. An orange lightning bug floated through the yard, its glower stuck on. Cigarette smoke bled to Rye's nose. His groin dropped as if plunging down the first hill of a roller coaster, until he realized Helen, not Sam, was approaching.

"Evening," she said, peering through a screen of smoke. "Where's urines been?"

"Say what?" he asked. *Oh, yourins.* "They're at Erin's momma's for the week."

She gazed at him, orange-faced from cigarette glow. "I didn't peg you as big on the outdoors," she said. "Your little one must get bored out here, living in the sticks."

Oliver had enough toys, some more expensive than Rye's first car, to stave off boredom until puberty took over. "This is a good enough place to raise a kid," he said.

"A boy needs plenty of kin around. I've lived here since I had Bobby. I was a year out of high school and now he's, hmm, thirty-six so I guess I gave away my age. Ours was the first house in the neighborhood. For as long as I can remember, where you're sitting was just a floodplain. Your foundation holding up?"

He looked at his lap as if at a window to the dirt. "Survives Oliver playing *Dance Dance Revolution* twenty-four-seven."

"His twenty-hmm-what?"

Tree insects began chanting. Rye wondered what the bugs looked like, if they were bugs at all. He knew so little of the world right in front of him. Denise's questions about Erin, they could have been a test; had he answered correctly, he would be with her now. On sight he wanted her, but now he was relieved to be home and guilt-free. Even his desires were unknown.

"A week's a mighty long time for a wife to be away," he heard Helen saying. "Seems she leaves you alone more than a bit. Can't say I was away from Robert a single night. You eating square?"

He patted his stomach but didn't care to comment on how easy it

was to eat.

"I sit out here and watch for these hooligans," she said. "I seen gangs on TV. Never thought they'd come out this far, but," she trailed off to take a drag. "You know they glued a plaster pecker on my concrete yard horse. By the way, how old's your boy?"

"Oliver's seven," he said. "He made a plaster hand turkey last Thanksgiving but it looked like a hoof. Building a horse penis might be a little outside his artistic range."

"Well I never did say he did it. How old are *you*?"

His age was a depressing purgatory. The camera had changed its focus to the dependents he took to baseball practice, the grocery—shit, toilet paper. "Old," he said.

"I was teasing." Flirting? He wasn't sure. She was old but took care of herself. Smoking had fought off fat at the expense of deep wrinkles. Rye compared her imagined caramel body to Sam's.

"You getting into anything tonight?" he asked.

Laughing, she flicked the cigarette far into his yard. There were no boundaries. "Yeah, bed," she said. "My own."

He was too tongue-tied to claim she had misunderstood.

The slam of a car door rolled Rye out of bed. He hurried to the landing window. In the yard, Erin stood shading Sam. Sunscreen, a paperback and other trip doodads had been dumped in the grass; a canvas bag covered Oliver's face. The boy stumbled with outstretched mummy arms before lifting the bag for a peek of the girl.

Rye still couldn't look at her, wondered what long-term effects the sight would have on his son. He felt like a kid whose parents had returned from vacation to find party aftermath. Erin nudged Sam with her shoe. The girl scissored her legs and covered her chest. Erin demanded something, moving her mouth and shoulders at double speed like a silent movie actress. She gave a cold stare to Sam's defense, but in a blink she was bent over, hands on stomach, shaking. Crying? No, laughing.

This reaction baffled Rye. His wife would always be a mystery. Cracking one of her layers only led to another puzzle, like an infinite Russian doll hiding smaller clones inside. He couldn't turn away. He watched in dumb wonder, unblinking, amazed to be struck so suddenly by love.

According to Chelsea

by Grant Tracey

According to Chelsea, if John Cassavetes were Swedish, he'd be regarded as one of America's greatest filmmakers. But critics like Pauline Kael didn't get his work—they called him self-indulgent. Self-indulgent? No one calls Ingmar Bergman self-indulgent, but if he were an American from New York they would.

Chelsea always says uninhibited things like that, and I love it. We get together three or four times a week, usually early afternoons to talk movies or watch movies or talk about the articles I'm writing. I'm a cultural critic, "Our Man in the Midwest," for *Beyond X*, a hip zine out of Toronto. From Iowa, I write about pop culture old and new and how it shapes our lives. I also wrote a controversial piece on Jews becoming white. "Jack Black is Jewish," the article begins, "but you wouldn't know it from the white-bread roles he plays."

I liked that opening sentence, the play on role and roll. Anyway, recently I also tackled *Snapped*, an Oxygen Network fave about women behaving badly who lose it and kill their partners. One chemist triggered a stun gun to immobilize her ex, then tossed him alive into a fifty-five gallon drum full of hydrochloric acid. "Bitches," I can hear sweat-stained men in NASCAR caps, yelling at the TV while sipping a cold one. "Shame on you," Chelsea said, as the afternoon sky turned a weird shade of green. She agreed that the secondary audience—angry men—may indeed be the main audience for that series, but I ought not make assumptions about the viewers' backgrounds. "Come on, Wally. It's like you reached into a bowl of stereotypes and came up with a cliché." Her green eyes creased with the color of the sky.

"True. You've got me there." I held up my arms and promised to rewrite it.

She leaned against the couch in my apartment, sipped orange juice, and nodded. We've known each other for four months and she's always flipping me much-deserved shit.

Today she wore a charcoal-gray sweater and scarf. She always dresses nice.

And after we watched Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, which she found wonderfully depressing, she wondered if I thought marriage didn't

work.

I'm divorced. My wife, a college professor, left me for a young hot shot Creative Writer: Pushcart Prize winner, book with Penguin, another forthcoming, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. Chelsea's divorced too. She's a part-time secretary in the Math department—twenty-hours a week, full benefits—and her husband, a Math Professor, left her for a student. Her most recent relationship with Tyler, director of *Get Gone Graffiti*, is up and down. I think this is one of the down periods. "What do you mean, I mean, about marriage?"

"Well—" She turned and looked at me with this incredible energy in her eyes that kind of scares me because it's so blinding—it's like she takes you in completely. She said she disagreed with what I had to say about *Get Smart*: Season Four. I had argued that Max's marriage to 99 dragged the show into domestic entanglements and took away from the comedy. Max was funnier when he was single. She said that she liked my article overall, how I contextualized things: the 1960s, the murders of RFK and MLK, and how a mood of uncertainty crept into the show as occasionally members of KAOS went unpunished, but one thing she was certain of was that marriage on the show worked and 99 was tops in her book.

"I like 99 too. Who doesn't like Barbara Feldon? But I just don't think marriage on the show worked."

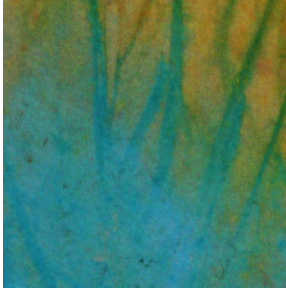
"I disagree," she said, and then looked through my shoulder, because she could sense my shyness. "Is it just the idea of marriage on the show or marriage in general that you object to?"

"I don't know."

According to Chelsea, it was the latter. I think she might be right.

Tyler showed up at my door a week or so after I first met Chelsea, saying he appreciated how I was helping her with the apartment, finding shit: a chintzy, particle-board desk for the computer, a red lamp, and a philodendron for the damn cat to chew on. I took it the pet wasn't his.

Tyler wanted to pay me for the gas, but I said I did it as a neighbor. He insisted, his eyes hard-edged stones, a corrugated five-spot in his left hand. Getting rid of graffiti in Cedar Falls had become a sprawling business, he said. Scrawls of blocky letters were everywhere: behind the coffee shop, under the overpass, and along the red bricks of our local utilities company. The cleanup made it hard for him to chauffeur her around—he didn't know why a woman in her forties still insisted on driving a 1979 Pinto. "Damn thing's always breaking down." He shook his head and gnawed at his upper



lip as if it were hardened chewing gum. “Take the money.” So, I did. Lincoln seemed unhappy.

Later, Chelsea thought it was weird that Tyler was so possessive. She pointed between me and her. “There’s nothing here.”

I like Chelsea. But I would never jeopardize anything by encroaching upon her relationship with Tyler. And I knew him or of him. Waterloo West. The hair was thinner than I remembered, the body less wiry. He was a year ahead of me in high school, and in summers had a blacktop business, smoothing driveways in the suburbs. During his senior year, a white phosphorous of rumors filled Waterloo. Some customers alleged that Tyler was over charging them—as much as three times for supplies. Despite the haze of scandal floating about, Tyler wound up Valedictorian and specialized in biochemistry at college. I guess he came up with a chemical mix that attacks Hip Hop words and symbols without beleaguering the buildings.

I once joked, flirted even, with Chelsea that is, that I loved talking to her and sometimes found myself so attracted to what she says, especially when she’s quoting me and my work, that I have to look at her eyes, her hair, her face, in order to avoid looking any other places, “and I never ever read any T-shirts you’re wearing.”

“I don’t wear T-shirts,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “I’m just trying to make light of things. I’m a minimizer.”

“Why do you minimize all the time? You shouldn’t do that.”

Why, indeed. Maybe she likes me too. I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I’m still in seventh grade. I’m forty-three; she’s forty, and I fear that I do “like her like her.”

The first thing about Chelsea that scared me was how much she knew. She said that I had sad, sorrowful eyes, the kind that carried pain and fatigue and hurt. I was surprised by her insight because I thought she was the one who had been hurt, and that’s why I had left my door open.

The night she moved into the apartment across from mine didn’t go well. Tyler’s voice was on edge—he was frustrated and his words were buried under shuddering boxes, knocked about end tables, and bookcases hitting baseboards. I think he even threw some things. Glass popped like underwater firecrackers.

Anyway, her voice, through the walls, was a flash of an earring—brittle yet bright. By contrast, Tyler’s words were heavy and dank like the inside of a cave. He yelled at her again, and then a door violently closed.

The next morning I left my door open while washing dishes and she knocked, asking if I had any eggs, and I offered her some and said I had heard her crying. “I wasn’t meaning to pry. Well that’s not exactly true. I was standing by the door, your door, with a very large glass.”

That made her laugh, and then she sat down and offered to show me a tattoo—*Vidi*, “That’s Latin for I saw.” She didn’t care for the other part of the quote because she didn’t like Julius Caesar. “Fascist creep.” But she liked the idea of seeing things, and then told me she had another tattoo, on her left breast—that one I wasn’t going to see—and then she made that comment about my eyes. And before I knew it, I was telling her all about Ginger, my ex, and how she left me for a Creative Writer, someone with more ambition.

I smiled, and as I talked about Ginger I wanted to tell Chelsea what I had really heard outside her door. Tyler felt that her love for him was always compromised, not fully there, and it hurt like hell. I wondered if he hurt her in return. Faint bruises shaped like Georgian Bay and Lake Huron marked Chelsea’s biceps. She noticed that I noticed and said it was nothing. Passion. “Some men scream your name. Tyler squeezes.” She forced a laugh. “I guess it’s his kind of personal tattoo.”

“I guess.”

Shit, when she was a kid Chelsea liked weaving her fingers through the metal webbing of her parent’s living room fan. As the twist of blades cut the heat she wondered how close she could come without nicking her hands. She held them up. “I still have my fingers.”

Weeks later, Chelsea said that I wrote beautifully and she couldn’t believe that Ginger would leave me for a writer because I’m a writer. And the topics I covered were “very ambitious.”

“Fiction is more sexy,” I said. I guess I’m just John Cassavetes to her new boyfriend’s Ingmar Bergman.

“Bullshit,” she said, her lower lip all pouty before a smile creased her eyes. “You’re both. Cassavetes and Bergman. But that’s beside the point. Divorce, separation, these things often come down to—,” she paused, “tension.”

“By tension, you mean sex?”

“Yeah. It’s always there among men and women.”

“No.”

Sometimes I feel like I'm still in seventh grade. I'm forty-three; she's forty. And I fear that I do 'like her like her'.

“Sure. Why do you think so many straight women love hanging out with gay men? I’ll tell you why—tension isn’t hovering, that’s why.”

There was a long pause, maybe too long as I wondered about Tyler—how much tension did he create when she didn’t want to have sex? The other night I think he was shattering plates in the sink. “I’m not gay,” I said.

We were sipping tomato soup at my kitchen table.

“I know.” She shrugged and adjusted the long braided scarf around her neck. My apartment was always a little cold. “I’m sure if I wore T-shirts, you would know what every one of them said.”

“Maybe so.”

“You haven’t given up on love have you? Because you shouldn’t,” she said, reaching across the table and lightly tapping a finger against the back of my hand. Her frizzy hair was frosted and her eyes the darkest green. She told me that I was a great listener, but the sadness of my eyes had to do with a celibate retreat from experience.

“Celibate?” I tried to deflect her insights with a “whatever,” but she saw through the mask.

“How did she hurt you?”

“My ex?” I shrugged and wiped at a crescent-shaped spot on the table. “I really don’t want to talk—”

“You know what I do when I’m hurt? I get a tattoo.”

She had three. Each scarred into her skin as comfort for a sad turning point. A dolphin on the ankle for the time she was turned down by New York’s Academy of Dramatic Arts; “Vidi” on the inside of her left wrist after a turbulent relationship with a high-school teacher ended—she was sixteen, his student; and on her left breast a Gaelic symbol for fertility. That was an act of humility. After spending a semester in Ireland she realized she would never create anything as beautiful as the prose of James Joyce.

Needles make me nervous, I told her.

Then she confessed to thinking about getting a fourth tattoo: a hammer and sickle for Tyler. “You know he wants me to straighten my hair? He doesn’t like how frizzy it is. And he wishes I dressed nicer. I dress nice. I’m a secretary.”

I nodded, and then talked some more about Ginger. For the past two years we had drifted apart: she into her world of academe and Carson McCullers scholarship, me into my cultural criticism. In the evenings we hardly spoke to each other and often she was going out with fellow faculty at UNI, networking, without inviting me. “And then she started reading this guy’s stuff—I saw the manuscripts lying around—instead of reading my

work—and—why does love have to be fleeting? Why can’t it last?”

“I don’t know.” Things with Tyler weren’t so good either. Everything she does is wrong. He wants time apart but still wants a relationship, only separate apartments. She bit the edge of a finger. “He also said I was too loud. I’m too loud when I sing along to the car radio; I’m too loud when I buy groceries; I’m too loud on the phone. Am I too loud?”

“Yeah, you are, but I find it endearing.”

“Thanks.”

I liked

talking to Chelsea. In my past relationships I’ve always been a kind of Dean Martin conversationalist. “You ever notice how he sings? The shallow part of his chest? Light. Not serious?”

“Why would anyone not want to be serious?” she said.

“Do you really think Chaplin is narcissistic?”

I nodded and said, yeah, I do. We were walking away from the marquee lights of the Art Theatre. We go there once a week and had just



screened *City Lights*. “I mean, that ending, come on. The close-up, the flower, that smile. It screams love me, love me please.” Chaplin was totally oblivious to his audience—it was all about himself and his need for approval.

Outside, trees sparkled with a shimmer of snow, a light foggy haze, and the street was quiet—one or two cars. Chelsea wore a camel coat and a beret. She looked marvelous.

“What’s wrong with love?”

“Nothing. Love’s great, I guess,” I said. Across the street from us, in the snow-beaded window of a coffee shop, I thought I glimpsed Tyler sipping from a dark mug. His hair was heavily moussed, and he wore a sweater, the cuffs rolled past the elbows. His hand made lopsided circles, like a child’s, against the store’s frosted glass.

“You guess?”

“Yeah. But with Chaplin, his desire to be loved is all encompassing; it’s too self-absorbed. I prefer Keaton. He’s clever, inventive, and less—”

“Touchy-feely?”

“Well, yeah.”

According to Chelsea, I’m uncomfortable with intimacy. Real conversations. I often have to make jokes to lighten the mood. “You’re right, I’m always protecting myself,” I said one afternoon while we were watching *Cabaret*.

“Are you scared of me?”

“A little. Now stop asking such deep questions—I want to enjoy this pretentious film.”

“I don’t think it’s pretentious.”

Of course she wouldn’t—it was her choice. The second part of the double bill was my choice, a depressingly gritty masterpiece, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. We were on a 72-73 kick.

“Well, don’t be scared.” Her goal was to match me up with someone. She said there was a secretary in Philosophy and Religion, Nina, who was single. I said I wasn’t ready for any of that.

“Why not?”

“I’m not ready. Let’s watch this drivel—it’s so bad, it’s good.” Minnelli was singing.

It was hard to match Chelsea’s energy, but through movies and TV shows I could talk to her comfortably.

On one of our first afternoons together, eating cold pizza and watching Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby*, I told her all about the cozy con-

finer of the Art Theatre: the clanking seats that needed to be reupholstered, the lingering mildew smell of the aisles, reminiscent of wet woolen sweaters, and the people, characters, eccentrics in fedoras and bright lipstick huddled in the dark. You see, one night, I said, these two women in pea coats, bracelets on their wrists the size of anchors, and a puff of perfume, arrived late at the Art and asked me to move over so that they could sit together.

“Of course you didn’t, because you’re anal retentive,” Chelsea said.

“No, well, I am, but that’s beside the point.” I get to the theatre forty-five minutes early so I can have my ideal seat: row thirteen, seat ten, nine seats to my left and right. It’s the ideal vantage point to watch a film. “I’m not giving that up. I tried to explain this to the girls using geometric logic and advanced calculus, but they just nodded and then sat next to me, on either side of me. And all through the show, a revival of Sidney Lumet’s *Prince of the City*, I became so aware of their breaths and breasts that I couldn’t concentrate on the film.”

“That’s too bad,” Chelsea had said, laughing.

“Thanks. Your sympathy is overwhelming. Why can’t my life be like a Hollywood movie? One with a happy ending.”

“You know Tyler wants me to see a therapist?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“A week ago, Tyler said he thought our love should be a series of collisions, car wrecks, and I guess we aren’t colliding enough or something—”

I thought about the clink-clink-clink of a fan and fingers. “Who does he want you to see, Josef Mengele?”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry.”

We were quiet for a long while but I wouldn’t apologize further—I didn’t like Tyler. To me, he was a darkened sun. The logo for his business was three granite G’s in a hard uncompromising font like him.

Fuck it, Chelsea said. “Finish the story. Tell me about the girls in the pea coats.”

So I did. If my life were like a Hollywood movie, the girls would have been hanging out in the lobby after the show and I would have approached them, or them me, and struck up a conversation about the film—no, no, they wouldn’t want to talk about *Prince of the City* yet. Too soon. They needed to let the ideas of the film resonate. “Stillness has to set in,” one of them would say. So, we’d talk about the film from last week, Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler*, love and loneliness, and how the ending was all wrong. Ram shouldn’t die coming off the final turnbuckle. Instead, here’s how I would

end the film, if it were a Wally Bober production: the Ram should retire, go back home to the trailer court, and the final shot of the film would be a tableau: the Ram standing on his front porch holding two trash bags, looking in the direction of Tomei and her pickup truck parked out front. Tomei is pensive, looking in his direction, the driver side door open, but unable to move toward him. Fade to black.

"I love cheesecake. But with gloves on?"

"That's beautiful," she said. "You can still approach Nina."

"No. Look at me—I'm a neurotic nut. No."

"You are a nut."

"Thanks."

And then she kissed me on the cheek. "But lovable."

Following the story of the pea-coated girls, Chelsea asked me to take her to the Art, and we've been going ever since. Usually Wednesdays. Church night. Tyler cleans business buildings then.

Now, taking short, quick choppy steps to keep up with me, Chelsea smiled and read the Art's theater program, *In Focus*. "Hey, look, next week the Art's showing *All Through the Night*."

We had watched the Bogart film last week at the apartment, and she wanted to see it on the big screen. She loved that film because it was such a weird mix of genres: comedy, gangster, romance, and wartime melodrama.

"It's like my moods—never consistent."

I laughed.

"Tyler doesn't want me to see you anymore."

A sharp nudge pinched my shoulders and suddenly my stomach was full of glass. "It's up to you what you do," I said.

"He's watching us from the coffee shop."

I didn't turn to look. "I thought he had the local community center to do tonight."

"Maybe there was too much snow."

And without knowing why exactly, I reached for Chelsea's hand, squeezed it quickly and let go.

"Bogart and the cheesecake scene? With the Sgt. Bilko guy? That's funny." She just can't see anyone eating cheesecake with gloves. "I love cheesecake. But with gloves on?"

"I can't eat it anymore," I said. I have to watch my sugar.

Poignant. According to Chelsea that's one of my favorite words, and I guess it is. I end a lot of articles with it. A zippy, one word sentence: "poignant," as if I'm resonating pithy truths for my readers, but the move in my essays has become stock, formulaic. *Poignant*. Corny is more like it.

Anyway, earlier in the day I had been stuck on an article on model Betty Furness and her 1950s TV spots for Westinghouse's *Studio One* anthology series. I did have some insights on a sexy woman in high heels and bright dresses belying a masculine, scientific discourse: Betty tells us, with great efficiency, that the fifteen vents on the Westinghouse iron make it more effective for dampening fabric; the removal of blades from the center of the Westinghouse washer and accompanying tilted basket get all of our clothes clean without wearing down the fabric. But beyond the initial paradox of the feminine sales rep and the masculine science behind her words I had nothing new to offer. Nothing about this was poignant or ever would be. Perhaps it wasn't an article after all.

Serendipity, however, is a weird thing. Here I was struggling with images of 1950s femininity and the construction of rational order through engineering technologies when who should come to the door but Tyler demanding that I return the China plates. Said China plates were loaned to me last week by Chelsea when I entertained some friends from the newspaper—where I also freelance—and we ate French cuisine—crepes—and watched three of Jean-Luc Godard's 1960s films including *Vivre Sa Vie*. Apparently the plates belonged to Tyler—his mother bought them as a housewarming gift—and he wanted them back.

"Plates? What does a guy want with plates," I said, somewhat incredulously, as I sipped orange juice by the kitchen sink.

"Look, Wally, I just want them—" He gnawed at his upper lip, a left hand on his hip. He was a lot bigger than he was twenty-five years ago. The sweater he wore crinkled his chest, his jeans were torn in the left knee, and his moussed hair was perpetually wet: a controlled look, exuding a faux-relaxed ease. Even Tyler's five o'clock shadow looked like it belonged in a catalogue for men's clothing.

I stacked the eight or nine plates from the cupboard and handed them to him. He said he thought that Chelsea was spending too much time with me. Everything was fine until I showed up with the car rides, and the talk, and the holding hands.

"That was just—"

"Affection?"

"Yeah, that's all." The words were dry, brittle crumbs. Chips of glass

returned to my stomach. For a second I felt that he was going to hit me with the plates, and then I just didn't care.

I didn't care that one time in high school he bloodied a kid in the gym lockers for stealing his lunch money; I didn't care that he was tired of me, tired of Chelsea's talk about the wonderful articles I was writing, like the one on Obama and 1968 and the intensity of actors like Clarence Williams III of *Mod Squad* and Otis Young of *The Outcasts*. "Yeah. That's one of my better ones actually. Those two actors brought dignity and a smoldering presence to the small screen. Where are these African-American role models today?"

In my irrational randomness, words were not quite fitting the moment; my internal censor was on vacation. Hovering on the brink of a whooping, lake-sized bruise were already forming under my eyes. Tyler shifted the plates to his left forearm.

"I'll tell you where those people are," I said. They aren't on TV. TV's for the rich. The new art's happening on buildings. Hip Hop. Graffiti. Don't you ever think about what you're erasing, Tyler?

"What? Art? Come on. It's just empty gang symbols—"

"Gang symbols? It's somebody's voice; it's a response to the systemic racism of our culture."

"Systemic' what? Wally—they don't own the buildings—"

"I'm not talking about buildings!" He never did get it. In high school, his tastes ran from the middle of the road to the crude. Favorite actor: Sylvester Stallone. Best book: *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell. Band: Guns N' Roses. Idea of fun: inviting the football team over for a night of poker, cigars, and VHS porno. Business practices: buy supplies cheap, charge for services high. Damn it, Tyler, you're messing with a people's means of expression, silencing their presence. Goddamn Philistine.

I guess I was saying all that Philistine shit out loud, because the next thing I knew, my nose was pop-popping like a roll of Black Cat fire-crackers and my shirt gushed red. I didn't know blood could be that bright.

A couple of nights ago, Chelsea said that the swelling around my left eye had gone down and she was pretty sure my nose was broken. "That son of a bitch, Tyler." I absently shrugged and she softly kissed the hurt spots and wondered why I had never asked about her name. What's to wonder? I said.

"Okay—" Her single mom was real into soccer and during Junior year studied abroad in England and took in a Chelsea/Liverpool match and

decided to name a future daughter after the city and its blue-clothed football club.

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"I got a niece, Rebecca, who's crazy about English soccer. Hopefully she won't decide to name a daughter Liverpool."

Chelsea laughed.

"Actually, I'm joking. She likes Chelsea."

"The team or me?"

"The team. She's never met you."

"Why is that?"

"Why? I don't know. We're not a couple. I hardly ever see my brother Manny as it is—"

She wondered if I could drive her to Wal-Mart. The Pinto was in the shop: master cylinder, water pump, something, and she needed to get a few things for her apartment: plants, a tea cozy, and some plates.

Last night Chelsea was standing at my door, holding up two trash bags.

"What's this?"

"Guess."

"Uh, you need help with your trash? What?"

"No. Remember *The Wrestler*?"

"Aronofsky's film?"

"The girls who sat on either side of you?"

Oh, yeah. The twins in their pea coats and my re-written ending with a pickup truck. "You're Mickey Rourke?"

"Yeah." She held the bags higher.

"I'm not Marisa Tomei," I said emphatically.

She refused to lower the bags and laughed. For weeks we had been talking about popular culture and she felt for half that time she had been really talking about us, about love, without saying it, but now she felt I needed a visual clue, because I was kind of dense on the love front, and this was her way of saying my life could be a Hollywood romance. "What do you think *this* has been about?"

"What?"

"This. Us."

"Us? Uh, friends getting together to talk and watch films and—"

"I wouldn't be here just to watch films. I spend a lot of time here—"

“You like me?”

“I told you the tension was hovering. I was tense around you—I mean, in a good way. Weren’t you tense around me?”

“Please lower the bags. Look, if I were to get a tattoo, it would be of a soccer ball. Right here.” I pointed over my heart.

“Don’t say that.” She thought it was sweet but also distant because she knew I’d never get a tattoo, what with my whole needles thing. So, according to Chelsea, I was Dean Martinizing it, minimizing again.

“I’m sorry.”

“I left Tyler. For good this time.” She wasn’t interested in seeing a damn therapist—there was nothing to mend. Even though he didn’t break the China plates, everything else was broken.

“Wow.” I didn’t know what else to say so I resorted to Brando-esque incredulity. Remember the scene with Rod Steiger in the car—*On the Waterfront*? Steiger pulls a gun on Brando, threatens his brother, and Brando utters a soft, wistful, “Wow.” Why can’t I be authentic and let real feeling come through? Instead, I resort to modes of being, actions and mannerisms from film and TV. Maybe I should write a book: *All I Ever Learned I Learned at the Movies*. It would be a depressing book.

Her eyes watered. She no longer loved Tyler, the passionate aggression, the white bursts of violence. So she gave back the China plates and the power tools. “Actually the power tools were mine, but I didn’t want to argue about it.”

According to Chelsea, I guess, I *am* Marisa Tomei, the stable one. Oh, well. I reached for her trash bags, plunked them by the kitchen, and directed her to the living room sofa. She cried into my shoulder and I held her and we sat there for a while, and for the first time I noticed her perfume: bright and fresh like the frost of fog on tree limbs outside. I told her I hadn’t been honest. “I do like you. Like really like you.”

“So we *are* in seventh grade.”

That made me laugh. And then I had one of those moments, like in a John Cassavetes movie where the lead characters let their masks fall, stop pretending, drop the role playing, and become authentic people through an epiphany. *Shadows* ends with three of them. Anyway, I held her hands and told her about Ginger, really told her, how not only had we drifted apart but I had fallen out of love with her—the last two years of our marriage we were just absent friends, nodding at each other, now and then, and I just wanted to be able to feel again, without worrying about falling out of love, because that’s the worst feeling in the world, that fleetingness, that inability to find

constancy, and I never want to experience that again.

“But isn’t it better to try to love again, to—”

“Maybe.”

“I wasn’t being honest either. I love you—”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess the moviegoer gets the girl after all, huh?”

“I guess.”

“I think I love you too, but I’m still not going to get that tattoo to prove it.”

She punched me in the shoulder. “Will you stop with the minimizing?”

“Okay. Okay.”

And then she suggested that we do something totally different tonight. Instead of going to the movies, let’s drive to New York City. No popular culture. No TV, no radio, no nothing. Just us.

“New York?”

“I’m packed.” The two trash bags were full of her clothes. She wanted to take to the open road, maybe find an Art-Deco nightclub in the big city and eat cheesecake.

“I can’t eat cheesecake,” I said.

“Live a little,” she said.



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V E R Y
H A I R Y



**TENDER-
NESS IS
DRAWING
NEAR**



Panning to the Right

by Andrew Gretes

Dear Son,

What I have written in this letter is a history of our people. Use it in prudent emergencies. For example, let's say you run out of things to say on a first date with a potential soul mate. Or, even worse, let's say you're put on the spot at dinner by your fiancé's father, a man who (despite only possessing one arm) could throttle you six ways to Sunday. Or, worst of all, let's say you find yourself in a position where the power has gone out at your father-in-law's house and each member of the family decides to tell stories in a circle until the power returns. In each of these instances, Son, refrain from panicking. Simply recall the contents of this letter and fib where you see fit.

The key to your ancestry is "panning to the right." Every famous figure in history has had a brother or a sister or a cousin who has, for the most part, been edited out of history by poor cropping. It's difficult to stress this enough, so allow me to reiterate: *your family's history is a chronicle of incredibly consistent but unfortunate cropping.* For example, the biblical Adam actually had a brother whose name was Buford. And while Buford didn't cause the Fall of Man or father the entire human race or swallow unadulterated knowledge at his wife's behest, he didn't exactly twiddle his thumbs either. You see, Buford was a loving uncle and pitied his poor nephew's plight. It was Cain's punishment, as you know, to have been branded on the forehead with a "G.O.D." tattoo and thus to be unpopular with the ladies. But all this changed when Buford took his nephew aside and showed him how to use sheep's fat and pig's urine and shellfish blood to mask the mark with antediluvian makeup. The next day, Cain, thanks to his Uncle Buford's assistance, was getting laid in Nod as if killing a sibling was sexy. And the next year, he even populated the world with little "Cainlets"—the technical term for a set of twins in which both are evil. But again, none of this would've been possible without the first makeover in history, a makeover conceived and performed by none other than your oldest and earliest cropped ancestor, Buford.

But cosmetics, Son, isn't the only trade your ancestors excelled at. No, to the contrary (and to the right) of the most prolific philosopher in

history, Plato, was a man called Prapoulopos. In the 4th century BCE, this man was better known as "Prapoulopos Pappapolos" to differentiate him from a noted sculptor of the time who also went by Prapoulopos—namely, "Prapoulopos Phiddapolos." But considering that both Prapouloposes have, for all intents and purposes, been lost to history, I don't think we'll be rocking the boat if we call our ancestor "Prapoulopos" and let the progeny of the similarly forgotten man of the same first name call their ancestor "Prapoulopos." And so long as you don't marry, son, some long lost daughter of the latter Prapoulopos, all should go well with our current system of nomenclature. Anyways, most people know the philosopher Plato through his "Allegory of the Cave." However, Prapoulopos, your 4th century BCE ancestor, also composed an allegory. From my understanding, it was quite chic in those days. The allegory was titled "The Allegory of the Study" and here—give or take the inevitable error which occurs when dealing with oral traditions over 2000 years old—is how it went:

Imagine a room with a low ceiling and four walls so close together that simply being in the room feels masturbatory. Now, imagine that each of these four walls is covered head to toe with bookshelves. Then imagine a small stooped man inhabiting this room, a man who has been residing there for so long that he's completely forgotten that he's in a room called a study and not a very small and rectangular universe. Seeing no doors, no windows, no mouse holes, no sunsets, the man logically concludes: "To live is to read." Until, one day, browsing through his bookshelves, the man stumbles across an unknown papyrus scroll; intrigued, he immediately removes the scroll from the bookshelf, triggering a trap door which whisks the man off to an entirely new location. Rubbing his eyes and gazing for the first time on the outside world, the man sees myriad magnificent things: most noticeably, phenomena outside the Platonic Idea of "Scroll." The most fascinating of these is a creature not unlike the small stooped man himself but with far more pronounced and enticing eyes, lips, breasts, and hips. Astounded, the man approaches the creature and asks in an alien, awkward syntax, "Read, I could you?" To which the creature, full of pity, leads the man to a room

The next day, Cain, thanks to his Uncle Buford's assistance, was getting laid in Nod as if killing a sibling was sexy.

similar in shape to his previous cell but, content-wise, very different indeed. The man, quite sagaciously, spends little time retracing his steps to his former bookish domicile.

Or if you prefer, Son, to scour your mother's side of the family, you'll find an Arabian princess named Dunyazad who was, if not completely cropped out of history, at least very poorly framed. By contrast, Shahrazad (her sister) is a name that rolls off the tongue like Solomon, Saul, or Sinbad. And that's because everyone who knows anything about storytelling knows that she's the author of the *1001 Nights*, a story based on an innocent woman's need to spin as many cliffhangers as possible in order to prevent her once cuckolded and now suffering from PTSD husband from killing her in revenge for his first wife's infidelity. But despite the fact that the name Shahrazad, as I commented earlier, rolls off the tongue as mellifluously as Andrew, Aladdin, or Ali Baba, Dunyazad was by far the more logical of the two sisters. And the pithier I might add. In fact, to prove this point, on the 532nd night, Dunyazad scribbled down a fable and handed it to her sister in hopes she would use the fable and thus end her tedious ordeal. The fable went a little something like this:

There once was a man who murdered his wife because she was an adulterer. The man, concluding all women were thus adulterers, proceeded to marry more women, deflowering them and murdering each and every one of them on their wedding nights. This, however, was a hasty generalization and thus a logical fallacy. Just because one woman proves unfaithful doesn't mean all women will prove unfaithful. The moral being: stop killing innocent women you irrational pig.

Unfortunately, Shahrazad never used her sister's fable for fear she might become the more famous and celebrated of the two. Instead, she stuck to her original (rather fallacious) strategy of bombarding the king with school after school after school of red herrings.

But even more recently, Son, your mother's aunt's cousin's sister was tragically cropped out of history in favor of Mother Teresa. Posterity, it appears, can only handle one altruistic Albanian avenger at a time. Now, as everyone knows, Mother Teresa spent half a century tending to the poor and the sick and the dying and the unbelievers, winning a Nobel Peace Prize for combining consolation and conversion into one tidy little package, but what everyone doesn't know (and yet *should* know) is that next door to Mother

Teresa was an existentialist of the Kierkegaardian vein named Mother Mimoza, a woman who spent her entire life exercising an unbelievable gift: that of being *infinitely funny*, so funny in fact that all those who heard her jokes inevitably died, their hearts rupturing with unconditional hilarity. This realization—that her jokes were of a killer caliber—forced Mother Mimoza to abandon her life as a budding scholar and to follow a very different path, finding her true calling as a hospice nurse. There, Mother Mimoza lived out the rest of her days in relative obscurity, waiting for her patients, one by one, to summon her to their deathbeds and ask for that final blessing: to expire in ebullience.

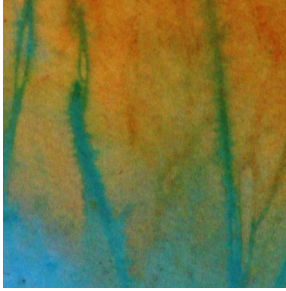
Most recently, this curse, Son, has struck my own father's brother-in-law, a man who is being cropped every day a little more from the public's common knowledge. The evidence for this, I'm afraid, is ubiquitous: simply go out to the street and ask a stranger who were the first two men to touch the moon. Inevitably, you'll receive the answer, "Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin." Then ask the same stranger who the third man was who waited on the Apollo spacecraft. Inevitably, you'll receive a blank stare followed by a shrug of the shoulders. But that man, Son, was Michael Collins, and, if you so desired, you could chart him as a wayward branch jutting out from the right side of your family tree. What the world doesn't know (besides Michael Collins' name) and what NASA doesn't know (despite knowing Michael Collins' middle name), and what even Neil and Buzz don't know (despite knowing Michael Collins' favorite color) is that this relative of yours did in fact touch the moon that day. While everyone else was glued to their television sets watching Neil and Buzz hop around like low-gravity kangaroos, Michael Collins surreptitiously slipped outside, taking the most placid leak of his life, wetting his diaper in the Sea of Tranquility.

So, again, Son, when worst comes to worst and you're perhaps put in the spotlight to say something witty and wonderful by a merciless circle of in-laws, take a deep breath, relax, recall your illustrious ancestry, and do the deed historians never fail not to do: *pan to the right*. Son, trust me on this one—it seems to have worked on your maternal grandparents.

Love,
Dad

Water Street

by Scott Laudati and Ronald Ennis



I.

Harvest time for rats under the piers is short—after the earth has done its hula-hoop around the sun, when the pink glow of twilight concedes to the gaslights of Manhattan’s streets. The young rats venture out in late afternoon, their blood cooling, becoming vulnerable to small boys with long handled nets. The young rats have not yet learned the art of escape. It is now, at twilight, that the older rats will emerge, risking exposure for a chance to gnaw at the watermen’s leftover scraps. Yet these are the rats in highest demand. The larger the animal, the higher the wage they will fetch. And if the rat is sharp enough, the time to scamper away will not run out on him, allowing him another day to become brighter and more imaginative than his hunters.

Mike McInnes watched five young boys waving their nets along the bottom of the pier, silhouetted in the shadows cast by the falling sun. He knew they were chasing rats. It was still early—anything they caught would be sold that evening to fight in the pits of Water Street.

“Hi yeh, Mike!” The boys called out to him. “Gonna git some big ‘uns tonight, Mike. W’ort seven penny.”

Mike smiled at the novice rat catchers.

“Stay still,” he advised them. “Let all dem big ‘uns git out.”

About this time last year, in the softness of autumn’s dusk chill, Mike had spent several months teaching these boys the trade. If they hustled hard enough as the light of dusk faded, right before the Celestial king turned off the light switch, they could sell enough rats to keep their bellies still.

Mike McInnes pulled a small hard cigar from his pocket that had been cut earlier in the day. Its black ash marked his hand like he rubbed it in dirt. He lit the cigar with a single match, and after the initial pull, which was especially harsh from being mashed out and pocketed, he looked past the piers into the river. Up and down, the endless masts of sailboats and riggings of ships rose like tall reeds around the island of Manhattan. The river was alive with tugs and sloops, schooners and lighters. Mike watched the shadow of a ferry move with a limp towards Brooklyn, towards the blue and yellow

fires and clouds of colorless smoke pouring up from the foundry’s giant chimneys on the other side of the water. To be on that other side. Mike looked at the green rise of the heights speckled with brick and white mansions, and laying before them, the East River, orange with the reflection of the setting sun. Two giant legs were being erected from the banks of each side’s edge, the sum of America’s perseverance—anything could be accomplished or conquered. Atop these two legs would sit a wondrous bridge, spanning Brooklyn to Manhattan, and back again. Worlds would be linked. Mike imagined bridges spanning everywhere, across oceans, across continents. Standing there, in the cooling breeze and the hymns of the slapping river waves, Mike felt somehow a part of it all, and triumphantly, he puffed his celebrity.

Mike and his dog, Billy McGlory, were having an exceptional run in the pits. The number of rats killed in one fight was nearing the big time, and Mike enjoyed the backslapping hoots and smiles of the men who had bet on his dog. In the pits the regulars knew his name, and in his pocket he held more money than any McInnes that had lived to his age.

Two years ago, Mike’s father had traded his LeMat revolver from the war for a newborn pup. He gave it to Mike for his eighteenth birthday. “Too short and t’ick fer da pits, he is,” Mike’s father had warned him. But Mike could see that Bill McGlory’s instincts were strong. During the dog’s first trip to the beach, he picked up a piece of driftwood, and summoning some inward instruction he shook it playfully, simulating the snapping of a rat’s neck.

It became daily routine, Mike and Billy McGlory going down to the empty piers. Only here could they find the solitude necessary to train for the rat pits. To strengthen Billy McGlory’s jaws, Mike lifted a log and twirled the dog by his teeth. Billy McGlory hung on to the wood, wriggling and snarling happily in the air. To train the forelegs, Mike buried rats in the rocky soil on the banks of the East River. Billy McGlory would dig like a starving beast until only the stub of his tail was visible above the ground. When he found the prize, he’d snap his neck back, toss the dead rat into the air, pick it up, and toss it again. The first time Mike placed a live rat in front of the dog, Billy McGlory didn’t hesitate, and the rat was dead in seconds. Six months ago, when the dog turned eighteen months old, Billy McGlory entered the rat pits on Water Street.

The boys on the docks stood with full sacks. Their canvas rat holders were tattered. Mended patches were sewn over holes that the vermin had tried to bite through. Mike nodded his approval at these boys.

“Dese some big ‘uns, Mike.” A boy said.

“Wor’t every bit of seven penny.” Mike answered.

“Even ten penny, Mike.”

Mike waved at the boys as he left. Some of them had fallen off the pier chasing the rats. Mike could hear their teeth clicking as they shivered out of their wet rags. The sun had now accepted its fate and disappeared behind the looming statues of Manhattan’s cityscape. There were still about four hours until Billy McGlory’s fight, and Mike decided to take the long way home. For several blocks, he walked along Water Street.

The smell on Water Street was particularly strange that night. It was peculiar to Mike because he realized he hadn’t caught a scent like that for longer than his memory allowed. There was always a stink emanating from Water Street. He could smell the sewage blowing off the river and the garbage rotting in the alleys, the bubbling urine pools and puke-lined gutters. But this was something refined; it was the perfume of a woman. It had been a long time since Mike visited the brothels, but there was a distinct difference between this and the night women and the cigarette smoke glued to their skin. No, this smell was a pleasure to every sense. It added color to a soulless street. It was pleasant to Mike in the way an old hat is pleasant. It was familiar. In its density, it smelled...hopeful. Mike read it as a sign that good fortune was on his side.

2.

In the long mirror on the wall of the Knickerbocker Club, Lindsay Smithfield Devery studied his reflection. He had spent nearly an hour this morning at his new house of Fifth Avenue, looking in the mirror while trimming his beard. It should be thicker down the line of the jawbone, shaved closer under the chin, with the mustache, as if chiseled, connecting smoothly with the sideburns. He was thinking about the enormous amount of time he spent each day on his appearance, perfuming his whiskers, checking the sharpness of the crease in the cuffs of his trousers. He wore a black bow tie, a black vest, and the long gray mourning coat altered by the family tailor. Lindsay looked the height of fashion—the proper attire for the future president of the Devery Import & Export Co. It was part of his job, his father told him, and one he excelled at, to stop at the Knickerbocker Club for a drink and a cigar after his day at the office ended.

The Import and Export Co. was founded thirty years ago by Lindsay’s grandfather, the first of its kind. They owned no goods or ships, but served as a broker between manufacturers seeking to distribute goods, mer-

chants wishing to buy them, and the seafaring trade in between. It took the war to build the Devery fortune. Sides were never chosen for business, the merchandise went to the highest bidder. Of course, this was only possible with the Devery’s assurance that whatever cargo they were dealing would guarantee the buyers extermination of his enemy. Now, almost thirty years later, the Devery name was synonymous with the elite of New York society. Lindsay, at twenty-seven, was the oldest of the Devery sons, and the heir to the family fortune.

Lindsay found the tedium within the paneled walls overbearing. The room was full of well dressed men, knee-slapping with laughter under their stovetop hats. They discussed politics—the Tweed Ring, Grant’s ineffectiveness as president. They discussed business—the money that could still be had from rebuilding the South, and the money to be squeezed from the teeming masses of immigrants that bulged, day by day it seemed, in the city of New York. Lindsay disliked this old generation of money, these men of local distinction, not only for their unnerving pomposity but also their lack of color, their lack of life.

In the mirror, Lindsay watched one of them, Edward Harrington, walking toward him. Harrington wore his usual snake grin, a smirk that suggested to the world he had some private knowledge that they weren’t invited to know. Harrington had been a classmate of Lindsay’s at Columbia. They had both studied the classics, but for no apparent reason. They both understood college was a just a task set forth by their fathers, and upon its completion, they would enter the family business.

“Devery, my boy. How’s that head of yours feeling?”

“Much better, Harrington. Thank you,” Lindsay told him.

“Quite a nasty blow you got,” Harrington said. Harrington chewed the end of his cigar, loosened tobacco flakes getting caught in his teeth. The way he held it out from his face made sure Lindsay noticed how much larger it was than his own.

“Nothing you couldn’t handle, I’m sure.” Lindsay smiled.

It had been just two weeks ago, as Lindsay walked along Water Street on his way to the rat pits. Whispering females dropped hot ashes on him from a second story window, and as he stumbled around the sidewalk, disoriented and calling for water, a shadow appeared and clubbed the back of Lindsay’s skull. He was half-conscious and didn’t fight back as his attacker rifled through his pockets. Seconds later, the shadow disappeared, leaving Lindsay to be ridiculed on the cobblestones.

“Tell me, Devery,” Harrington asked. “Why do you keep going back

down there?”

Lindsay pulled his lips up to smile on just one side of his face. He knew Harrington wouldn't get it. Still, he said, “There's life there.”

Harrington's whole face wrinkled up. “A squalid life. Full of beggars and rakes, don't you think?”

Lindsay gave him a real smile now. “Life none-the-less, my boy Harrington. There is still a beating heart under this old city.”

3.

In the doorway, Mike could feel the tavern's breath move by him on its hurried way onto the Bowery. Inside, the ale house was noisy and crowded. Wet sawdust on the floor smelled of stale beer. At tables along the back and side walls were varying tragedies of men, some silent, with mouths submitting to another pint glass of beer, others shouting across the tables at one another in mock battle, taunting until someone took their challenge. Then the two would compete, face to face, with a tray of shots, while betters and on lookers threw money and kept count until only one man was left standing.

In two or three criss-crossing queues, men shouted orders over the wet bar, and huge German bartenders, long since tapped on liquor and beer, filled glasses with any sort of liquid they had at their disposal. Half filled with beer foam, the rest of the glass filled with dish-washing water, shoe polish, whale oil and the scuzz of pints others had been too drunk to finish before they collapsed onto the inviting mattress of sawdust blanketing the floor. This glass full of gurgling black poison was sold by those large German bartenders for a few cents. To a drunkard active in the saloons of the Bowery, this was a fine way to finish off the evening—a concoction that would send them blind and frothing back into the civilized world, and make the pain of sleeping in a cobblestone alley go unnoticed, at least for another night.

Mike scanned the room. The shadows in his eyes had a hard time adjusting through the yellow haze of tobacco smoke. Yet, even with this handicap, it was clear his father was not in the tavern. Mike's father, Sean McInnes, would be easy to find in any crowd of men. He wore a black patch over his right eye. The rest of his face had healed, but in the way that a lizard's tail will eventually regenerate, more like a cauterized amputation than a reformed limb. During the draft riots he and some other men were setting fire to a black residence when a soldier, fresh from the fields at Gettysburg, fired a shot through his face. In a downward trajectory, the mini ball had en-

tered at the corner of his eye, tore away his cheekbone and exited just below the lobe of his ear.

Mike last saw his father eight months ago. There had not been a large domestic disturbance, like the ones that so often echoed through the walls of his tenement building on Catherine Street. Sean McInnes had not stormed out in a violent drunken rage like other poor Irish fathers. He simply got up from the kitchen table and walked out the door. The cumulative burdens of his failures, the ones that reflected hideously in the eyes of his wife and children, stole his hope away from him. He had nothing left but existence. The weight of shame in his family's eyes proved heavier than the shame of leaving them alone.

Almost nightly, Mike searched the Bowery dives for his father. He wanted to tell him it was alright to come home. He wanted to tell him nobody blamed him for conceding to a city that thrived on the under classes misfortune. In truth, Mike had no idea what he would say if he found him. Mike was beginning to think it would be best to leave his father lost among the multitudes that fade into the streets of New York.

4.

After leaving the Knickerbocker club, Lindsay changed into the clothes he purchased the week before in thrift shops along the Bowery. He loved the way the floppy hat dipped over the corner of his eye, and his tattered jacket gave him more life than any suit he had ever purchased in the fine haberdashery shops on Broadway. It was important not to draw attention to his wealth. He could not have another incident. The Devery Import and Export Co., his father had said, could not handle another scandal. Several of the newspaper rags were quick to question his purpose on a street full of opium and prostitution.

On his way to Water Street Lindsay walked slowly through the Centre Street Food Market. He liked to begin at the top, and eat his way down to the bottom. Several hours had passed since sundown and the air had the sharpness of an autumn night, but the stalls were still occupied as they would be past midnight, only to open again before dawn. Crowds of people bargained with vendors, and fingered through meat, fish, fruits and cheeses they were buying for themselves or the city's restaurants.

Several of the butcher's stalls had open air fires. From one, Lindsay purchased three pieces of meat skewed with a thin wooden stick. He had already eaten two pheasant legs fried in lard and flour, and strips of mutton spread over a piece of bread, and Lindsay's favorite—a dozen saddle rock

oysters. The saddle rocks had been pulled out of Manhasset Bay just that morning, and they were as big as Lindsay's palm. He walked by the vegetable stalls and saw that the cabbages had been sold down to the soft flattened heads at the bottom. He watched the old Irish women begging the peddler for the better deals they needed to make their family's stews.

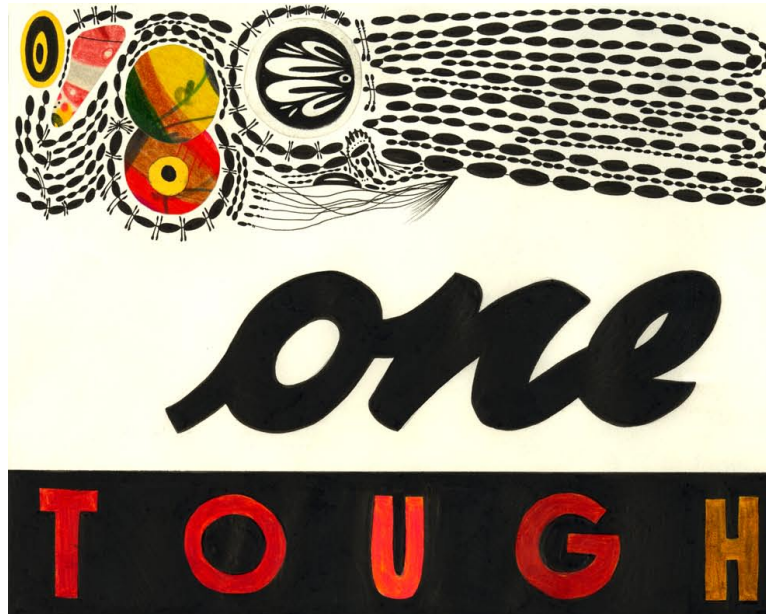
There was such an energy to this place, Lindsay thought, and places like this, filled with people all clustered together in a brutal and beautiful struggle for survival. The haggling over the weights of freshly killed chickens surpassed

the most elegant debates at the Knickerbocker Club, and it made Lindsay think of the poet Walt Whitman. Whitman knew the real Manhattan, *a kosmos-turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding.*

At first, Lindsay viewed his obsession alone and from a distance, but each time he came down here, he felt closer to it, to them, to Whitman. What motivation did he have to be at one with them, and they with him, equal parts of some divine whole? To truly arrive there Lindsay knew he needed to make a closer connection with one of them. He needed to let one of them into his world, to receive an introduction into theirs.

With his stomach full, Lindsay headed toward Water Street. The first fights in the rat pits were still hours away. After eating this much, he liked to walk the old streets of lower Manhattan. He walked down Centre Street to Canal, turned down Mulberry, too close to the borders of the Five Points, cut quickly to Bayard, then Mott, then Pell, then the narrow Doyers to Catherine Street. Chinese men sat in wooden doorways, sipping tea to keep themselves warm. When Lindsay whispered hello they were unresponsive, so he turned the corner at Water Street.

Water Street was alive with disgraceful men and graceless women. Lindsay could feel the three, four and five story buildings sweating from his



position in the street. Not sweating from this October night, but from the fresh and ancient excretions splashing their filth against the walls of the narrow street. The street smelled of guilt and it smelled of sin. It smelled of garbage, vomit, piss and feces. It smelled of death, and the death clung around it, and down the narrow alleys where shadowy figures wrestled in the shade of the night. Forty nights of rain couldn't wash away the death, the same as it couldn't wash away the film that clung to the cobblestones. And yet, Lindsay thought, it smelled of life.

At Water Street and Dover, Lindsay saw a young prostitute standing on the corner. As he walked toward her he felt a certain pulse, a terror move through his limbs, and he thought again of Whitman. *Closer yet I approach you.* Her hair was bright red under the gas lamps, and her white shoulders reflected brightly into the chilling night. Somewhere within her sordid struggle on Water Street, she managed a freckled smile. Their eyes held in the shortening distance. The fear thickened in his loins. She lost her smile. Like the eyes of many other passing strangers, Lindsay felt that terrifying connection of souls embracing. *I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.*

5.

Mike McInnes stepped into the Kit Burns's Sportsmen's Hall, his small dog stiff and powerful under his arm. Mike's eyes reacted to the smoke, and in defiance he puffed harder on the small cigar in his mouth. Billy McGlory struggled to free himself. He could smell the rats, live ones and those buried under the bleachers of the amphitheater. The muscles in his back tensed, and bulged like slabs of concrete. Billy McGlory was ready.

"Hey Mike, Mike, Mike. 'Ow's old Billy doin'? 'Ow's he feelin'? Huh?"

The little dog snarled at the man.

"He's ready, Elijah. Feels strong."

Elijah had lost his dog in the ring some weeks before. Like his owner, the dog had too many extra movements. He spent far too much time on a single rat's neck. He didn't have the same cool killer's joy of Billy McGlory. When the bet was upped to eighteen rats, the dog couldn't handle the onslaught. Elijah had jumped into the ring to save his dog, stomping the surviving rats. The fox terrier lay limp and dying in his arms. A side of its face was gone, his neck and genitals lay open and bleeding. Elijah borrowed a gun from one of the guards and shot his dog in the courtyard behind the Kit Burns's Sportsmen's Hall.

"Doin' a hun'erd tonight," Mike told Elijah.

"Oughta be big bettin' on dat one, big crowd. I'll bet a bunch myself on dat one, I will. Maybe enough to get mes another dog, I will, I will."

As quickly as he came, Elijah rushed away. Mike pushed his way through the street floor of the hall. There was already a fight in the pit and Mike heard a cheer rise over the men exchanging money under the cigar smoke and poor lighting that hung in the amphitheater.

Kit Burns's Sportsmen's Hall featured only rat-baiting now. Five years ago, when Mike first came here with his father, the sportsmen's hall had two rings, one for dog fighting and a second for cock fighting. Before the Civil War bear-baiting was a main event, but the population of Manhattan had pushed itself through the forests and hills of the island, and habitat loss made the bear-baiting spectacle unreliable. For a while dogs were pitted against raccoons, but rats were so plentiful in the city that rat-baiting became the cheapest method of gambling.

Mike tied Billy McGlory to the leg of a table, and waited his turn. It was the first time Billy was doing all one hundred rats. The terrier was now two years old and needed to step up in class. Billy McGlory had done well as a novice—first six rats, then twelve, then eighteen, and several times

at twenty-four. There was always a lot of betting and excitement when a dog did the standard one hundred rats. It was often the time when a dog was killed. If Billy McGlory could kill all one hundred in less than forty-five minutes, the purse could be near two hundred dollars. If Billy McGlory took longer than an hour, or was killed, Mike would get nothing.

6.

Lindsay awoke on the third floor of Kit Burns's Sportsmen's Hall. He had been asleep only a short time, but his disorientation upon awaking was long and frightening. As his memory returned, he checked for his wallet in the jacket hanging from the bedpost. He had fallen asleep to his young prostitute's confessions. She told of a long trail of woes that had brought her to him, under these conditions, and how, with God's help, she would change it all. At the start, he thought he could be that change in her world. With just a small portion of his money this woman could get a new dress, a new place to lodge, the foundation for getting a head start in this part of the world. The power of Lindsay holding this girl's fate manifested itself into a cruel tangle of lust and compassion, one that ebbed only with the release of his energies. She was gone when he awoke. She would not be the one he would take away from all of this.

His wallet was safe in the pocket of his jacket. In the short time Lindsay had been asleep, the vibrations in the building had changed. Lindsay could feel it seeping up through the floor boards from two stories below.

Two hundred men crowded in the bleachers surrounding the rat pit. The ring was an unscreened box, with zinc-lined walls eight feet long and four feet high, just tall enough so a rat could not jump out the top, and just low enough that the spectators could cheer on the dogs, or the rats, in full view from any seat in the house. The gamblers had several ways to bet. They could bet against the dog, betting the rats would survive over an hour or the dog itself would be killed. Side bets were held on what five minute interval the last rat would be killed, their odds increasing in the lessening of minutes. A good dog could kill all one hundred rats in between thirty and forty-five minutes. The record was set a year before by Little Augie McGraw. He slew all his rats in fourteen minutes, twenty-eight seconds.

Lindsay took a seat halfway up the bleachers. It was just high enough to see the four corners of the pit. In the closeness of the bodies, the squalor of the room, and the genuineness of the decadence, Lindsay tried to articulate the excitement. Even in the solitude of his own mind, he could not do it. How indeed could he explain this to Harrington, or the other men

at the Knickerbocker Club? Whitman would understand. A novice dog was about to move up in class. He would face one hundred rats for the first time.

7.

Mike tried to steady his arm as he held Billy McGlory next to the pit. The dog was stiff with an ancient rage. His growling had taken on a groaning hum, the pitch not unlike the straining sound of ropes holding giant schooners to the piers. A strange pressure built up behind Mike's ears, and he opened and closed down his jaw several times to release it.

A large black man carried a wire cage into the pit now alive with the huge water rats that lived in the piers. Smiling at the crowd, the man put his arm into the cage and pulled out a rat by the tail. The animal climbed backwards and latched onto the man's thumb. Holding his grin, the man bit the rat's head and ripped it from his body. Then he spit the two pieces into the cheering bleachers.

"Jus' ninety-nine tonight," the black man said, smiling at Mike. Mike had seen him do this before, a gimmick for which he usually charged a dollar.

The black man dumped the wire cage into the rat pit. The animals scurried to the corners, piling atop one another, their cumulative height reaching half way up the walls of the pit. Mike held Billy McGlory tightly in both arms. The dog's growl had changed to a desperate whimper in his struggle. Now that the time was here, events were moving too quickly. Mike had no time to think through the images and the sounds that bounded at him from every direction. The timekeeper nodded, and Mike leaned Billy McGlory over the side of the pit. The dog leaped in delight from his master's arms.

Billy McGlory needed none of the usual encouragements. The dog was upon the rats in an instant. Still, the bettors called out from the bleachers, "Hi! Hi! At 'em! At 'em!" They were used to dogs that pranced around the pit at first, sizing up their competition before setting in. In the time this usually takes, Billy McGlory had four rats dead on the floor of the pit. This is quite a dog I have, Mike thought.

Billy McGlory's legs were shorter and thicker than the fox terriers that usually inhabited the pits. His head seemed to be oversized and his short front and hind legs were thick with visible muscle. It gave the dog a dwarf-like appearance at rest, but in motion Billy was a beautiful rat-killing machine.

With a nearly feline grace, Billy McGlory leaped upon a rat, seizing

the animal with his powerful forelegs. In an instant, like the strike of a wolf hound, the dog had the rat precisely at the back of the head, near the base of the skull. You could see the pleasure the dog derived from the kill in his quick, lethal shake—two short, savage and graceful movements of its head. The rat's neck would be broken, dead only a moment in the dog's mouth, until Billy McGlory would drop it, and move on to the next.

As tactical as a prized boxer, Billy McGlory fought a wise fight. At the start he stayed close to the middle of the pit, catching rats scurrying to and from the corners. Too often a dog would attack into the piled corners. If a dog made the fatal mistake to view the rats as single entities instead of one razor toothed mass, the vermin had their chance to overwhelm the dog.

When the scurrying dwindled it was better to strike quickly at the fringes of the pile, and pull a rat back to the middle. Other rats would scamper to the other three corners, and when Billy McGlory returned the pile would be shorter and more manageable.

At twelve and a half minutes the bettors against Billy McGlory had their time to cheer. The pile of rats was too large for the depth of the dog's penetration. Before he could snap the rat's neck in his mouth, two others latched onto the same hind leg. It was here that Mike knew the true worth of his dog. As Billy McGlory whirled around to face his attackers, fast and unafraid, the rat in his mouth flew over the side of the pit into the front row of the bleachers. The two rats that had attached to Billy McGlory's leg were dead in a blur.

To the regulars the geometry of the dog's endgame was astonishing. Rats littered the floor of the pit, and Billy McGlory leaped over their bodies to catch the next one, carefully cutting off their exit routes with his own body and the wall that was forming with dead bodies of other rats. The men were cheering hard as Billy McGlory closed in on the time of their bet. "Drop it! Dead 'un! At 'em! Hi! Hi! At 'em!" Billy McGlory was tiring near the end, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth between the last six rats. When he seized a rat not at the base of the skull, but in the middle of the back, the rat curled around and fastened itself onto Billy McGlory's nose. The dog spent a long time shaking the rat loose, but still, the last rat was dead in twenty-nine minutes, twelve seconds.

In the center of the rat pit Billy McGlory stood like a statue except for the intense panting of his tongue and mouth. As the crowd cheered he dipped his head down and up as if in a bow, and his panting was so wide that it seemed he was smiling.

Men pounded Mike on the back in appreciation, while others threw

pieces of paper in the air. Twenty-nine minutes, twelve seconds! Depending on the gate, such a time would bring close to three hundred dollars, more money than Billy McGlory had earned in all his previous matches combined.

Mike carried Billy McGlory to the same table where they had waited. Back at the amphitheater the bettors were waiting for the last rat-baiting match of the night. It was well past midnight. Mike slumped in a chair, Billy McGlory wet with rat spit in his lap, their bodies filled with pleasant exhaustion. Twenty-nine minutes, twelve seconds!

“That’s quite a dog you have there.”

Mike looked over at the man, who, without asking, seated himself at the table. Mike had noticed this man earlier. He had sat quietly in

Mike had never been handed anything in his life but a dog, and here he was, making something of himself in a world built to close men like him out.

the bleachers and didn’t get caught up cheering with the crowd. The only man in the house, it seemed, to have some grace about him.

Lindsay held out his hand.

“Lindsay Devery,” he said.

Mike took the man’s hand and shook it. Billy McGlory growled. Lindsay leaned over and offered the dog the

back of his hand. To Mike’s surprise, Billy McGlory sniffed it.

“What do they call you?” Lindsay asked.

“Mike. Mike McInnes.” With small eyes, he looked at Lindsay.

What did this man want? Why was he here to disturb their victory? He was not from this side of New York, but Mike knew there must be racket men all over the city.

“Mike. You have done a marvelous job training your dog. He’s the best dog I have ever seen kill his first one hundred rats.”

The sharp-edged manner of the man’s speech made Mike aware of his own, so he said nothing. Instead, he lifted Billy McGlory in the air and examined the dog’s underside for wounds. There were just a few bite marks on the inside of his hind legs. Billy McGlory had a cut on the top of his snout, and another inside of his left ear. The wounds were small enough that Billy McGlory could heal them himself. Mike tied his dog to the leg of the table and Billy McGlory lay still on the floor, panting less strenuously now.

“You must be very talented to train this dog so well. How many dogs have you trained before?”

“None. Jus’ Billy.”

“That’s quite amazing.”

“Whadda yeh want?” Mike asked Lindsay.

Lindsay smiled. Mike had never been handed anything in his life but a dog, and here he was, making something of himself in a world built to shut men like him out. His instincts were stronger than most of the men Lindsay had known at Columbia, or at the Knickerbocker Club. He would be the one, Lindsay thought.

“I want you to work for me,” Lindsay told him. “I need a good man to work the docks. I need someone to negotiate the prices with the merchant ships.”

“I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout workin’ the docks.”

“I’ll teach you.”

The manager of Kit Burns’s Sportsmen’s Hall walked over to the table. He counted out the purse in front of Mike.

“How much did you make?” Lindsay asked.

Mike quickly put the money in his front pocket. He couldn’t control his smile. “Tree hundred and t’irteen dollars.”

Lindsay took out his wallet. He counted out bills on the table in front of Mike. “Here’s three hundred and thirteen more, as an advance towards a future salary.”

The two men nodded at one another.

“I see you like cigars,” Lindsay said. “Here, try one of these.”

Mike held the large cigar. Even unlit, he could smell the rich tobacco. It had life. When he pressed it between his fingers the cigar retook its shape upon release. For Mike, the beauty of this cigar represented how much world there was beyond Water Street.

Lindsay handed Mike a book of matches. “Of course,” Lindsay said. “We keep fighting Billy in the pits.”

“Of course.”

The cigar caused Mike’s tongue no bitterness. The cheers at the pit were dying down. Men were leaving the amphitheater. Mike leaned back in his chair, puffing, watching the rich smoke circles dissipate in the lights above his head. No more rats would die tonight.

8.

The next morning Mike walked out of his tenement building onto Catherine Street. It was the sharpest, clearest autumn morning he could remember. It made even the sordid streets of the Fourth Ward pleasant to walk. He had not slept long but the mid-morning sun had forced his eyes open. He felt for the money in his pocket. It was still there.

The intersection of Catherine Street and the Bowery was swelled with the usual myriad of people walking quickly, walking everywhere, walking nowhere. Canvas-topped storefronts sold their goods on the sidewalk, and Mike walked by shoes and coats and hats and gloves; tomatoes, cabbage, onions, and squash; brooms and brushes; loaves, rolls, and soda bread; live chickens, dead pigs and quartered cows hanging from the ceilings; pipe tobacco, snuff, and small hard cigars; pickles, pickled onions, and pickled tomatoes; snapper, river bass, carp, cod, eel, mussels, oysters and quahogs for chowder. In every storefront, the merchants wore the same tired but friendly smile. Mike felt a particular affection for them this morning, an affection greatly exaggerated by his perceived distance from them. Mike defined this distance by the six hundred and twenty six dollars in his pocket. He walked briskly up the Bowery, without pausing at all the burlesque theaters, or all the penny arcades that promised cheap glory. When he reached Houston Street, he turned west toward Broadway.

At the corner of Broadway and Houston Street Mike could see all the way down, near the tip of Manhattan, to the spire of Trinity Church. The spire dominated the lower end of the island, rising far above the five-story brownstones and even above the cast iron columns of skyscrapers eight and ten stories high. Broadway was wide all the way down to the tip of the island, the street of parades, the street of ladies, one of the most glorious streets ever laid upon the earth.

Before today, before this moment, Broadway was never part of Mike's world. It represented something far beyond his existence, beyond even his hope. Now indeed, it was his. For the first time in his life, all of New York was his.

He could walk down Broadway and be part of its splendor. He could walk up Broadway, see the spectacle of construction bounding northward, building his city—his city!—to the sky. He could go East or West, to the tall masts on the shores of either river. He could go across continents, across oceans. He could walk by old buildings and feel their past. He could walk, one with the crowds and the generations of crowds before him, and the generations after. He could walk back down Water Street, and it wouldn't matter. Indeed, his city!, his world!, had changed. He could walk in any direction, and it would be right.



Merlin Flower | *Progeny*

The Rapture: A BBM Conversation with God

by Marisa Roman

An actual transcribed conversation published on Wikileaks between God--the Lord--and his personal assistant, Reba, in February 2011.

GOD: May 21st. 6pm sharp.

Reba: Judgment Day.

GOD: Dun. Dun. Dun.

Reba: LOL.

GOD: It will forever lay in infamy.

Reba: You sound like Bill Pullman.

GOD: Lol. Independence Day reference. Nice.

Reba: I heart Bill Pullman.

GOD: You know, I've been thinking. I don't want to make this like the ark.

Reba: So no floods?

GOD: No, let's not.

Reba: Something bigger?

GOD: Yes. I think I need to make an appearance.

Reba: Oh, God. That's big.

GOD: But where?

Reba: Central Park?

GOD: No good, really my allergies lately...

Reba: Lady Gaga is playing in Barcelona?

GOD: No, I don't want to ruin the show for anyone.

Reba: Oh, wasn't her HBO special to die for?

GOD: Put her on the list.

Reba: She's gonna be raptured?

GOD: Of course. Speaking of, do you have that list in front of you?

Reba: As a PDF.

GOD: Good, I want to make some changes.

Reba: Fire away.

GOD: Bedbugs, out. Gay kid from Glee, in. Chilean miners, in. Gaddafi, out. Sarah Palin, out. Bristol Palin, out. BP employees, out. Dr. Oz, in. Dallas Mavericks, in.

Reba: Raptured and un-raptured. Check. I'll email you the finished copy.

GOD: Good. You know, I can't help but think we need something more.

Reba: Like what?

GOD: I don't know, something. Really shake them up. They are sinners after all.

Reba: Something besides the birds and fish?

GOD: Yes, not a warning. Something like an earthquake.

Reba: I can do an earthquake.

GOD: Just a scare tactic.

Reba: Isn't that a bit mean?

GOD: No. Mean? Come on. Cancelling Oprah was mean. ☹

Reba: God, I know. I just feel like the whole afternoon opened up, right?

GOD: Ok, so everyone being raptured...how do we get them to heaven?

Reba: Stairway?

GOD: LOL, right, and fulfill every rock and roll prophecy.

Reba: Escalator?

GOD: Better. I can dig it.

Reba: Where do we start with the earthquakes?

GOD: New Zealand.

Reba: Why?

GOD: Russell Crowe.



Reba: Understood.

GOD: Good. So you start with the earthquake, I'll descend, so on so forth. Escalator upstairs, boom, done.

Reba: And everyone left?

GOD: Not my problem.

Reba: And animals? You said no ark, so I'm assuming we're not rapturing any animals.

GOD: Send out the message—Aftertherapturepetcare.com.

Reba: Done.

God: I'll send Gabriel if I need anything further. TTYL.

May 21st, Inching towards 7pm.

GOD: Helloooooo? ☹

Reba: God, I'm sorry. Overslept. Up late catching up on Dancing with the Stars. Reschedule the Rapture? Maybe October?

GOD: Ugh, Fine. Five months from now.

Reba: I can do that.

GOD: Good. Make this the word of the Lord.

Reba: Thanks be to GOD.

God: LOL.



Book of Puzzles

by Jim Miller

She refuses to be called Ms. anything. She rejects that she is a teacher. “I’m your guide,” she says. Dipped in black, she walks into the classroom, sits on top of the desk, criss-crosses her legs, and says, “My name is Michelle and I will lead you to your path.” She pauses, looks around the class and says, “But you must explore it on your own.”

You paid for this program of self-actualization—a five-week seminar in a rented classroom of the adult learning center of North Central High School. The website asked, “Do you want the ability to DO and BE what you know you WANT?” It asked, “Are you selling yourself short, living the ‘same old, same old,’ ‘getting by,’ ‘settling’? Are you living an average life of convention, a life of conformity, mediocrity, unhappiness, and despair?”

The website promised to let you discover your unique purpose in life. The website guaranteed that you will never worry again about what others think or say; become unleashed from anything that holds you back from your full potential. It guaranteed you results or your money back.

Because you’re a sucker, and because things are going bad for you at work and because things are going worse for you at home, you “clicked here” and you paid the \$485 to improve your life, to become self-actualized.

Michelle turns off the lights. She lights a candle. She puts on tribal music—soft drums, wood flutes—Native American, if you had to guess. She says, “I want you all to close your eyes.” She says, “Search for what scares you. Envision your fears. Embrace them. Absorb their power.”

You think quirky.

With the lights off and your eyes closed, Michelle talks about her recent fast, the one, she says, “that lasted at least a week, but probably longer because you lose the reality of time and place when you deprive the body of sustenance.” She tells you her spirit led her to the woods for an evening frolic in the wild. She tells you she met her talking crow. “Not any talking crow,” she whispers. “My talking crow.”

You think odd-duck. You think carnie-freak show.

She says, “If you sit in the woods long enough, still and quiet, your crow will find you. Bring you your message from the nether space.”

You think head-case, nut-job.

She reads poems, her poems. Poems about Texas, trailer homes, and rape. Poems of booze and pills. Poems of binge eating and purging.

You think damaged. You think fucked-up.

And because damaged and fucked-up is something you think you could get behind, you decide you like her.

It’s late when you get home and Sarah is already in bed. At first, you aren’t all that interested in telling her about the seminar. Maybe it’s because she’s a shrink and you think—no, you know she’d scoff at the idea of improving one’s lot in life by way of, what is it, positive thinking? Or maybe it’s the idea that starting this conversation would inevitably end in an argument you aren’t capable of winning. Or maybe it’s the excited feeling you get when you think of Michelle and that feeling just might disappear if you talk about the class. But then you see that Sarah’s enthralled in her book of crossword puzzles and didn’t see you walk into the bedroom. You want to distract her so you ask her about her day.

“Huh? Oh fine, yours?” She doesn’t lift her eyes off the puzzle.

“Strange,” you say.

In the bathroom, you change from office attire to gym shorts and a t-shirt. You brush your teeth.

“Strange how?” she calls out.

You tell her how you found this class. Once a week for five weeks and you will, in the end, be self-actualized. “Or,” you tell her, “I get my money back.”

She says nothing.

When you go back into the bedroom, she looks up, asks, “How is that strange?”

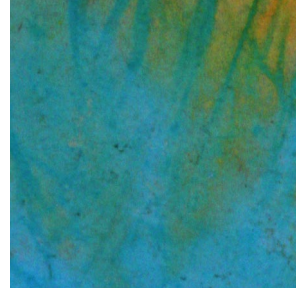
“Well, that’s not all that strange,” you say as you climb into your side of the bed. “But the teacher, I mean the *journey guide*, is, um...”

“Strange?” she asks.

“Curious.”

And with that one word, curious, you become aware that you have nothing else to add to this conversation. You took a class and the teacher was curious. Next topic, please.

You miss the old days, back when you were first married. Back when Sarah noticed that you entered a room, that you were breathing the same oxygen. You miss how she listened to your daily war stories of spoiled actors and lazy directors. You miss how she told you stories of crazy patients,



“not my real patient,” she used to say. “My pretend patient, David.” Or “my ‘friend’s’ patient, Leslie.” It was always David and Leslie. You even miss how she used to ask for help when she was stumped with her puzzle. You miss, “Do you know a seven-letter word for strange? Last two letters RE.” Back in those days, you seemed to pull the words from out of nowhere. “Bizarre,” you’d say and she would start to fill in the word and say, “That’s it. Thanks, you’re a life-saver.”

She was happy.

But then she quit asking about your day, she quit telling you about David and Leslie. She quit asking if you knew “a five-letter word for cool and distant, starts with a,” and now you can’t tell her “aloof.”

I’m anthropophobic, isolophobic, and I fear contradiction. If I think too long about Alzheimer’s, I have panic attacks. I’m scared of getting old, of choking on peanut butter, of the fallacy of ghosts and leprechauns, of dogma, and of the number eight.

But quitting is not an option. Your show has remained in the top ten for years and the money is good. You know you need to ride it out. Stick with the show until it ends. Until the studio quits making money from it and cancels it. You can’t quit, because studio heads aren’t interested in new sitcom projects from quitters.

“Anyway,” you say, “I think I could make a sitcom of her life.” And you really do think it is possible; with a character like Michelle, the show would be a little dark, a little tragic. A little funny.

“Whose life?” Sarah asks and scratches a word in her puzzle.

Michelle doesn’t light a candle—not this time. Her face is paler than last week and you wonder if it’s the fluorescent light bleaching the life out of her. She is again dressed in black, but this time she shows more skin. Her flour-white legs look like prosthetics attached to the blackness of her torso. She explains that you must envision your success before you can achieve it—that you must see yourself being successful. “If you can’t see it,” she says, “then how can you do it?”

“How was work?” she asks.

“Did the shoot wrap up?”

You don’t want to talk about the show. You don’t want to tell her how the producers want you to bring in a new character, a possible love interest for one of the leads. Someone to freshen up a stale story line. A stale time slot. That conversation is also stale and always ends with Sarah saying, “You could always quit. Start a new project.”

She tells you to think back to one of your failed attempts in life. She says, “Think back to a time where you wanted something and you messed it up or stopped trying. Maybe it got a little too hard.” She turns to the person to her right and says, “Please tell everyone your name and tell us your failure.”

“Yeah, um, my name is Jared. And I, um, so I tried once, but then I, um...”

“Don’t be afraid,” Michelle says. “In the right capacity, fear is an emotion we need, but too much of it can prevent us from doing things necessary in our life.”

“Um, okay.”

“Jared, fear is a necessity, unreasonable fear is an obstruction. You need to learn the root of the fear, visualize how your life will change if you challenge your fear—if you face your fear. Don’t let fear prevent you from achieving your prime directive.”

You think, Prime directive? Where have I heard prime directive? It’s there in the outskirts of your memory, but you can’t touch it. You write in your notebook: Google prime directive. You write in your notebook: Fear is a necessity. Use fear to achieve goals. You’re not exactly sure this is what Michelle meant, but it’s close enough.

Then it’s your turn and with all eyes on you, you share the first time you met with Sarah—your first date. You explain that it wasn’t a date, not really. It was research for your show. You were interviewing several female psychiatrists because you needed to get into their heads collectively. You wanted to build an archetype. “I paid each one for a session,” you say, “and they pretended to be my doctor.” Typically, you met in their office, for effect, but this time, with Sarah, it was dinner, and wine, and valet parking, and you picked her up and you were dropping her off after. “So yeah,” you say, “it felt more like a date.”

While sipping wine, she asked you questions. Typical getting-to-know-you type questions, but with a shrink tone. She asked about your childhood, your parents, your romantic relationships; she asked about what made you angry and what made you happy. She asked what you were afraid of.

You told her in one breath what scared you: “Poisonous snakes and rats.” You said, “I’m not afraid of insects really—when they’re onsey-twosy. Yes, they creep me out, maybe cause the shivers—but not real fear. Swarming insects, well, that’s a different story.” You told her, “Thousands of bees or millions of ants invading my personal space—shit.” You said, “I’m anthro-

pophobic, isolophobic, and I fear contradiction. If I think too long about Alzheimer's, I have panic attacks. I'm scared of getting old, of choking on peanut butter, of the fallacy of ghosts and leprechauns, of dogma, and of the number eight."

"Did you practice that?" she asked, looking over the rims of her glasses. "It sounded well-rehearsed."

You told her she wasn't the first shrink to ask what scared you. You said, "You aren't the tenth."

"Is any of it true?" she asked.

"Why would I lie?"

"Why would you tell the truth?"

You both sat quiet for a moment, then you picked up the bottle of Merlot, half tipping it toward her glass. "A little more?" She nodded.

She asked about what you do and you told her that you work in TV. You write and produce TV shows.

"Anything I've seen?"

You told her about the two shows that nobody has seen yet. Two pilots. "One is a campy little sitcom about a gay plumber, a fag hag who loves the plumber and tries to convert him, and her brother, a failed poet whom the plumber loves and tries to convert." She scrunched her face with worry and you saw what would be deep wrinkles in the next few years. She said, "That sounds really stupid."

"It is stupid. But in order to develop my idea, I have to develop this pilot."

After ordering your meals, handing over the menus, and resituating yourselves, she asked, "So then, what's your idea?"

"My idea?" You sipped your wine. "My idea is a drama about a shrink who blows a case. She misses a problem with a kid and he kills himself. The kid comes back as a ghost—he haunts her in a way. She has all these sessions with him trying to cure him, and whatever issue she tries to address, one of her real-life clients suffers through something similar."

"Sort of like that Bruce Willis movie, you know that one with the goofy-looking kid?"

You know that movie. And you've heard this comparison before. Stephens at MGM said pretty much the same thing. He even had the stonies to ask, in the middle of the pitch, if he could change the doctor to a male lead...maybe even try and get Willis. Before you walked out of his office, before you called him a useless hack, you asked him if he even "bothered to read the fucking manuscript."

"No, no, no," you said, "not at all like that movie."

You explained how in your story, the kid dies because the doctor messed up. The kid is a ghost who comes back to haunt the doctor, but he is a good kid. He is a confused kid. And the doctor has all this guilt.

"They have imaginary sessions, right?" she asked. "And they both receive mutual therapy?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And through this therapy, strangers are helped by the kid or the doctor?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that movie?"

You picked up your glass and finished off the wine. Filled it, and took another long swallow. Behind her, in the distance, the kitchen doors flapped open and a tuxedoed waiter hauled out a tray of dinners for some table somewhere. Outside your window, in the corner, a spider was preparing its dinner. You said, "Yeah, just like that movie."

When you finish your story, you admit to Michelle, to the class, that Sarah was right. Your show was a thinly disguised imitation—or more accurately, a rip-off. What were you thinking? Maybe, in part, that is what you loved about Sarah. She calls things as she sees them. She pulls no punches. You say, "She saved me from spending one more minute on this project. She freed me to look for something more original."

"So what can you do to avoid this type of failure in the future?" Michelle asks.

For the others, this was a trick question. For you, the answer was painfully obvious. "I need to listen to Sarah more."

"Why would you do that? Her advice is what caused you to quit your idea. Her opinion is what caused you to give up on yourself and fail to follow through on your goals."

"But it was a really bad idea that no studio was going to buy. I was able to spend more time on the show that the studio wanted, which has proved to be a moneymaker. It made me a success."

"But you hate it. You have settled. You have fallen into the trap of mediocrity and conformity. How many other ideas will you let another crush before you trust yourself?"

She looks to the person to your left. "Your turn. Tell us your failure."

You think Michelle is wrong. You don't let others step all over your ideas. You never have. Which is why Stephens doesn't answer his phone

when you call. But that's not important, not the idea, not whether or not you failed or fell into any trap, not anymore. What is important is your new concept for a sitcom. This one based loosely on Michelle, or not so loose. This Michelle. This damaged young woman, and what? She can't be a self-help guru, can she? There's irony, but it's too close to reality. Maybe a dietician, you think, an anorexic dietician. Or maybe she is a hotline consultant, phone-sex worker, or maybe a web-cam porn star? The more you think about it, the more you like the idea of Michelle as a character. She's a gold mine.

You decide to talk to her after class. You tell her she was right. That you should never have given up on that shrink story idea. You tell her that you want to restart your work, but you need to freshen up some research. Would she allow you to interview her? "Can we meet for a drink? Talk a while. Informal really—maybe coffee?"

"Coffee sounds good," she says.

"So how was class?" Sarah asks. "Are you self-actualized?"

She's working a puzzle and you can't tell if she is mocking you or if this is playful banter—the type of banter that used to lead to sex. "It was okay," you say and plop on the bed and lie back. "Shoes, please," she says. You sigh and hang your legs off the side of the bed. You sit, not talking. She scratches the pencil on her puzzle. You stare at the black-and-white photo on the wall—Sarah on the beach, Sarah in a bikini, Sarah splashing and playing with a beach ball. You think, What was that, two, no, three summers ago—St. Thomas, Rum Runners, reggae and the sex, all the sex. Damn, what happened to her?

You wish you could pinpoint that exact moment when the two of you quit talking to each other, or worse, when you quit listening to each other. You wonder if it was an exact moment, or if it was a gradual drift. Like erosion, a fraction of an inch here, a fraction there. And then one day you look at a picture on the wall and think, what happened to that happy couple?

You tell her that you have set up an interview with Michelle for the next Tuesday.

"Michelle?"

"The teacher from class."

"Oh."

"I told you about her last week. I told you that she was a little bizarre and would make a great character in a sitcom."

"You said she was curious."

"Yeah, well, I've set up an interview so I can develop a character

sketch, develop a story line."

"Like you did with me?" she asks.

"Exactly," you say and remember how that first interview ended with Sarah. You think about the two extra bottles of wine, you think about the invite to her place, waking in her bed, both of you naked with sex still fresh on your skin. You wonder if Sarah is thinking the same thing. Moments pass—the clock ticks and she taps her pencil on the puzzle book. She's stuck on a word and you wait for her to ask.

You check your watch every minute or two. When Michelle is 20 minutes late, you think she is fashionable. At 40 minutes you think flat tire, maybe rear-ended. At an hour, you decide she is a no-show. You finish the last cold swallow of your coffee and pack up your stuff. You convince yourself to wait five more minutes and stare out the door, willing her to open it. You watch out the window as cars pull in and out of the parking lot. You see this little kid outside, sitting with his mom. He has long, wavy blonde hair and huge blue eyes and you think he's six, maybe seven. You think he could be in commercials and if he was good, on TV. He waves at you while his mother talks to her friend and smokes a cigarette.

You wave back.

You're watching the window, like TV, the boy eating a cookie, making faces at strangers, when Michelle walks in.

"I need something stronger than coffee," she says. "You in?"

She is a wreck. Her black mascara, you think yesterday's mascara, is smeared around her puffy eyes. Her stance is nervous and jittery.

"Yes," you say, "let's go."

You sit on Michelle's futon holding a paper cup half filled with tequila and struggle for something to say—something, anything to break the awkwardness of virtual strangers. Michelle is sloppy drunk. She holds her cup up. "Cheers." You soundlessly clink cups and drink. You know it would be easy getting her into bed, and this would be the farthest thing from the "same old" that you can think of. But really, would it, you think—a bored husband cheating on his wife—isn't that the very definition of bourgeois?

"Did I tell you about my husband?"

"Husband?" you ask. "No, I don't think you ever mentioned your husband."

She looks across the room, at herself in the mirrored wall. She unslumps her shoulders, pushes out her breasts. She lifts them up, support-

ing them. “They’re starting to sag a little,” she says, but not to you. “I’m not even thirty yet and they’re starting to sag.” She lets her breasts go and pushes her fingers through her hair. “Maybe that’s why?”

“Why what?”

“Did you know that my husband is in prison? Felony assault or maybe it was attempted murder, I don’t remember.” She walks across the room and grabs her cigarettes. “Get this. He beat the man who fucked his woman. Not me; he quit fucking me a long time ago. He kicked the shit out of some young kid who fucked his nineteen-year-old girlfriend. Put him in a coma.”

You look to the front door and wonder how exactly to leave. You think about all those old spy shows you used to watch. When danger was in the air, they always had a secret passage or an emergency exit that led them to safety. Now, just this one time, you wish for the secret passage, you wish you could go to the mirror, touch the corner, and swoosh, a door.

“Can you fucking believe it? She was only nineteen.”

You don’t know what to say so you ask, “Are you going to divorce him?” She starts to pace around the room.

“All he said was, ‘I’ll make it up to you, baby. When I get out, it will all be better, I promise.’” She drops her cigarette on the carpet and grinds it out with her foot. “His lawyer, the fucking swine, says six months minimum, two years max.”

Your entire body tenses when she sits next to you, close to you. She puts her hand on your leg. Her fingers glide up your thigh, stopping fractions of an inch from your starting-to-get-hard dick. “Or,” she says, “I could be lying and he could walk in any minute. He could catch us in the throes of hot steamy passion.” She says this while drawing small circles on your thigh, her long nails sending lightning across your body. She grabs your leg, using her nails like claws, and squeezes. She asks, “Can you feel the danger?”

You grab her hand and move it off your leg.

“Dangerous sex is my favorite kind of sex,” she says. She leans over your lap, her breasts resting on your legs, and grabs for the bottle of tequila. You grab hold of the bottle. You say, “Michelle, it’s time to stop,” but you’re not sure what exactly you want to stop. She lets go with a pout and rests her head on your shoulder, staring again at the mirror.

After a few minutes, she asks, “Am I the kind of girl you’d leave your wife for?”

You pretend not to be listening. You zone off, stare deep in the mirror, at the reflection of the cheap art hung on the wall behind you—a deserted beach at sunset or sunrise; only a set of footprints walking across

the sand hints at a person. You put on your faraway eyes and don’t answer. There is no easy answer to her question. If you say yes, then you’re leading her down a long, deceptive road. You say no, and—well, it seems too cruel to say that out loud.

You wonder why you’ve never asked yourself that question. Not Michelle’s question, but your version of that question—should you leave Sarah? Not for Michelle. But to leave. To escape. You wonder if she would notice that you left. If she noticed, then what? Would she get a cat or a dog to share her stories with? Would she find a new person to help her with her crosswords, a new person to help fill in the blanks?

“I know this is a shitty question,” Michelle says, sounding a bit more sober. “I’m not asking you to. I don’t even want you to.” She sighs deeply and stares off with her own faraway eyes. “I just wonder if I would be the type that would make you want to.”

You want to tell Michelle that she’s all character, no plot. You want to tell her she needs to find a story; she needs to find a beginning, a middle, and an end. But then what would be the point? She wouldn’t understand. “No,” you say. “I don’t think you are.”

“I didn’t think so,” she says and falls asleep.

It’s after midnight when you get home and Sarah is asleep, her crossword book folded on her stomach. You undress and slide into your side of the bed. You pick up her puzzle book, with its cover worn and slightly tattered. She’s been working on this book for as long as you can remember. You flip through the pages, see the empty boxes of the unfinished puzzles. You see all the unasked questions. 40 across: a five-letter word for “single entity.” Starts with “t,” ends with “g.” 44 across: “far from fresh,” six letters, ends with “cid.” You pick up Sarah’s pencil and start filling in the empty boxes. You write: thing. You write: rancid. You write: clone, realm, stoolpigeon. Page after page, the empty boxes are filled.

Israeli Ace

by Robert Wexelblatt

“Hey there, Harold.”

It was Joel and Riva Cohn. Harold turned, not altogether pleased to be found, and nodded an acknowledgment.

“Okay if we slide in with you?” whispered Joel. “Where’s Julie?”

Before Harold could answer, Riva had swished up against him.

“Well, Judy got a gorgeous day,” she announced as if Harold might have neglected to notice the weather or were unsure on whose daughter’s bat mitzvah the sunshine had been bestowed. Riva presented her cheek to be nearly kissed. “Mmm, *really* gorgeous,” she hummed. Riva’s face smelled of powder and perfume, the odor of sanctity. Julie favored Shalimar, which came in a bottle shaped like the Taj Mahal. Riva’s scent was a little different, but not different enough to matter. As he pulled away from her Riva was already rubbernecking, taking roll. The consequence was that Harold’s nose grazed her hair, which was stiff as a guard rail. “So where *is* Julie?” she demanded.

He’d done a little buttock-walk down the pew, right up against the wall, so as to preserve what remained of his space. He had been relishing sitting alone. It made him feel as if he were either a widower or a teenager again. You see things differently when you’re on your own, he had been musing, and it was because he was feeling this not unpleasant disconnection that he answered Riva brusquely. “Stomach’s acting up.”

“Oh, that’s *awful*. She must feel *terrible* about missing this, of all days. I mean, well *you* know how she slaved with Judy over practically every detail.” Riva was not looking at Harold. Her wide eyes were sweeping the front of the synagogue the way searchlights seek prisoners. “Judy and Julie,” she hummed to herself, and it occurred to Harold that Riva might be jealous of his wife’s friendship with Judy.

“She sure was feeling awful when I left,” he said to make up for his earlier bluntness and conceal the sudden insight which made him feel sympathetic to Riva.

“Perfect day for tennis, eh?” Joel whispered to him behind Riva’s head. Harold smiled and nodded, still thinking about Riva’s jealousy and wondering what other passions he had overlooked in their circle.

A young couple bustled in behind them. Harold glanced around.

The man had a baby face under prematurely thinning hair and seemed anxious about something. The woman, petite and fierce with severely curled black hair, was urging a little boy in front of her. She was shoving her child. “Get up here and *sit down*.” Harold could feel the kid messing about on the floor just behind his feet and there was a palpable bump against the back of the pew that made Joel turn all the way around. His face changed quickly from indignation to good cheer. It was the synagogue, after all, and children are to be welcomed into the community of worshippers. *Jewish children are our future*. This was one of the rabbi’s favorite tautologies. Harold imagined the father shrugging and making an ambiguous face at Joel: *What can you do? You know how they are*. Wives. Children.

Another whisper: “Look, Jordan, if you don’t calm down we’re going to have to go outside. You don’t want Daddy to have to go outside, do you?” Harold could tell from the strain in the man’s voice that he was leaning down, coaxing, but the mother overrode him like a merciless editor. “Jordan! Cut that nonsense and get your bum up here. *Right now*. God’ll be here in a minute.”

Harold grinned. *God’ll be here in a minute*, as if the synagogue were a cathedral, as if Jehovah were going to burst in to kick butt and take names. How had they put it back in Hebrew school? *A Christian church is God’s house and the people have to be invited in, while our synagogue is the house of the Jewish people and we invite God in*. This in a smug, entre-nous voice.

“Jordan, shh! Quiet now. Or else.” The matron’s whisper could have sawn through oak. Harold raised his eyes to the ceiling, so white and modern, angular; the whole building was aggressively post-Holocaust, decorated with an expressionistic sculpture of Jacob wrestling the angel, hangings so colorful they hurt the eyes, not one but two huge brass menorahs. They looked like melting candelabra. Harold unpacked another of his non-biodegradable memories. Julie was tearing a wailing Beth from his arms in Sears, that same Beth who was now a level-headed actuary in San Jose, California. *You, you couldn’t train a cocker spaniel*, Julie had barked at him, a reproach that had lodged in his memory for twenty-three years. This was due to her words’ rhythm, he now judged, that double you, as much as their cruelty—or their accuracy. He probably couldn’t have trained a cocker spaniel, smacking its nose with a rolled up newspaper, yelling to make the puppy cower with big terrified eyes. No, he had turned out the same as the gentle fellow behind him, the same as his own father, whom he could still see arriving home, helplessly baffled by the bill-of-particulars his mother had drawn up

against him and his sister. *Jewish husbands make the best slaves.* It was one of his mother's favorite sayings and the day of the cocker spaniel remark in the mall Harold had gone into Sears and spitefully typed it on all the typewriters. Where are the typewriters of yesteryear?

Riva used the same peculiarly penetrating whisper the young matron had. In fact, Harold could hear identical whispers all around him. Riva was whispering to Joel about Judy's dress. That was how he and Julie would have communicated too had she been there; she would have evaluated everything for him in exactly the same synagogue whisper, the pre-service whisper. Once the rituals were over, he realized, people always resumed speaking normally. Decorum. And yet this whisper achieved little in the way of concealment and could hardly be said to be decorous. Though obviously an adult form of behavior, one he had engaged in countless times himself, all this whispering struck Harold now as childish, the inverse of Jordan's bored fooling about on the floor. At least the kid didn't know enough to be insincere. If this is *our* house, why the whispering? They had been right in Hebrew school. Nothing to do with sanctity or God, everything to do with social propriety. And it seemed to Harold, who was having all these peculiar thoughts simply because he was on his own, that the really distinctive religious attitude of Jews was to whisper at each other so God wouldn't hear, then to argue out loud with God, and then, at the last minute, submit. The Chosen People. Abraham haggling to save Sodom. To bargain with God was hopeful and hopeless at the same time, but so human. He'd always liked Abraham for putting up that argument. Was a Jew at prayer like a clerk asking for a raise he knows in advance he isn't going to get and so he slinks back to the office and whines to all the other clerks, who whisper complaints to top his? What thoughts he was having!

The place was filling up quickly with more and more whisperers. Fred's brother stood at the back giving everybody a white, specially printed commemorative booklet in sham-Hebrew script. Julie had been out until one a.m. last Tuesday working out the final editorial touches with Judy. *Sarah's Bat Mitzvah* it said in swirling arabesques. The first names of all the family were printed at the bottom. *Brought to you by.*

Joel leaned forward and whispered to him around Riva. "So, you left her puking or what?"

Riva hissed at him then swiveled from the waist, like a mannequin. Her bottom made a small swishing noise on the smooth wood. "What is it? Twenty-four-hour bug?"

"Chicken fat on Chinese noodles."

"Ech. They put MSG in everything, even when they say they don't."

"Not MSG, he said *schmaltz*," corrected Joel then thought better of picking a fight. "Nice flowers. What kind are those, the orange ones?"

"Mums, they're mums." It was as if she were saying Joel was a moron. "Carnations, lilies, and about a ton of baby's breath."

Riva was a haughty gardener, and Joel wisely gave her every opportunity to show off. It occurred to Harold that Riva's nose must be out of joint because she, the expert on horticulture, hadn't been consulted on the flowers.

"Is God here yet?" whined Jordan at full volume.

"Sit still. It hasn't even started."

"I'm bored."

The whisper rose to a crescendo. "*Shb. You're embarrassing us.*"

"Someday you'll be up there, Jor."

The child yawned loudly.

"Want me to take him outside?" begged the father.

There was a slight pause as the question hung in the sanctified air. "No. I do *not*." The absence of the contraction was chilling.

Julie had been fine when she went to bed but had awakened at dawn with the bad stomach.

"Those noodles! I knew they were soaked in fat," she gasped, heading for the bathroom.

Julie was not a vegetarian on principle but because she was incapable of digesting animal fat. This did not prevent her from adopting the current food theology. Fat is sin. The evening before they had played a little bridge with the Feldmans and ordered out. Julie had stuck to her usual rice and vegetables, but she was tempted by the noodles.

"Chicken fat?" Harold had said from his side of the bed, rubbing his eyes. The noodles had been greasy. In fact, he had warned his wife but it would have been foolish to remind her of it. Instead he padded down the hall to Beth's old bathroom to pee. When he returned Julie was falling back into bed, staggering under the weight of her inadvertent alimentary sin.

"Christ. I'll never make it. I'm not even going to try. Judy'll just have to forgive me."

Harold was by the bureau reviewing his cufflinks. "You're not *going*?" he said stupidly.

"You think I could? You know I'll have the goddamned runs until tomorrow. Believe me—"

"Poor baby."

“—I’d drag myself if I thought...I’m just sick that I’ll miss—”

“Judy’ll understand. Of course she will. She knows your stomach.”

“You’ll explain? Promise?” Julie whimpered.

“You don’t want me to stay with you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Okay. So you’ll see the pictures.”

Julie groaned, heaved up, and rubbed her tummy. “They’re doing a video, of course.”

“All right, so you’ll look at the video and make extra-loud compliments. Can I at least get you something before I go? Pepto? Maybe a cup of tea? A little toast?”

Julie made a dramatically miserable noise as she rolled back off the bed and reeled toward the bathroom, too sick to swear.

At last Rabbi Aaronson burst in from his chamber fiddling with his

**"Every Jew is a universe,
Howard. When we drink it's
not mud in your eye or bottoms
up, it's to life. Not just our life,
all life. L'chaim."**

prayer shawl and strutted around the pulpit like a prosperous man arriving late to his own birthday party. A large man, pink of countenance and shinningly bald, Aaronson was adept, much revered, constantly being invited to speak in places like Poland and New

Zealand and yet, Harold sometimes thought, a little too vital, a dab over-sure of himself. “I wish I could be as joyful as you, Rabbi,” he had said to him at the Shiva of Howie Schultz’s mother. “We Jews have to affirm life,” Aaronson had replied with cheerful pomposity then surprised Harold by throwing an avuncular arm around his neck. “It’s because they wanted to kill us all,” he said into his ear, as if it were a stock tip. “You understand? Look, life’s full of wonders. Howie’s mother died at eighty-six. Isn’t that a triumph? Every Jew is a universe, Howard. When we drink it’s not mud in your eye or bottoms up, it’s to life. Not just *our* life, *all* life. *L'chaim*.” And he had released Harold to drain a glass of Howie’s Chivas Regal. Harold thought of saying, “My name’s Harold,” but didn’t.

Rabbi Aaronson was taking his time, though the service was already running late. He chatted casually with those members of the family privileged to participate, reminding them of their cues. These were seated not, as was customary, in the first few rows but on folding chairs specially set up on the dais. This was only one of Judy’s innovations, but then, to judge from the booklet, she had virtually rewritten the Sabbath service itself. As for Sarah, whom he had seen earlier running around greeting all of her school

friends, she was now sitting stiffly behind the pulpit in her new white dress, knees pressed together tight. Harold could imagine what was in her mind. *If I stay very still I'll remember everything*. The rabbi’s nonchalance must have exasperated her, for she was scowling in his direction. As for her mother, Judy was everywhere, greeting, pointing proudly toward her daughter, still arranging a chair here, a lily there. No, there was no doubt whose affair this was. *Produced by*.

At last the rabbi motioned to Sarah’s father. Fred stood up and made his way to the pulpit, the proud patriarch. Harold was shocked by the height of Fred’s forehead shining there in the spotlight and instinctively felt for his own hair line. Fred gripped the podium like a motorcycle’s handlebars, arms straight, fists firm, elbows slightly bent, then looked around with a grin of studied benevolence until the whispering petered out. This was the Father’s Speech promised in the program. Fred’s new Italian suit made him look pretty trim, and there was no doubt he was at home with public speaking; but Harold was thinking of the two tumultuous weeks Fred had crashed in his basement after the breakup with Shirley. That epoch had marked the true beginning of their friendship. As a well-regarded college administrator, fair scholar, husband, father, as a winning athlete, taker of intriguing vacations, and a chef of exotic delicacies, Fred had not particularly appealed to Harold. He began to appreciate Fred only after his life collapsed; that is, when he became vulnerable. A friend in need. A friend *only* in need. Or, best of all, a friend who has been humiliated, as Shirley had thoroughly humiliated Fred. There had been a painful yet heroic year when Fred was at his best, when life was something through which he trekked like a desert. To Harold, Fred may have been attractive when he was a problem, but Julie preferred him as a solution, which is to say a safely remarried one. Julie would have liked the set of him that morning. He was once more invulnerable, and he delivered a fine speech too, at least as good as any he spouted to raw freshmen. He greeted everyone, many by name, thanked them for coming, interpreted the yarmulkes and prayer shawls and the scrolls for the Gentile guests, explained the significance of the event, though all this was exhaustively covered in the booklet, with footnotes. He then talked glowingly of his family and its “strength,” flattered the rabbi, thanked his daughter’s tutor, and wound up by directing some seriously sententious stuff to Sarah, who looked back at him with her even teeth and unblinking eyes.

Next it was Judy’s turn. She spoke about the role of women in Jewish history, noted the overdue progress signified by a *bat* mitzvah, told a suitably expurgated version of the story of the original Sarah, praising the



steadfastness of her for whom her daughter had been named. Then she pulled a neatly folded prayer shawl from a shelf under the pulpit and draped it over her daughter's shoulders. It was a very fancy shawl. "This was made for Sarah by my late beloved mother, Hannah Shulberg," Judy concluded tearfully. Cancer, Harold recalled. They didn't get it all.

An uncle spoke and also an aunt, one from each side of the family, both also making a fuss about family life, a major theme, of tradition and, once again, the enormous *strength* of this particular family. The uncle was even moved to call it "an impregnable bulwark." But the rabbi's was the most fulsome speech of all, family-wise. The only one who looked really at ease up there, he went on and on describing the pleasure of getting to know "Judy and Fred and their terrific kids," extolling "this model Jewish family and their devotion to our traditions as we see here this day." Amen. Hallelujah. There was no mention of the fact that the four children on the dais were actually the products of various couplings. His, hers, and theirs. Lev was from Judy's first marriage to Solomon the philandering periodontist, Rebecca and Scott the products of Fred's to the castrating Shirley. Only little Sarah, named for the woman who cracked up when told she'd be having a baby at ninety, was actually theirs, the fruit of their lives' second acts, the precocious earnest of their new, self-conscious happiness. No matter. The rabbi spoke jocularly of the bat mitzvah girl, calling her alternately *Her Nibs*, *Your Highness*, *our little Princess*. True, *Sarah* does mean *princess*. The congregation seemed amused by this teasing, taking it as another proof of Aaronson's good nature; but, thinking of his own bar mitzvah and what he had then felt to be the condescension of adults, Harold suffered on the child's behalf. Thirteen-year-old skin is thin. But he needn't have worried. Sarah actually glowed under this kidding, self-possessed and suddenly confident, and Harold realized that Aaronson was cleverly loosening her up.

Like a fussy field marshal disposing troops for a battle, Judy had planned the day in each detail, from the florists and caterers to the garments of her family, the musicians and the service itself. Fred paid through the nose. Harold knew the drill. Ostentation elbowing spirituality to the side. He had seen it often enough and if it disturbed him today this was simply because he was alone, temporarily without a family to dress and feed, daughter calculating death-rates in California, wife groaning on the can. Had either been there he would not be having such unseasonable thoughts.

Finally the service got under way. Most of it was familiar, de-

spite Judy's feminist redactions. People rose and sat on cue, chanted the old verses. The ark opened electronically and the honored relatives stumbled through the prayers over the Torah. The scroll was carried from the ark by two siblings. The rabbi rubbed his hands together and Sarah made ready for the moment of truth, hefting the heavy silver pointer.

As he was turning to sit for the reading that "would seal the bond of Sarah's union with the Jewish people," as Judy put it in her speech while pointedly lamenting that *her* generation of Jewish girls had been unable to do likewise, Harold's sight was arrested by two people behind him. The first was Jordan. He was curled up on the wooden pew, thumb in his mouth so that he looked like a hooked worm; his miniature blue suit was wrinkled and his tie unclipped. The second was an indistinct face in the last row. There was something familiar about it, familiar and compelling.

It was not until everyone stood for Kaddish that Harold was able to catch sight of the man again. He couldn't help staring, though when reciting Kaddish Harold always concentrated. It was always for his father that he repeated the ancient words, but today, when everything seemed to be askew, he turned. Jordan's parents glanced up from their prayer books, and looked at him with disapproval.

The fellow seemed to be both comfortable and awkward in a rumpled grey suit, an odd effect. Salt-and-pepper hair fell limply over one side of his forehead. Two deep lines running from his nose to either side of his mouth made him look like a philosophical chipmunk. Harold wondered if these lines were owing to excess of laughter or bitterness, because the face struck him as capable of expressing a full measure of either. It was an intelligent face. With a beard it would have been that of a Jewish sage; nowadays it was the countenance of a professor. He had an air of being lost and inattentive, bored as Jordan. But inside this face was another one, a face Harold felt sure he had known when it was smooth. Like himself, the fellow was fiftyish and apparently alone, huddled in the corner of the last row. The standard-issue yarmulke lay ridiculously bunched up over what was probably a bald spot. A wife would have made him smooth it down properly. As he turned and mechanically resumed the prayer for the dead Harold reached up and touched his own head for reassurance. Then, with one last glance over his shoulder, he noted that the stranger was not saying the *Y'skadal*.

The reception line moved sluggishly and Harold was obligated to go through it between Riva and Joel. No more whispers now as Riva trumpeted "She was really wonderful" into his left ear above the din. He couldn't be sure if she meant the child or Judy. "You staying for the luncheon?"

Harold would have liked to go home. He could deliver his check and a big Mazeltov to Sarah, tell Judy and Fred about Julie with full pathos, then go home to nurse his sick wife and watch a game on TV. But that would not have pleased Julie. No, she would want a thorough rundown on the luncheon, a review with plenty of details. *How was the food? Who sat where?* Besides, he wanted to find the man with the familiar face.

"I'll stay a little while maybe," he said to Riva, looking over her head.

"Huh?"

"Maybe a little while," he yelled.

Joel took his arm. "You hear this one? A Nazi, a Bolshevik, and a Jew all die and go to Heaven on the same day. God's there to greet them and says he's so glad to see them that he'll grant each one a wish."

Harold was still trying to find the face and thoughtlessly delivered Joe's punch line for him. "Yeah, yeah. In that case I'll have a nice glass tea."

"Oh, you heard it," said Joe, hurt.

La Bibliothèque restaurant featured long oak tables, French provincial food, and high bookcases stocked with leather tomes nobody read. Fred and Judy had some sort of relationship with the owner so they had gotten a good rate. "Not inappropriate," Harold had joked when Julie told him about it. "What?" she said. He shrugged. "The people of the Book?"

So La Bibliothèque, which only did dinners, was theirs from noon to four but Judy still had to find her own caterer. You'd have thought it was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Harold was amused when, after two weeks of anguished phone calls, Julie told him that they had settled on Camille Kardon, whom everybody used, and that the bill of fare was to be the customary dolled-up chicken, stuffed mushrooms, etcetera. Today he felt all this fruitless striving after originality in mitzvahs of both genders was misplaced, could only be achieved at exorbitant rates. He was in a conservative mood. Wasn't the essence as well as the consolation of ritual its predictability? What is customary becomes in time traditional and it is tradition that gives weight to what would otherwise be wasteful ostentation. As he looked around La Bibliothèque, though, he wondered ruefully if ostentation and waste had themselves become part of the tradition.

A buffet was set up at one end of the place, a bandstand and dance floor at the other. A long bar stretched in front of the bay window at the side. Three young bartenders were backlit, like archangels. A crass old pro named Blumfeld doubled as wailing clarinetist and relentless emcee. Harold had seen him at least a dozen times before. Even his tuxedo looked brash.

He opened with the *bora*, of course, which Harold skipped in favor of the bar. He watched the joyous double round, young people going fast on the inside, their elders working up an appetite more sedately on the outside, and everybody laughing and looking around as if to say, “Hey! Look at us! We’re doing the *bora*!”

After that Blumfeld began to call the principals up one by one, insisting on rounds of applause for uncles and aunts and cousins whose dignity he scraped away with the well-honed edge of his amplified voice. As for the blooming crowd of thirteen-year-olds, they disdained Blumfeld at first. Harold could see them whispering things like “What a dork!” but Blumfeld was practiced; the man knew his job. He won them over when he summoned Sarah to the bandstand, flicked a switch on a tape recorder for a backbeat, and, grabbing her hand, performed a tasteless rap song about her. His accompanying gyrations were so comical, so utterly self-mocking and inept, that the kids were stupefied, won over by fascinated distaste.

*This babe Sarah
can twist and shout,
studied the Torah
and never zoned out,
talked a fine speech
thanking the ‘rents,
walked a fine walk
to get her presents.
The boys all like
to see her arrive,
hip-hops so fine
and that’s no jive.
A perfect bat mitzvah
and a knockout too,
let’s hear it for Sarah,
one grown-up Jew!*

After that they’d have pinned the tail on any number of donkeys at Blumfeld’s command. As it was, he lined them up for a giggly game of Simon Says while the winded adults headed for their tables or the bar. Harold, having liberated himself from Joel and Riva, resumed his quest for that man in the last row.

He found him in a corner talking to Wiener. Wiener, an obstetri-

cian, was also the perennial head of the local Allied Jewish Appeal so the topic was, of course, Israel. Zionomania was Wiener’s *idée fixe*. Harold stood a little aside to listen.

“You mean you’ve never been? Not once?” Wiener was saying incredulously. “You telling me you never *wanted* to go?”

“Once.”

“Ah ha, and when was that?”

“May of ‘67,” said the man with an expression Harold judged to be about equally bitter and droll, “when I was dodging the draft over here.”

“There! You see?”

“See what?”

Wiener nodded twice. “You obviously wanted to fight for your people, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I’d have done that.”

“So, why didn’t you?”

“Family problems. And then the war was over too quickly.”

“Quick and neat. A miracle.”

“You think it was neat?”

“Well it sure as hell wasn’t a quagmire like Vietnam, was it?”

The man sighed; it sounded like exasperation.

Wiener, raising a finger, was about to start in again when Harold, coming up behind him, interrupted.

“Pardon me,” he said.

The man turned his face toward Harold. Wiener spun around, spilling his drink over his shirt. “Shit,” he said, flicking furiously with his hand as if it were acid and glaring from his chest to Harold, who ignored him and the unspoken reproach. Harold liked Israel more than he did Wiener.

“I’m sure I know you,” he said to the stranger.

The man looked at him hard for a moment with furrowed brow and then smiled. “Used to. I think we went to Hebrew school together. Harold Shamberg, right?”

Then it hit him. “Good Lord! It’s Billy, Billy...”

“Billy Wasserman.”

They shook hands while Wiener, obviously the odd man out, grabbed a napkin from the closest table and angrily excused himself.

“God, how long’s it been?”

Wasserman squinted over Harold’s shoulder. “Children are such tyrants.”

“Pardon me?”

Wasserman nodded toward the dance floor. All Harold saw was a gang of adolescents of various sizes gyrating to Blumfeld's pathetic rendition of a rock tune.

"Never mind me. I hardly slept last night. Motel. There was this couple in the next room."

Harold shrugged. "So. How do we catch up on thirty-five years?"

"We don't. Grown-ups exchange résumés. You want mine? Got a law degree. Married twice, two kids from the first, zero from the second. Two divorces. Worked for the FBI a few years, spent a half-dozen more in private practice. Now I teach criminal law at Columbia."

"You and Fred—?"

"Colleagues and semi-pals. I happened to mention I was going to be in town for a conference on Friday and he asked me to stick around for this. Poor guy. It bothers him to neglect me. Or maybe not. Anyway I haven't been to one of these things in a century or two, so I thought okay, Fred's a sweet guy, I'll go."

"You'll sit with me, we'll catch up."

Wasserman looked at Harold and his face sagged with irony. "Why all this eagerness to *catch up*?"

Harold felt a little unsteady under Wasserman's challenge. Why indeed? "I don't know. It's what you do, isn't it?"

"No doubt a lot of people do it. But why?"

"Look—"

"No, I'm not trying to be insulting. I'm really curious. I mean you run into somebody you haven't seen in a couple of lifetimes and probably won't see again. Why catch up? I mean, is it like shaking hands or what?"

Normally Harold would have taken this Socratic pickiness as rudeness. In fact, had Julie been there the conversation would have ended on the spot. But Julie wasn't there. "All right," he said, "let's talk about something else then. Why don't you tell me some exciting FBI stories?"

"Wait. I haven't heard *your* résumé."

"Still on my first wife, a grown daughter in California. Nice, tidy, boring career with Sandoz. I play tennis and go to schul. The end."

"You go all the time? Not just the high holidays?"

"Tennis is twice a week, synagogue once. Julie's a big shot in Hadasah and everything."

"Then maybe you can tell me."

"What?"

"When did all the S's turn into T's?"

"Huh?"

"In the Hebrew, in the *prayers*. In our day it was S's, now they're T's. Is it some sort of local dialect or what?"

Harold laughed.

"You're right. I'd forgotten. How long's it been since you've were in a synagogue?"

"Well, almost since the last time I saw you. Since '67, actually, when my father blew his brains out."

"Your father—?"

Wasserman smiled. "You wanted to catch up."

This sudden intimacy overwhelmed Harold. "I'm sorry," he said lamely.

"He thought the country was going to dissolve in a race war, that it wouldn't survive Vietnam, that the Arabs were going to sweep all the Jews up like lint and dump them in the Mediterranean. So he blew his brains out. I suppose it made sense to him at the time."

"It was because of Israel that the S's became T's, I think. Hebrew came back to life."

"Like Church Latin and the real thing?"

"Something like that, I suppose. Anyway, the S's were declared to be T's."

Wasserman laughed. "Well, it pisses me off. I mean here I am, this non-practicing Jew, which is always the most conservative kind because he thinks, well, it's a 6000-year-old religion. Then one day he goes to a bat mitzvah and all the S's have turned into T's. Some joke."

Harold smiled. "Remember what old Littauer used to say?"

"Rabbi Littauer? Gosh, I haven't thought about him in ages."

"He used to say when you meet an atheist always be sure to ask him which God he doesn't believe in."

"And so you come every week because you found one you *do* believe in, is that it? Or is it just the Brotherhood and the Hadassah and the wife?"

Harold shrugged. "They're incompatible? Or is *that* the God you don't believe in?"

"Oh, the family god." Wasserman took a step closer to Harold as Blumfeld got the crowd singing *Dayenu*. "You know the prayers, T's and all. You chant the songs. I watched you. I'll bet you know all the verses to *Dayenu* and *An Only Kid*. You feel easy at a Seder. You *recline*. Me, I'm never at home. That's the sort of Jew I am."

"Not like me, right? You think I'm a hypocrite?"

“Heaven forbid I should think *anything* about you. We were sent to Hebrew school together; it was something our parents wanted. Assimilate, but not too much. With you it took, with me it didn’t. That’s all. Wiener over there wanted to prove it took with me too because as a teenager I had some atavistic wish to go fight Egyptians when they didn’t need me and my father did. No, I admire you. I just don’t envy you.”

Harold pulled out a chair. “Come, let’s sit down and finish these drinks and then—”

“Then we’ll get a couple more. Or is your wife waiting for you somewhere?” Wasserman looked around as if he’d recognize Julie.

“Sick at home. Chinese food.”

“Traf fat or MSG?”

Harold nodded with an involuntary smile. “Chicken fat.”

“What they say is true. No Chinese restaurant ever went bust in a Jewish neighborhood.”

Harold tried for a witticism. “You’re a lawyer. You ought to know the dietary laws don’t apply to Asian cuisine.”

They laughed and then sat and drank and Harold felt apart from all these people who made up so much of his life. He was not unhappy to feel apart. Fred was making the rounds. When he got to them he beamed as if the one thing lacking to make his day quite perfect was that the two of them should have known each other in Hebrew school. He clasped Wasserman’s hand and thanked him for coming.

“So why aren’t you mingling? No women to push you around? Say, Harold, I’ll bet you don’t know how important Herr Doktor Professor Wilhelm von Wasserman here is, do you?”

“How important?” asked Harold dutifully.

Fred leaned down and cupped his hand to whisper loud enough for Wasserman to hear. “Scuttlebutt is he’s on deck for the bench, Superior Court no less.”

“Don’t listen to him,” laughed Wasserman, reddening.

“No, no. You just wait. That’s going to be a superior rear end he’s sitting on.” Again Fred was intent on flattering Wasserman. “Why not,” he said straightening up. “We could always use another one of us on the high bench.”

Wasserman didn’t reply and Fred made his way to the next table, his hand already stretched toward the next shoulder.

The two men fell silent for a while, as if they were both embarrassed by Fred. Wasserman rubbed his fingers on the starched table cloth.

In silence they finished their drinks, which were mostly melted ice, and watched the other guests enjoying themselves. Where he would normally have seen tradition and joy Harold saw, as if against his will, forced smiles and stale custom. “Quite a interesting floor show,” Wasserman said with a Mephistophelian air. Women kissed the air next to each other’s cheeks, appraised their respective dresses and hair. The men talked in a kind of shorthand, telegraphing business tips and sports news, recycling their stock of jokes. Blumfeld’s band began to pump out a medley of old swing tunes and the more elderly took the cue to occupy the dance floor while the kids stampeded for the buffet. The restaurant was already beginning to look like a battlefield. It was all as it always was and Harold, looking at it through Wasserman’s eyes, felt almost ashamed, as a half-educated native might while showing his naked tribe to an anthropologist.

“I don’t remember anything Littauer told us, but I sure remember that pilot,” Wasserman said suddenly. Harold realized he must have been thinking of Hebrew school the whole time.

“What pilot?”

“You don’t remember him? Well of course we couldn’t have been more than eight or nine at the most, but he made an impression on me. I often think of him, in fact.”

“What pilot? I honestly don’t remember.”

“A hero of the War for Independence. I suppose he must have been sent out to whip up the generosity of Diaspora, guys like Wiener. Send your money, plant more trees, lobby more Congressmen. Even though we despise you. Even though you’re so deluded that you actually believe the Gentiles will accept you. Assimilation’s expensive and we’re the taxmen. Imagine, a Jewish fighter pilot, not a violinist for once, not a sociologist or a doctor for a change, but a real *ace*. *Our* ace. At least they told us he was an ace, which meant he’d shot down at least five planes. You honestly don’t remember him?”

Harold’s flailing memory finally snagged on something. They had been in a close, overheated classroom. It was probably wintertime because heat and boredom steamed from the radiator. Then the rabbi came in. “Did Littauer tell us he was an ace?”

“Littauer, Shittauer. All I remember about the famous rabbi was his saying about six million times not to marry a shiksa.”

Harold was embarrassed by the “Shittauer,” also the “six million” and especially the “shiksa.”

“How about I get us another,” he said, tapping the side of his empty

glass.

“Good man. Vodka tonic for me. I’ll try to organize some hors d’oeuvres.”

Harold made his way to the bar. People stopped him. They either wanted to ask about or to commiserate over Julie. The women said “Ooh” and kissed his cheek, the men patted him on the shoulder. It was as if he had been widowed overnight. It was the etiquette of mourning, its emptiest forms, only slightly mitigated.

The pilot, the pilot, he thought, trying to remember. The pilot had been important to Wasserman who still thought about him; he had made a lasting impression on him and Harold was drawn to Wasserman, this apostate, this near-judge. Two wives, no doubt a pair of shiksas to spite mom and dad and the rabbi, just the sort of women he himself had always been attracted to and frightened of as if they meant him harm with their knee socks, would poison him with their casseroles, impale him on their sharp noses and humiliate him with their hard blue eyes. Were Jewish girls ever cheerleaders, stewardesses? Plenty of actresses, but how many strippers?

And what of the pilot, the Israeli pilot? Wasserman didn’t call him an Israeli pilot. Why didn’t he call him that—an *Israeli* hero, an *Israeli* ace? Could Wasserman be one of those cracked anti-Zionist types?

Harold secured the drinks and made his way back to Wasserman, dodging nubile adolescents in stockinged feet whose dresses seemed to be unraveling before his eyes. The far end of the table was now occupied by the Katims and the Rosenbergs, an animated foursome. Harold would ordinarily have been delighted to sit with them, to schmooze with Richie and kid with Emily, talk a little tennis with Sam. He’d have enjoyed hearing Anna’s commentary on the affair, a treasure to lug home to Julie. For them he would have drawn out the story of the fatty Chinese noodles, provoking sympathy and chuckles. So it was with some surprise at himself that, before the others caught sight of him, he motioned to Wasserman to join him in a corner, which Wasserman promptly did, balancing a little plate piled high with stuffed mushrooms.

“These aren’t bad,” he said, offering the plate to Harold after relieving him of his vodka.

“Thanks. Okay, so what about the pilot? I remember a little, not much.”

“Oh, the pilot, my ideal Jew.”

“Ideal?”

“Remember? He was a shrimp, hardly taller than we were, pale

as a Yeshiva kid, gray, no, more *white*—you know, bleached out, like an old convict. He looked terrified, permanently scared out of his pants, even of us. And I’ll tell you something else. I don’t think he could speak Hebrew. I heard him mumble a few words to the rabbi. He was so quiet I couldn’t be sure but I’m pretty sure he spoke Yiddish or maybe German. And he was jumpy. I mean this guy had shot down five planes and he couldn’t even look us in the eye. He just stood there in the middle of this circle of awed American kids, his little hands jumping all over the place. You could see that for him it was an act of courage in itself, just standing there. All alone. I saw part of the tattoo on his wrist. He was on display like a monkey from another dimension. No brawny, browned kibbutznik in shorts and a little blue cap dancing around an orange grove, just this absolutely terrified mousy guy, some Galician survivor in a too-big gray suit, shaking all over like one of those rodents at the bottom of the food chain.”

“And we were supposed to admire him?”

“We were supposed to admire *something*, not him, not that brave displaced European scared out of his wits, so completely out of place in our fabulous turquoise and gold temple. Part of nothing, belonging nowhere, bewildered by his life, his heroics, the speed of death in the sky, the weight of death on the ground. I don’t know, Shamberg. That couldn’t be what we were *supposed* to admire, now was it?”

Traffic

by Malachi King

In the year 2000, the United Nations adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. In 2011, several countries within Africa are still primary dissenters of the Protocol, and the United States continues to remain the primary destination of thousands of human cargo every year.

Stuffy room with metal walls. Slight swaying motion. The air carried sounds of captivity and discomfort. A woman lay on her side, wedged in a corner. Her hands were bound in front. Steady breathing. Pan left: more women, some sitting, some sleeping. A muffled groan from the corner.

Alayla lifted her head. The binding tape across her mouth pulled at her face and was wrapped several times around. She could smell its strong pungent adhesive, specially applied for long distances. The cold steel floor under her heaved with the undulating motion of ocean waves. Someone had gotten sick through their nose and it ran along the floor, soaking her at the knees. Her hands were bound behind her. The darkness enveloped her the moment the doors had slammed home.

She could sense the others. Their sounds of discomfort would fill her ears for many years to come. She would never forget the soft moans and pitiful whines in that darkness. Nearly everyone cried. But not Alayla. She had no room for tears. Most of her life had been abuse and this horrible journey might just lead to something better. She told herself that. She told herself all people suffered and this was her lot, abandoned by God. Her name means “the lost one” and she took it to heart.

She believed a sin she had committed years earlier was the cause of her present torment. Alayla was twelve years old now and had begun her period, her *bedbi*, last year. That was when her uncle had sold her. She told herself it was out of necessity.

When Alayla was five, her father was killed in the Ituri Conflict of the civil war raging in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She wasn't aware

of which side exactly her father died for, but she knew it had destroyed her mother. Since her husband's death, Subira took little notice of her housework, her children, or herself. She committed suicide within the year by jumping down a water well with a piece of wire wrapped around her neck, tied to an iron pump. That afternoon, the village children had stood around the well staring down. That was how Alayla had found her. She stood with her shoulders stooped forward, chin down, and gazed at the top of her mother's head.

The other children stared blank-eyed and motionless. They had seen death before. They had not seen it down a well. They stared with an impartial curiosity and a wonder peculiar to children. One of them kicked a stone in, turned around and ran into the bush. The others followed him. Alayla heard one mutter *makosa* as he ran past, meaning “mistake.” He did not mean her mother had fallen down the well by mistake, he meant it was a mistake to wait there any more as there was no longer anything interesting to watch. Alayla just stood there and dried up inside.

She had cried endlessly for her father; he who would hug her tight under the covers when gunfire was rattling in the distance and a slug had pierced the side of their hut, he who would wipe her tears and say *bora kesho* when she had tired of wiping them herself, he who always promised a “better tomorrow” and was incapable of providing it. She loved him with a daughter's devotion and wore the flowered dress he had bought her the day he left for the front. The elders had called for volunteers to fight and his honor brought him to the depot the next day. Alayla stood in her flowered dress, holding her mother's hand, and kissed her father's lips letting the tears flow.

When news came of his death she cried by herself under the covers. Her mother did not console her for she could not console herself. Alayla cried and clutched the blanket and tried to shut out the gaping hole caused by the absence of her *baba*. There was nothing to fill it. And soon it began to gnaw at her insides, pulling pieces of her into its yawning mouth, and she feared she would be torn to little disappearing specs, falling in the hole that was eating her up from within. Her whole being was in peril of becoming engulfed, and just before the last piece went in, the morning sun crested the horizon and peeked in

The woman let out a moan and hummed something in response to Alayla's presence. It was a soft conciliatory sound, emitted from one whose burden has been eased by the simple touch of another.

the window of her hut. It brought a ray of brightness into the room and the darkness lifted for Alayla. What her father had said was true; there would be a *bora kesho*, a better tomorrow. It was only for Alayla to allow it to arrive.

Austin Frakes had been transferred to the harbor in Richard's Bay, South Africa three weeks after his arrival in Johannesburg. His family in London had supplied him with enough cash to last him a month and he had grown restless searching for a job. He had been sent to an uncle's shipping business in the region to learn the trade and had refused a foreman's position, partly because he wanted to work his way up, but mostly because he knew he wasn't qualified and nursed a fear of failure.

Dock work had never appealed to Austin, but he threw himself into it nonetheless, loading small freight, checking orders, running hi-lows, all the while knowing he was learning the groundwork of the port business. He wrote letters home to a London girl, Aisha Richards, and told her he was working hard for their future. She was finishing her schooling to be a teacher and Austin envisioned a broad future for them both. He felt he hadn't yet made his mark in the world and wanted to capture a sense of accomplishment before proposing to her.

When Austin walked into the port office one morning, his supervisor told him there was an open crane operator position if he was interested in the training. He asked knowing full well Austin would be interested. Operating one of the port cranes was a respected position. The operator was enthroned high above the ground action, pushing levers that moved thousands of pounds of weight and millions of dollars of cargo. The operator was a respected individual in the business and took on an incredible responsibility for the welfare of the company, not to mention the lives of the men he swung his loads over. However, when accidents occurred, the crane operator was automatically suspect. Few envied him on those days. Despite the responsibility the position offered, Austin jumped at the chance. It was an opportunity for a significant promotion, a better future.

A crane operator in training did little lever pushing. Austin began like most trainees, oiling cables, securing loads, and helping with the maintenance of the rig. Each morning there was an extensive checklist handed to him and the journeyman operator followed Austin around double checking his work. In two weeks Austin had the list memorized. In four he had learned to rig the loads and land them. He even was able to interpret and

form the complex system of hand signals necessary for ground crews to visually communicate with the crane operator. It came time for him to try his hand in the cab of the crane.

Austin settled into the operator's seat, it was frayed and depressed from years of service, and placed his hands on the black knobs protruding from the various consoles. Jacob Billings, "Jake the Brake," explained the functions of each lever once more to Austin. Austin already had them memorized from his time watching the Brake operate, but he listened patiently. It was no small matter to take control of a 250 ton, multimillion dollar port crane. One lever, when pushed or pulled, raised or lowered the giant overhead boom, the massive arm of the crane. Another black-headed lever swung the entire chassis of the crane around a horizontal gear, causing the entire rig to rotate left or right. A third lever raised and lowered the block hook suspended by steel cables. These three would do for a first lesson.

On his first pick taking a container off the bed of a semi-truck, Austin's arm slipped a fraction of an inch and the load lurched up several feet unexpectedly. The riggers started in unison and instinctively backed away. But, the container was judged to be secure and the semi moved forward. Using rope a rigger spun the load ninety degrees, Austin reversed directions on the hoist lever and the container sat snugly down on the surface of the loading dock. Jake the Brake breathed a sigh of relief. Austin's eyes dared not move from his load until the cables were disconnected from the block and it was raised up to a safe height.

"Next time ease into the lift more. Not so sudden." The Brake said.

Austin nodded assent. He didn't need to be told. Jerky movements with the crane were sure signs of an amateur. His face flushed and the tips of his ears burned.

"Remember this feeling," the Brake went on. "A tiny movement in here can mean instant death down there. Never forget that."

"I won't." Austin meant it. He turned to exit the chair. He wanted nothing more than to be relieved of the responsibility. At least for awhile.

"Let's take lunch," the Brake said.

At the office recreation room Austin sat across from the riggers and loaders. There was an argument about the best way to rig the new forty five foot boxes, with an extension-shackle combination or the tradition method using cable clamps and support grips. The cause of the disagreement was lost on Austin.

He stared out the window at the ship coming in, loaded to the brim with thousands of containers. This ship, the *Omega*, was owned by FFS Bun-

kers Ltd., a common sight in Richard's Bay, its company letters were stenciled in twelve foot letters across the bow. Austin recognized it as outbound, stopping here for a last loading before heading over the Atlantic, sometimes for Boston, New York, or Jacksonville.

There was a curious gathering of suited individuals at the customs office. Two stood next to a dark blue sedan watching the ship come in. Two others walked over to the dock's edge and gestured towards the towering bridge of the ship. Still others emerged from the office. Austin saw the head custom's official with them. He was frowning heavily. The group made their way to the service area where the ship would dock, directly in front of the port crane.

Jake the Brake took a manly bite of his sandwich and headed for the door. Austin followed. It looked like this wasn't going to be the usual load-and-go shipment.

As they passed the dark sedan with the two men standing guard, it became clear there was an individual in the back seat. His face was bronzed and intense, framed by bushy black eyebrows and a matching Van Dyke. He stared at the *Omega*, touched an ear piece and began speaking.

Swaying with the motion of the container, Alayla closed her eyes against the oppression of the darkness. The putrid odors of her surroundings were blocked out one by one with mental effort. She sank deeper into the hole ever-present inside her chest. There were constant hummings and groanings in the container now, some women sitting next to each other for comfort, swaying back and forth together. A few had been locked in here for several days, the others less.

The first ones in discovered the half barrel in the corner and used it appropriately when the need arose. The newcomers followed their example. Bread was tossed in after the second day, but their mouths were covered with layers of tape, indeed it was wrapped around their heads. It had been explained by their captors that this was temporary; as soon as they made sea the tape would be removed. Alayla figured there must be crew members in on the scheme to perform this action. At least, she hoped there were.

Alayla had heard of human trafficking before, but like everyone else she never dreamed it would happen to her. It was a horrible unthinkable occurrence in the women's lives around her and her heart went out to them. But for her, she believed it was her fate to be taken in such a manner because

of the sin she had committed.

It wasn't long after her mother's suicide she had been picked up by an uncle and taken to his apartment in the suburbs of Johannesburg. She was six years old when she came to live with her uncle and his family.

In the beginning, Alayla had helped with the housework, cooking, cleaning, and washing the clothes. There were several cousins coming and going, no one as young as Alayla. Her uncle worked at a packaging factory next to a major stream feeding the Orange River. He was gone much of the time and the young girl only made a friend in Aunt Rossy. She would greet Alayla each morning with a standard Afrikaans greeting, "Hallo! Hoe gaan dit?" Alayla learned the correct response was "Baie goed, dankie!" and she would elicit a smile on her aunt's wrinkled face which brought her pleasure.

The other family members ignored Alayla and treated her as a servant. She was there to work for them to earn her food and bed and they saw no reason to show her respect of any kind. She didn't try especially hard to please them and that gave them reason to scorn her even more. One cousin, Abraham, took her by the hair once and threw her against the wall because she didn't show obeisance to him during meal time, as was their custom. He felt it was the culmination of a long list of disrespects she had shown towards him, he had later explained to his mother. She had asked him to show Alayla kindness because she was alone in this world. When he went to speak to Alayla she was sitting on her bed, head bowed in quiet respect. He sat next to her and spoke in soft tones. She responded in affirmatives, hoping to appease his disdain towards her. When he began stroking her hair she didn't resist.

It was only afterward that Abraham's attitude turned against her again. Alayla had confided in her aunt about the sin she had committed with Abraham, hoping her desire to bring peace to the family would absolve her of it. Her aunt was shocked and confronted Abraham about the deed. He claimed Alayla had seduced him and that she wasn't fit to live in their household any longer. He flew into a rage when Alayla tried to defend herself. Finally, in tears, her aunt declared no more would be spoken of it. There was hardship enough without this stain upon their family. Alayla went on with the business of living, performing the duties of a house servant for the members of the family, but always as an outcast. The black shroud of incest now hung over her, and she felt the debilitating weight of sin and condemnation cast around her neck whenever she was in the presence of another who knew of it.

Her uncle did not know of it and he still cared little for her and

paid her no attention. That is, until he lost his job at the factory. He sought other employment, but was unsuccessful. His drinking increased and he spent more and more time at the gambling halls hidden in the rear sections of small shops crowding the streets of Johannesburg. He was not particularly good at gambling and racked up substantial debts in the matter of a month. A few high interest loans covered his bets in the beginning, but it was a vain attempt to recoup his losses. He fell further and further behind. His debtors pressured him to sell his car, which he did, but it wasn't enough. They told him to pay his balance in three months or his life would be forfeit. He tore out his hair in nights of frustration and anger. Several times Alayla's aunt emerged in the morning with fresh bruises scattered over her face and arms and Alayla would run to her and embrace her. Her aunt's ebony fingers traced patterns in her niece's hair while she muttered, "uvumilivu." She spoke the Swahili word for 'patience' for Alayla's benefit, not her own.

When the deadline came for her uncle's debts to be paid, there was no money. Men showed up at the family door, powerful and menacing, shouting at her uncle. He shook his head, promising the money if only they would give him more time. They refused and brandished weapons. They pointed around the apartment at the various articles that could be sold to raise the money. They pointed towards his wife and laughed, pulling her by the arm as she shrieked. Alayla's uncle pleaded on his knees for them to not take his wife, to take anything else, but leave his wife and children alone. Suddenly, he grabbed Alayla by the hair and threw her at their feet. No one resisted as they took her away. She didn't even cry as they forced her into their van. It was the punishment she deserved for her sin. It even alleviated the guilt she felt over losing her mother down the well. In her childlike innocence she felt somehow responsible even for her father's death. If she had been a better daughter, worked harder or loved purer, he might have stayed home. He might be alive. Her captivity was her penance for such things.

Alayla rested her head against the side of the steel box. The up and down motion had ceased and her stomach was thankful. Some in the enclosure took the opportunity to stand and walk about. Some made attempts to communicate, but the tape was strong and stuck to their skin, and it was dark inside their confinement. They were left with touching shoulders and other small comforts they could gain from each other's presence.

Austin Frakes slid into the operator's seat of the towering port

crane. He eyed the boom stretching out over his head, pointing into the heavens. This was the path to a better life, he mused. Austin was still in awe over how the little knobs and levers at his fingertips could move such great heights of steel. It filled a niche in his mind that lusted for power over his environment, that natural urge from which all men suffer. Jake the Brake leaned in the doorway and gave preliminary instructions. This was just some routine pick and drops. They had been told by their supervisor that government officials were here to inspect the cargo containers aboard the *Omega* barge. Austin could see them far below, miniature men scurrying here and there on the docks. No particular features separated them, but for color. He could distinguish black faces and white faces and he could see the car which held the diplomat. The supervisor had told them it was their privilege to host the Honorable Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, South Africa's Foreign Minister. It was he who Jake and Austin had seen in the black sedan speaking into his Bluetooth.

Presently Nkosazana exited the car and walked with the lead customs official to the first container Austin had set on the docks. The black-suited men crowded around it and someone who specialized in high security seals was called over. Certain containers remained locked throughout their transport and only special tools could unlock them. Someone had a clipboard and was checking the freight number against it. Everyone stood and waited. The enormous pile of thousands of such containers on the ship waited too.

The door was finally opened and the container thoroughly checked. A cargo lifter was brought and took the box to one side while Austin maneuvered the crane for another pick from the ship. Another clipboard appeared on board the vessel and a man indicated which container was next. They could not be safely inspected while on board the *Omega*, the stacks were simply too high. Riggers swarmed over them and successfully prepared another box for the crane. Austin moved the levers and brought the hook into position and eased the container into the air. He set it down where the other had been and the men on the ground went to work. Another clipboard, another sealed door, and another search of the contents.

"What do you suppose they're looking for?" Austin asked.

"Could be narcotics. Maybe contraband." The Brake spoke from experience. Delays of this nature were not unheard of, though, he couldn't remember ever having such a diplomat on site before. "Watch the rigger on the left there. He isn't watching for the hook. Boom down a touch more, as well."

Austin responded with the proper correction. The absent minded rigger found the hook and guided it into his connection. The lift was smooth and controlled. Austin felt the caressing touch of pride in his new skill and allowed himself a moment of self-congratulation. After setting the next container down, his phone beeped. It was the port supervisor. "This is too slow. We're forming another rigging crew to help speed this up. The captain of the *Omega* is probably chewing his fingernails off. Come down, Austin, and lead another rigging crew. Meet on the ship, customs will tell you what boxes to rig."

Jake the Brake took the crane controls and Austin began the descent down the metal rungs on the side of the crane. He was quite comfortable rigging boxes and was intrigued with what the government officials might find, but concern clouded his intrigue. He was supposed to be learning crane operation. Austin hoped his time on the ground would be short lived.

He made his way across the dock and crossed the scaffold to the ship. The other riggers were there with the shackles and cable clamps. A man with a clipboard was standing with his head thrown back eyeing the faded numbers printed on the ends of each container. The many colors created a checker board pattern along the entire length of the barge. Austin approached the customs man. "What number do you need next?"

The man studied his clipboard. "S2-130834"

"What do you suppose is in it?"

The man glared at him. "Just find the next damn container."

A little light seeped in from air holes on the ceiling. They had brightened considerably in the last half hour. The women inside had heard faint noises from above, but it excited no great amount of hope. Similar noises had been heard before, in fact several times, and it was discerned that their barge was simply being filled at various locations. Most of the occupants did not know their destination, a few suspected it. Some had been told beforehand, but they were in the minority. Nearly all had been lied to. Verbal communication still was impossible, so one could not ask another from whence she came or where she thought their destination was. It was very much a solo journey in the company of others.

Alayla sensed difficulty from a fellow captive. The woman's outline was barely visible and she was shaking on the floor and wheezing through her nose. She shuffled towards her and positioned herself next to the

woman. There was little she could do; her hands were still tightly bound behind her back. The woman let out a moan and hummed something in response to Alayla's presence. It was a soft conciliatory sound, emitted from one whose burden has been eased by the simple touch of another. Alayla felt the cursory movements of sympathy warm her chest. She had rarely known warm feelings for another person for many years. With sudden insight, she turned and brought her fingers into contact with the prone woman's head. Her hands groped blindly but it was only a few minutes before she located the end of the binding tape by scraping her fingernails along its length feeling for an edge. When it was found she started picking at it, hoping to pry a section up that she could pinch between her nails. The woman's self-pity was lightened by the effort and she assisted as best she could. Alayla found this simple cooperation was forming a brighter future for both of them and she worked all the more diligently.

When Alayla had been taken from her uncle's family she had not felt any specific loss. Her aunt had held a special place in her heart at first, but her failure to come to Alayla's defense during the abduction stirred the coals of anger deep down inside. The men had grabbed her and forced her into the hallway and not one voice uttered protest. Isolation cemented itself around her heart and she tucked any remaining feelings deep inside the hole in her spirit, keeping only the bare remnants of self-awareness alive.

She was shuttled into a waiting van and it sped off through the streets of Johannesburg, filled with vile oaths from swarthy men. They brought her to a warehouse and kept her in the van while two of them stepped out and went inside. One of the men remaining with her took out a knife. He brandished it before her eyes, letting the lights from the street lamps dance along its stainless surface. He grinned an evil and licentious grin, causing a long thin scar on his cheekbone to curve and bend as if made of rubber. Alayla rolled her head until her eyes found a window. She receded into the dark shadows of her mind and purposefully blurred her vision. Her father's voice echoed from a dark recess *bora kesho, bora kesho*. She waited for the morning light to warm her face but found none.

The men inside the warehouse agreed to an exchange. The girl for a crate of small arms. The man who had driven the van, the one to whom Alayla's uncle owed money, was a dealer in weapons and had found great profit in it. The man he now dealt with was a dealer of a different and more lucrative kind. One of humans. He had connections in the United States and a full shipment of captives meant his income for three quarters of the year. He indicated his desire to have the girl brought before him.

Alayla was pulled from the van and brought inside. Her new captor approved and the men loaded the crate in her place and drove away. She was grabbed by the shoulder and herded into a back room. The man smelled of cigars and sweat and wore snakeskin boots. They clicked the concrete in a particular and regular nick-knock pattern. Alayla did not feel fear towards this man, only the same indifference she felt for any man. She was led to a locked door and stood there unmoving as the man fumbled with keys. When it opened, the man pushed her in and locked the door behind her.

She was in a spare room with a few crumpled blankets on the floor and a wicker chair in the corner. There was a pile of women's clothes against the far wall. She sank down on the blankets and covered her head with a corner. In a few minutes she was asleep and breathing with a deep and slow heaving of her chest. She dreamed of green grass and blooming ericas surrounding a giant baobab tree. Its tangled branches reached far into heaven. Her father sat underneath it playing the harmonica. He had on a straw hat and a white shirt tucked into tan, khaki pants. The brim of his hat dipped rhythmically with the notes of his music. She could see the harmonies radiating from the instrument. They flowed in a rainbow mix, streaming out in all directions, a great panorama of the color spectrum. The colorful waves flowed into her and filled her being, reaching into the farthest recesses and replacing the darkness with vibrant hues. She sensed a completeness wash over her as each melodious ray pierced the wall she had built around her heart. She felt feminine and innocent. All guilt was gone. All traces of self-accusation vanished and she simply basked in the glory of the sights and sounds flowing in and around her.

In the next room the man with the snakeskin boots made a phone call. He arranged for the pick up of his latest cargo bound for the states. He would deliver his cargo in the morning already packaged and ready to transport overseas. He asked about the status of his latest advertisements on the internet. These needed to be ready to provide income from his recent investments when they arrived at the destination. He was informed the ads had already generated more demand than could ever possibly be filled. A smile spread across his stubbled chin and a gold tooth glinted in the fluorescent light.

Austin Frakes helped remove twenty three containers from the *Omega* in four and a half hours. It was already long past normal working

hours, but everyone was still waiting. The customs officials were nearing the end of their lists on the clipboards. Minister Nkosazana was back sitting in the black sedan parked in front of the customs building. He made repeated calls for any more specifics on which containers the human cargo should be found. The *Omega* was known to currently carry over four thousand containers. It was an impossibility to search them all. Nkosazana believed his information was reliable, but the sheer size of the task had become a looming reality. He stared stoically out the window willing to expend his collected resources as far as he was able. Unfortunately, he was only permitted to search the containers on his prepared list and that was running out. His Bluetooth blinked.

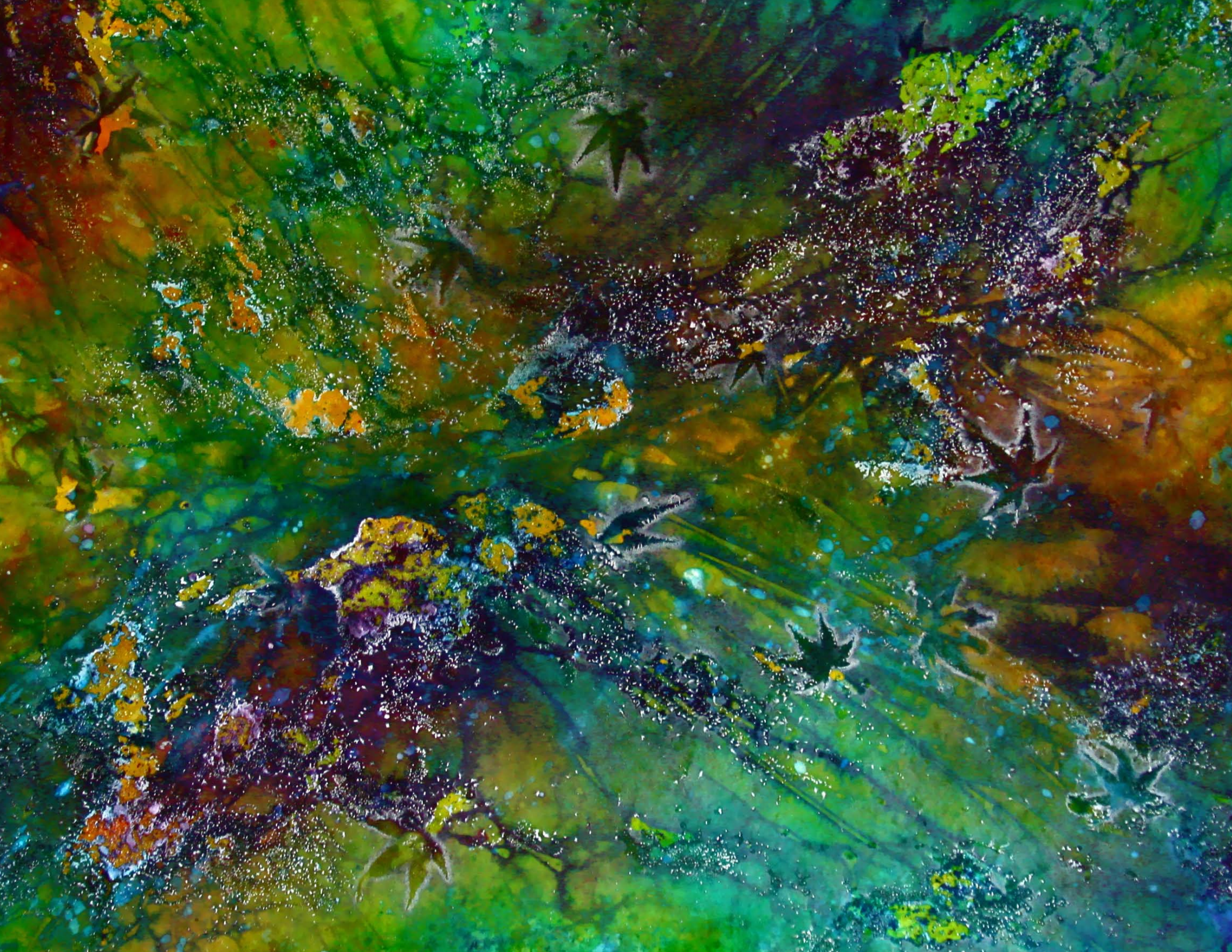
The voice on the other end told him he was wasting his time and money at Richard's Bay. It told him to call off the search and no one would question him. It told him if he didn't call off the search, his stake in Caltex Corporation would diminish considerably. Whereas, if he did withdraw from his efforts, a man would deliver a briefcase to him containing adequate compensation. So, Minister Nkosazana sat there thinking. His daughter would be graduating secondary school soon and he planned to send her abroad for her education, and his wife had just privately filed for divorce and was demanding heavy alimony payments. There were too many strings attached and he felt the decision wasn't his own. This feeling had pervaded his entire political career and he had hoped to become accustomed to it. He never did. This decision was like the rest. It had already been made before he ever became involved.

Nkosazana directed his driver to take him to the head customs official in the dockyard. He told the official his search list had been exhausted and his men would be withdrawing. He thanked the official for his cooperation. The black sedan pulled out of the port complex and sped towards the airport.

Austin Frakes was bending down securing a shackle on the top of a red tinted container. He was in a corner, surrounded on three sides by steel ribbed boxes. A customs man shouted up to him to forget it, they were through. Austin went to the edge and looked down. The man's list on his clipboard was only partially crossed off and he was walking away. Austin shrugged and went back to get his rigging equipment. A whining overhead told him the Brake was repositioning the boom of crane. He bent down and twisted the center pin of his shackle. A voice from the phone at his side told him to call it for the day, the lost time could be made up better tomorrow. A muffled shout from inside the container in front of him was entirely drowned out by the sounds of the port coming back to life.

Julie Hayward | Pictographic Sun Dreams





Mappa Mundi

by Jennifer Falkner

Ana leaned over to the leather satchel she had tossed on the passenger seat this morning and rummaged through its disorder for her notepad and a pencil. The satchel had been her father's when he was at university and she often wondered how he managed; to her it never seemed quite large enough. Still, she couldn't give up its vintage chic. She liked to imagine him, thirty years ago, stalking across Queens' campus in the hard sunlight reflecting off limestone walls. The bag slung over his shoulder filled with his sketchbook and charcoals. Her braless and bell-bottomed mother on his arm. Ana ran her fingers across the deep red-brown leather, supple after so many years of use, wrinkled and curling up at the corners. The temperature dropped more rapidly now, keeping pace with the afternoon, and her fingers had started to shake a little. But she had to find something to do. All this sitting and waiting while the snow kept on falling and falling, trying to obliterate her car in its ditch, and no sounds of plows on their way, was going to do her head in. Not for the first time she wished for her phone, which was still sitting uselessly on its charger at home.

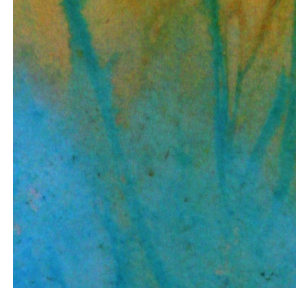
The snow fell more softly now, like a forgiving hand on a cheek. At least she didn't have to go out there as often to clear snow from the car. It had become difficult to warm up again after each trip. The car also had stopped trembling as the buffeting wind fell away. Ana checked her watch, turned the key in the ignition and allowed it to run for precisely ten minutes. This much she remembered from the driving course her mother insisted she take before she was allowed to use the family car, even after she had gone out and gotten her license on her own. Her mother jolted herself out of her depression occasionally to insist on her parental rights over things like these lessons. Ana wished she had a candle. That was the thing to have in a situation like this, she remembered, heating the car quite nicely until help should arrive. The car had warmed a bit, her fingers had thawed a little, just enough to feel thousands of tiny pinpricks as if the nerve endings were trying escape. She picked up the pad and pencil.

She thought about writing a letter, a note to someone, but as soon as her mind landed on a possible recipient—her mother, her aunt, Matthew—it emptied of words. The only things she could think of to say right now were

to herself. Her false starts landed at her feet like another layer of snow. Ana began blocking out the rough shape of a house with thick, heavy strokes following closely the limits of the page, as if to block out the cold and panic trying seep in. Then she drew a large circle inside the gable shape, as large a circle as would fit. She knew whatever she drew would be lustreless compared to her father's work, with the cycle of paintings that won him the Sobey award the year before she was born. Childish, even. She tried not to care. It was only a time-filler, after all. Just until the plows came.

It had been easy to keep the incessant hysteria from the radio and TV on the periphery. *Mega-storm*, they cried. *Storm of the century*. But there had been so many storms already this winter, so many dumps of snow but little in the way of actual crisis; the packaged hysteria became easy to ignore. Ana had flown into the car after seeing Matthew, deciding suddenly to come to her aunt's birthday after all, without any other consideration. She hadn't called ahead. She hadn't checked the road conditions. She didn't think of her father's accident or her mother's insistence on careful driving. She just went.

Last week, in her medieval art class, her professor had pulled down the large screen and treated his students to a section-by-section analysis of the thirteenth century map of the world stored at Hereford Cathedral. As the lecture progressed, and the short professor, whose bald spot resembled nothing so much as the tonsured head of a monk, paced excitedly along the length of the first row, Ana was infected by his enthusiasm. She mentally added Hereford to the list of places she must visit on her great European tour when she would finally see in person all the masterpieces she had studied. The Uffizi, the Louvre, the Tate and now Hereford Cathedral. The map was an enchanting cacophony of topography and legend, images and words. Her professor began by describing the very first action the monk-cartographers would have taken in creating this map. Spreading out the clean, white expanse of calfskin, bending their tonsured heads over it, mumbling in Latin, pricking the centre with a compass. Drawing the circle in the centre of the map, the centre of the world. Her professor quoted, "Thus says the Lord: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the centre of the nations, with countries around her." Ana liked her monkish professor even more for this. She copied it down into her notes, as well as the co-ordinates for finding it again. Ezekiel 5:5. She was not in the least religious. The first and only time she entered a church had been for her father's funeral six years ago. Ana didn't even know if she had been christened. Knowing her mother, she



rather doubted it. But there was something regal in these words, simple as they were. Something that could swell the heart, strengthen it and carry it forward.

Her fingertips were numb again. Her knuckles had stiffened and swelled; it was difficult to bend them all the way. She dropped down the pencil to blow on them. At the beginning of winter, Ana had bought three pairs of gloves from the dollar store, the kind that look like they would only fit a child, until they stretched to cover an adult hand. Good enough as hand-coverings for the few minutes she spent outside in the winter as she hopped from building to car, car to building. She hadn't needed more. But they would inevitably snag or the fingertips would split if she let her nails grow too long. She was on her last pair and her thumbs were almost completely exposed from the knuckle up. They throbbed painfully, feeling too large for their casing of skin. As long as she could still grasp the pencil, Ana thought, she would be fine.

The map was oriented eastward, so she turned the pad sideways to trace the shorelines, the outlines of continents, the shape of the Mediterranean. Medieval cartographers had only a hazy sense of proportion, so she didn't worry too much about it. She had been left with an impression of a slightly skewed-looking Europe, with Sicily seeming almost as large as Britain, which sat compressed into the lower left hand edge. But all the towns and regions were there, crowding Europe and spreading out more sparsely through North Africa and Asia, labelled in black or red gothic lettering. Rivers stemmed from the Mediterranean, wriggling through the landscape like tadpole's tails. Hills and mountain ranges were represented by billowing, cloud-like lumps, making a puffy, dream-like world. Canada wasn't on the map. She thought of it as part of a secret continent, withheld, not yet part of the world. Its Great Lakes, its fields plumped with snow, its dark forests, as yet undreamed of. Its sudden blizzards that could ice the roads and disorient drivers, causing them to skid blindly into snow banks in a normally familiar section of Highway 15, were unimagined.

Radiating outward, Ana's pencil filled in what she could remember of cities and towns, each one represented by a round tower, like the Martello towers around Kingston. She dotted her map with these towers, varying their sizes and only filling in names like the first cartographers had, sporadically, where she could remember them.

The Hereford map was more than a map of the world, she could hear her professor saying, trying to wheedle interest from the bored faces slumped in the seats around her. It was a history, a bestiary, a theology.

People didn't just use it to plan their holidays, he joked. It was a representation of a cosmos and humanity's place in it. A lesson in wonder and humility. Ana, always methodical, filled in the history first. Of course, it was a Christian history, beginning with the Garden of Eden at the very top of the map, the most eastward position. Noah's ark was there, she plunked it down somewhere in Germany, a childishly simple sketch with the faces of Noah and the animals peering curiously out of the portholes. She added the story of the Passion, as it made its sombre way from Bethlehem to Gehenna and the crucifixion, just above Jerusalem. She sketched this lightly, uncertainly. On the original, the figure on the cross had been damaged, wrinkled out of its detail by the creases of an ancient fold running down the centre, and she wasn't sure yet if she was copying the map as it was now, yellowed and damaged, or the map as it was drawn seven hundred years ago.

She could feel her expression of worry and concentration—eyebrows pulled together, lips pursed—draw all the muscles in her face into one tight knot. She ran her fingers over the line between her eyebrows, a line she had lately noticed didn't completely disappear when she relaxed. She rubbed circles into it with two fingers, like she did at home with cold cream every night before bed, rubbing faster and faster—difficult to do without the lubricating effects of the cream—until it was red and hot from the friction and Ana couldn't even feel the muscle to frown.

The bestiary next. Ana had been anticipating this part since she began sketching. Animals were always her favourite subject. Tropical-looking birds, singly or in pairs. She regretted having only dull graphite when, in her mind, she saw feathers as bright as millefiori beads. Giant lizards here and there. She saw their green scales shining like newly polished silverware, before they darted beneath pungent undergrowth. An elephant sat astride India, its humped back crowned with a wicker box draped with elaborate silks, for some king or emperor to ride in. Then, the further out she moved from Jerusalem, away from the centre of the known world, stranger and more fantastical creatures emerged out of the vellum. Unicorns, with bodies like small cattle and corkscrew horns almost as long as their bodies sticking straight out in front of them, ready to impale any man who got too close. She did three or four of those; they were fun. There was a dangerous, long-

Then, the further out she moved from Jerusalem, away from the centre of the known world, stranger and more fantastical creatures emerged out of the vellum.

taloned gryphon, too, part eagle, part lion, regal and savage. The picture was really starting to snap now, as her father would say.

She wasn't sure if Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the entrance to the underworld was on the original—surely it was too pagan—but she drew it anyway. She enjoyed detailing three slobbering mouths appended to one wagging tail, imagining she was drawing her father's old mutt, Eddie. It helped keep her from thinking about the fading light outside the car, the cement-hard sky and the snow uniting in an unremitting grey. The silence.

Then there were the human monstrosities, living in the furthest reaches of the map. The dog-headed men; the men with feet so large they used them as parasols, shading them from the burning sun; the men who made horse blankets from the skins of their enemies, arms and legs dangling lifelessly beneath the saddles. Men with no heads at all, whose faces erupted from their chests and whose eyes were fastened on their shoulders like buttons. Men who ate the corpses of their parents. Hermaphrodites. It was difficult to draw a hermaphrodite, her pencil kept wanting to draw a man or a woman, not both at the same time. An image from the morning flashed before her, as she frustratedly erased another purely male figure who had no room for curves. She was standing in the open doorway to Matthew's apartment. The door had been opened by a tall, impossibly cool grad student, thinner and more serious than Ana, with trendy glasses and waist-length blond hair. Imposing, to say the least, and wearing nothing but a small, faded blue towel. She wore it like it was embroidered silk from an exotic bazaar. Ana had come to patch up her quarrel with Matthew from the night before—he had called her immature and she had called him an arrogant, pretentious prick—but now she felt wrong-footed. She stuttered, blushed, embarrassed because she felt confusedly that somebody should be and no one else was volunteering. Matthew stood behind the blond creature. Ana saw his expression, gaping like a goldfish and vaguely apologetic, tinged with furtive anticipation over what might happen next. This was what she drew now, her confused impression of the blond Amazon intellectual and the infellectual curly-haired boy behind her, twisted into one monstrous figure.

The circle was filling up now. It was time to move outside the map, to fill in those events that the medieval monks considered took place outside of history completely. For the circle was pinned to another world by four letters in gold, studded along its ring, like abbreviations for the four directions. M-O-R-S. Filling in the triangular space at the top of the gable shape, God himself, in the form of the Majestic Christ. She remembered this bit

was quite damaged, darkened so Christ's features were difficult to make out. She filled them in herself, no longer bothering with the kind of uncertainty that had troubled her earlier. The light was disappearing and she didn't have time for ambiguity. She sketched in his features, his beard and long nose, familiar and comforting. A line of the blessed on his right, making for heaven's gates. A slower, more mournful procession on his left; the damned entering the jaws of hell. Hell was entered through jaws of a ravening serpent.

Finally, running the car engine for its last ten-minute stint and providing herself briefly with light from the overhead bulb, she worked on the empty lower right hand corner, outside the circle. A traveller on horseback, his head turned back to look at the world behind him, one hand raised. Without the context of action, it was impossible to tell if the hand was raised in a kind of benediction or in farewell. If it was reaching out to hold onto the contents of the circle for a moment longer. A deep red-brown leather satchel hung about his body. The smaller hunter behind him, with a lean greyhound eagerly nipping at his heels, urged the rider on. "Passe avant," he said. Go forward.

She turned the engine off again. The ten minutes had ended and she didn't want to waste any of the battery; there was a long night ahead. The darkness was thick on her face and she wanted to push it away, clear it from her eyes, from where it trickled in her ears, flew up her nostrils and into her lungs but felt helpless. It was too pervasive. Ana thought this was something akin to her mother's worst days after her father's death, when she sat at the kitchen table with vacant eyes, lacking the necessary strength to move. To begin the herculean task of enduring another day. The refracted winter sunlight had shot across the table onto the linoleum, like shards of glass, sharp and glittering. Ana remembered thinking that her mother sat so still because she was afraid to cut herself on them. This was before her aunt urged her mother out of her mourning and on to anti-depressants.

The present is a viscous thing; it manages to run into the cracks and gaps to fill out the conceivable past, the conceivable future. Ana felt that she had been in this car forever, she had been born here, born exhausted from the involuntary contraction of muscles tense against the cold, from hardening her jaw because she was afraid the force of her chattering might chip her teeth. She always would be alone in this car. She had created the world outside like she had created the world of the map. The dark and the cold folded themselves around her as she clung to her gable-shaped vision of another world and whispered to herself. Go forward.

The Face Up Table

by Kevin Roberts

Keep at it! Keep at it! Smoko in ten! Keep at it! The young supervisor with the neat white shirt and GPO tie walked slowly down the left side of the row of workers seated at the Face Up Table. Lotsa blokes want the work, he called, Keep at it! Speed! Accuracy! He turned and sauntered down the right hand side. The vast Xmas mail came in cascades from the input shaft, letters, cards, manila envelopes, all shapes and sizes pouring like an avalanche in slow motion. I sat transfixed. Would I survive this tsunami?

The Face Up Table at Adelaide GPO was about eight feet wide and maybe forty or fifty feet long. The Xmas mail moved at glacial speed on top of a conveyor belt. Our job was simple but mind numbing. We had to select mail from the pile and build three piles of envelopes—small, medium, and large, directly in front of us, pulling out the letters from the endless heap, setting them upright with the stamp on the top right hand side. Sounds easy but it wasn't. Constantly behind, or near, or across from the rows of workers seated at the Table, the young supervisor walked up and down exhorting us, threatening us, cajoling, menacing, repeating that Her Majesty's Mail required both speed and efficiency. He'd call out the time for the next smoko when we could get off the Table and walk about and relax and smoke for ten minutes, refocus eyes that were glazing and a mind that was frozen solid. We'd stand up away from the chairs, shake our heads like unleashed dogs or horses, stretch like cats, light up a Capstan, and sip at a Woodroffe's lemonade bottle.

What kept the three of us at this brain deadening work was the dream of a Graduation trip to Surfers Paradise in Queensland in January. Keg had worked it all out. Or a part of it. Third class rail fare sitting up on the train, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Surfers for about twenty-eight Quid. Working nights eight p.m. to four a.m. at the Adelaide GPO for four weeks before Xmas at twenty quid a week would do it no worries. Eighty quid was lots. We could still go to Uni during the day. Five hours sleep was plenty. Besides we only had morning lectures two days a week. Catch up on sleep on the train, suggested Keg. So we were all three in like Flynn no sweat.

Keg had an older uncle Curly Barnet, who was an Assistant manager at the GPO, and Keg got all three of us interviews. Following Aussie

ironic nicknaming, Curly was as bald as an emu egg and his domed head shone brilliant white as he looked us over. We filled out the application forms and stood there in his office as he glowered at us from over his glasses, flipping through our applications. Well you don't look like criminals, he muttered, But you have bugger all work record. God knows what will happen to Her Majesty's Mail if I let you lot at it. He sighed. We're short of hands so we'll give you a tryout. Give your particulars to my secretary. Punch in before eight p.m. on November twenty-seventh. And you, Bernard, are in my sights if this mob turns bad. Give your Mum my love.

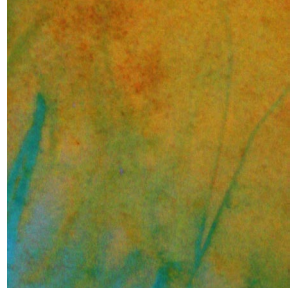
We all started our tour at the Face Up Table but before that we had an Orientation Session. Probably about thirty of us new recruits standing around on the main floor near the Face Up Table—mainly older blokes. Not a woman anywhere. And us three. At the Face Up Table, about a dozen or so old fellows picked away slowly at the pile of mail moving glacier-like past them. Some looked a bit worse for wear. Like Alkies from the Parklands with grey blue stubble faces and shaky hands. The clatter of machines and conveyor belts overhead and all about was pretty loud. The place was in full Xmas swing. An abundance of white shirted GPO tie Supervisor blokes wandered about doing something or other—though most of the older ones just seemed to float here and there. But our Super was young and enthusiastic. He had to yell over the noise but he went on about efficiency and flow rates and production costs cuts. I sort of recognized him from Uni—but two years ahead of us—Business faculty—played footy. But I didn't let on. That'd be too forward, too familiar, too brown-nosing.

You new blokes follow me, he yelled. He strode off and we followed like a mob of straggling sheep. I noticed a couple of older blokes simply peel off and disappear.

The next stop was the Entrance Landing downstairs. Red GPO vans pulling in. Incoming bags of mail tossed on to conveyor belts taking all the letters upstairs. Then the Face Up Table. The same blokes sat there picking even more slowly at the mail, which was gathering in a huge heap at the end. The old stagers seemed totally unperturbed by the growing heap, some of it now spilling on to the floor. They picked away at the heap with shaky hands like half blind chickens. Had to feel sorry for them.

This! the young Super pointed to the Table, Is a major flow rate problem. You, he waved at us, have all been hired to improve the production level here. Ok. Follow me.

We walked to Prime Sorting, then Fine Sorting. These blokes sat in



front of twenty or more pigeonholes and flipped letters into the appropriate hole. They looked very confident as they held a handful of mail and dispatched it. One or two wore those shade caps. Our Super stopped and cried out over the noise, This too is a major flow rate efficiency problem but not really your concern.

One sorter bloke gave our Super the finger behind his back. We went on to Parcels.Registered. We were not allowed past the glass partitions containing those last two.

Security of HM's mail is a very high priority in the GPO, our Super announced.

We looked in though, at a group of men tossing parcels to each other and dumping them in huge wheeled bins. They dropped a few, but didn't seem too worried about it, though at each failed catch our Super winced. Then on to Final Sorting. This looked like Re-sorting as well, given the big number of blokes tossing mail into holes. The Delivery Landing. More GPO vans and trucks arrived to take the mail out for delivery. It all seemed to be well planned and efficient. Funny though that as we walked about, in the dark edges and sides of the big rooms and halls, figures seemed to dart away or disappear as soon as we went by.

Our last stop was the Mail Bag Room, heavily secured with padlock and deadbolts. Our Super stopped before the door and harangued us about HM mail's integrity, outlining the heavy criminal penalties for stealing HM's stamps, the sacred nature of mail bags and the heinous crime of reading private letters. While he was on a run he went on about no more than ten minutes in the Lavatory once a shift, and penalties for bludgers and slackers and clock watchers.

What about reading postcards? some old bloke asked, You can't help that.

Confidentiality is key, our Super cried, We are the keepers of the integrity of HM's mail. Let us always remember that.

He unlocked the big doors to the Mail Bag Room and turned on the lights. It was a huge room. A massive pile of grey canvas mailbags filled the far end. Our Super ran up the mountain of mailbags. Just as he was about to speak the mountain erupted. Like a rabbit warren when the ferrets are put into the holes, here, there, everywhere, men disgorged themselves from the pile, a head first, then an arm there and finally a body leaping out from its hidden cave deep in the mail bag mountain. They all ran for the open door. Too quick to count them or recognize any one of them. I reckoned damn near a dozen. Our Super was stunned.

Stop! he cried, Stand still there!

But they were all long gone. I thought our Super was about to cry. Silence. Muffled giggles from our group. Had to hand it to those blokes. Sleeping off a night shift in peace and quiet under mailbags beats working, though how the hell they managed it, locked doors and all, I couldn't fathom.

Our Super recovered. That is the end of Orientation, he announced, ignoring what we'd just seen, Please report to the Face Up Table in ten minutes.

After a couple of nights at the Face Up Table I felt my mind was slowing down. The mail came in endlessly, a huge pile moving ever so slowly past us as we sat and sorted—stamp in top right hand corner—three sizes. But the real trouble was the decision about size—small, medium, large. After a few hours I would hold a letter up and be unable to decide for the life of me, whether it was small, medium, or large, or which of the three piles in front of me it should go on. I would freeze up for a few seconds and then drop back into the deadening routine. What was soul-destroying was the fact that like Sisyphus rolling his rock up hill, we never made any headway on the never ending avalanche of mail, which came at us like a glacier all night and was still coming when we knocked off at four a.m. and left the Table for the early shift. Also depressing was that the moment when you did build three respectable piles of envelopes roughly in three sizes, a worker would walk by and take them off to Primary Sorting. I was just about at my wits' end at the Table when I got a break. I felt a tap on my shoulder. The young supervisor.

You can go on pick up, he said, You've worked well here.

I grinned at my mates who shot envious glances my way. I leaped up. For three nights I gathered mail from the right hand side of the Table and took it to Primary Sorting. But it was not the cushy job it appeared. My mates accused me of sucking up to the Super.

Bullshit, I said, all I did was keep up my side of the Table.

I think he's a poofter, declared Keg, don't bend over.

No way, said Kitbag, I saw him at a party snogging away with Anne Lucas.

We all digested this. Anne Lucas was a dark curly haired baby faced porcelain skinned green-eyed doll from a rich family taking Arts at Uni. We all lusted after her, but she was private school only apply. We were all State High School proles. The young Super grew visibly in our grudging esteem, though not in our affection. Turned out my promotion wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

The blokes working at Primary Sorting certainly did not want any mail to sort. And they were wary of any possible extra work landing at their side. Their main concern was to make sure they did not get one letter more than the next bloke to sort, and they watched like hawks the size and nature of the piles I brought from the Face Up Table. They were rude and aggressive about the whole process. So I worked out a system. I told all of the Primary Sorters I'd bring them each a mail pile as big as their wanger. They thought that was funny and for a couple of hours joked freely about the various sizes and height of the mail I handed out, and taunted each other, especially when I dropped a two inch pile of all small size mail in front of the biggest whinger, a fat bloke called George. Actually he took it pretty well

God knows what will happen to Her Majesty's Mail if I let you lot at it.

and kept his gob shut after that. But after a couple of hours we dropped into a dull routine and a bored silence rose from the sorters. They continued their monotonous work, though I could tell that after a while they were just tossing

letters willy-nilly. It couldn't have been too tough to distinguish between Australian States and the other big areas like Asia or Europe and so on, but very quickly I realized that most of these blokes couldn't or wouldn't bother to tell Tuvalu from Timbuctoo and simply tossed any mildly challenging mail into Foreign, thus passing the buck nicely on to the next lot of Sorters. As long as I was fair and open with handing out the mail the Primary Sorters were happy, though every now and then I'd throw in a big or small pile just for a giggle.

I got promoted yet again a few nights later. The young Supervisor, hearing laughter from the Primary blokes, cruised over to see what this unusual noise was. Actually I'd dumped a very large pile of extra large mail on George as a joke to break up the monotony.

What's so funny? He asked. Silence. He looked at me and at the sorters who put their heads down and worked stolidly away.

Ok, he said, I have an extra job for you. Come with me.

The Face Up Table loomed in my mind as punishment, but instead we walked a few yards away, and he turned to me

If you are interested in management, he said, Don't get too familiar with the workers.

I am a worker, I said.

You could move up. I've watched you, he added, you've dealt well with distribution here

I'm just a temp, I said.

He looked at me for a long second.

Ok. Here's your extra work. Up there. See those conveyor belt crossovers? Where the two meet?

I followed his finger. Letters were piling up, bending, crumpling, and crushing at the junction. A small pile of mail lay on the floor. More fluttered down as we watched.

Yeah. I see the problem, I said.

Maintenance was supposed to fix this yesterday, but they haven't. So we improvise. Take this broom handle and every couple of minutes give it a good prod and poke to clear the junction. Place the spillage in the bin for resorting

Two jobs? I said. I keep on handing out the mail as well?

He was silent for a second or three.

Ok, he said, I'll get you relief every hour. And someone else on the Sorters now and then. Ok?

Suits me, I said.

And so began my third promotion at the GPO, standing with a stick and poking at overhead conveyor belts when they got jammed up, and also distributing piles of mail to the sorters. Every hour I got a good long break when some poor addle-eyed wreck from Face Up took over the poking for me. Maintenance never seemed to fix the problem. In fact some nights it was visibly worse. My job as mail deliverer continued. Actually I learned Primary Sorting on my sixth night just for something to do. It was not rocket science, though I picked up the Primary Sorters position at the GPO was jealously guarded by an entry form, an exam, and an interview. But it was not too tough to pick up the rudiments of initial mail sorting. As I've said, Australian States were specific pigeon holes and all they had to do with the rest was shove it into apigeonhole labeled Asia, Europe, Africa, America, and about another six or so large areas. There were also a few common countries like England or USA. The biggest pigeonholes and most used were either Foreign or Misc. They copped the lot every night. From what I saw, the bulk of the sorted mail got tossed in there, either through ignorance, or laziness, boredom, or sheer caprice. Some blokes got so jacked off with the whole sorting business that when faced with Bhutan or even Burma/Myanmar they gave up the ghost, filed the whole pile of letters into Misc. or Foreign and sat back waiting for their next pile to arrive. A big map of the world hung above them but it was clear that for the majority of Primary Sorters places like Maldives or Miquelon were far too specific for their expertise, and demand-

ed far too much of the average Sorter. This matter of rank and expertise in jobs became clearer to me after my fourth promotion. It was a big one and the green envy of my mates, two of whom seemed stuck on the misery of the Face Up Table. Though Keg liked it.

I just sit here, he said, and think of girls swishing by in bikinis and the surf curling in on golden sand and the bikinis ripping off in the surf and time just flies by.

My fourth promotion was mail deliverer to Secondary Sorting. Now these blokes thought themselves a cut above the other workers, having passed two tests and an interview for their seat on the Secondary Sorter. They loved to call out scornfully the errors of previous sorts, though their corrections were not always much better.

What bloody idiot put Tuvalu in India? Got to be Europe!

What nitwit shoved Bhutan in the USA? Everyone knows it's Russia!

Ha! Ha! Lithuania in Asia? Any clot knows it's Middle East!

I thought I'd rectify a few of these errors by looking over the piles beforehand, particularly the Misc. which was always full. I fixed a lot of errors there, on the quiet, mainly the simple obvious ones. Again the young Supervisor somehow picked up on what I was doing. He took me aside again.

The GPO doesn't mind, he said, in fact they applaud what you're doing.

I thought it was a bit thick him talking for the GPO, but he went on.

But the Union'll have your head if they catch you and we'll have to fire you.

Well, firing wasn't an option for me, so I began to swan along at the mediocre pace of the Secondary blokes. The nights began to drag. We all got more and more tired. Sleeping from four a.m. till eight a.m. began to take its toll. Kitbag got bitchy and Keg was out of it. We began to look for ways to sneak off and sleep. Like everybody else we took an hour for our half hour lunch breaks and half an hour snoozing on the toilet in the Lav. At any given time a snorting cacophony of snoring men came from the row of toilets. We stretched out our ten-minute smokos every two hours and generally put the gear in low. But that wasn't enough. Keg and Kitbag found a row of largely unused mail bins on wheels in a dark corner and whenever the young Supervisor was away at another position or on another shift, they jumped inside and curled up in fetal sleep. Amazingly they got away with this for three nights. When by bad luck, an old Supervisor, way out of his normal route,

probably lost or pissed or both, tripped in the dark on the bins, and both Keg and Kitbag's heads shot up, all he did was bellow at them

Face Up Table! Right now!

Kitbag and Keg ran out of the dark back to the Table while the Supervisor stood there in the dark holding his aching shin. It was clear he hadn't recognized them at all. I don't think he had a clue that the pair were temps and simply punished them as if they were full time Union malingerers by sending them to the Table of Horrors.

I couldn't try anything because the Supervisors somehow seemed to know me, or maybe I was too chicken to take chances. Surprisingly they didn't seem to recognize anybody else, even the permanent blokes, or maybe they didn't want to. The full time blokes knew the bosses didn't have a clue who each individual worker was, and took advantage of two hour Lav breaks and even three hour lunches. Some just seemed to disappear into dark corners or somewhere for hours at a time. Somehow HM mail got through. I pondered the mystery of the triple locked Mail Bag Room rabbit warren but couldn't work it out. One of the primary blokes put it to me this way at lunch.

Listen, we're all small potatoes in the stew, and no one misses a couple of tiny spuds. Especially if your name is Mr. B. A. Nonymous. Get it?

Besides I found out no Union bloke ever actually got fired. Usually they got told off and a strip torn off them. But that went off like water off a duck's back. In fact they laughed about it. Some got nasty letters in their files; some were suspended for a day or week, with pay usually. They got demoted, some to the Face Up Table. Drunk at work got a one day without pay I was told. Some blokes had a day off a month that way, usually a Monday or Friday to get a long weekend. They had to be careful not to turn up pissed too often or they got a rehab week with the GPO chaplain and that apparently was really bad news. HM mail got through despite this. Even if they pinched the loose stamps, a heinous crime which was supposed to bring the Federal Police in on the act, they were always given the benefit of doubt. Everyone nicked a few loose stamps but they put them in the cuffs of their trousers or rolled up shirt sleeves or in their shoe tops so it always looked like accidental flutter-ins. The GPO job looked like a real soft touch for ten months of the year except for Xmas, and even then they brought in lots of Temps. Most of the permanent blokes, I realized, had adjusted readily to the sloth-like GPO pace and a good number of them were cunning malingerers and total bludgers. We were beginning to fit into this ethos ourselves, though I didn't feel right about it.

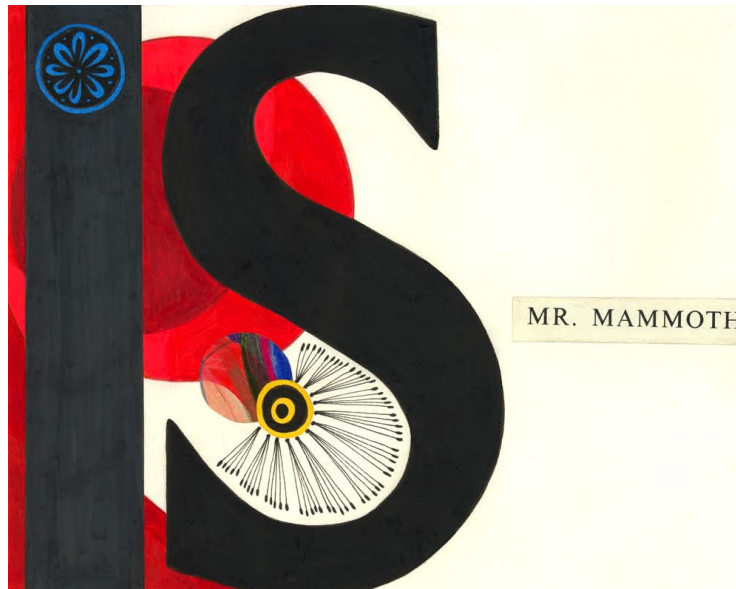
My next and fifth promotion was in the last week before Xmas. Kitbag and Keg had finally got off the Face Up Horror and were handing out mail to Sorters. Despite our slack efforts and bludging ways we had all out-shone the permanent blokes. A bunch of permanent Union blokes, recusants and recidivists, were now chained like galley slaves to the Table. But, again led by the young Super, I was now downstairs in the cool quiet air of the Outgoing Landing. This was a big move. The responsibility of the job was drilled into the gathered workers. This was usually a Senior GPO job. Security was the keyword. HM mail must be protected at all costs. I was now on the front line.

The landing itself was an elevated concrete curve, a road really, a landing for the red GPO trucks and vans to pull up and pick up their specific load of mail for delivery. Behind us a series of a dozen or more numbered metal chutes rose up into the sensitive bowels of the GPO building. Down these chutes at specific times would rumble HM's sealed Mailbags. I was given a two-wheel trolley and told that three chutes were my responsibility. G,H, and I. When one bag came rattling down the chute I was to put it on the trolley and wheel it to the exact corresponding spot on the landing where, about ten yards apart, G, H, and I were painted in large letters. G to G, H to H, I to I. I repeated the mantra to the young Super who nodded his approval.

And one bag only at a time, he said firmly.

One bag at a time, I said.

But how do I know which van is the right one for the bag? I asked
You don't. The driver does, he said flatly.



I kept quiet but I thought of the general state of GPO Union blokes' efficiency and reckoned how easy it'd be for anyone in a red van or blue or white or any van to just pick up a bunch of mailbags and zoom off with the precious and sacred mail of HM. He seemed unperturbed by this possibility and walked off to the stairs leading upstairs.

We were fairly busy for the first couple of nights, though it was hard to tell how many blokes actually worked on the landing. Every night it was a different number and blokes'd disappear here and there and reappear at the



knock off whistle. We carried their mailbags for them though there was a lot of grumbling about the lazy bastards and a few set to's now and then, but nothing serious because they all sneaked away when they could and the kettle calling the pot black was pretty silly.

The red GPO vans

arrived more or less on time and seemed to know which numbers they had to pick up. One driver was called the Cowboy. He wore his telegram pouch slung low like a six gun holster and had a Stetson on his seat ready to wear out on the road. He drove his van as if it was a coach and six horses calling out appropriate commands like 'whee up' as he came in and 'geddy up' as he took off. Another was called 'Never' because he was never on time. Another 'Well I'll' because he kept saying 'Well I'll'. I thought he was called Walleye for a bit until I caught on. Another 'Thallium' because he was a slow working dope, another "Killer' because he stuttered and glanced about with nervous darting eyes and crouched down in a paranoid stance ready to run, another 'Shadow' because he was rumoured to be frightened of his own shadow. I reckoned anybody who stayed on at the GPO would end up with one of

these juvenile nicknames, though none of the so named drivers seemed upset by it and answered cheerfully to their uncomplimentary nicknames. I thought that the one thing I didn't want was a nickname born of GPO boredom and over familiarity. The one I already had, Shorty, because I was a bit tall, did me fine.

Kitbag and Keg had another run in with an old bald Super. They were in the big mail bins in the dark corner sleeping again after lunch when the bins started to move. It was only when the long row of bins came out under the glaring fluorescent lights of the main floor that they woke up. They immediately leaped out of the bins, and with the old Super roaring after them, ran and dodged their way past Primary Sorting to the Face Up Table. There they began to zealously build their piles of mail. The young Super was downstairs with us on the Landing and missed the event. The old Super who caught them couldn't work out who was who anyway, and went off muttering. Relieved, the pair dropped their letter sizing down to the glacial pace of the other drones seated next to them, and when no Super was around went back to delivering letters to Primary. The letters were decreasing in volume anyway and the pile of mail on the Table was a mere dribble.

The last couple of nights the Xmas mail dropped right off. For two hours on those nights when we arrived we were all pulled in to the Mailbag Room to feed strings through the necks of the bags and attach lead crimpers to the tops. Then we went back to normal jobs. Down on the Landing we filled in time between the rare arrival of a mailbag down the chutes, standing by our trolleys and pretending we were diesel trucks idling over. Or singing carols. Or Abdul the Bul Bul. Or jokes. Anything to break the boredom. Someone'd pretend to have a flat tyre or a dead battery. We'd gather to consult. When the Super was upstairs we had drag races with our trolleys, up and down the Landing.

The last night I had an unexpected visitor—the young Supervisor. There were no bags arriving at all. Upstairs was apparently very quiet. Most blokes'd found a sleeping spot and the Supers were nowhere to be seen, though the rumour was they were at a big pissup in the offices on the fourth floor. The young Super had brought a small bottle of Drambuie.

Xmas drink? he asked me. The others wandered off a bit miffed. We sat dangling our legs over the landing, sipping on the Drambuie. Chris was his name. He was very reflective. I reckon he'd had a couple of drinks beforehand.

You don't want a job here? He said, I could put a word in.
No. Sorry. Not interested, I replied.

Can't blame you, he said, I have to move on too. This job is going nowhere. We could be one-hundred percent better if we tried. But it's a flustercluck. You've seen it. Slacking off, sleeping. Incompetence. No one cares either. It just rolls along like a...slug...that's it, like a slug. The time wasting scams. Blokes sleeping in the mail bag room.

Yeah, I said, How the hell did they get in there past all the locks?

I reported that incident, Chris said, Wrote it up in detail. It got ignored. I found out those blokes probably slip one of the Supers a quid or two and he locks them in for the whole shift. They never touch a letter but get paid anyhow. I couldn't prove anything.

But aren't the Unions the problem?

No, said Chris very sadly, It's not just the Unions. We can negotiate efficiency and tighten all the details with them. A lot of the Union blokes are embarrassed by the goings on. No, it's just old tired management. Encrustation. Everything's stuck in old spider webs. Management rust and decay and no one cares. It's rotten. I hope it's better elsewhere. Maybe a private corporation. Ok, so we got the mail out again this Xmas. They're all up there celebrating, he said, waving the bottle up at the ceiling, But it was a really a disaster. A shambles. I'm moving on.

Chris got up, shook my hand, wished me Merry Xmas and walked off. Then he turned and said, Oh, by the way, Anne says hello—Anne Lucas.

He smiled and left. I was a bit thunder struck by the last message. But I started to wonder where I was going. Surfers Paradise, yes, bikinis and surf. But after that? After graduation? Somewhere better? Elsewhere? I sat there on the Landing, thinking.

I knew Chris and I would never be friends but we had a connection of some kind I couldn't quite fathom. It had to do with encrustation and a better elsewhere. Where I was going after Uni was a vast blur—maybe even a dark abyss. It was frightening. Maybe out there it was all a stuffed up flustercluck like Chris said, no matter what you did for a living. I didn't want to think about it. I hoped, like Chris, it would also be better elsewhere, wherever that was.

At knock off time I went upstairs to line up with Keg and Kitbag to collect my pay. The three of us waved our pay cheques about like flags and danced and whooped. We went down to the Market pub which opened for the fruit and vegetable stalls at five a.m. and downed four quick shots of rum and milk. After which I slept like an innocent without a single care for the GPO, HM or her endless mail rolling in like mindless surf or the three blind Fates awaiting us all.

Way Down in the Hole

by Jonas Mueller

Aiden was walking Lurch when he heard sirens. Lurch, a Boston terrier who had been stubbornly licking himself in the middle of the road while Aiden tugged at his leash, howled along with the sirens until Aiden picked him up and tucked him under his arm.

The noise came from two directions, and the sirens rose as they got closer, then converged in his street. Aiden began walking home. Lurch squirmed in his arms. He ran out of breath a block away, but even from there he could see the police cruiser and the fire truck parked in front of his house.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself. He remembered hearing a loud crash downstairs before he took Lurch out, but the couple who lived downstairs were always fighting, so he didn't worry about it at the time. Now he felt dizzy thinking about it, and a sickly thrill passed through him. He was afraid he might drop Lurch.

Aiden walked past the nest of emergency vehicles in his driveway and tried to get into the backyard, where the stairs led up to his apartment. The lone police officer, a woman with a face like a parakeet, stopped him. “Sir,” she said, held up her hand, and waited for him to turn away. He walked back to the edge of the road and scratched Lurch behind his ears. Lurch shivered and whined.

Most of the neighbors were too polite to gawk. Instead, they peeked out their windows, or walked their dogs past the house, or just slowed down as they drove home. One of them stopped and pulled over. The window rolled down, and Nurse waved at Aiden.

Nurse wasn't a nurse; he was a euthanasia tech. Every day he killed dogs and cats for ten dollars an hour. He had a shaved head to hide his premature baldness and a boyish face so white it seemed to glow. Aiden and Nurse knew each other from high school, but never really hung out until all of Aiden's friends moved away and all of Nurse's friends withdrew from the smell of death that hung around his scrubs and his car.

“What's going on?” asked Nurse. Lurch, the only dog that would come near him, stopped whining when he heard Nurse's voice.

“I dunno,” said Aiden. “I'm kinda worried.”

“Do you have anything up there?”

“Anything?” Aiden shrugged. “You mean...”

Nurse nodded.

“No, I think we used up all of it last night.”

“So that's not it,” said Nurse. He rubbed his head. There was a five o'clock shadow shaped like a swooping bird of prey on the back of his crown.

“I don't know,” said Aiden. “I'm fucking losing it. Can I-”

“I need to shower first,” said Nurse. “I'll call you when I'm done.”

“Okay.” Aiden stood up; he was shaking a little, but nodded at Nurse as he drove away.

Then he heard the parakeet-faced officer's voice behind him. “Excuse me, sir? Are you a resident?”

“Yes,” said Aiden. He turned to face her. Lurch whimpered in his arms.

Aiden and Nurse played with Lurch in Nurse's living room. Down the street, they could hear the police driving away from Aiden's house and the sinkhole in its ground floor living room. They turned on their sirens, though Aiden didn't understand why.

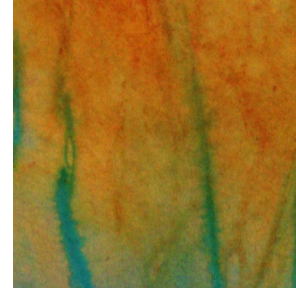
“So do you have anywhere to go?” asked Nurse. He and Lurch were in a tug of war over a scrap of fabric. “I mean, if they do condemn the place, and it doesn't look like it's about to collapse from outside.”

Aiden watched Lurch maul the scrap of fabric. “I could get a hotel,” he said. “Or I could call Mom, but I'm never gonna find a job here if I'm in fucking Louisiana.”

“Louisiana's not so bad,” said Nurse. “Can't be worse than this place.”

“It can,” Aiden said. “You have no idea. I mean, just fucking churches and mud, and then I'd have Mom up my ass every day about how much money I'd be making if I'd done this or that or what the fuck ever. And besides, I put all my goddamn savings into staying in that place.”

Nurse yanked the denim out of Lurch's snout, and Lurch climbed



onto Nurse's torso to get to it. Then he rolled over and licked Nurse's face. "I'm always weirded out that this dog likes me so much."

"Maybe he has a death wish," said Aiden. He was playing with his hair, picking out tangles and unknitting them.

"Maybe." Nurse picked Lurch up and put him down on the floor. Lurch sat down and licked himself. "Anyway," said Nurse. "I was thinking you could crash here tonight."

"You sure? I don't wanna be a burden."

"Don't worry about it." Nurse stared at the floor between them. "I mean, if you're lucky, the guy from the city's just gonna okay you to move back in tomorrow. And anyway, this place has been kind of weird since Nathan left for Nicaragua."

The next morning, Aiden woke up on the couch under the front window. He looked outside and saw Nurse walking Lurch. Lurch circled him, tying him up with his leash.

He bought the dog the previous month, exhausting enough of his savings and the money his family had given him when he graduated college that he barely had enough left for another month's rent. His work study job had gone to an incoming freshman, and while he'd tried to get a new one in the two months since, a part of him still felt as if he only had to make it until August to receive another check from financial aid. Most of the time he played video games, or read books, or smoked pot with Nurse, who let Lurch sit on his chest while he lay on the floor, staring at his own smoke.

No one called Aiden, so he called his landlady. The house, she said, was a loss, and he had three days to move. The building inspector had refused to even set foot upstairs, or to spend another minute in the house, after he saw the condition of the living room. His landlady was livid; she yelled at him as if he'd caused the sinkhole. He said goodbye to her in mid-sentence and hung up.

"So what's happening?" asked Nurse. He'd just gotten back from work, and his left arm was wrapped in gauze.

"The short version or the long version?"

Nurse picked up Lurch and gave him a kiss. "Short."

"The house is condemned and we need to get my shit out of there."

"We?" Nurse looked at him from behind Lurch's head.

Aiden sucked on his cigarette. "Sorry."

"I'm kidding," said Nurse. "How much of it is there?"

That night they went down the street to the condemned house.

The front door had a yellow sign nailed to it, but the stairs only had a strip of caution tape tied to the railings. They ducked under it, treading lightly, watching the road for police. Aiden thought he saw the house sway, and the steps croaked like frogs under his feet. He wasn't sure if he remembered them doing that, and wondered what it meant that no one had bothered to board up the door yet. Inside the attic, he took his boots off and tried not to make any noise.

Nurse looked around. "Do you want the couch?"

"Let's not touch it," said Aiden. Was the floor moving under him? "I don't wanna move heavy stuff around in here, y'know?"

"I hear you," said Nurse. He'd bought a stack of cardboard boxes and was putting them together in the middle of the room. Aiden piled his clothes in a suitcase and smoked.

The house groaned, and Aiden started. "We gotta hurry," he whispered to himself. Then he looked at Nurse, who was still taping boxes together with his back turned toward Aiden, and silently mouthed it. "Hurry hurry hurry shit shit shit c'mon c'mon c'mon..."

The house whimpered. Nurse looked around. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah."

"We should hurry," said Nurse. He glanced out the window that overlooked the street.

That night Aiden woke up on the couch with the Weather Channel still on. The living room reeked of Nurse's pot, and he could hear Lurch scuttling around behind the baby gate in the bathroom. Aiden's sweat cooled on his skin. His hands shook.

He tried to think back to the rest of the evening, but all his thoughts crumbled into a little hole in his mind. He tried to stand up and the room drifted around under him. His chest fell in on itself and he barely managed to cross the room before falling over and catching himself on the baby gate. It tilted over, and Lurch climbed over it. He licked Aiden's sweat off his forehead until Aiden pushed him away.

Nurse opened his bedroom door and stood there in his black briefs. He switched on the light, illuminating the boxes of Aiden's things that stood between them.

Nurse clambered over the boxes. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Aiden. He shook. His skin was pale, and his lips felt chilly. "I... Can you help me up?"

"I don't think I should," said Nurse. "Just lie there for a moment. I'll get you some water." He ran into the kitchen and poured a glass, then came back and held it to Aiden's lips.

"The baby gate," said Aiden. Nurse put it back in place, secured it, and chased Lurch around the room.

Aiden pulled himself upright and leaned against the doorway. He kept on drinking. Nurse leaned over and took his pulse. His fingers were warm against Aiden's skin, and Aiden's heart slowed down a little.

"I think you're gonna be OK," said Nurse.

"Cool," said Aiden. The room stopped flailing and now rotated slowly around the axis of Nurse.

"But we should go to the hospital," said Nurse. "All right?"

Aiden nodded. "How about the clinic?"

"Hospital's closer."

"It doesn't matter."

A few minutes later, they were on the road. The car smelled like frightened dog, so they rolled down the windows and smoked cigarettes. It didn't get the smell out.

Everything in the clinic seemed to glow, even Nurse. They had the waiting room to themselves, but it still took half an hour for a bony nurse to call Aiden's number. He got up, and Nurse followed, but she stopped him. Then she led Aiden to a dingy little room and left him there for ten minutes. He laid down on the examination table and had almost fallen asleep when she came back with a blood pressure monitor. Then she took him back to the hall, weighed him, took his temperature, shone a light in his ear, all without a word except for the occasional instruction. "Judging by your paperwork, it's just a panic attack," she said. "But I see here you're a smoker. You wanna talk about that?"

Thirty seconds later he was back in the waiting room.

"How'd it go?" asked Nurse.

"She said I had a panic attack."

"So it's nothing?" They both stood at the billing counter. Nurse smoked an imaginary cigarette.

"Well," said Aiden. "It's a panic attack."

Aiden paid and they left. Nurse lit a cigarette the moment they got outside. When Nurse turned the ignition in the car, the clock said 3:08 AM.

"Shit," said Nurse.

"What?"

"I work in the morning." He started the engine.

"What time?"

"Seven to one. They cut my hours again."

"You might as well stay up."

Nurse sighed and pulled out of the parking lot. They drove through empty streets, and Aiden felt the crumbling feeling in his chest again. He took deep breaths, tried not to take them too quickly, felt like he'd lost the ability to breathe without concentrating. He could feel the car drive off the road and over empty space for miles, then he looked outside and the road was still there. They were halfway home when Nurse slammed his fist on the horn and screamed, then put his arms back in two-ten position as if nothing had happened. Aiden wanted to ask him what was wrong, but Nurse turned on the radio and cranked the volume up all the way.

They lay on the living room floor, staring at the dust that floated above them and sparkled in the lamplight. Nurse's GED, associate's degree and Euthanasia Certification stared down at him, two eyes and a mouth on an otherwise bare wall.

Nurse stared up at the ceiling fan and said, "I don't want to go to work tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"I want to be fired. I want them to drag another dog into the room and tell me to destroy it, and I want to tell them to go fuck themselves, and I want them to fire me on the spot and chase me out of the building. I want them to try and euthanize me." He hissed out a laugh.

"That'd suck."

"If I got fired?"

"If they euthanized you."

"Why?"

"Cause then I'd have to move back to Louisiana." Aiden paused.

"Can you euthanize Louisiana?"

Nurse licked his lips. "I'm not certified there. I think I need to take

another sixteen-hour course or something.”

“You can't just transfer?”

“You know, when I told my parents what I was doing, they didn't even know the job existed. They said 'But you need a veterinarian, right? At least supervising you?' Like how it is at the vets. A lot of people don't know jobs like mine exist.”

He paused, glanced over at Aiden, who looked away. “Maybe in Louisiana,” he said, “this job doesn't exist.”

Lurch sniffed his way over, pausing to lick the carpet between them. Then he curled up in Nurse's armpit. Aiden reached over and petted him. He noticed Nurse watching his fingers. Nurse closed his eyes.

“Thanks for taking me in,” said Aiden. “I'm gonna try to find a job again tomorrow.”

“There's a bunch of openings in the strip by the shelter,” said Nurse.

“Really?”

“I can drop you off. I mean, not this morning, cause you're too out of it, but the next time I work, which I think is Tues-. No. Fuck, I'm out of it.”

It was another week before Nurse took Aiden to the strip mall. In that time, Aiden read want ads on Craigslist and watched television, filled out online applications on the university's job site and checked his inbox. He smoked in Nurse's kitchen, blew smoke rings out the window, and his mother called almost every day. Once, he went out to hunt for job applications, but she called him on his way out the door, and he spent half an hour appeasing her about his future only to hang up and find that the talk had knocked the wind out of him. He spent the rest of the day reading and playing with Lurch until the little dog shit on the carpet and he locked him behind the baby gate in the bathroom.

That Friday, Nurse dropped him off at the strip mall, which was really a quartet of strip malls gathered around an intersection. The animal shelter covered behind a Bed, Bath & Beyond. The shelter's front entrance was only accessible by a dirt road, but the dumpster was in the strip mall parking lot, and Nurse parked next to it.

Aiden nodded goodbye, turned around once more on his way to the corner, then went into Starbucks. The line swelled on both sides of him, and when he got up to the counter the press of people behind him made

him feel like something was scuttling down his back. He forgot to ask for an application.

At Bed, Bath & Beyond, he barely got past the door before a salesperson approached him. She asked him whether he was interested in their new line of three-hundred thread count sheets. He had no idea what that meant, so he decided they'd never hire him.

Barnes & Noble sent what looked like a loss prevention worker after him. Someone must have seen the folder he'd taken for applications, and thought he was stealing books. He tried not to make any sudden moves, and he knew better than to ask for an application.

The pet store told him to e-mail them a résumé. The cashier gave him an e-mail address, and he wrote it down on the inside of his folder.

In the end, the only application he got was from an ice cream store that forced its employees to sing whenever anyone tipped them.

“But you can't sing,” said Nurse while they sat in a restaurant booth and waited for their beer.

“Yeah, I know,” said Aiden. “Worth a try, right?”

“Did you ask here?” asked Nurse. There was a little bloodstain on his scrubs. Aiden couldn't stop staring at it.

“I'm not really sure who to ask.”

The waitress came back, and Nurse asked her if they were hiring. She stared at the ceiling for a second and told him to call the next morning, when the manager was in. “The number'll be on the receipt,” she said, obviously in a hurry.

When they got home, neither of them could find the receipt.

Aiden spent the next two days online. He dug around Craigslist, read a string of suspicious e-mails that allegedly came from nuns or elderly philanthropists who needed a blank check to set up direct deposit before they could send him an application, and smoked too many cigarettes. When he filled out online applications, he always found something he couldn't fill in; his hourly wage at a store that paid him entirely in tips, the mailing address of his first job, an emergency contact. If he chose his mother, what would it say about his social skills? And what if he chose Nurse? What would they think when the work number was the number for Animal Control?

“You're being ridiculous,” Nurse kept saying, and every time he said it Aiden could feel something bottom out inside him. “They never check

that kind of stuff. And besides, you're a college graduate. Shouldn't you be working somewhere better?"

"No one's hiring," said Aiden. "All I get is a bunch of pyramid schemes."

"That law office at the strip mall had a sign out for a receptionist."

Aiden looked up from the screen and rested his head on his fist.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then the room began to tilt, and Aiden clung to the laptop for stability. Any moment, the floor would turn sideways and pour him off of it.

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"Are you okay?" asked Nurse.

He could barely hear Nurse, who seemed tilted at a bizarre angle, like a sculpture just beginning to fall over.

Nurse had a hand on each of his shoulders

and pulled him back from the laptop. "Dude, you're hyperventilating."

And he was. His breath came fast, and it felt like something outside him was sucking air out of his lungs and blowing it back in. After a minute he got it under control and the room slowly shifted back into place. Nurse was still holding onto his shoulders.

Aiden would wash Nurse's dishes, vacuum his carpet, clean his counters. He alphabetized Nurse's DVD collection and wiped the patina of brown ooze off his absent roommate's door. He dumped the ashtrays and bought new batteries for everything in the house. He got little beads full of lemon-scented fluid that deodorized the garbage disposal.

One night they were drunk together, watching an awful movie that Nurse said he needed if he was going to get his mind off what he'd done that day—a whole litter of miniature dachshunds and both parents.

"I thought there was a lot of demand for purebreds?" said Aiden. He stroked Lurch's back. Lurch snored.

"Not if they have kennel cough." Nurse sat straight up. He still wore his scrub pants, but he'd changed into a plain olive t-shirt. He stared at the TV with a look of wide-eyed fascination, like someone who wanted to avoid staring at something else.

"They had kennel cough? All of them?" Aiden realized he was

staring at Nurse, and turned to watch the TV. On the screen, a black-clad woman broke a man's spine, leaning forward to give the camera a good view of her breasts as she did so.

"One of them," said Nurse. "But it spreads like crazy. And we can't afford to risk having the whole shelter get sick."

"The vets don't give you any kind of discount?"

"We don't call the vets," said Nurse. Lurch made little snorting noises. "Can we not talk about this?"

"OK," said Aiden. Lurch's snorting turned into honking.

"Lemme see him for a second," said Nurse.

Aiden handed the dog over. Nurse cradled him in his arms and gently pinched his nose. Then he scratched Lurch's throat, and after swallowing a few times Lurch strutted onto the arm of the couch, lay down and fell back to sleep.

Aiden imagined Nurse putting the dachshunds to sleep. He imagined a room with pink walls, picture windows shot through with sunlight, Nurse cradling the tiny dachshund puppies and sliding the needle in when they fell asleep in his hands. He imagined them taking one slow, calm breath and going slack on a soft pillow in a shoebox.

In the movie he and Nurse were watching, the black-clad woman and her friends dragged an unconscious teenage girl to the black-clad woman's car.

Nurse came back one day with a manila folder full of job applications. His skin had a glow on it that Aiden hadn't seen in days. The cartoon dogs on Nurse's scrubs seemed to be grinning at him. Lurch ran in circles around Nurse's feet and pawed at his leg.

"Dude," he said. "I don't know where you asked, but you missed a ton of openings. I mean, they kind of looked at me funny, but I guess that's what happens when you go to Barnes & Noble looking like this." Lurch ran into the kitchen, where Aiden had been mopping, and slid around on the wet floor before scuttling back to Nurse with a scrap of fabric.

"Thanks," Aiden said. "I'll look in a minute."

"I'm taking a shower," said Nurse. He scratched Lurch behind the ears, tugged on the scrap until it came loose, and threw it into the bedroom. "I'll leave this by the couch, okay?"

Nurse left the room and Aiden finished mopping, then went to the

living room and

looked at the manila folder. Lurch followed him, the drool-soaked scrap of fabric hanging from his mouth. A Starbucks application slid out of the folder and flopped onto the floor. It was bright green and reminded him of the color of Nurse's favorite scrubs. Aiden picked it up and read it over. He thought about the loss prevention worker who'd followed him through the aisles, wondered if Barnes & Noble even had any, then crumpled up the application and stuffed it into a box of his clothes. No sense taking that kind of risk.

Sometimes, their walks synchronized without the slightest thought or effort, until one of them noticed and slowed down. Sometimes, one of them would go to walk Lurch, and the other would come along, say that he had nothing better to do. Sometimes, one of them would come into the living room and find the other one staring at the TV screen, holding a cigarette that had burned itself down to a finger of ash, and would know not to ask. It was at times like this that Aiden thought his life was going somewhere.

Once they were walking Lurch when they passed Aiden's old house. One of the walls was starting to sink into itself, and one side of the roof sagged visibly. Some of the vinyl siding had already cracked.

"Wow," said Aiden.

"What?"

"I'm really homeless."

Lurch peed on the mailbox and stared at them with his bulging eyes.

"Not really," said Nurse. "I mean, you live on my couch, so I guess that's a home. And my roommate might not be coming back until spring, so you're pretty much set."

"Really?"

"Yeah," said Nurse. "He called me yesterday. Said he'd joined this missionary group or something."

"Weird." Aiden couldn't stop smiling.

A couple days later, Aiden stood in the parking lot behind Bed, Bath & Beyond with a folder full of job applications. He had a voided check and his social security card in his wallet in case anyone wanted to hire him on

the spot. He'd warned Nurse that this wasn't likely, it being the middle of summer and there not being all that many openings, but Nurse asked him if he was serious about finding a job, and Aiden got out his checkbook without a word.

"If you get a job," Nurse had said the next morning. "I mean, I need you to find one either way if you're gonna be sleeping on the couch, and Nate's mailing over his room key and if you're gonna be subleasing then you definitely need one, but anyway..."

"Yeah?"

"If you can find even some shitty part-time minimum wage thing, and I can find some shitty part-time minimum wage thing, then I've been crunching the numbers and we could make the rent without me having to kill—without me having to destroy animals anymore."

Nurse was probably destroying his first animal of the day while Aiden walked around the corner to Starbucks. The earth seemed to open up between him and the front door; it grew farther and farther away with every step he took toward it. Aiden sat down on a chair outside the store and looked at the application. He checked it carefully for mistakes, but there was nothing wrong with it. He remembered his time at the library, scanning, stamping answering an endless barrage of stupid questions, excuses for late books, having to keep everything moving. Then he looked through the Starbucks window at what the baristas were doing. It occurred to him that he didn't know the answers to any of the stupid questions he'd get asked. That he wouldn't know what to do with any beverage. That he was a terrible barista. He threw the application away.

That was stupid, he told himself while he stood in line for coffee. He could learn. They all had to learn. Then he went to FedEx and did the exact same thing.

It was a hot day, and Aiden's dress shirt was laced with sweat. The girl at Top Dollar kept glancing at his armpit. She looked over his application. "So you can only work these hours?"

"The bus doesn't run any later," he said. He thought about telling her that he could call a taxi if the shift was long enough to justify the cost, but before he could formulate the sentence she said, "We'll call you if we have an opening. Was there anything else you needed help with?"

Outside, everything was white with late morning sun, and the parking lot swirled with mirages. He looked over the applications, looked at the strip malls on every street corner, realized how many times he would have to do this, and each one would give him that same tone of voice, those same



quivers in his stomach, that same feeling of a world just starting to turn over on its side. But at least now he knew not to waste time with the places that were open after eight.

“I’m done,” said Nurse as he came out of the shelter’s back door. He had a dark stain on his scrubs with a clear imprint of a dog’s nose in it. “I’m gonna fucking quit.”

Aiden’s world stopped turning for a moment. “What?”

“I fucking can’t take it anymore.” Nurse unlocked the car and got in.

Aiden yanked on the passenger side handle until Nurse unlocked it. When Aiden got in, Nurse had turned the radio up all the way, but Aiden turned it down.

“Dude, you can’t fucking quit. I mean, not until I get a job.”

“Yeah, sure.” Nurse rolled his eyes. “I’ll wait until then.”

“Hey,” said Aiden. They were speeding out of the parking lot.

“What the hell do you mean?”

Nurse lit a cigarette without rolling down the window. They drove through residential streets where the parallel parked SUVs barely left them with any room to drive. A shrill talk radio host bleated through the speakers.

Nurse rolled down the window. “Nothing,” he said. A cloud of smoke had formed in the car, blotting out the smell of scared dog. “I’m sorry, man. I can be such an asshole sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Aiden. “I’m kind of a shitheel myself.”

A week passed. No one called. Nurse kept telling Aiden that he should call the places where he’d applied, and Aiden kept saying that he would, he just wanted to wait a little.

“I shouldn’t be pushy,” he said. “Besides, how often do you call the vets you applied at?”

“I called one of them this morning.”

Aiden sighed. He was reading job postings online. All of them looked like pyramid schemes or outright frauds. “I’ll start calling tomorrow,” he said. “Can I get a cigarette?”

Nurse stuck two in his mouth, lit them, handed one to Aiden. He felt something else pass to him, and then Lurch stumbled into the room,

tripped on himself, and flopped over to sleep next to Aiden's laptop.

Aiden overslept the next day, and the day after that he woke up to hear Nurse on the phone. He stood up, still dressed in a wrinkled t-shirt and a pair of jeans, unwrapped the dingy sheets that had coiled around him while he slept, and walked into the kitchenette. He started making coffee when Nurse came into the room and leaned against the doorway. Nurse sucked viciously on his cigarette.

“Barnes & Noble couldn't find your application.”

“Huh?”

“I called and told them I was you.”

“What?”

“And the other places, too. You gave the wrong phone number at the dollar store, by the way.” Nurse lowered his head and shoved the last three words out through clenched teeth. Then he walked into the room, sat down at the dining table and rested his forehead in his hands. “Aiden,” Nurse said. “What do you want me to do?”

“I don't know,” said Aiden. He took a seat across from Nurse. Lurch slid across the tile floor and begged for scraps.

“Because I want to help you, and I want you to...” Nurse ran his hands over his shaved head. “I want you to pull yourself together, and to... I don't know. I mean, I don't even know what's wrong with you.”

“Nothing's wrong with me,” said Aiden. Lurch sat on the floor and stared at him.

“Then why are we here?”

“Because I-”

“I can't help you,” said Nurse.

“I don't understand.”

Lurch gave up on Aiden and began scratching Nurse's leg. Nurse picked him up and held him. The dog sneezed and licked Nurse's face.

“Look,” Nurse pushed himself upright, stood there, his eyes half-closed. “I come home every day smelling like anal glands and covered in streaks of blood from where the needle doesn't go in right or the dog's been bitten or where it's bitten me. I can't help you.”

“So what do I do?”

“I don't know.”

Aiden got up, went to the living room and dredged a backpack from the heap of clothes in his open suitcase. He stuffed it with underwear, a few decent shirts, some socks, a pair of khakis.

“You can keep Lurch for now,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“I don't know,” said Aiden, and he pulled his cell phone charger from the wall. “I'll call you later today.” Then he left.

It was a humid morning, and he felt the first drops of sweat percolate on his skin as he stood on the reeking porch. He could hear birds in the distance, and the swoosh of the morning commute on the nearby highway. The newspaper lay by the edge of the road, and he went to pick it up. He could picture Nurse waiting for him inside: Nurse scratched his shaved head with one hand and held Lurch in the other. Lurch's bulging eyes stared at the doorknob as if he'd never seen it before.

At the edge of the driveway, Aiden looked both ways down the street. He could feel the heat build up under his bangs. He imagined Nurse, on his way to work tomorrow, and the day after, and the killing room filled up to Nurse's chest with dead dogs. Lurch would wait behind the baby gate all day, chewing a scrap of denim, peeing in the corner until Nurse came home and cried into the dog's velvety fur.

Aiden imagined that he might be able to help them.

The street shifted around him. Aiden's sweat became icy, and he had to fight to slow down his breathing. He focused his eyes on a palm tree across the street, and when the world stopped spinning he turned and saw a couple walking their dog down the street. One wore a yellow sundress, the other dressed entirely in black. They walked a few inches apart and passed the leash back and forth between them as the dog circled their legs. For a moment, Aiden watched them, enraptured at their movements, and then he took a deep breath and turned around.

Rumors of My Life are Greatly Exaggerated

by Sarah Barnett

It's mid-afternoon and Starbucks is practically empty. I find an easy chair in the back with a view of the door and sit down to wait with my latte and the *Times* crossword puzzle. If Wally doesn't show, at least I'll have exercised my brain cells.

I'm already regretting this adventure. I'd rather be home watching *Dancing with the Stars*. Two years ago I found myself single for the first time in twenty-five years. No problem, I thought. How hard could it be to find a replacement mate? That was my first mistake—treating the situation as if I were looking for parts for my vacuum cleaner. Alex, my ex, had no trouble meeting and marrying a woman fifteen years his junior. I'll show him, I thought. But I wasn't quite ready for the dating scene. *Then what am I doing here?*

You know those commercials you see on TV, maybe for hair color or some new diet product? A woman of a certain age is getting ready to go out on a date. She tries on one great outfit after another, brushes, then fluffs up her hair, slips into a slim dress and opens the door to this gorgeous male with just enough gray at the temples and crinkling around the eyes to let you know he's age appropriate? Well, that's not me.

I'm fifty-two years old and invisible. I once stood at a bar for twenty-three minutes waiting for the bartender to take my order. All around me couples were sipping exotic beverages, men ordered martinis, but I stood alone and ignored. I made a game of it. I called it "waiting with growing patience"—as if patience was something you could grow like begonias or zucchini.

I joined a singles group oxymoronically called "Happily Single." It was a good concept. Put a gender-balanced group of people in a room and encourage them to discuss topics such as "Date is a Four-Letter Word" or "I'm Dating my Ex in Disguise," and pretty soon people get to know each other and well, you get the idea.

I learned a lot from the more experienced singles around me. First, in order to fully recuperate from a failed marriage, you were required to have a transitional relationship, which seemed to mean dating someone you could torment in precisely the same ways your ex had tormented you.

You also needed a checklist, a compilation of those things everyone wants in a person of the opposite sex—sense of humor, honesty and an understanding of how to buy jewelry—plus those things many people consider deal-breakers—smoking, teen-aged children and a catch-all category called "emotional baggage." Armed with your list, you could easily disqualify someone as inappropriate, unless, of course, he was so magnetic you couldn't help yourself, and then you checked your check list at the bedroom door.

I developed my own three-part test.

1. He had to be age appropriate defined as my age plus or minus five years.
2. He had to be available: divorced or widowed and interested in a long-term relationship.
3. I had to talk to him for ten minutes without thinking, *I know why you're divorced*. This method saved a lot of time, but it also meant I didn't go out on a lot of dates.

In my abundant free time I became fascinated with those classified ads titled "I Saw You" or "Missed Connections." Someone spots a possible romantic interest in a restaurant, on the Metro or even in a passing car. A spark kindles and hope is born followed by an ad that reads something like: *Tues. April 1. Clyde's, Georgetown. Our eyes met; we didn't. Let's have coffee and see what develops.*

Call me crazy, but when I read these ads, I can't get the idea out of my head that someone is looking for me. Maybe he saw me at the supermarket picking out a pineapple or comparing soup labels. "She's the one," he thinks. "I'll just find her by posting this ad." Insane? It gets even stranger when I contemplate what such an ad might say.

Brunette in trench coat, Reeboks and in a hurry. You were crossing 16th St against the light and I almost ran you down. Let's meet for real.

I know I have a better chance of conceiving triplets than of meeting someone this way, so I move on to the "In search of" ads, where people get to spell out exactly what they're looking for. That is, if you know the code. For example: *DM (divorced male) seeks fit, attractive, intelligent F (female) for possible LTR (long-term relationship)*. "Fit" is synonymous with "thin," preferably very thin. "Attractive?" No one of average looks should consider applying. And "intelligent" is code for: "You should be smart enough to appreciate

how smart I am.”

I never scraped up the courage to respond to a personals ad, but one day a rather lengthy one caught my eye:

DM, Handsome, exciting, dynamic, passionate, outrageous, intense, software entrepreneur, author, designer, gourmet cook, Jefferson kindred spirit, fit, runs, lifts, sails and skis, funny and adventurous. Desires attractive, exciting F, under 37, 5'7" and size 8 for expressing, caring and sharing joy forever. Bring a smile, high heels, short skirt, silk blouse...

Somebody needs to tell this guy a thing or two, I think. I open my laptop and tap out the following:

Dear Handsome, exciting, dynamic, etc... (or should I call you Mr. Jefferson?):

I've never answered an "in search of" ad before, but I just had to write and find out more about the owner of all those amazing adjectives.

I read your ad several times but can't figure out why Mrs. Jefferson was foolish enough to let you go. Maybe her cheeks hurt from smiling, or she exhausted her intensity laundering her silk blouse collection.

I suppose it's more likely that you found Mrs. J. lacking in some respects. Did she allow dust balls to accumulate in the halls of Monticello? Maybe she wasn't able to squeeze into her miniskirt, or perhaps she kept falling off her high heels. Is it possible that she was so thoughtless as to turn 38 when you weren't looking?

You probably want to know more about me. I think I meet most of your requirements. I have the shoes—black suede pumps with 6" heels—and they're size 8 too (how did you know?). The skirt, blouse and smile are no problem, but in that outfit I'm not sure I'll be able to keep up with running, sailing and skiing, not to mention software.

Write back soon.

That felt good. What felt even better was clicking on “send.” Imag-

ine my surprise when Mr. J. responded the same day. Wally (his real name) liked my sense of humor, acknowledged that his ad was a little over the top (it was his first attempt) and asked if we could meet for coffee. After a few more e-mails in which we discovered a common interest in Russian literature, I agreed. He asks me to carry a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* so he'll recognize me, while he decides to arm himself with *War and Peace*.

Now I'm really confused. Who is Wally and why did I agree to this? And the biggest question: Is this a date? A date, that is, with a capital D. I should be up on this because I attended a Happily Single discussion a few weeks ago on this very subject. There were lots of ideas about who asks, who pays and clothing, both outer and under. None of this is helpful.

I'm at the coffee shop twenty minutes early so I can check it out. I'm sitting far enough back so I'll spot him first. I've chosen an all-purpose outfit—black turtleneck and jeans. I'm pretending I'm in a Left Bank café wiling away the afternoon before going off to French class. I've gotten to the part where Jacques, the waiter/struggling artist, strikes up a conversation, when I think I spot Wally.

It's him all right, carrying a fat paperback under his arm. He's shorter than I imagined and older too—gray hair and mustache. He's wearing chinos, white shirt, brown sports jacket, but I can't see his eyes. Like me, he's wearing sunglasses.

Now what? He hasn't spotted me yet, in the semi-dark rear of the store. *Invisible*, I think, pretending fascination with the paper in front of me. Wally scans the room, probably looking for the blue silk blouse I was supposed to wear. I freeze. *Don't give yourself away. It's not a date...It is a date... But, if it is a date, it's all wrong.*

Wally removes his sunglasses, and while his eyes are adjusting to the light, I slip my copy of *Crime and Punishment* into my newspaper and walk nonchalantly out the door.

**Brunette in trench coat,
Reeboks and in a hurry.
You were crossing 16th St
against the light and I al-
most ran you down. Let's
meet for real.**

Alexander Williams (descending)

by Michael Clough

(i)

It seemed not so long ago, that cool winter morning when Alexander Williams walked into the temp agency on Pin Street. He'd been looking for a job, of course, but preferably something in media. Yet with his bank refusing to extend his overdraft any further, he'd little choice but to accept anything. Thus he found himself sat at a VDU inputting his vital statistics. It didn't matter that he had a third-class degree, he was assured, as long as he could use a keyboard and answer the phone. BCC was undergoing a recruitment drive. It had recently opened a new call centre on the tenth floor and needed a pool of temps. It didn't sound all that appealing. He'd heard that call centres had a high turnover of labour, poor wages and terrible conditions—there'd been speculation that one of the larger banks intended on moving its operations to India; if it did, others would surely follow. He was told BCC was different. If he did well he might be selected for a permanent position.

Had he heard of BCC at all?

He admitted no, he hadn't: the only aspect of business he was interested in was leisure. As an undergraduate he'd researched the music industry and written a dissertation about EMI. He wanted, eventually, to manage a band.

She told him that BCC was a good employer with prospects; he should endeavour to find out all that he could before starting.

You've not much time. You can start this afternoon if you want: there's a late induction at two.

He apologised, said that he had other matters to attend to, and would it be okay to leave it for today.

She told him yes, that would be fine, and the next morning he took the train into the city, a tube from Kings Cross, alighting at Bank Street across the road from the BCC headquarters.

He couldn't help but be impressed by the company's towering edifice of shimmering glass, the forty-four floors rising sleekly into the cool blue air, the sprawling car park fronted by glimmering Porsche Carreras,

Lamborghinis and Ferraris, the wide, airy reception teaming with young employees, the fountain that drew light from the multitude of windows and sparkled like diamonds. There was no formal dress code at BCC—he had been told as such at the agency—and although some wore suits and carried briefcases, it was virtually impossible to identify rank from outward appearance. Above the long curving marble desk, where he collected his pass, there hung photographs of the various executives—only the CEO wore a suit and this was without a tie and he had the same effusive smile as the others.

There were fifteen other temps starting. They were hustled into a room on the ground floor where a breezy young man wearing jeans and a jogging top shook everyone's hand and cracked jokes about the company initials.

No one really knows what the acronym stands for, he said. Be confidently crazy. Beware crafty corporation. Benign capitalist creation. And so on and so on.... until he'd practically exhausted all possibilities.

There was a podium at the back of the room but he preferred that everyone arrange their chairs into a circle. He explained that no matter whether you were temp or permanent, you would be properly inducted.

I love working here and hope that all you inductees will come to share my joy.

He gave a presentation, a slideshow profiling the company's activities—BCC had a diverse range of operations, everything from selling mobile phones to offering financial advice. There was a brainstorming session during which the facilitator, as the young man in a jogging top liked to call himself, explained they were being assessed for Potential.

Here at BCC, he said, you are always being assessed for Potential. Everyone is being assessed for Potential in every activity in which they participate, every project. Even the CEO is being assessed, although he'd like to think that he's already shown his worth and achieved his goals. That's what we believe in at BCC: it's our corporate ethos. At BCC we believe everyone should be provided with the opportunity to maximise their Potential.

Alex liked the sound of this—it wasn't the music industry, no, but he believed he could do well here. If he worked hard enough he could rise, rise, rise—there would be no limit to what he could achieve. He had Potential.

There were questionnaires and psychometric tests to complete, to assess his personality and latent abilities. Alex concentrated hard, more so than in his finals, hoping to impress the marker. He imagined the Head of

Personnel glowing with anticipation as he reviewed the scores.

By when lunch arrived he was already feeling quite exhausted. A buffet had been laid on. Nibbling a chicken wing, Alex chatted with a young Asian who like himself had graduated earlier that year.

He told him he'd been to five of these inductions now. He'd temp for a few weeks, pay his debts, and then quit.

You get your free lunch, he said, you do your tests, draw a month's salary and then leave before you get sucked in.

“You could spend your life here, sleeping, eating, keeping fit, as well as working of course. You might even find the love of your life here and use the pub across the road to get married in.”

There was a note of cynicism in the man's voice which Alex found distasteful. He wondered whether he ought to report him.

After lunch, the facilitator talked about the benefits of working for BCC.

There are plenty of activities to get involved in, he said. More perks than any organisation I've worked for. There are the football, rugby, cricket, basketball, rowing and darts teams. There's the bonus scheme which means you can put in extra hours and be compensated with shares in the company, if you work hard enough. There's a gym with a sauna, a Jacuzzi, twenty-four tread mills and a swimming pool. You could, if you wanted to, sleep over meaning if you've a deadline to reach you'd not be wasting time getting to and from the office.

You could spend your life here, sleeping, eating, keeping fit, as well as working of course. You might even find the love of your life here and use the pub across the road to get married in.

It was only now that the young Asian decided to say something. The facilitator had been in full flow, and for a moment he appeared to be grateful for this intervention.

Why you sayin' all this to us, man, when we is only temps? Why you tellin' us all this bullshit? Sleepin' here, eatin' here, marryin'. None of us wants to spend all our lives here, get married here. Nobody wants that. It's

Alex was taken aback.

If you work hard enough you might be taken on permanently by one of the country's largest organisation.

Bullshit.

Seems like a good place to start.

We could all get good jobs here if we show we're capable.

Do you really think so? Well, I might just do that then.

just a job. A means of gettin' by.

And with that, the young Asian swept out of the door. Alex didn't see him again. He decided it wasn't such a great loss.

Before the induction was through, the group was presented with an eighteen page document which the facilitator described as the BCC bible. It contained platitudes about how the company was striving for success and was proud of the collective effort of its members, as well as email addresses and numbers for the various personnel.

Finally the group was taken by express lift to the tenth floor and sat at pods with VDUs and headsets. The floor manager took over, putting on a headset and demonstrating how to take a call. Unlike the facilitator he wore a suit and spoke in a terse, clipped manner; he had red ruddy cheeks and the intense look of a dog about to bite.

You don't have to think in this job, he said. All you have to do is press the green key on the keyboard to take a call, and then when the call comes through you follow the script that appears on your screen. Any deviation from the script is unacceptable, no matter what the customer says. A deviation wastes time and you don't want to waste time. I'll know if you're not following the script because I tape and monitor the calls. I can refer to any disputed call if I have to, and that's all the evidence I need. If you're taking less than one hundred calls in a day then you'll be put on review. You'll have two days and if you don't come up to standard you'll be issued a warning; if by the end of the week you're still falling short I'll have no choice but to dismiss you. And listen, it's not difficult. I'm going to show you how easy it is. This isn't really a job but a holiday camp—you're lucky to be here. Oh yes, you've landed on your feet all right, on the tenth floor.

The record is two hundred and ten calls in one day, which is quite something. Mostly you should be averaging at one-fifty, one-sixty, even after a couple of days because there's really not much to it. That works out at about three minutes a call, which isn't bad because the vast majority of calls are straightforward. You ask the questions, they give you the answers, and you make sure to input everything the computer asks for. Anything else is extraneous, a waste of your time and mine. Watch and listen, I'll show you.

Alex watched and listened; the floor manager, following the script, dealt with the customer in three minutes.

As I said, there's no need to use your brains, there's no stress in this job—a piece of cake. Not a particularly appetising cake, a chocolate gateau or anything, but cake nevertheless. Something to keep you from being hungry, I suppose. So just take it as it is, be here on time, keep to your quota,

and you'll be fine.

The next day he arrived at the office half an hour early, wearing a jogging top he'd bought especially. He was sat in a pod next to an experienced operator. He admitted being worried about the quota.

Although I'm not exactly loquacious, he said, recalling a word from college, I'll find it difficult not being rude to anyone—if some old grandma, for example, wants to talk about her pet budgerigar, I'll feel obliged to make conversation.

Don't you worry about that! There's a way around all that shit, quotas and what have you. You just need to know how. Watch me and learn.

With a simple click of the green followed by the red key, the experienced operator doubled his tally of calls.

You take a call, you skip a call—it's as simple as that. It looks like whoever's on the other end has put the phone down. Do this for a couple of hours and you can take it easy for the rest of the day; it's that simple.

Won't they check the tapes, figure out what you're doing?

The experienced operator laughed. The tapes get wiped at the end of the week; no one ever checks them—it's just a legal requirement. Why on earth would anyone want to check through all these dull, dull calls—unless they were a masochist?

Alex didn't think much of this. If he wanted to be taken on permanently, then such an indiscretion could cost him—it amounted to little more than fraud, and the last thing he wanted was to begin his working life on a bad footing.

On that first day he took less than fifty calls. He followed the script as best he could but it was impossible not to deviate. One woman practically chatted him up, saying he had a nice voice, did it match his body, and what was he doing working at a call centre? He told her all about his degree, his research about EMI, and thirty minutes went by before he'd hung up.

Still, as he would discover, even if you stuck to the script it was near impossible to keep a call to three minutes. His average came down from six to five—not enough to reach target.

The following Friday he was summoned to the floor manager's office.

I'm afraid I'm going to have to put you on review. Your timekeeping is good, you're always here early, but these figures fall below what's expected. Your best is ninety-two and really that's not good enough.

What about everyone else? Alex asked. There was pleading in his voice.

Admittedly it can take a couple of weeks to get into the swing of things, and you're not the only one to fall short, but your average is seventy—that's very low, even for your first week.

Alex returned despondently to his pod. He did his best to hurry along the callers but even then, out of breath and sweating, it'd take four and a half minutes to obtain all the information required.

With every chance of being out by the end of the week, he allowed his hand to hover over the red button.

The caller gave his details, Alex apologised, asked him to ring back; pressed. He figured it was better than simply cutting the man off without a word.

No, the experienced operator said. There's not much chance of the tapes being reviewed, but even so the last thing you want is your voice on there.

It's much better to answer and cut off - all in one swift motion. Look.

At the end of the month, Alex was summoned once more to the floor manager's office. He feared the worst.

Impressive, the floor manager said, looking at his print out. This is the most a temp has ever done in their first month. At first I had you down as a slacker; one of those fly-by-night fools who stays a couple of weeks, messing us around, and then leaves. But no, not at all. I'd say you've got a future here. Welcome to BCC.

(ii)

He knew he had to leave. If he didn't leave today he'd surely be transformed into a non-entity, a golem of officialdom, a simpering old creature with all hopes in this world abandoned. The loathsomeness of it all was in the cloying, claustrophobic air he daily had to inhale. He felt his blood thickening, his arteries choking; so many petty concerns.

EMI, he liked to say. I sent my dissertation to EMI.

He would sit at his desk hour after dismal hour, his mind a whirlpool. There was a contract nearing completion, a report to write.

His reflection in the VDU was black skin and hanging eyes. He would open his dismal BCC mouth and all that jargon would flood right out.

Quantity versus quality measures.

If he didn't leave today he'd surely be transformed into a non-entity, a golem of officialdom, a simpering old creature with all hopes in this world abandoned.

Asset accumulation.
Targeted marketing strategies.

One sick, tired afternoon, the young Asian from the induction rose up before him as an apparition.

I thought you'd left, Alexander said.

I had second thoughts on the matter. My friends all had the latest gadgets. Girlfriends and cars. And there was the rent to pay. Anyway, I'm older now. I wouldn't walk out like that again. So immature.

No, no, you were right. It was just as you said: the corporation sucks you in and strangles your soul. You become a cog, a particle, an atom drifting without purpose. What is this? I'll tell you what it is. It's a great stupid amorphous mass. BCC. But what does it stand for? Really, what could it possibly mean other than Brainless Crass Corpse?

Bloody Clueless Cunt.

Something like that, yes. Listen. Your life is passing, passing, passing in increments of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, moving ceaselessly, inevitably onwards and downwards with no real sense of anything at all. And then what? What happens then? Death is what happens. The pitiful grave.

I've got to go, okay. I stand a good chance of promotion if I's gets this right. I could have a good desk like yours, man. A future.

No, it's no future. Here take it. Take what I've got. You can have it all. I'm going. I'm going right home and do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to put together a swap tape?

A what?

A swap tape. You never done it, you know, with your mates and all? You put all your favourite tracks on it, and then you swap them around and leave comments on the sleeve. It was Billy Bong who got me into it.

Who?

Oh, he was a good friend of mine, a real good friend. He lived in the same house, see, in the attic of all places. A right character he was, a bit of a geezer. He had this scam going forging and selling rent books and all his mates were skimming thirty quid a week off the DSS.

Yourself was?

No, not me. I was playing it legit. I'd only just graduated and I had this temp job here. I didn't need to. But anyway, it was his idea—making and swapping tapes. The rules were simple: you had to put together a compilation of ten tracks that were meaningful to you on some level, you know,

without explaining why. That was for your mates to think about.

Alexander laughed.

Wow, some of those tapes were so like left field and bizarre. We were all trying to outdo each other, see. Black Flag followed by Shirley Bassey on one of mine, can you believe it? Mostly, these swap tapes weren't properly listened to, at least not the way they were meant to. But there was one exception. That exception was Billy's tape. He pushed a copy under my door. Nick Drake, Paul Weller, Scott Walker. All classics in their own right. Yet it was the way the tape had been put together, the songs complementing each other, you know, forming a pattern. As soon as it came to an end I'd rewind it and play it again. Each time you heard it you became aware of something more, another connection. Even the crackle of the vinyl between tracks, it sounded somehow alluring, meaningful. But there's more to it than that. The very last track was the best of all but nobody knew who it was by or anything. On the listing he'd just put down a big black question mark.

And did you ever find out, who it was?

I had the tape duplicated. I listened to it again and again and again. Everywhere I went I had to be listening to it, in the car, on my Walkman. I was becoming lost to it. Nothing else mattered to me but that tape. Not this cruddy job at BCC, not my pitiful no-love life, nothing.

I needed to talk to Billy about it. I had to know who that last track was. Art it was. Real art. The words got right into your head, into your very soul—I know that sounds daft, but that's how it was. The song was about someone out walking, what he sees and how he feels—he sings about a glittering city of fading lights, going down by a slick black river, and all the people he has ever known rise up out of the waters and come towards him holding out their hands in pleading, all anguish and darkness, and then something about dull brown leaves falling from tall dead trees and settling upon the frozen pavement. It became a part of you.

I like rap me. You know, like Dizzee Rascal. Bonkers.

Yeah, well, there is a place for that. But this, this was something different. These simple guitar riffs, they build up all around. An echoing of drums, silence, and then you hear his voice. It leads you in. It pulls you apart. It's fucking poetry, don't you understand. Poetry. Ah, just fuck it all. Fuck this monitor screen. Fuck this office. I was once Alexander Williams. Descending. Let me tell you about it, how I went down.

(iii)

I went to his door and knocked hard. I had to know who it was on the tape. And do you know what...do you know what he said to me?

That's me, he said. It's what I used to do before I stopped doing it.

It's beautiful, I told him. You do know it's a work of genius. You could be famous. You could have a record deal.

He said he used to gig bars and clubs. He'd bought time in a studio where he'd laid down tracks. There'd been a contract but he'd turned it down. Said he didn't need it.

And do you know how I saw it, Dizzee Rascal? Do you know how I saw it? I saw it as my way out. My way out! This is what I'd do. I'd convince him to make a proper demo. I knew the business. I'd done my dissertation about EMI after all. I'd tout it around, get the best possible deal. And if that failed, then we'd set up our own label; he'd be a phenomenon. I drew up a business plan. I even drafted my resignation letter. I'd be gone from this place. Two in the hand is worth three in the bush and all that. That's what they say, isn't it?

With plan in hand, I hastened up the stairs and knocked hard on the door to Billy's attic. No answer, Dizzee Rascal, no answer. But the door was unlocked and so I went in, as you would. All the drawers had been flung onto the bed. On the bedside cabinet propped against a lamp there was a cassette and an envelope. There was a letter with it. Billy said he was off and gone. Off on his travels or something crazy. Itchy feet, he said. Perhaps he'd go off to Russia or America, he wasn't really sure.

The tape was a revelation. All the tracks he'd laid down at the studio. Jesus they were good. Not good, no. Amazing. Awesome. Phenomenal. The best.

I listened to that tape over and over, until I knew every beat, every last word of it. Perhaps it holds a clue, that's what I thought—these tracks, Alexander Williams, these tracks are clues. Each one was poetic, hypnotic, resonant. Track one: waiting for a girl outside the pictures in Croydon, wondering whether she'll ever turn up, hopes fading, uncertainty, question marks. The Ritz at the Corner of Cradle Street. The next was about lying in bed all day and the simple pleasure of watching the world go endlessly by. The clue was in the last stanza, Dizzee Rascal. It was right there in the last fucking stanza. Glancing idly through a dusty window I see streams of tourists with their kiss-me-quick hats and smiling retard faces. Paris, New York, Rome, but it all came back to a Northern Seaside Town.

I asked around. I needed to know what people knew. Where did he

come from? Where had he gone? The landlady said he was originally from the North. Morecambe she said.

Morecambe. I had to go there.

I called the office, said I was taking my flexi. They were all furious: twice as much work on our desks now and important contracts due. Three calls I got back.

No. No. I'm packing already. Gone.

It was raining hard the morning I took the train. I'd brought with me a cassette player and a duplicate tape. You see, I had this idea that playing Billy's songs would help me find him. I had to take three trains, the first into London, the second to Manchester, and the third to Morecambe. I took it out on the Morecambe train, speeding through these dull grey fields with the rain belting against the windows. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy. There were these two guys that I imagined the likes of Billy would hang out with—hair falling over shoulders, army fatigues, black tee-shirts, badges all over their jackets. I sat at their table, took out the cassette player and pressed play. Billy's wonderful tinny voice erupted all around. I looked at them meaningfully. I expected a response.

They asked me what I wanted, real gruff voices, you know, northern twang.

My name is Alexander Williams. And I am on a mission to find a good friend of mine. His name is Billy Bong and he heralds from your neck of the proverbial woods. You wouldn't happen to know him, would you? This is him singing. A musical genius is Billy Bong. You must 'ave heard of 'im, lads. Your neck of the woods, after all.

They got off at the next station, laughing. He's taking the piss, they called after the train. That southern jessy woos is clearly taking the piss. Mad fucker.

I am Alexander Williams on a mission, I called out of the window, with the rain spitting into my eyes. The train lurched inevitably away and I watched them disappearing along the damp northern platform into the black, cloudy dusk.

It was ridiculous, Dizzee Rascal. I was acting bloody weird. But then again, I could think of no other way.

I'd been doing a lot of thinking, as it happens. I'd thought a lot about BCC, what it meant to me or rather didn't. I'd thought about you too, about how you'd walked clean damned out of that insufferable induction, corporate ethos and all that dross. I often wondered about what had happened to you, drifting from one induction to the next, taking a month's

salary and then bugging off. Hero. I had a notepad on that shivering train. And I wrote down this:

I don't do anything.

It takes up all my TIME.

I don't have much TIME.

My TIME is limited, fixed, determinate.

It's what I think about, worry about, when I'm not there.

It is the opposite of living; the opposite of being.

The opposite of Billy Bong and his genius words.

Time, time, time passing so fast that before I know it I'll have damned used it all up, every last grain, ounce, increment of it.

But I will find Billy and we'll escape from TIME.

It was drizzling when I arrived. Gulls were wheeling across the cold grey sky, the wind buffeting all these grim boarded up windows.

Not often people come here this time of year, the receptionist said.

All just about shutting up right now with the season over.

I said,

My name is Alexander Williams and I am here on a mission. I took out the cassette player and played her the tape. She said she'd never heard of him, this Billy Bong. But she handed me the key to my room anyway. She said, you must remember the front door gets locked at twelve and after that you'll have to ring the bell to call the porter.

Those three days the sky did nothing but bucket down with rain, so heavy, black and persistent that I thought the entire world was going to drown under a great flood.

I wandered between arcades, shops, cafes, the pier, the funfair, playing the tape to everyone and asking about Billy. I was brushed aside. I was laughed at, mocked.

Billy is from here, your town, a real local hero, I liked to say.

You know, Dizzee, it wasn't all that bad. Occasionally some kind soul would perk up favourably on what they had heard. They might say good voice nice tune and ask whether Billy Bong was brother or friend.

No, I'd say. Local hero. Your town. Me, Croydon born.

I took the bus up to a place called Ulverston because the landlady had said she thought he might have connections there. I asked around local pubs, with the fanciful idea that someone of that area may well have seen or heard him busking street corners. No luck. If the truth of it be known I was beginning to despair. My soul felt low with the task.

By the fourth day of my blessed mission the weather had relented. I

had no fears now of forty days and nights of torrid rain, as had happened in the Good Book. I climbed down a steep stone stairway to the beach. The tide had slipped out leaving long stretches of damp sand, more black than yellow owing to the rain having been so hard and furious these last few days, bringing up all the dirt and dredge from the seabed.

Two children, a boy and a girl with nets and a bucket, were stood in a rock pool with their trousers rolled to their knees. They'd caught a crab and it was struggling hard to climb the sides of the bucket. I couldn't help but think of it as a metaphor, Dizzee Rascal, for my mission mainly but also life in general, and time. I played these kiddies the tape. They looked at me with a strange mixture of curiosity and fear. This is Billy Bong, I said. Should you meet him on your travels I'd be grateful for the knowledge of his whereabouts.

I threw a clump of sand which disintegrated and splattered across the muddy flats. The town looked distant and unreal, a mist rising above its pebble-dashed hotels and abandoned Ferris-wheel.

I cut a path across the beach to the pier where beneath the girders I found something that interested me greatly: two black carrier bags stuffed with clothes. I returned to the promenade. When a figure emerged from under the pier I flicked a coin into a telescope. It was someone of Billy's age wearing a dirty old T-shirt and dirty old khaki pants. He had darker skin though and was a lot thinner. Not Billy, no, but someone like him who might know him. I watched him pull a blanket from one of the carriers and after wrapping himself in it, he smoked a cigarette all quite nonchalantly. It was an image from a song of Billy's: the sea parting and the stranger smoking. I had to keep him close under surveillance. I had to follow him.

There wasn't much to see. Mostly he slept. Sometimes he got up, stretched and looked towards the sea. I needed to go down and play him the tape. But something stopped me; a sense of dread, I suppose, a sense that once more I'd be badly let down.

When at last he left his cosy beach, I followed him along the main drag ducking behind lampposts and into doorways whenever he turned.

A moment of clarity in the drizzle and gloom of a late October afternoon.

Shivering badly, clutching the cassette player to my chest, I walked quickly on following him down an alleyway. I watched him buy chips and Coke from a chippie.

The old fun fair was being dismantled. It had seen better days

and they'd thought to hell with it: we should build a car park over it, hardly anyone comes to the seaside these days - they're all off to the see the sun in Fuerteventura. The rides were all gone but for the creaking dinosaur roller coaster, the ghost train and the Ferris wheel. He'd ducked through a gap in the fence and I could hear him whistling a tune which I'd heard on Billy's tape. I pulled back a metal sheet and clambered into the darkness of the dead fair, my cigarette glowing faintly against a backboard of witches and bats.

People paid good money to see this shit.

His face was well lit, illuminated you might say. Close up, I could see the resemblance now. He had the same bright eyes, the same loping grin, although he looked older, with skin darkened by the elements.

Little kids.

Yeah. Suppose you would've shit your pants once.

When you were a boy, that last holiday—did you shit your pants then? Or were you unafraid?

Do you know of Billy?

Yes, he said.

Can you take me to him?

Yes. I am his brother, after all.

Didn't know he had one. Never mentioned it.

We're soul buddies more than brothers. Me and him, like that we are. Wherever he goes, I go too.

I came looking. Where is he?

Deep inside us all. The essence of man. Do you wanna chip?

I'm starving. I've been looking for so long now. Looking high and low.

When I was a kid, I heard about some fella who stayed overnight in one of these places, a ghost train or a horror house or somethin'. He did it for a bet or for charity. Anyway when they unlocked him in the mornin' he ran out screamin'. Pale as anything, with his hair all white. I used to think I'd get left in one of these places by the old man, you know, as a punishment. Never thought I'd end up living in one. And look, has my hair gone white?

I thought you lived under the pier.

What makes you think that?

I saw you this morning. I was walking along the beach.

That was you, was it? I thought some cunt was watchin' me.

Thought it was the fuckin' pigs or somethin'. You looked through my stuff.

I didn't mean to pry.

Pry? Now there's a word, pry. Didn't mean to fuckin' pry. Where're you from then?

You know that. Come on. You're playing with me, aren't you? Soul buddies and brothers. You look different. But not that much.

You wanna buy some, is that it? It's what every fucker's into round here. It's the heavy stuff. They come crawlin' out of their bedsits at night like fucking vampires. That's why I stay down the pier. No one disturbs you down there.

What about food? How do you eat?

With me fingers, that's how I eat, just like everyone else. There's bins, leftovers from cafes and stuff. An' I do wash, I wash all the time. The lavvies, sometimes the sea. That freezes your bollocks off. How much cash you got then? What you willing to pay?

I'll pay anything for you to come back. Listen to your cassette, man. Just listen to it. You could be the next big thing.

This is the next big thing. That's what they're all dying for round here. You buyin' or not?

What's it going to take me to convince you?

Just chill out, man. This shit will chill you out.

The tide slapped against the pier. We'd gone down to the beach to lean against the seawall and swig cheap cider. Dusk was setting in, the pier's wooden struts throbbing with the umpapah rhythm of the concert above. We looked out across the darkening sea.

You know how to do it, don't you?

I watched Billy Bong fumble with a lighter and foil.

I need a note. Rolled right, it's got to be rolled right.

It makes sense for me to do this, I said with nerves. I see it as my way of getting into your mind, seeing where you're coming from. I'll understand you then. And think about it, years from now they'll look back on this, they really will. Jesus in the desert for forty days and forty nights. If it takes that long, then so be it. I'm not going back without you, Billy Bong.

With the foil powdered, he held the lighter under it and inhaled the smoke. Then it was my turn—Alex the dull office boy who day in day out worked the nine-to-five. I almost knocked it from his hand, so nervous was I. But then I caught a quivering thread and sucked it darkly in.

We looked out across the vast blackness of the sea, at the flickering lights of the far-off bay, cars twinkling along the narrow coastal road. I put the cassette on full and laughed at Billy's words as they worked through my mind.

What the fuck is this?
You know that, Billy.

There was nothing to do but drift from one arcade to the next, sit in pokey cafés slurping tea, or play this game where you'd run between leaking gutters trying to get so wet that you'd catch pneumonia. He wouldn't admit it but I bloody well knew. Wet had a line about doing just that, running the gutters. I'd been there two weeks but had still not yet been granted an admission. We smoked pot and heroin. Billy Bong would disappear for half the day returning with these fat black red eyes, all moist and glazed over like he'd been experiencing a vision.

You are Billy. You know you are. How can you not be Billy?

Well all right, if you want, yes. I can't think of being anyone else.

His face kept fading in and out of focus.

Sing. You've got to sing then.

I can't sing. Why do you want me to sing? I've never sang except at school and that's years ago.

If you sing, I can make you famous. You've all the songs and everything. Those songs on the tape, they are works of art.

Your problem, you know what it is—it's vassalage. This Billy guy you keep going on about, who for some reason you think is me, that's what you want to do—you just want to use him as an escape from vassalage. You keep going on about how shy he is, how he gets stage fright.... Well maybe you just want to enslave him and that's what he's afraid of, becoming a vassal like you.

I felt that I was getting somewhere; entering negotiation. Only Billy would talk in this strange way, of vassalage.

That's not true. It would be Billy who benefits most. I'd be there to help. His manager. And if ever things got heavy, well, we'd just take it easy for a while. Come back to this place if you'd like.

I thought about how I used to sit at my desk for hour after hour, doing nothing. That seemed long ago, a different time. But I'm still here, aren't I? Why am I still here? I'm glad you came back here, in a way, and not to some other corporation. I'm here right in front of you because of that, as a warning. Though I didn't think it at the time you were my hero for doing what you did, walking out on that induction. You should have carried on walking. You really should. Dizze Rascal.

(iv)

Every morning Billy Bong would disentangle himself from his blanket and go over to the rock pool, where he'd pull off his underwear and crouch. I decided that I should do the same, although really not so long ago it would have appalled me to even think it. But I figured it would give me an advantage of sorts, help get him on my side so that he would be kind enough to admit who he was. This is what Roman legionaries did - crouching and shitting together - and they were utterly dependent on each other, a real unit. As the cold sea air breezed about my backside, I laughed to think of it. This will be in the annals of rock and roll, Billy, the annals of history. THE ANALS!

Wordlessly, Billy Bong kicked sand all over his excreta.

You can shit in the lavs up top if you want to. I don't bother goin' up there of a mornin'. There are people looking for me all over this place now.

We have to make a deal. You'd be crazy not to.

Listen, you've just got to ease off with this. You've got to ease off my case, bud.

A man came past walking a dog, and then a middle-aged couple out for a morning stroll. The rain beat down hard on us. I was still laughing. Roman legionaries, that's what we are. The annals of history.

I'm better off not staying around, Billy said, folding his blanket into his bag. I'm leaving.

You want breakfast? You hungry? Do you want me to treat you to a breakfast?

We walked beneath the seawall, Billy kicking seaweed and splashing through rock pools. There was poetry in this: I could hear his words, the soft strumming of his guitar.

We went to a cafe for breakfast. I dangled a pen right in front of him. You can't go. We haven't struck a deal yet.

I've just got to go, that's all. I came here to chill out. And all I get is some crazy guy following me everywhere, thinking I'm John fuckin' Lennon or somethin'. I don't sing. I don't write songs. I never have.

He'll fleece you, that bugger, the woman behind the counter said. We don't want druggies in here.

Billy here's going to be big. He'll be the next big thing.

Billy? He's not Billy. That's Greg. Him an' his mates used to come here all the time before I 'ad 'em banned.

Tupelo. Abbey Road. This location will be remembered. Tourists

will come here.

I bought Billy a second mug of tea. We smoked and watched the rain pattering against the windows.

I'm leaving today, Billy said. I'm getting the train into Manchester. I'll come with you.

It's up to you where you go but just forget this Billy shit.

Billy Bong.

Whatever.

We took the train that very afternoon. Billy said he had no money to pay the fares and we ended up having to jump the turnstile, and then the guards chased us through the concourse past the taxi rank and along Deansgate. It was really something. I felt very alive.

In a way, Alexander, you were looking for the authentic self—one that has been hopelessly lost in the machine. But still, there are limits. You have to accept the limits.

We went into a pub to celebrate our escape. Billy agreed he should play some gigs before cutting a CD. Then he said,

I do need to score some. You got a bank card?

A bank card?

Yeah, a bank card, debit or credit card, I need to get a line of credit going. You need a card for that. Any

card will do. It don't have to have anythin' on it.

And then he was gone. I watched him disappearing along the street.

Thirty minutes went by, an hour. I kept looking through the window expecting to see him but soon darkness was falling and I could hardly see anything at all. I didn't have my card any more, only the change in my pockets and a five pound note. I bought another drink, then another. And then I had no money left at all. It occurred to me then that Billy was never coming back.

I had to get out of there. It was cold and there wasn't much light on the streets. Drunks were teetering along, pissing down alleyways, picking out fights. Billy was somewhere in this city. I had to find him.

I sat on a bench watching figures flitting in front of the mottle-green windows of a warehouse. I could feel a cold breeze lifting off the black canal that threaded past it. I tried sleeping but it was impossible. I knew that I'd never see him again. I knew that I had lost him and I began to weep and scream thinking about this desk and the dreary nine-to-five that surely

now awaited me. I felt myself falling, descending badly.

It was that more than anything which made me do what I then did.

(v)

He was stranger. Just someone out for a midnight stroll. Maybe he'd had a jar or two, I really don't know. He never saw me coming. And then he was down on the ground being kicked and punched. They dragged me off of him, screaming madly.

And then there was only blackness.

He had on a suit, a suit and a tie—it was that more than anything that made me do it.

(vi)

The purpose of hexagonal pool was to further unhinge the confused mind, or so it seemed. I'd play from early morning until late afternoon when the second dose of medication was dispensed. By now, having accepted the diagnosis, I could more or less accept discordant pockets.

I was in the supervision ward of Fairland Hospital squandering time awaiting judgement from the psychiatrists. There was much screaming, much hustling and many remonstrations.

You have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, Alexander Williams, and it will require an independent report to determine the value of continuing this pending treatment. On my bedside cabinet there was a card from BCC wishing me a swift recovery. It was full of comments and signatures and I couldn't stop reading them.

There's nothing at all wrong with you. Sooner you realise that the better for us all. You're needed here. Without you the Floor functions significantly less well. Missing you badly.

Whether my ability on the pool table had any bearing I didn't know. I surmised that the subtle deviations from the norm were all part of the planning. If you accepted the authenticity of the table then maybe you'd accept diagnosis too. It was Orwell's two plus two equals five. But what sort of organisation would require this to be circulated? Surely it would be self evident. You didn't have to be reminded that two plus two equals five. I thought about all the tiresome hours doing more or less nothing; how it had dragged me down.

It had made sense for me to seek out Billy.



In a way, Alexander, you were looking for the authentic self—one that has been hopelessly lost in the machine. But still, there are limits. You have to accept the limits.

The more I played the more I got used to the balls flying into the pockets from unlikely angles. In the real world, I'd been able to knock in a table within three to four minutes. Now I'd to forget all I'd ever learnt to beat manic depressives and cue-swinging schizophrenicals.

When not playing hexagonal pool or being counselled, I would sit in the hospital grounds writing letters to big bad record companies. I'd send

them the cassette in multiples of five.

But don't listen. If you listen you might end up in here with me. The words are powerful. They work down into your mind like hypnotism.

That's the reason why you're in here is it, Alex? That cassette of Billy's?

You can't hear it and not be otherwise. The words make you want to take off and drift. I understand now why he didn't want to go touring and cut a CD. He recognised that it was too powerful and unhinging. What would the world be like if all of us listened?

Fantasies are important though, aren't they, Alex? Without them everything would appear dull, flat and lifeless. I think the importance is in recognising where reality ends and fantasy begins.

But what if we've got it wrong? What if we're so blinkered that we can only accept what's right in front of us? We don't see Billy, only our shoddy desks, our grey monitors, all the tiresomeness and pointlessness of our mundane lives.

That's why we enjoy television, a good book or a good film—chasing after something that isn't there, at least temporarily, because we recognise the boundaries, where one thing becomes another.

You think he doesn't exist, is that what you're saying? All you have to do is call Mrs. Grimes the landlady at our digs and she'll tell you all about him. Billy is real.

Well there's no denying that. But this journey you went on, this person you thought was him, well, that's altogether different. It could be said that you'd built him up in your mind into something that he isn't and in doing so you lost your grip on reality. And anyway, more than likely it wasn't Billy you found but someone who just happened to look like him. Because think about it, everywhere you looked you kept finding him. He was there, yes, but only in your mind.

I don't know. It won't happen again though. If I did all that again, looking for Billy, I'd be a lot more clearheaded in my approach. I'd put adverts in the papers, a photo-fit.

Fantasy and reality, Alex. The important thing is seeing where one ends and the other begins.

And boredom?

Boredom?

The boredom of the nine-to-five. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, years of it until you drop stone down dead.

Your job? Well, I suppose it's just something you have to put up with. Think about it this way: if you never experience boredom you'd never experience excitement. I get bored here, you know, dreadfully so. All the masses of paperwork are enough to unhinge anyone. Today for example I'll be spending the morning talking to patients and the afternoon filling in forms. I'll get home and there'll be more. I'm holding a therapy session on the acute ward tomorrow and that requires an awful lot of planning, reading patients' notes and establishing strategies to ensure everyone is involved. Now that might sound exciting and it is the first couple of years. But the same old issues keep propping up: it becomes repetitive—like any job. But I don't let it get to me. Instead I just get on with it. I enjoy the good times and I endure the bad. I make sure that I have something to look forward to at the end of the week; my own time.

But what if there aren't good times? What if the distinction between good and bad doesn't exist, no black and white only grey, oceans and skies of it? What if it just goes on and on, day after day, this misery of nothingness?

I told him about you then, going from induction to induction, working the month, resigning. I didn't know that I would ever meet you again. Certainly didn't think I'd be telling you all this.

Happy, you know. Genuinely happy.

And just wait till the poor sod gets married, owns a house, has kids. He'll have to work then and it'll come as a real shock to him. Do you know about five years ago I used to think just like you, Alex? I thought about quitting my job and travelling the world, writing a journal or something. And then I met the girl of my dreams. We're married now with a third kid on the way. It gets bad and not just the repetition either. There's a sense of hopelessness, nothing can be done for some patients, the acute cases. Sometimes I can't face getting out of bed of a morning. But then I think about the babies. I've got no choice but to get up and take on the day. It takes away a lot of the pain, knowing that I have these responsibilities.

But I don't want to accept something just because of responsibilities.... And anyway, I don't really have responsibilities. The only responsibility I have is to my self. I am a free individual. Or at least I would be if it wasn't for my job. I have aspirations. They are thwarted. Don't you ever think you're wasting your time, living like that, the nine to five?

I do my job. I do it as best as I can and then I go home to be with my wife and kids and it feels right.

I crunched my Styrofoam cup; the coffee flowed down my fingers leaving a sticky residue. I really wanted to kill him then, this fuckin' finger-lickin' psychiatrist. I wanted to punch his fuckin' lights out for him.

But you know what you're doing don't you? You know what you've done? You've given away freedom, given away your time. It's your time, Mark. No one else's.

I've swapped it, I suppose. I've swapped my freedom for love; for love and responsibility. It's a bloody good swap, you know. It really bloody well is.

(vii)

They said I was getting better.

Alexander Williams, you are no longer descending. You are right and ready to go out into the big bad world.

By then, Dizzee Rascal, I had chalked up so many wins against the manic depressives and schizoid maniacs that I'd lost count. The pockets no longer seemed so much to be in the wrong places; the balls zinged right in. In fact, it seemed to me that all pool tables should be designed as such, and in many other incongruous shapes too.

The more I thought about what my psycho had said, the more it appealed. I had, it could be said, come to terms. I would spend this happy life as a crunching, turning cog in the Big Complex Corporate machine. I'd need love, of course, and many babies.

I'll be a static ghost for forty, fifty hours of the week, but having ventured out into the world of romance and love I'd have also a nuptial wife.

Wanting to be this big crazy record producer was nothing but a dream—a puerile fantasy of the stupid graduate boy.

You're making progress, Alex. Good progress. You are no longer Alexander Williams descending.

The night before I was due to be discharged I thought long and hard about it, and in the sunshine morning I packed away my paltry possessions, all the cards I'd been sent, and waited for the taxi to arrive.

Take a tenner from petty cash, the psycho said. On his desk there was a new photograph. The week before his wife had given birth to a third child, a boy. There were tears welling right up into my eyes and cascading down my cheeks.

It seemed bizarre that less than a month ago you'd considered me sick enough to be sectioned and now you're paying to get rid of me.

You'll receive an outpatient's card but whether you act on that is your own decision. You're not ill, not really, but I'd recommend that you sort out your life, your priorities. If you do want to be a record producer it's not going to happen by following strangers around with a cassette player and punching some poor bugger to the ground.

No, you're right. And anyway I'm going to forget all that. I'm going to be just like everyone else. I'll listen to music, I'll make tapes perhaps, but I won't be a producer. I'll be a cog in the big fat corporate machine.

I looked disinterestedly towards the motorway, at the fat black bulbous clouds tumbling in towards me.

You have to take responsibility for your actions. That's what it's about. Let's say you found a girl you absolutely doted on and the choice was between this Billy and her.

I don't know, I said, I really don't know, and the rain began hammering down.

(viii)

Of course suicide was an option, the easy way out for the waster, the malingerer. I didn't believe in no religion at all. If I took my own life, Diz-zee Rascal, there'd be no angry venomous god waiting to crush me.

I had touched greatness with Billy. I had actually touched greatness with him, by just being with him. And if I could find him, if I could find him...it would all be so very sweet.

Have you seen Billy Bong? Yes Billy, Billy Bong? I need him. I'm looking for him. Looking for him every damned where.

But no one would listen.

Alexander Williams had been ill, he'd been cruelly descending, and you had to be gentle with him.

Time passed, Diz-zee Rascal. Time went on by.

It only makes it worse if you humour him. You've to tell him no. Pull him back in line. Alexander Williams has POTENTIAL. Or is that had? Alexander Williams had potential. He had potential in this big clanking corporate machine. Anyway, another mark against his name and sorry, but really, he's gone. Last warning. Gone.

Buckle down, Alex. Buckle the fuck down or they'll kick your arse out onto the diabolical streets. Hell.

If a cog is faulty you simply replace it. Loyalty and goodness can only stretch so far. The machine has to keep ticking over, tick-tock, tick-tock. Opportunities seized, turbulent waters navigated.

I knew this. I understood my position to be precarious. I had been on the very edge, the precipice, but now I was back. I would sit at this desk here, Diz-zee, and do my work to the best of my ability, answering the phone, writing reports, calling clients, all the usual.

But Billy was in my mind. He would not let go. His songs were within me, deep inside me. I'd be sat at this very desk and a rhyming couplet would appear as if out of nowhere, and this would be followed by a line, chorus, verse, or on the radio there'd be a familiar riff and I'd imagine the voice of him bursting through.

There were strange looks of course and the rumours spread. It was said I had less than a month left. Other averred that I'd already been dismissed and simply came here for the warmth, with the floor manager too kind to have me ejected.

Finally, I was persuaded to take my long due flexi.

The rent hadn't been paid and the room was a scene from the very depths of dissension. I had been in there now for three weeks, contemplating it all, where it was heading. I'd go out drinking alone, the worst of dives, and my only solace was to invite back dark-eyed drunks with puffy cheeks and blistering vaginas. With so many tinnies littering the floor, the slightest movement of arm or leg caused a metallic crunch. The ashtrays were overflowing with dope ash, a foul grey layer over everything.

During the day I'd watch a monochromatic television showing endless repeats of sitcoms, DIY shows and gardening programmes. I seemed to be surrounded by clocks or rather I was attentive to their presence, the ghostly flickering digits, hands moving onwards into the vast eternity. I couldn't help but dwell on what the psycho had said up at the hospital and sometimes the vision of a young woman, a beautiful woman, would come to me. I'd reach out to touch her. I'd think her real.

One morning the landlady hammered on the door waking me from my stupor.

A terrible stench in here and look at this mess. I must remind you that you're required to maintain this room in a comestible condition.

I buried my head under the pillow groaning that she'd used the wrong word.

I beg your pardon.

Comestible means it can be eaten.

You'll not be eating anything in here. You know the rules. Now why are you not in work?

Flexi. And anyway, what the hell are you doing barging in? I pay for this room.

No, you paid for this room. You used to pay for this room. You're so far behind with the rent that I've every right to turn you out. The only reason why I don't is the goodness of my heart. Two hundred and ten pounds. Either that or you're out by the week. Do you understand?

Out by the week, eh? Out by the week? Yeah, the week. Okay. I'll be long, long gone by then.

So I swigged the sour remains of a bottle and sat by the window looking at the motorway streaming endlessly into the city and back again. There's no way to stop it, I thought. It will go on forever, long after you're gone Alexander Williams.

I listened to the cassette again, although I'd been told to destroy it or lock it up in a safe or a box or something, Pandora. I still liked it, you know. But something was missing. That original quality of surprise, I suppose, that sense of addiction.

That night I went out to top up supply. Storm clouds were gathering and the air had a stark chill. But at least I had a bottle, a tenth of dope and Billy Bong playing into my hairy holes. When later that night there was a knock on the window, it didn't surprise me at all. There she was, this girl of my dreams, all gossamer and airy but nevertheless real. I needed to clean up, to take a shower, but she told me not to. She wanted me for myself and not anything else, this real enough girl of my dreams.

Money's old rope, she said. And your job's no damned good.

We sat on the bed and smoked the dope.

Billy Bong, she said. I'd like us to listen to him, together.

I'm not meant to. Warned.

Come on, she said, clutching my hand.

She sprawled her legs out across mine and I took it from the Walkman and slotted it into the recorder. By now the sky was tinged blue-black and lightning flashed in a multitude of directions. We breathed in the cool air and made rollicking love, listening to Billy.

The smell of you, I said. It's the smell of you I love, that above everything else. I could die for this smell. I could die for you. Lay down my life for you.

She put a finger to my honest lips. I knelt between her legs and

looked up into her glimmering eyes. I saw Billy Bong in there. And other things too.

We have the same thoughts, you and I, the same thoughts. It will last forever.

Time, she said. Time moves on.

Not in the moment.

I kissed her. I whispered into her ear. The voice of Billy Bong shimmered all around. I fell asleep after we'd made love, and it was the gentlest sleep ever, so soft and comforting like being a boy again held in your mother's arms.

In the morning she was gone, the only sign that she was ever with me at all the wonderful smell of her and the door caught in a gentle swing. I threw back the curtains and watched her disappearing into the mist.

A light drizzle had begun to fall as I made my way along the street, thinking that the only thing to do now was to follow.

By when I reached the shopping precinct the sun was rising to dapple across stretches of black water and all the great encircling tower blocks. It was now that I saw Billy. It was unmistakably him, as real as the daylight. It struck me how fragile he looked like he'd been through a bad time but gentle bad like in one of his songs. I quickened my pace and we headed down into the ghostly dawn towards the very edge of the city and the swaying fields.

Billy turned to me now, his face lit bright, and he was singing.

He was singing a song about time and how together we could descend into it.

I said goodbye to the world that morning, Dizzee Rascal. I said goodbye, Billy Bong, so long. And it's why you find me here right now, at this desk.

Author Biographies

Sarah Barnett has had careers as a teacher, librarian and lawyer. Now retired, she lives in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware where she tries to write essays and short fiction while walking her dog on the beach. Her work has been published in *No Place Like Here: an Anthology of Southern Delaware Poetry and Prose*. She is vice president of the Rehoboth Beach Writers' Guild and leads a weekly "Free Write" for other writers. She can be reached at sbarnett99@comcast.net.

Brandon Bell lives in Louisville, Ky. His work has appeared in *Apiary*, *Cricket Online Review*, *Leaf Garden*, *Barrier Islands Review*, and *Inkspill Magazine* (United Kingdom), and will soon appear in *Work*.

Michael Clough is originally from Manchester, UK, a city known throughout the world for its 'soccer' team, Manchester United. To earn a living he lectures in English Literature and Creative Writing. When not doing that, he can be found writing articles and short stories. He has been published in small literary journals and a radical newspaper. In 2008 he published a limited edition book about sports and politics. He is currently working on a novel.

Ron Ennis studied writing at the University of Kentucky. He currently lives in New Jersey with his wife and children. He frequently reads Hemingway and plots his escape to Paris. More short stories are in the process of completion.

Jennifer Falkner recently completed her Master's degree in Classical Studies at the University of Ottawa. Her short stories can be found in the *Paragon Journal*, *Subtle Fiction*, *Untoward Magazine* and are forthcoming in *Eunoia* and *Perspectives Magazine*. She lives in Ottawa with her husband and daughter.

Andrew Gretes received his MFA from American University. His works have appeared in *The Monarch Review*, *Subliminal Interiors*, and *Lunarosity: A Journal of Poetry and Fiction by Contemporary Authors*. He lives, teaches, and writes in Washington, D.C.

Malachi King is an English teacher, Mensa member, and holds a Language Arts degree from Grand Valley State University. His writing centers on extreme emotion, survival, and courage. Malachi has work published in various markets including *Mensa Bulletin*, *Orion's Child Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine*, *Indigo Rising Magazine*, *Liars' League*, and *The Corner Club Press* among others. He is currently looking for a qualified agent to help secure publishing for a novel and can be contacted at his website: www.malachiking.webs.com.

Scott Laudati is 25 and lives in Frederick, MD. Neither of those are things he is happy about. He is currently finishing a novel called *Pool Boys*, detailing a story of two pool cleaners trying to obtain the American Dream. It will be available from his website (STDSandIOUS.com) in the late summer

Jim Miller was born and raised in the blue-collar suburbs of Detroit. After several years of working in advertising and joined by his wife and children, he moved to Florida. He received his MFA in fiction from the University of South Florida. His work has been published by *Midwestern Gothic*, *Palooka*, *Prime Number*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Stymie*, *Alligator Juniper*, and is forthcoming in *Tigertail: A South Florida Annual*. He is the Graphic Nonfiction editor for *Sweet: a Literary Confection* and holds editing positions with *The Mailer Review*, and *Black Market Review*. He teaches creative writing at USF-Tampa and Eckerd College.

Fiction Fix

Jonas Mueller is a graduate student in the MFA program at the University of Central Florida.

Lindsay Oncken is a first-year English student at the University of Texas in Austin. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poets/Artists*, *The Blue Pencil*, and *The Best Teen Writing of 2011* anthology, among others, and last year her poetry was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Currently she is working as an assistant editor for *Poets/Artists* magazine.

Elahzar Rao holds a BA in English from Hunter College and is currently earning an MS in Education at Long Island University. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gargoyle*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Pilot*, and *The Literary Review*.

Kevin Roberts is an Australian/ Canadian poet, dramatist, and fiction writer. His latest novel is *The true story of Hamlet and Horatio...* (Pilot Hill Press 2009). He lives and writes on Vancouver Island in BC Canada.

Marisa Roman, born and raised in New Jersey. Studied English emphasizing creative writing at Florida International University and New York University, after disowning her guidance counselor's advice to avoid lifelong destitution by humoring a business minor. Marisa hopes to pursue her Masters degree in creative writing and become a significant presence in the literary community. Marisa attributes her far-reaching vocabulary to being an avid *Words with Friends* competitor, she writes most drafts of her work by hand, and her influences include Junot Diaz, Patricia Engel, and Rick Moody.

Grant Tracey teaches Creative Writing at the University of Northern Iowa and edits *North American Review*. He's published three collections of stories and has new work appearing in *Ascent*. He's also a huge John Cassavetes fan!

Robert Wexelblatt is professor of humanities at Boston University's College of General Studies. He has published essays, stories, and poems in a wide variety of journals, two story collections (*Life in the Temperate Zone* and *The Decline of Our Neighborhood*), and a book of essays (*Professors at Play*); his recent novel, *Zublinka Among Women*, won the Indie Book Awards First Prize for Fiction.

Artist Biographies



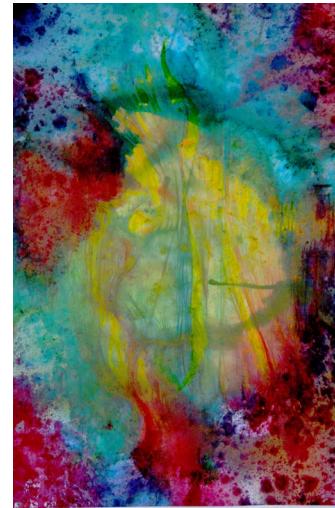
JJ Cromer's work has been shown in many individual and group exhibits. His art is in numerous private and public collections, including the American Visionary Art Museum, the Intuit Center of Outsider Art, the High Museum of Art, and the Taubman Museum of Art. The Fall 2010 issue of *Raw Vision* featured his work. He has several drawings in the current exhibit at the American Visionary Art Museum, "All Things Round: Galaxies, Eyeballs & Karma." The show will be up until September 2012.

To see more of his work visit his website: <http://www.jjcromer.com>

He also blogs at "Old Old Old Virginia": <http://ooova.blogspot.com>



Merlin Flower is an independent artist and writer. More works at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Merlin-Flower-Art/203803286317952>



Julie Hayward was born and raised in Oahu, Hawaii. After high school she moved to California where she pursued and earned a Bachelor of Science degree. Her major was Graphic Design, with an emphasis in illustration from San Jose State University. After several years working in the print and paper product industry she started a small freelance business, and then a small family. As her family has flourished and become more independent it was a natural transition back into the arts, as time allowed Julie to pursue her first passion again. She has a studio space in Livermore, California and has been involved with the studio's shows since January 2011. She is also

currently showing in the Ryan Fine Art gallery. She works in multi-media, using everything from inks to wax, letting her work take the direction it wishes to go. She has the discipline of internal deadlines and the freedom to create without boundaries. She believes if the artist lets the art have a say in the matter the artist can experience the wonderment of discovery.

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