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## Fiction Fix 07

April E. Bacon

Marianne Mckey

Louise Freshman-Brown  
*University of North Florida, lbrown@unf.edu*

Devin Balara

David Greenwood

*See next page for additional authors*

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**Authors**

April E. Bacon, Marianne Mckey, Louise Freshman-Brown, Devin Balara, David Greenwood, Dan Buyanovsky, Malcolm Murray, Harmony Neal, Russell Gift, Chad Senesac, Travis Wildes, Stephen Williams, and Tim Gilmore

# FictionFix Issue Seven



# FF ⑦ Spring 2010

COVER: "NAPLES & SORRENTO 2008, #27."

BY LOUISE FRESHMAN-BROWN

*Editor-in-chief, A. E. Bacon || Associate Editor, Vanessa Wells || Assistant Editors, Laura Hyman, Chrissy Rand, Alan Shaw, Laura Vigen || Editorial Assistants, JJ Grindstaff, Joanna Ring || Typesetting & Design || A. E. Bacon*

**[www.fictionfix.net](http://www.fictionfix.net)**

**[editor@fictionfix.net](mailto:editor@fictionfix.net)**

This issue is dedicated to Eileen Maguire. She brings light and inspires it.



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Exits and entrances; folds, opening and closing again; hyperlinks, blinks of the eye – Nadine Gordimer calls them "Flashes of Fireflies" and the short stories presented herein are exemplary of the artform.

Dear Readers: pull up an armchair, roll up your sleeves, and enjoy.

Love,  
April

# The Christmas Present

by Marianne Mckey

Groping his way along the unlit hallway, the boy approached the closet with caution. Mama had warned him against hunting about for his Christmas presents. He had grown too clever for her hiding tricks so now she resorted to intimidation rather than stealth. He crouched; beads of sweat began to gather at his hair line. The laundry room closet. He had seen her put the bright red shiny wrapped box on the top shelf next to the bleach. Every day, since mama had placed the present on its makeshift pedestal, he would make up a reason to go to the laundry room, searching for lost socks or getting a towel for bath time. All just to get a look. He would open the closet door and just stare blank-eyed and open-mouthed, hypnotized, mesmerized, until he was torn away by Mama's concerned holler.

How he longed, as any six year old would, to know what was underneath. It became an obsession. He would fantasize about the size, the shape, the feel, even the taste. Would it be soft or coarse? Would it be small or wide? Would it be pretty or ugly? Scary or cute? He had pined for weeks. It drove him so mad that finally he decided upon taking it. No guilt, no remorse. All he had to do was scale the dryer, balance on the wicker hamper, and it would finally be his. So one night, this night, after Mama's tender kiss, the boy lay there wide eyed. He had smelled the familiar burning scent of alcohol on Mama's lips and knew that once she went to bed she would fall fast and hard asleep. Though he would err on the side of silence he knew, if it was needed, the loudest of noises could be made. Once the boy had screamed and cried, for fear of the ominous shadows in his closet, for what seemed like hours and Mama didn't come. When he was brave enough to get up and tell her of the horrible things he saw, he found her face down in the pillows in day clothes snoring. A glass clutched limply in her hand slowly dribbled onto the rug, next to a bottle that read "whiskey." She was holding a glass in her hand when she came to tuck him in. Yes, tonight was the night.

He waited to hear the faint clicks of the television being powered off. He waited to hear Mama's padded footsteps putter down the hallway. He waited for the distant sound of a door tapping shut. He counted to thirty by Mississippis, just to be sure, and then made his way in the dark to the laundry room closet.

He entered the room hurriedly and hushed the door shut. He squatted and without too much thought, overcome by the adrenaline, he leapt up from his crouching position and slapped his clammy hands onto the metallic surface of the dryer. He quickly realized, as he fruitlessly climbed in place, one foot

rising and sliding after the other, that his red and white footed pajamas that Aunt Marge gave him last week would not work. He dropped to the ground and stripped them off. His breaths were beginning to grow short; it's hard to peel a full body garment off of slightly supple skin. His cheeks were now flushed and hot, but the dryer felt almost too cool against his once private, now naked, boy parts.

His moist body made clinging to and grappling up and onto the dryer a simple task. He straddled the empty space between the hamper and dryer, one foot on each. He patiently transferred his weight to the slightly elevated hamper until his dryer foot was completely lifted and suspended. As the wicker cursed and moaned underneath him, the boy's hands, outstretched for balance, slowly closed in around the shiny present, coaxing, inviting the box to come down without a fuss.

He placed the present on the hard top of the dryer as he sat and slid onto the floor, his feet making a sticky smack as he landed. He turned, collected the box from the dryer and brought it down with him to the white linoleum floor. For a while, they just stared at each other. The pale yellow light of the moon that spilled in from the laundry room window was now faintly radiating red as the present sat in its spotlight. Minutes passed and gradually he became brave enough to touch it.

Trembling, he extended a single hand and gently lowered it towards the package. Delicately tracing the folds of the wrapping, his finger tips created a streaky whine as they passed over it. At that moment, all he could hear was his pulse. Then suddenly, all he was aware of was a dull buzz and that the heat from his insides was melting his skin. He closed his eyes and bent over the top. He put his face close, letting the tip of his nose just tickle the box, and breathed deeply. It smelled like aluminum foil and cinnamon and bleach. Cheek pressed firmly to the top and one hand on either side grasping desperately, he began to breathe with steady aggression. He raised his head up, still clutching the box's torso. His eyes now open, were glowing red with the illustrious paper's reflection. Naked, his tiny chest fluttered with rapid intake of air. He began once again to build courage, but this time for something far more risky than touching. At first, he approached the tightly taped side flaps with a kind of tenderness. He hoped the package wouldn't put up too much of a fight. He wanted to return the box to the top shelf of the closet and pretend that nothing happened, but the flaps wouldn't come quietly. He attempted to ease his hands up and under to gently peel the tape from the red wrapping. He tried to be gentle, he really did, but his gentility was getting him nowhere. So he once again approached the package with a delicate type of strength. As he pushed on the dense corner fold, the paper quivered and tore. He stared horrified. Confusion and panic took over. He had taken it too far, but could he really go back? The paper is torn. Mama will notice. Open the box. It doesn't matter now.

These thoughts took less than two seconds to transfer from synapse to synapse in the boy's brain and back to his bare heaving chest and fidgety



arms. He ripped and tore and tore and tore and tore. He scraped and clawed and thrashed and shredded. He soiled the shiny red foil and began to defile the cardboard. In a moment of frenzy the boy feverously tugged the figurine from the box. Finally! Finally it was his. Everything went silent. It was beautiful. Glossy black plastic with red detail. It was the exact action figure he had written Santa about two weeks earlier. It was perfect. He pulled it close to his face. He hugged it. He kissed it. He moved its arms. He made it walk across the linoleum. He fired its weapons. He raised it over his head in a victorious manner. He skipped around the room triumphantly. He squeezed the figure tighter. His thumb pressed down and the plastic surface beneath began to give, there was a tiny click. Instantly the doll began to wail, to shout, to screech, louder than anything he had ever heard.

“Stop. Halt!”

Its eyes began to flash red

“Stop. Halt!”

“Stop. I said, stop.”

“I command you no further.”

Again and again and again and again. Stop. No. Stop. Halt. Again and again and again. I command you no further. Halt! Stop. Louder and louder. Again and again. Nervous the boy peaked out the cracked laundry room door down the hall towards mama’s room. Suddenly her light clicked on. He began to panic.

“No no no no, no, no! Shut up, shut up, shut up! Be quiet. I said be quiet!”

His whispers were frantic, aggressive.

Slam. He looked again: shadows began moving.

“No no no no no no. No!”

Slam. The toy quieted slightly, yet still it called.

“Shhhhh shhhhhh, sh sh!”

“Shut uup!” he could hear mama’s bewildered voice calling his name.

Slam.

Slam.

Slam.

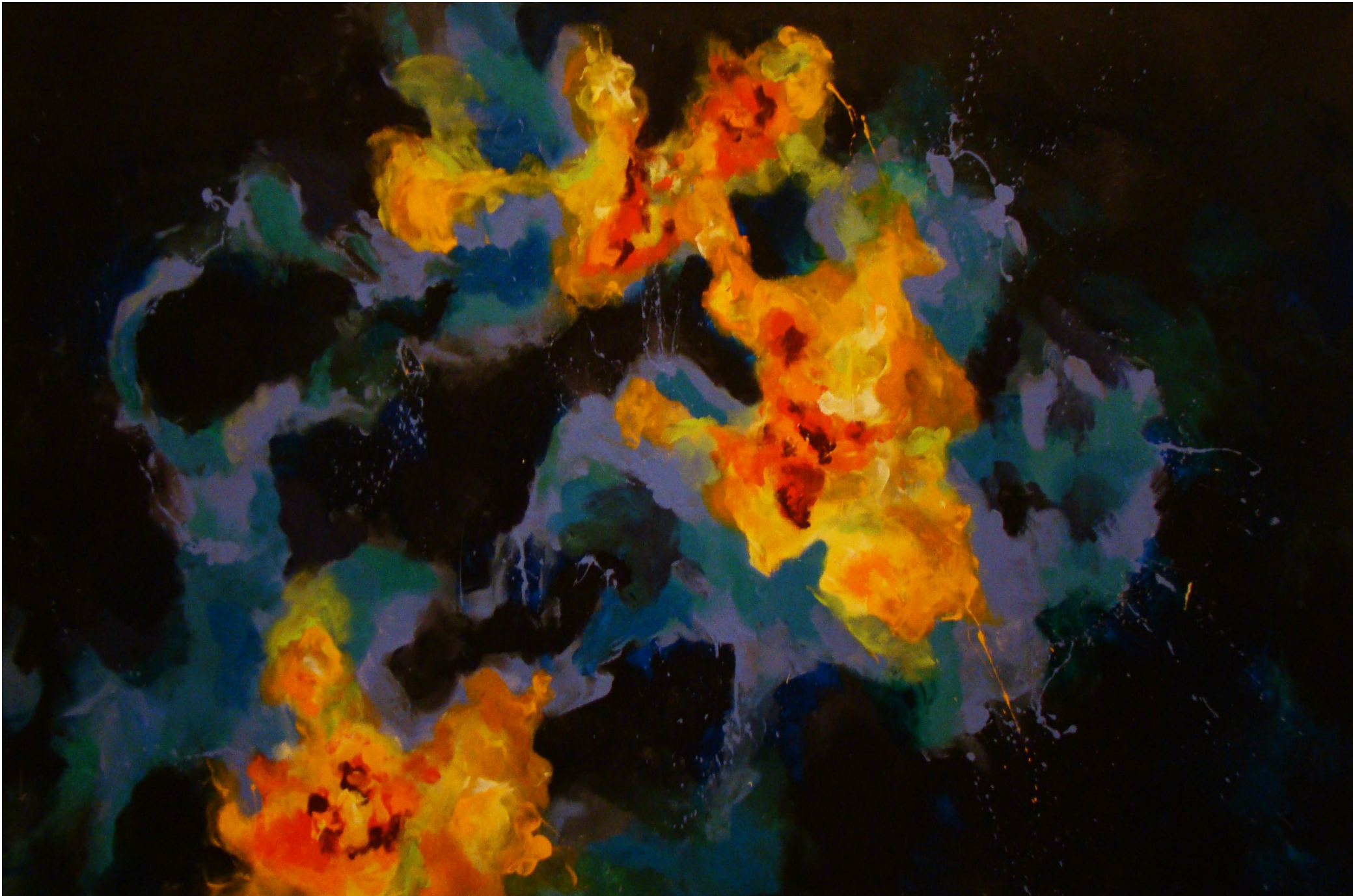
Red and black plastic scattered under the dryer and old wicker hamper. The boy grabbed his footed pajamas and ran back to his room at the end of the hall. He couldn’t face it. He huddled under his striped sheets. He let their dense flannel muffle his guilty sobs, as he tried to ignore the sounds of padded footsteps shuffling clumsily down the hallway. The toy lay limp and ragged in the dark corner of the laundry room, warbling a faint call to “Halt.”











# Staying in with Ida

By David Greenwood

I was sent to New York to look after my aunt, who'd written home of a collapse, signing the letter *Ida*, though her name was *Maria*. I was a farmer then. Or I lived on a farm. I recall little of the workings. What I glimpse, with the stubborn lilt of all things irrecoverable, is my hillside in gaudy green under thin mist, and my life itself as mist, a life of books, of solitude stanching only by a single elderly neighbor. This neighbor, Miss *Abanza*, I should mention, had died just before my mother brought the news of *Maria* and a borrowed car for the drive. I never learned how.

At the airport, I tried for a goodbye, nothing elaborate, just what I imagined a person might say. There was a sort of embrace. My mother pressed a passport into my hand and told me to answer politely to whatever name the Americans might like to call me. "You will write us your wonderful letters? Now hurry, your flight."

I looked for my hillside as the plane banked over the outskirts and marvelously I found it. I could make out the red tiled roof under which I'd slept my brief adult life, from this height of departed souls, and I thought of old Miss *Abanza* my neighbor and wanted to point it out to her, as I had the cracked basin by the old outbuilding, with the engraving, *Do not wash*; the various seasonal growths; the zombie outburst of mushroom after a rain. All this, passing under a cloud as the plane ascended, I addressed to her ghost before falling helplessly to sleep on the shoulder of the man beside me.

The taxi ride to Aunt *Maria's* in twenty minutes trounced all this, mushrooms and the like, the horded artifacts of my farmer's life. Into that pandemonium of sky-flung glass and metal I coursed, a stunned blood cell (transfused, say, from humble mosquito to woolly mammoth). We stopped at one of these great towers and I checked the address on my paper against the gold lettering above the door. It was the right door. So I revolved through it into a cold silence of marble and glass that gave the feeling of being stuck inside an expensive paperweight. I showed the man at the desk my paper and he pointed me to what I knew was an elevator.

I found a staircase and puffed up nineteen floors, rehearsing the impending encounter. Aunt *Maria* had been older than my father. I prepared myself accordingly for white hair, jowls, decrepitude. I couldn't recall if we'd ever met. She absconded to America by boat, long back, her reputation sealed across generations: a witch, a slut (as my mother would tell it) who made repeated passes at her brother's wife. I felt, more than I heard, my knuckles on the heavy door, and was struck all at once by the strangeness of my assignment,

the considerable expense laid out to care for this unappreciated figure.

Aunt *Maria*, a powerful stump of a woman with a boyish odor and piled-up gray hair, conducted me without any great show of ill health to a parlor, asked a maid for our tea, spoke at length and incomprehensibly to another servant less manifestly present, and went to bed. I lingered on, entranced by the details of that parlor. There were, in particular, sixteen statues of eggs. The window finished off the night. I say window, not windows; the entire outer wall was one sheet of glass. Nosing up to it, I wavered over the mouth of a bridge, the flowing streets, the twinkling, infinite circuitry.

In the morning, *Maria* returned with a newspaper and perched at the edge of the green leather sofa. I tried to get her attention by whistling, softly to myself. In my time on the hill I'd developed an accomplished, melodious whistle.

"Stop."

"I'm sorry," I stammered, "but I came because I thought you were *Maria*—my aunt. Are you *Maria*?"

She shrugged, not glancing from the paper.

"Are you *Ida*?" I tried.

"Who did you say you are?"

"I'm your nephew."

"Are you new?"

I wasn't sure. "We haven't met. You wrote a letter saying you'd been ill." She seemed to try to recollect.

"My mother sent me to care for you," I said, as a maid brought in our tea. "My mother, *Erica*."

"Oh yes," *Maria* said, brightening. "A very sexy woman."

"Thank you."

"Nice round ass."

"Very spherical. I'm her son."

"Right. I remember. *George* is it?"

"*Peter*."

"Oh, *Peter*. Have you been traveling long?"

"Nearly two days, if you count last night."

"How awful of me," she said gaily. "Does your detestable family still have you exiled to that shack in the mountains?"

This surprised me. "Do you know about it?"

"Does it seem a long time?" she asked now with complete attention.

"It does seem long," I allowed.

"Years? Poor *Peter*, up on the hill all alone."

"How do you know all this? Have we met? My father's funeral?"

"Yes, then. You must have been lonely," she repeated.

"I had a neighbor. A woman."

"Young? Pretty?"

"Old. *Anosmic*. She's dead."



A look of surprise, perhaps even fright, momentarily gripped the old face, and she studied me more narrowly. Then, as though to erase from my memory the lapse in blitheness, she smiled and returned to her theme with special gusto:

“You must have been so horribly lonely! Your entire family should be drowned in the East River.”

Was that the East River out the window?

“Come with me,” she said.

We descended by elevator to the lobby and approached the man at the desk.

“Good, there’s only one,” my aunt whispered. “Say something. To the doorman.”

“Like what?”

She wouldn’t reply.

“How are you finding the building this morning?” I inquired.

The man looked at me, shrugged, and said something to my aunt in English.

Maria broke out laughing. “I’ll be damned! You really are here!” She caught me by the arm again and started back to the elevator. “I’m awfully sorry for talking about your mother that way. Come, we’ll have breakfast.”

Under the kitchen sun I squirmed over a vast omelet and slices of cold fish. My stomach troubled me.

“You say I wrote you a letter?” My aunt sat across from me, loading a piece of toast.

“You wrote my mother a letter, signed Ida.”

She laughed.

“Who is Ida?” I asked.

The toast reached capacity. She threw it into her mouth and regarded me intently. From what I could make out through the sandwich, she asked if I would like to meet Ida.

“Do you suppose I could?”

“You must have been horribly lonely.”

So began my new incarnation in my aunt’s bright enclosure of sky, looking out over the river and bridge, the ceaseless arteries. My room faced southeast. I never once drew the shade. Sunrise roused me each morning. I’d report first to the window to check below on the waking corpuscle flow, the hats and umbrellas, the clouds reflected everyway in the thousands of glass boxes like mine, behind which, what?

At night my aunt would put me in bed, muttering away. I would wake hours later for a pee and find her still muttering beside the bed. When she couldn’t be at home in the evening she would record her mutterings on cassette and have the maid play them back for me. We always had breakfast together. My stomach never grew accustomed. Sometimes she would take me to dinner.

Other nights I would go wandering, just as I had on my hillside, and how often did the specter of my late neighbor Miss Abanza appear beside me on those walks as I spied beneath the arch of a bridge, or in the distant smoke stacks, some moonlit wonderland. Other times it was not Miss Abanza I conjured but someone younger, slighter, with a sense of smell and an agreeable personality. Sometimes too I thought of my aunt. What a fine companion of old women I’d turned out to be. One day at last I said:

“This Ida person. You said I might meet her.”

“Oh, but of course!” said my aunt. “You still haven’t met. But she came last week in the afternoon.”

I’d never been much of an afternoon person. “Do you suppose she’ll come again?”

“I’m certain. Here, write something.”

So I wrote Ida a letter, several pages, practically an outpouring. Well, I rarely had the chance to introduce myself and I’m a great writer of letters. In a few days her reply arrived.

Dearest Peter,

How pleased I was to have your letter after enduring so much about you from your aunt. Quite something how she eats! But a lovely woman, as you say, and that mole above her eye does look like a horsefly. I’m going now. Okay, I’m back. I just reread your letter. I was especially touched by your description of the orb web in the window socket of the old stone church. Is there really a heart carved in the stone just below? And can you be sure that’s a pancreas beside it? If I weren’t so afraid of spiders I would seek out that faded heart and pancreas. Perhaps you will show me some day. Damn it! Someone’s at the door.

Sincerely to the point of tears,

Ida

Now, naturally, I began addressing the private discoveries of my evening explorations to Ida rather than the tired ghost of Miss Abanza. When I found the decomposing wing of an albatross beside the underpass grate, I harassed strangers for pen and paper. When the clouds tinged red, when the leaves rained, when the window was a masterwork smuggled improbably onto my bedroom wall, with what meticulous agony I conjured the words! How I wished she were there beside me. How even more I wished she were not there beside me, as she surely wasn’t, but with me, to see what I saw, to hear what I heard, her eyes moving along with mine, in her head the same song. And when the sun touched my skin, how I wished that she could feel it!

In her beautiful letters (one was signed, Sincerely, to the point of intestinal discomfort, and another detailed, without a word of salutation, the contents of a purse left on a theater seat – a vial of dried dill as I remember just now) I would sometimes think I discerned a similar longing, the pull of a like

solitude. I devoured them. With each new letter the ghostly companion of my evening rambles colored into human form. And I felt myself coloring, assuming form along with her. The only thing tempering my budding lovesickness was the lack of any concrete overture to meet in the flesh, and an unavoidable suspicion that it was my aunt writing the letters.

“I am not writing the letters.”

“Then why can’t we meet? We’re in love,” I added feebly.

My aunt nodded. “I’m glad.” Then, quietly, “But it is hard letting go.”

I nodded. I didn’t understand. This was routine.

“You can’t see her now,” my aunt explained, “but you can speak. Please try. She will try too. I’ve been training her. She’s almost ready. You are.”

“Must I speak English? Is that it? Have you been translating the letters?”

“No,” Maria said, “your letters are not important.”

Nothing conclusive. But why would my aunt write these wonderful letters to me? Was she in love with me? Where would it get her? She was unsteady, sure. Consider all that muttering in my ear through the night. It occurred to me then that Aunt Maria might not even know she was writing the letters. I’d read of such conditions.

I grew withdrawn, from my aunt personally and in my letters to Ida. Yet the replies I received (handed to me with a maddening grin) were so artless, so charming, I could not help tearing off to my room to gorge myself on each line.

Esteemed Peter,

A frog has hopped across my path. I thought of your river and all you describe from your marvelous window, and I figured an amphibian could do worse than to be trapped there. I nearly snatched it for you, but at the last moment I considered it too slimy. Still, I named her Maria. Perhaps our paths will cross again. With aching heart and fluttering diaphragm,

Ida

Perhaps our paths...and the ache was mine, and I’d vow to write a more generous letter the next time. I recognized well enough my desperation, the selfish strain of my longing. And I saw that I could no longer hold myself. Even now I’d call it love.

One evening I came down with something acute, food-related I suspect. I ran a high fever and lost consciousness. I woke in the hospital to a close-up of my aunt. I realized she was shaking me. As sleep again enclosed me—I now imagine some orderly prying her from my shoulders—I heard her cry, “Don’t die. Please, Ida!” Then, “Peter, I’m sorry. She’s yours. She’s yours!”

I stayed on at the hospital several days, dull as the curtain around me. I had no books, understood nothing on TV, had no visitors other than my aunt in the mornings. There was no window. One evening, at a loss for anything, anything at all better to do, I said, “Goddamn it! Ida, I’m speaking to you.”

“Thank goodness,” she said. “Are you feeling better?”

I won’t recount the whole conversation, though I remember it perfectly. It was possibly the only moment of my life I was glad for. I suspected the fever was toying with me, but I wouldn’t dare object.

Back in my aerie over the bridge, I tried it again. There was no reply. I was disconsolate. I ran out in my shorts to bathe in the East River. Without drying off I dashed to the subway to lick turnstiles. I went without sleep. Once I had a good raging fever again, I said, “Ida, come in.”

“Peter, I thought you’d gone for good! Did you see the early moon this afternoon? It reminded me of a chestnut. You know, I used to adore a perfectly roasted—”

“I saw it tonight, yes! When I was in the river. If you ever have the chance, Ida, I urge you to float on your back at night in some body of water. That’s proper moon-gazing, though the chestnut sounds appetizing,” I added diplomatically. I went on to describe a lagoon I’d once discovered by my orchard (though now that I consider it this lagoon business was the fever talking; there was nothing of the kind). Our conversation was soon interrupted, however, by my aunt coming in to babble.

“Peter, you must stop this. You’re going to kill yourself.”

“Quiet please, I’m talking to Ida.”

“Very good,” my aunt said. “But you don’t need to harm yourself. I’ll teach you how tomorrow. I should have done it weeks ago. You were ready. Now sleep.”

The moment she withdrew I went on talking to Ida as long as I could stay awake. Unfortunately I recovered quickly. I approached my aunt at breakfast.

“Who is she?” I demanded. “What are you doing to me?”

“I’m giving you a gift.”

“But is she not you?”

“No more than she’s you,” my aunt replied, returning an errant scalion to an upper tier of her sandwich. “No. My Ida is an old woman, all but gone now, a trace. Your Ida is young and beautiful. She’s beautiful!”

I backed away to the window. “My Ida is Beautiful?” Through my incredulity, I could not help tasting the words on my tongue. I recovered myself: “You’ve been methodically driving me crazy, haven’t you, Auntie? I’ve suspected it for some time. The evidence is overwhelming.”

“But you were speaking to her yourself.”

“You succeeded.”

“Peter, why should I want to?”

“You’re trying to reincarnate this Ida of yours in me.”

“It’s true,” she sighed. “It’s so hard letting go. But I can’t make your Ida mine. She is so similar, though, so beautiful and kind. But, oh, she’s yours.”

This moment, I remember, even as I railed against the awful idea with my aunt, I did so with the beginning of a flutter in my diaphragm.

“You’re driving me crazy,” I repeated with feeling, burying my head in my hands.

My Aunt laid a gentle talon on my forearm. I dropped my hands to find her grinning with the question:

“Do you not like her?”

I was silent. I must have made a face. My aunt smiled victoriously.

“She needs you, Peter. Please, speak to her.”

“How?”

“I’ll teach you. Never tell anyone.”

And I don’t intend to start with you bastards. I will say it involved tortuous, sometimes unbearable, exertions. My least favorite drill required mentally splitting eggs, beginning with one egg rotating in air. The progeny of this egg (2 eggs, rather than one chicken) were to rotate in different directions before splitting into four eggs, all of which were to continue rotating in alternate directions. This would go on, a new division every ten minutes for the span of an hour. At my best, I never made it past forty minutes, when the thirty-two eggs would inevitably stop rotating and rush together into one of my aunt’s prodigious omelets. Another drill entailed an imaginary abyss, tweezers, and the upper atriums of the heart.

I don’t know where my aunt got it. She was undeniably a genius of sorts. You can imagine how hopelessly love-struck I must have been to endure those weeks of tedium and mortification. But you must also try to imagine the ecstasy, rare I think in this world, the consuming solar flair of bliss, when next I quavered, “Ida?” and she replied, “Peter!”

Doctors, lawyers, have you ever swum across the ocean to find your lover?

We would be lying together, an overgrown lot, a crumpled brick warehouse, the moon through a crack in the falling roof, wild flowers sprouting from a cauldron.

“Yes I see it, Peter. It’s lovely,” she’d say.

Lovely! And I would know then she wasn’t merely at my side, but profoundly with me, her eyes dancing along with mine, in her head the same melody. Were two people ever so much together? It was a gift. It was heaven. I don’t say she was anything more than a phantom. We’re all equally phantoms in the mind of another.

Listen, we even made love. How we inveigled our unwitting participant I’ll never know. Maybe she was a prostitute—she was young and fit—that’s beside the point. Ida handled the chitchat. Maybe it was a true seduction. Surely she’d know better than I what to say to a woman. And here inside, Ida and I felt everything, every eyelash flutter, every finger’s tracing, every wriggle, every gasp, together, and at once. With the possible, nauseating exception of my aunt, I doubt if such carnal perfection has ever before been known on earth.

This paradise was my daily life. As such, it grew tired. After all, it’s

healthy to be a little apart, Ida would say, to do some things independently. One gets overwhelmed, consumed, until one really is just a part of another person. I would reply I’d had enough independence for this lifetime. Nevertheless, I was glad at times when Ida began showing up later in the evening. The solitude felt lighter than before.

Meanwhile, my aunt had started me on a program to learn more about the history of my surroundings. She said it was a shame how I wandered all night aimlessly, knowing nothing of what I saw. She bought me textbooks and assigned reports. She said my mind was atrophying, all the time turned within itself. To reward me for my studies she would bring home cakes from fancy patisseries and send me to the theater with box seats. She lavished on me clothes and books. She ceased muttering and babbling to people I could not see. Her skin looked brighter. She smelled of perfume.

And Ida joined me later and later.

One night I asked Ida if she’d been seeing my aunt.

“We eat lunch together,” Ida replied. “You know, she’s a very interesting woman.”

Another night, stepping into the bath, I found scratches on my back and shoulders. The following night there was a fresh mark on my neck. My aunt found me sitting listlessly at the edge of the bed.

“Will you not go out wandering tonight?” she asked.

“Please leave me alone.”

“Oh Peter, don’t feel sad. I won’t have it. I’ll send you to any show in the city. I’ll have a cake ready when you get home.”

I blurted, “Am I not interesting?”

“You are, Peter. You are.”

“I haven’t heard from Ida.”

My aunt nodded. I thought I detected a flush on her cheeks. She affected a pensive sincerity. “I’m sure she just needs some time to herself, to redraw her circumference.”

“Circumferences are for assholes.” I was in a state.

“You should listen more,” my aunt went on. “Surprise her. Hold yourself at some distance. You don’t want to become tiresome. You don’t want to be needy.”

“I’ve spent my life alone.”

“Try,” my aunt said, her lips spreading in the pink-painted smile I would find traced around my navel next evening.

I considered moving out. I couldn’t. I was not a functioning part of the organism. I was a visitor, helpless. I ignored the evidence and called her name all through my head, morning and night. I took our favorite rambles. I went to the abandoned church where once the sunset ignited the orb web like stained glass. I sought out new wonders. Ida would not appear. Perhaps she’d never so much cared for these things. Perhaps she was glad only to be with me on my explorations, for a time. A time.



I leave your competent officers to sort out my aunt's supposed disappearance. I don't care to know what you discover. I don't care if you blame me, or this person on my passport whose name you insist on using, or Ida herself. Did you think of that? What's the difference? Prison or hospital. I'll take prison. I won't take the medicine. I'll get her back. I'll do the exercises. I'll lick the latrines. Ida, I'll listen.









# Death-Swirly

By Dan Buyanovsky

David King had been a cartoonist since eleventh grade calculus class. After giving up on mastering polynomials, he drew caricatures like the Paul Frank monkey, the archetypal forgetful elephant, and his favorite – daisies with personality disorders.

He got lost in his drawings, often getting criticized by girlfriends for not being able to decipher reality from his cartoon-world. Usually, David resorted to creating Betty Boop flipbooks in which she slowly undressed and... well, you understand. Loneliness subsided.

The passionate illustrator's breakthrough came in 1999, when he drew an anti-millennial comic strip, which New Jersey's own Marsupial's Quarterly quickly purchased for a generous \$6.01. His friends and sister thought the cartoon to be a clever social commentary on a natural fear of change, but David intended it merely as a cute portrait of a tree frog.

After the MQ success, companies like Purgatorio's Pizza and Mallifert's Juxtaposition Inc. promptly commissioned David to create logos. Never one to potentially pass up life-changing opportunities, David took the assignments and ran with them. Again, he struck gold.

Within months, he'd been referred to nearly every small business in the quad-county area and even won the moniker "Slick-Stick Herbowitz." A nickname he never quite understood, as his surname was never Herbowitz, but he thought it most likely related to the incessant times he'd heard "jew-devil" yelled at him while working for "Catho-Cristy's: A Hardcore Hub."

By his mid-twenties, David was a local star. He'd reached the social echelons that the simpletons he grew up with could only fantasize about. While they were mining fields and sowing diamonds, Dave was rubbing shoulders with the elite. He was close friends with the curator of the Aberdeen Museum of Lithographs, tennis partners with acclaimed WTFB 99.9 talk-radio host Donatavius Waxx, and often dined with Princetown's own "Prince of Pastel Stationery" Walden Huckli. David had made it.

His bisexual sister had long since told him it was time to retire and really focus on him. Lord knew David had devoted himself entirely to his craft, which didn't leave much room for distractions and the enjoyment of life's pleasantries.

Still, David felt a wee-bit unfulfilled. There was just one accomplishment left...one whale still to be whaled, so to speak. David's Goliath was an insertion in the most magnificent tome of all – the Mecca of transfixing studies of American mores and manners.

The New Yorker.

David had submitted upwards of seventeen classics to the ungrateful blobs of witty banter. And though he'd now resented and abhorred them enough to deliver to them a burlap sack filled with Molotov Shrimp Cocktails, David had something to prove.

Finally, Prince Huckli secured for David a meeting with Johnta Juniper, the cartoon editor-at-large. On an unusually smoggy morning, David entered the offices of his once-sworn enemy, with a manila folder of cartoons in hand. He'd spent an entire week locked in his dungeon of solace – a tornado bunker beneath his cousin's home in Pittsville, Massachusetts – with only a jar of dill pickles, a case of cherry soda, and the sexy elixir that got things goin' when nothing else could – triple-distilled cognac.

The product of the week's work was fifteen illustrations, which David was convinced were his absolute best yet. They had it all – biting sarcasm, furry and likeable marsupials (his trademark), and enough wit to knock Woody Allen off a carousel.

Still, the moment he was summoned by a secretary to enter Juniper's office, David felt off. His confidence gone, his morale weary, he suddenly became very aware of the horrid stench emanating from his earwax. Juniper was on the phone when David walked in, and David carefully ducked his head from left to right, so as to mask the smell.

"Yes, the one with the kangaroo in the courtroom! Print it," chirped Juniper. He wore a six-piece suit and a monocle, and David suddenly felt entirely underdressed in his two-piece and bifocals.

David sat, and Juniper immediately beckoned – "Well, bub? What're ya wastin' my minutes for?" Without a word, David slipped the pack of drawings across the oak table and watched patiently as Juniper glared at each one. Juniper was sweating now, slowly letting drips from his forehead fall onto the drawings.

"Get outta my face, ingrate. This is hot trash, and not the kind I chase on a late Wednesday," shouted the large editor. He threw the stack of papers at David, stole the leather carry-all they were once packed in, and quickly shuffled out of the office.

Juniper was no doubt a pudgy man, the kind of kid in gym-class whose thighs squeakily rubbed together when he ran the mile. So, though he tried to stroll quickly and with a purpose, David quickly caught up to him in the hallway.

Nearly defeated, David swallowed and begged – "But, what was wrong with them? I understand, they might not all be prime material, but certainly worthy of back-of-the-book placement. Heck, at least getting some show in an e-issue!"

Juniper shook his head. "No, no, no. You just don't comprehend, boy-chick. You're comics – they're pretentious, but not nearly pretentious enough. Intelligent, but altogether far too simplistic. If we were aiming for a demo-

graphic of Ringling Brothers B-squad, you'd be published by yesterday, lad! But we're trying to keep this joint upmarket. I want one reader to get it, and the other 6900 shlubs awestruck with uncertainty!"

By the end of the vicious monologue, the large editor's brow was again sweating profusely, and he was wheezing like a sadist in synagogue. His pudgy legs continued to trek on, and he ducked into the employee lounge for his lunchtime nosh of a half-dozen skirt steak submarine'wiches.

Feeling as if Wile E. Coyote had just materialized and dropped an ACME anvil on his dreams, David resisted the urge to fall unconscious and instead stumbled into the little boy's room. Once inside, he grabbed hold of a stall's door to maintain his balance, and swung himself in the tiny receptacle room. He stared at the toilet, with eyes half-closed, dropped all of his prized drawings and shoved his own head inside the bowl.

What ensued was the most haunting and prolific swirly given in the bathrooms of *The New Yorker* Magazine since 1999. David held himself under, until finally his feet stopped sloppily hopping around, and urine bubbles no longer floated to the bowl's surface. David had committed suicide by way of the swirly — and lord knows he wouldn't be the first cartoonist to do it either.

Roughly six hours later, David was still alone in the toilet, dead. Alone — because the urban legend that *New Yorker* staff tends to ingest vital organs before compromising their creative flow on a menial task like defecating was likely true.

But alas, one of the magazine's new cartoonists, Jaxon Pilstick, could participate no longer in the barbaric tradition, and jetted to the restroom after a 95-minute discussion with Juniper about Garfield. Neither had appreciated the futile feline, but rather debated about the character to be uproariously ironic.

Jaxon bounced through the door, and before he had unbuttoned the fly on his Banana Republic corduroys, he spotted David's dead-legs. Frightened by the sighting, but channeling his investigative journalism background at the Boise State Bugle, Jaxon opened the stall door to find David — lifeless. Initially appalled, Pilstick was quickly stung by the creative bug.

He raised the pointer finger and thumb of both hands into a rectangle like the film directors of yore and visualized an animation, starring David. Instantly, the caption came to him, and he whispered — "Edwin's mind was so salacious, not even the gutter would allow him to sublet."

Gold!



# The Wheelchair Pusher

by Malcolm Murray

Mr. Z. walked to the hospital. People called him by his initial given the difficulty of pronouncing the remaining letters of his name. The walk took him about an hour. It is pleasant to walk. When he walks, he thinks about where his feet go, and not much else. Such absorption is upset only when he has to cross intersections. Cars would stop for him and he would feel obtrusive. Mr. Z. waited in front of the nurses' station in the cancer ward. He was relieved to sit after his walk. He felt his breath return. The nurse with the name tag reading Lila greeted him while she attended to some paper work. Hello Mr. Z.

She was young and white skinned, and her skin was smooth and clean and she had large, white teeth. Although all the nurses were good to him, Mr. Z. liked her the best. She seemed happy with her life. She made the cancer patients and the volunteers, like Mr. Z., smile. They smiled despite their complaints. When Lila had finished sorting the paper work, she came around the counter and patted Mr. Z. on his knee. I'll go see if Mrs. Whitman is ready for her walk. He watched her walk down the hallway. He focused on how her hips swayed.

Mrs. Whitman had bone cancer. The pain made her unpleasant. The other volunteers were loathe to help her, blaming her personality more than the pain, whereas Mr. Z. seemed to want the meanest, the rudest, the least grateful, and the other volunteers let him. So Mr. Z. became her usual helper and Mrs. Whitman complained about his taciturnity. He never speaks. I have to do all the talking. If I ask him a question, he doesn't even answer. What kind of a companion is that? Mr. Z. pushed her wheelchair through the hospital doors and turned toward the park. It was a sunny, autumn day. There was a bit of a coolness, but the sun felt warm on her skin. Almost soothing. The leaves on some of the trees were already starting to turn, but the grass was still green. Mrs. Whitman wore a number of blankets on her knees, and a woolen touque on her head. Mr. Z. pushed her.

It isn't quite true that Mrs. Whitman preferred the other volunteers to Mr. Z. First of all, there weren't many other volunteers, and few lasted very long. Certainly none were as stalwart as Mr. Z. And when the others pushed her, a constant chatter berated her, as if they thought her pain was superficial enough to be assuaged merely by distraction, the way a parent may distract an infant with a rattle. And conversation wouldn't be too bad in itself if it were interesting, but interesting conversationalists never volunteered at the hospital. Only the uninteresting ones. The ones with nothing to say and not sense enough to stop them from saying it. At least Mr. Z. was different in this respect. He knew

he had nothing to say. So he didn't bother saying anything. With Mr. Z., it was almost as if she were really out for a walk alone, the way she might have done before the cancer had she the time, or the desire. There are many lessons in life one learns too late, like the pleasures of a simple, unaccompanied walk.

When they approached a bench in the park, Mrs. Whitman told Mr. Z. to stop. Every now and then, she needed to stand. The pain in her marrow meant that she could not remain in one spot for long, not that an altered position helped. Mr. Z. helped her stand. She leaned on him awhile. Then, when the pain subsided, she asked to be lowered to the bench. Mr. Z. sat beside her. Some birds fluttered in the branches above them. Embarrassed by her having clung to him, Mrs. Whitman said, When I die, and I hope it's soon, who are you going to push around?

Mr. Z. didn't say anything. He looked at her and faintly shrugged his shoulders as if to say that it didn't matter. Another volunteer would have said something like, No, you won't die, you'll get through this. Or I'll always be pushing you in my heart. Or something similarly lame.

Mr. Z. just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't come to help her. He came to help someone. And such indifference rattled Mrs. Whitman. Why are you volunteering, anyway? Is it community service for some crime?

Mr. Z. didn't understand the question.

Did the court order you to volunteer?

No.

Why do you volunteer, then?

Mr. Z. looked up at the branches above their heads. He scratched the back of his neck.

When he returned his gaze to Mrs. Whitman, she was grimacing in pain. He assumed the question had been forgotten. He felt relieved. He examined his fingernails and waited.

Are you going to answer my question? Mrs. Whitman said.

It's a long story, Mr. Z. said. By that, he meant to end the matter. Mrs. Whitman could not withstand sitting still for a long story.

So? You can tell me in installments.

I haven't told anyone, Mr. Z. said. It's personal.

Who am I going to tell? You know I'm going to die, soon.

With that promise, Mr. Z. said, When my hometown was evacuated, due to the war, my mother and I traveled on foot to the village where my cousin lived. It was about thirty miles. My brother and father had already been killed in the war. We took what we could. I carried suitcases and my mother pushed a laden wheelbarrow. We left them in a ditch en route. I remember seeing other treasures abandoned on the roadside. In peace, you would pick that up. In war, it's all worthless. Soldiers passed. The allies. Not our own troops. Our own troops were far away, and mostly dead. We could hear the bombs. Destroying our house, my school, the church. Everything.

Mr. Z. waited for a pedestrian to pass. Then he continued. We arrived at



my aunt's house, my father's sister. She was surprised to see us. I don't think they liked each other, my mother and my aunt, and my aunt had her own troubles, her husband and two sons were somewhere in the war, presumably dead, and there was little food, but we were tired and hungry and my aunt couldn't turn us away. Anyway, we weren't there for long. The war followed us. Our new home was to be evacuated, too.

Which war are you talking about? Mrs. Whitman asked.

Mr. Z. forgot she was listening. He said, We had to evacuate about a week, later.

A week is a long time, Mrs. Whitman said. Sometimes it is a very long time.

Mr. Z. nodded. He wasn't sure if he should continue. He had not told anyone the tale before. It had lain dormant in his marrow. He said, My cousin was there. She was older than I was. I hadn't seen her for a while. I couldn't look at her in the eyes. She had dark eyes. Strands of her hair fell over them. Her slender fingers brushed them aside. She had deep, dark eyes.

Did you love her?

She surprised me, Mr. Z. said. The amount of change that had come over her since I had seen her last. I felt uncomfortable being near her, yet if she was elsewhere, I wondered where she was.

How old were you?

I was fifteen. She was sixteen. When the officer told us that we had to abandon the house for her the first time, for me the second time she told me that she wasn't going to go. I didn't understand. I had seen the destruction. The enemy would come and blow everything up. There was nothing to do but flee, unless you wanted to pick up a gun. And she said, That's the idea. Forgive me, but in those days, it was not deemed proper that a girl should fight in the war. But he told me how she was not going to simply run. Too often one is told to do something, and one does it merely because one was told. She wanted to decide her own fate. She wanted to defend her town. She wanted to defend her own dignity. I didn't press her on this. I didn't really know what she was saying. In hindsight,



I should have talked her out of it. I wouldn't have stayed had she not stayed. And if I hadn't stayed, she might not have. But we decided to be heroes. We would defend our country. Everyone else was fleeing, carrying possessions that they would later abandon in a ditch, but we would stay. I didn't feel like a hero. I just wanted to be with her. I felt I needed to be with her. I didn't really think of anything else.

Mrs. Whitman's pain became unbearable. She could no longer sit. She tried to stand from the bench and fell over onto the dirt at the side of the bench, where the dogs lifted their hind legs. Mr. Z. helped her up. She was wincing and groaning. He got her into the wheelchair. Her mouth hung open. Saliva drooled down her chin. He took his handkerchief and wiped the saline from her face. He straightened her touque. He tucked the blankets around her bony legs. He pushed the wheelchair back to the hospital.

When he finished pushing wheelchairs for cancer patients, Mr. Z. would eat his dinner in the hospital cafeteria. The food was bland, but cheap and convenient. After depositing his tray and nodding to some of the staff who recognized him—the wheelchair pusher came three times a week for more years than many of the staff could remember—he walked a half hour to the factory to begin his night shift. He drilled holes into a metal sheathing, and sent this sheathing down a spur to be picked up by Millicent. Millicent attached the sheathing to a snow blower coming along the main track. She used the drill holes Mr. Z. had made. He had learned to slow his hole drilling so the metal sheaths wouldn't pile up beside Millicent. If they piled up, Millicent would complain. It made her look bad, she said. It made her look as if she wasn't working very hard if he could drill holes in the sheathing faster than she could attach the sheathing to the snow blower. So he paced his drilling to match the creeping pace of the plant. It suited him to slow his thoughts. Tonight, though, because he had begun to tell his story, he found it difficult to keep up. When Millicent yelled at him, he forgot a step, and the drill warbled, creating a hole too large and too warped for Millicent to use. And then he did that a second time.

When the shift was over, at five in the morning, Mr. Z. walked back to his apartment. He enjoyed the early morning walk the best, even when it was bitterly cold, or raining. No one was out. He could hear the echo of his own steps. His breath. His heart beat. The silence and the dark were comforting. He would focus on where his feet go, and not much else.

You didn't finish your story, Mrs. Whitman said when he pushed her chair through the park the following week. He thought she had forgotten. At any rate, he hoped she had forgotten.

He regretted beginning the tale. Nor was it a vain hope. The pain was often too much for her to worry about remembering things. At other times, the drugs she took to combat the pain clouded her mind. It was rare when neither the pain nor the drugs incapacitated her. Because Mr. Z. didn't respond, Mrs. Whitman goaded him. You were in illicit love with your cousin. And the two of you decided to fight the enemy. What happened that day that you punish

yourself by pushing me?

It's not punishment, Mr. Z. said. Mrs. Whitman expected him to exclaim that it was in fact a pleasure to push her. She wouldn't have believed it, of course, but that was the customary thing to say in such circumstances. Mr. Z. remained silent, however. He was thinking what his punishment should be. Mrs. Whitman goaded him again. What happened to your cousin?

Our mothers left us, not without complaint and tears on their part. Ulla, my cousin, held my hand and remained defiant against our mothers' protests. I stood beside her, my attention directed at the sensation in my palm and my finger tips. We found a motley crew of fighters, mostly allied soldiers. They lay in wait for the enemy in church towers, and the post office, and the banks. Ulla and I approached and she told them we would fight with them if they could give us guns. The captain regarded us. He handed me his automatic rifle and pointed to a window under which I should crouch and be ready to shoot. To Ulla, he said, Come with me. He took her away. The other soldier who was there followed, leaving me alone at the window with the rifle.

What did they do with her? Mrs. Whitman asked.

I was told to stay. To look out for the enemy. I was nervous. Without the pressure of Ulla's hand, I suddenly felt scared. I heard the distant bombs. I scanned the streets and alleys, and the field beyond. I gripped the rifle.

Mrs. Whitman turned in her chair as much as she was able. She said, I asked you what they did with your cousin.

Mr. Z. stopped pushing the chair. They were near a park bench. He sat on it. He said, Perhaps I heard Ulla's screams. I can't recall. Perhaps it's a fabricated memory, a memory I introduced later. Or perhaps I thought the screams were normal. And distant. I can't recall that part very well, or whether she called my name. I clutched the rifle and wondered what would happen when the enemy came. Would they really shoot me? Would they not care that I was only fifteen? Would they not care that it was me? I was terrified. I couldn't pay attention to what was happening in another room behind me.

Mrs. Whitman rolled the chair to face him. His head was down. His shoulders were sunken. She could see that he was very sad. If she had more strength, she might have comforted him. She might have rested her hand on his knee. But she couldn't move the chair close enough. The ground under the wheels was uneven. Mr. Z. raised his head. He drew his hand through his thin, greying hair. He seemed disoriented. What time is it? he asked. She didn't know. He stood. I should get you back.

No, no, Mrs. Whitman said. He must have thought that his reverie had lasted hours. We have plenty of time. I want to know what happened to Ulla.

Mr. Z. sat back down on the bench. It was hard for him to remember Ulla. It was harder for him to remember what happened next. My focus was on the enemy. I assumed that was what we were all doing. And presently I saw them. It happened so fast. Two ran around a corner on my left, and then three



more followed, and then one came running at me from a corner on my right, and closely following him two others. All of them running. Running toward me. I hesitated. I wanted to yell to alert the others. I couldn't open my mouth. I couldn't swallow. Eight enemy soldiers running at me. They would be on top of me before I had the guts to raise my rifle, let alone fire a single shot. And so, I don't know how, I managed to overcome my fright. I raised my rifle. I felt it is incredibly stupid to say, but I'm describing how I felt I felt as if I were finally alive. I was now part of the world. I acted. I aimed my rifle and fired. First shot, first hit. The man crumbled face forward onto the street. I was in the moment. I was so there. It is hard to describe. There was no time to ponder. I aimed again and fired. A second kill. The two kills seemed to upset the others. I expected them to just keep running at me, but they turned and ran away. One turned and ran back in the direction he had come from. I shot him in the back. One turned to the right. Then stopped and ran to the left. My shooting had unraveled them. I fired. That was my first miss. It was easier to shoot someone running toward you or away from you. For someone running across your line of vision, you have to adjust your aiming. I did so. Another hit, though I only wounded him. Perhaps seriously. He writhed on the road. It was actually a woman. I hadn't realized that 'till then. You could tell by her screams. The remaining four had fled. I had staved off the attack. I stood. I was jubilant. I was the hero.

Mr. Z.'s face, watched closely by Mrs. Whitman, was hard. His lips were pulled back in a grimace. Moments earlier, she had wanted to reach out and comfort him. Now, as he described his kills, he seemed ferocious. He seemed more evil than the cancer coursing through her marrow. She was greatly unnerved. Stop, she said. Take me back.

Your pain? he asked, concerned.

Yes, she lied.

Mr. Z. rose from the bench and turned the wheelchair back toward the hospital. While they walked, he figured he would continue the tale. For the thing that happened next was the whole point of the tale, the explanation for his pushing her wheelchair. It was then that I saw what I had done, he said.

Enough, Mrs. Whitman said.

You don't understand, he said. I understand enough, Mrs. Whitman said. You take glory in killing.

It seemed unfair of her to stop his story at this point. She was the one who had bade him to tell it. He breathed the autumn air. The earthy smell of decay reminded him that he was not there to tell stories. He was there to offset as much as he could the ill that he had caused. He clenched his lips and dutifully pushed Mrs. Whitman back to the hospital.

Mr. Z. sat in the cafeteria eating tepid string beans listening to the chatter at the tables around him. When he finished, he deposited the tray and walked to work. Maybe Mrs. Whitman would ask him to continue his tale. It was wrong to leave it hanging. Stopping the story too soon leaves a wrong impression. Maybe she would ask him to continue, he thought. He had never told

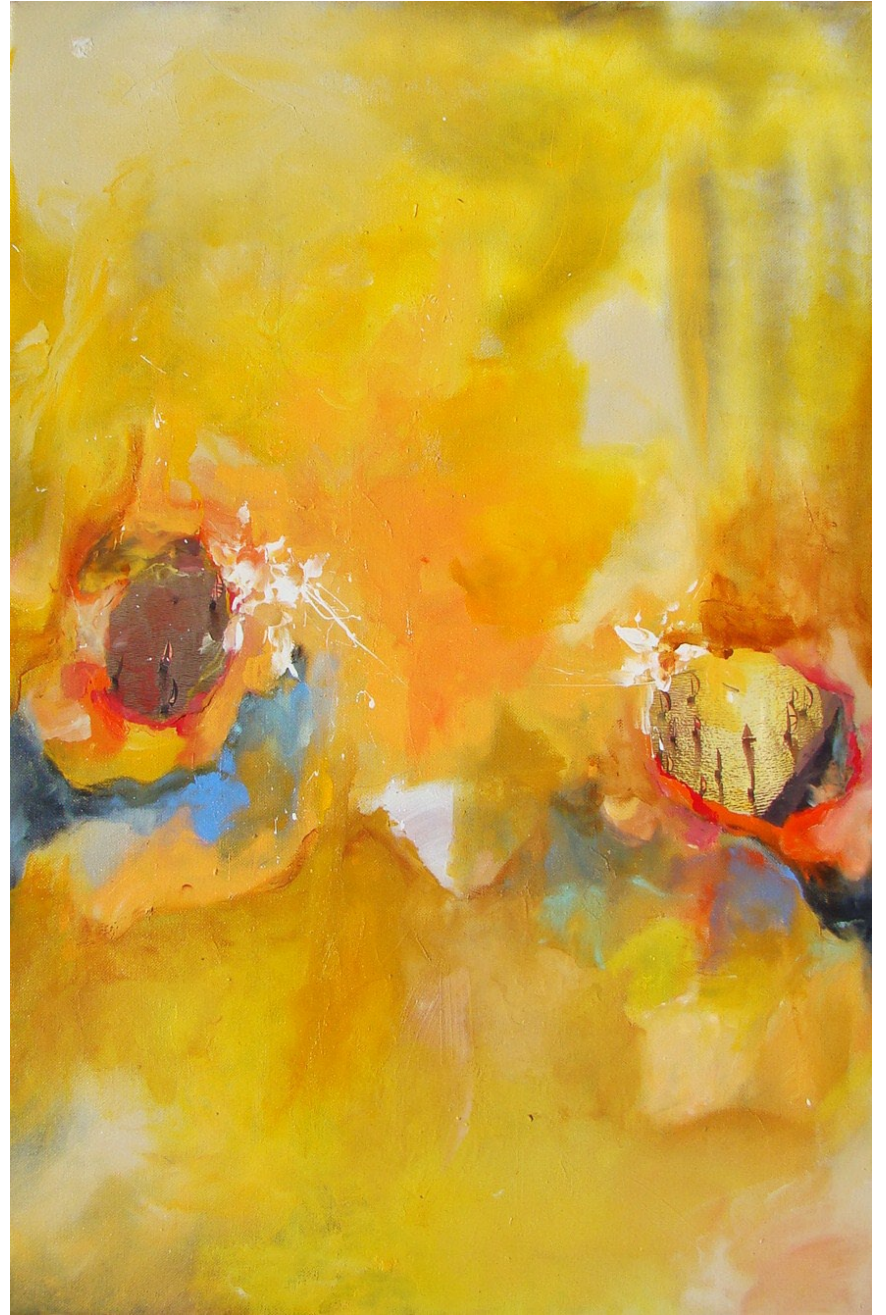
anyone. He kept it to himself. When he had found his mother, she asked him and he could not tell her. He could not tell anyone. He learned to clench his lips and say nothing. He was worried about what he would say. He was worried about how people would look at him after they heard. He was afraid the story had trickled down to all of his relatives, to all of his friends, to all the people of his country. He was sure it had. He was afraid that someone would look at him and say, Oh, you're him. After all these years, he had never felt the need to tell his tale, but now that it was uncorked, he needed to finish it.

On his next visit to the hospital, the attending nurse assigned him to Mr. Alcott, who had prostate cancer, and while he pushed Mr. Alcott's wheelchair, Mr. Z. wondered whether he could begin his story anew. He decided that who he told didn't matter. It did not matter whether Mrs. Whitman heard it. Only that someone heard it. Mr. Z. said, During the war, my mother and I had to evacuate the town where I grew up. Saying this reminded Mr. Alcott of his own stories, which he narrated. The narrative was disjointed. There were too many names. Too many asides. Mr. Z. nodded his head and pushed the wheelchair. He reminded himself of his purpose. He did not come to the hospital to tell stories. Nor did he come to be entertained. He certainly didn't deserve to be entertained. If he deserved anything at all, it would be the firing squad. But life is unfair. That much he knew.

Mr. Z. ate in the cafeteria. He worked the night shift at the snow blower plant. He walked. He volunteered at the hospital. Lila, the nicest nurse, reminded him of Ulla. They both had slender fingers and strands of their hair would sometimes fall over their deep, dark eyes. And they both had straight, white teeth. On his next visit, she assigned Mrs. Rawlings to him. He asked her, Not Mrs. Whitman?

Lila's face turned sad. I'm sorry, she said. Mrs. Whitman died last week. I should have told you. I'm sorry. Mrs. Rawlings came out of the elevator. She was happy to get outside. She was very chipper, despite her cancer. She prated on about her daughter and about a garden and about her dog. Mr. Z. nodded his head while he pushed her wheelchair. Mrs. Whitman was dead and Mrs. Rawlings was cheerful.

Mr. Z. was disappointed to have missed the funeral. He wondered how many people had come. She had once mentioned a son who lived far away and had not come to visit her, though he had phoned once, asking whether her will was in order. But Mr. Z. was saddened most of all by the fact that she died without knowing what had happened to him. She thought he was a braggart, as if he thought of himself as a hero. But that would not have prompted him to push wheelchairs. She didn't know what had dawned on him. The haphazard runners he had shot dressed in shawls and pinafores were themselves fleeing the enemy, the uniformed enemy who now appeared from behind the walls in an orderly march with their weapons drawn. Seeing them come like that, not individually, but en masse, like a tidal wave, horrified him. He dropped the rifle and ran.





# Empty

by Harmony Neal

What they don't tell you about a successful exorcism is that it leaves you empty—literally. When the dicks in robes finally let me go, I rip off my soiled suit, run a wet towel over my rank flesh, throw on jogging gear, and sprint down the street to The Original House of Pancakes.

I tell the blonde waitress to bring me OJ, whole milk—large, of course large!—and a bowl of bananas and strawberries with cream, stat, and get some eggs—all types of eggs, two of each, fried, basted, scrambled, I could give a fuck—and toast, yes yes, whatever toast, all the toast, and run, seriously, run and get me started. I place a fifty in her tiny hand, pull her close, look straight into her mascaraed eyes to press my point: run.

Between gulps of OJ and milk, around mouthfuls of bananas, with cream dripping from my chin, I order a Farmer's Scramble and Eggs Benedict and everything that takes time in their special dutch oven: apple pancakes, all five specialty omelets, and of course a Dutch Baby with all the fixins. When she can't understand me through the eggs, I slap dripping fingers at the menu: this and this and this! This waitress is smarter than she looks. She has a busboy run me over my own gallons of milk and OJ, then the eggs and toast. He keeps the food coming and empty plates out of the way.

I eat with my hands. With yolk running down my face, I order crepes and waffles, chocolate chip pancakes, bacon pancakes. My intestines are deflated balloons. The busboy is a miracle. He jellies toast for me, smears butter on everything, salts eggs and potatoes, empties pitchers of syrup onto pancakes, waffles, crepes. He does everything but put the food in my mouth.

After I've downed a few plates of crepes and pancakes and two Belgian waffles, and all those eggs, I notice the busboy keeps glancing at my chest. At first I assume he is looking at the chunks of food resting in my sparse hair until I realize I am covered from chin to lap, with a pile of refuse—bits of bacon and slivers of eggs and sticky pancake globs—growing on the floor. I look, and damn if there isn't a rosary burn showing under all that mess: hairless, red, raised. With one hand I yank my jacket zipper up to my neck, pour milk down my throat with the other. I don't know what the hell my wife was thinking.

What will we do without Jared to run the business and deal with investments? What will we do without his otherworldly connections? Sure, the guy really enjoys fornicating, and that time I fucked a stray dog behind the backhoe at the luxury mall site freaked her out, but those were small prices to pay. How will we afford her salon wraps and pedicures and laser peels now?

How will we keep the kids safely tucked away at boarding school? Who will clean the house after we have to let Liviette go? Did she consider any of that?

I scald the roof of my mouth on apple pancakes that are only seconds out of the oven. The busboy hands me my milk glass, holds the jug ready to refill. Jared and I had a deal. He would make me rich, and in return, he got to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. When I drank that foul liquid from the monkey-skull goblet, I thought it was pomp and circumstance, that he was wisping in through my ear or nose. But no—he must have physically been in that goblet, been in me, entering my body in a wholly physical fashion. That's why those assholes emptied me of everything.

I shove the pancakes aside and chew my Denver omelet, lost. I don't know if I can get him back. I don't know what he might do to her if I convinced him to try. The busboy cuts up a Dutch Baby into buttered, gooey squares.



# Love in the City of God

by *Russell Gift*

The unusually cold Florida air bit into Anton's cheeks as he walked along the outer edge of the moat belonging to the Castillo de San Marcos. His arms were outstretched as he balanced along the old stone wall, the moat empty down below. Anton glanced to the left and saw the massive crumbling walls of the fort beside him, various plants and vines filling the cracking in the coquina walls. Then he turned his head to the right see the sprawling shops of St. Augustine behind the old Arch that once marked the city's entrance. He felt contempt for the commercialism that, in his mind at least, enslaved the first white city in the New World.

Anton despised tourists and he thought that being a natural Floridian gave him an automatic exemption from being considered a tourist at, or even near, any Florida landmark.

"It says here that Henry Flagler turned this place into a golf-course in 1885," a soft voice said, coming from a direction which Anton seemed to ignore.

Walking beside him and looking carefully over a map or an itinerary or maybe it was a pamphlet, was his girlfriend, Chloë.

He looked down into the grassy moat, once filled with the feces of the Spanish, the English and some partially digested Indians berries as well. He pictured old-timey golfers shanking a drive into the moat, splashing the filthy froth onto the fort's walls and upsetting the colonial inhabitants, who wonder why these old people keep knocking little white balls into their excrement.

"Golf," Chloë said. "I swear to God...golf."

"Tourists love golf."

"I think most Floridians love golf," she said.

"No, just tourists and old people love golf."

She laughed, "Maybe."

"You know, you look like a tourist with that pamphlet."

"Who cares? Everyone looks like a tourist here...that's why it's called a tourist trap, Ant."

"This isn't a tourist trap," Anton said, rolling his eyes. He looked back to give her a stern look when he said, "and don't call me Ant." He almost tripped into the moat.

"Be careful," she said but he ignored her.

As Chloë bought their tickets at the counter, Anton stared at the flip-flopped feet of a dark-skinned girl who was standing near the pamphlet stand which was immediately inside the fort's entrance.

"Aren't you excited?" Chloë yelled to him.

"Not really...I've been here like a hundred times."

Anton wondered if the pamphlet girl's dark skin kept her warmer than everyone else standing around. He was pretty sure she was an American Indian. A real, live Native American. Which tribe was she? Maybe she was a local Timucuan. He seemed to remember pictures of them in loincloths while the invading French were all bundled up in pseudo-conquistador garb. She just seemed so comfortable in flip-flops, tight, torn jeans, and a tank-top, while everyone else was bundled up in jackets and shoes, Anton himself included. He glanced down at his heavy jacket.

He unzipped it for no particular reason. He wished he was smoking a cigarette or something.

"Aren't you excited?" Chloë asked, walking up to him with the tickets.

"What?" he said startled.

"I know you want to cross yee-old draw-bridge. I see you staring over there. Wait and let me get your picture on it."

"Gee thanks, mom."

She started walking forward, turned slightly. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, Zip up,

Ant. It's freaking freezing out here."

The pamphlet girl turned the corner and Anton jogged lightly to catch up with Chloë.

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm not cold."

"Well, what do you want to do first?"

Anton didn't answer as they stepped into the inner courtyard of the fort. Chloë read the map of the fort.

"I guess, we can just go in here and make our way around."

Anton's hope dwindled as the dark-skinned girl walked over to and then hung onto another man's arm. Anton should have guessed. And now these two, this apparently happy couple, were heading up the stairs toward the lime-stone roof. Anton tightened his mouth in disappointment as he began to feel a tug on his jacket. He turned and saw Chloë already yards away, walking towards the first room. He followed reluctantly.

Anton was a man who thought about love quite often. He often thought the concept of love elusive for others but strangely accessible for him, for he fell in love so often that he experienced it merely as a mild form of casual exhilaration now and again. He was incapable of counting how many times he'd fallen in love in various bookstores, restaurants, and movie theaters. Sadly, when love did strike him, he was usually in the presence of Chloë. And poor, oblivious Chloë, who loved Anton in her stale, unenlightened, very usual way, knew nothing of his inner love-life and his sexually-active imagination.

Anton and Chloë walked into the Guardroom, replete with ancient



wooden bed-frames and Spanish-moss stuffed mattresses. By this point, Anton had given his dark-skinned love a name: Annabel. He imagined making love to Annabel on the terribly uncomfortable beds in these ancient barracks. The uniformed tour guides would wave their hand over the scene in order to show the many tourists how the soldiers of yore would copulate with the native peoples. The guide would say that on cold days very much like this one, many a Spaniard or an Englishman was saved by the warmth of a welcoming Indian. Anton imagined Annabel imagining the same thing on the cold roof. He thought it would serve as an excellent ice-breaker; to bring up how Indians kept the white man warm on cold, oppressive nights.

"I bet you're thinking what I'm thinking," whispered Chloë into Anton's ear.

"Probably not," Anton said.

She smacked her lips. "You're no fun," she said with a smile and a very delayed wink. After a moment, she popped him a kiss on the cheek and walked away.

"The beds are probably too uncomfortable anyway," she said, putting distance between them.

Anton imagined the man with Annabel, that usurper, breaking into the Guardroom, ripping their naked bodies away from each other, yelling at her in...in...in French. That's it. He must be French. A Parisian tyrant exercising his tyranny over Annabel in order to keep their true love apart. Anton named him Napoleon.

When they reached the last chamber, so much time had passed



that Anton had almost moved onto a new fantasy. But as luck would have it, he glanced up and saw Annabel pleading with Napoleon on the roof near the stairs. Napoleon must have been too cold; his womanly French blood no match for the tough skin of the Native Americans.

As far as Anton could make out, Annabel wanted to stay on the roof. She would suffer the cold Florida air and cruel wind for just a brief taste of freedom, for a single moment away from this tyrant. Napoleon appeared to relent. He walked down the stairs, his hands deep in his jacket pockets.

"Aren't you coming in?"

Chloë asked.

Anton waited, staring at the tyrant. Napoleon made eye contact with Anton as he passed by.

"Man, its cold up there," he said in a friendly way that certainly did not meet Anton's expectations or match his scowl. Anton stared at him, eyes squinted. Napoleon looked around awkwardly as he took his first steps away from Anton. He freed a hand from his jacket and began to feel around his face, to check for anything that might have offended someone, like maybe a flotsam of frozen mucus or a spider crawling out of nose, harboring itself from the cold. As a matter of fact, Napoleon thought it entirely likely that his nose had probably fallen off on that cold roof. He hastened his pace into the giftshop to look for some warmth and a mirror.

"Did you know that guy?"

Chloë asked.

"No," Anton said suddenly.

"Then what was that look for?"

"What look?" Anton played

dumb.

“What’s wrong with you today? Are you coming in here or not?”

Anton looked up. Annabel was gone.

“I think...I’m going up top. I can’t stand anymore of these rooms.”

“But it’s the last one.”

“Then I just need some fresh air.”

“I think you do too,” Chloë said but waited. She didn’t move before Anton did. She really wanted him to tell her what was wrong, for him to change his mind, grab her hand and walk into the last room with her, to make jokes about the days-of-yore with her. Right now, she couldn’t remember a time when he actually did those things with her.

He didn’t take her hand. Instead, he made a fast break for the stairs and Chloë shook her head in defeat. She wondered if her memory was that bad or had Anton never done anything like this with her, anything fun. She walked into the last, empty room.

Chloë read the last sign of Castillo de San Marcos twice. The sign featured an old photograph of three Apache women. The information below the photograph said that each of these women claimed that they were the wives of the notorious Geronimo. Back in the day, the imprisoned Apache women had been a massive tourist attraction and the only students of an ill-fated Indian School founded in St. Augustine.

She tried to picture what would possess three women who had probably never even met Geronimo to claim their marriage to him and be held as prisoners in the fort. But Chloë didn’t do too well dealing strictly with her own imagination. Looking around and seeing not another soul in sight, she turned away sadly, knowing that without discussing the photograph immediately, perhaps sharing a joke or two, its relevance in her mind would be lost forever. It was almost like she never read the sign at all. She walked out of the room and looked around for Anton in the courtyard. But he wasn’t there. She thought about going up to the roof but she didn’t. Here in the courtyard without the man she was supposed to love and without even her imagination, Chloë felt alone. She meandered toward the giftshop. Away from the roof and further away from Anton.

Meanwhile on the roof, Anton screwed up his courage and walked over to Annabel. She was examining an old Spanish cannon and reading the inscriptions on its top plate. Anton pretended to read the information sign attached to the cannon ball next to cannon next to Annabel but he just stared at her feet instead. He watched her black toe nails. Dragging his eyes up her body, he stopped at her small and perfect hands. She noticed and smiled at him.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” she said back.

“Aren’t you cold up here?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said. “It’s actually pretty warm.”

“Indian blood, right?”

“Uh...actually, it’s more like Minnesota blood.”

“Minnesota?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you’re here with your boyfriend?”

“Excuse me?” she responded, uncomfortable.

“College?”

“Yeah, Flagler.”

Anton cleared his throat and said, “You know I heard that Flagler turned this place into a golf-course in the 1800s.”

“Okay...” she said and started to walk toward one of the garita towers that rest on the corners of the fort. Anton followed. Annabel touched the rough coquina shells that made up the tower. She looked up toward the top of the garita as she moved her hands up as high as she could reach. The top was high above her head and she moved backward to see it better.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Anton said. Annabel looked at him. “Phallic, right?”

Her mouth fell open a little bit as she furled her brows.

“The tower...I mean those engineers...back in the day...perverts, right?”

“I hadn’t thought of it—”

“So, Minnesota...you’re an Indian, right? The feathers-kind, not the dot-kind.”

“I’m going to go find my...boyfriend.”

“That guy you were with?”

“Yeah.”

Anton felt his fantasy shattering and, as in a dream, he decided to give it his all. Sometimes it worked, in dreams and most movies.

“I love you.”

Annabel backed away. “Actually, I’m married,” she said and quickly stuffed her hands into her back pockets.

“I thought you said you were going to see your boyfriend.”

She backed away much more quickly.

“You don’t have to back away. I’m not—I only—” Anton reached out but dropped his hand. “Shit...” he said and hung his head.

Inside the giftshop, two hands touched over a display of lead-based soldier figurines in various wartime poses. It happened that each hand reached for the same small figurine of an Englishman suffering from the throes of ennui. And from hands to eyes, Chloë and Napoleon stared at each other.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No—it’s no problem. I was just—” She started but stopped short. With a little laugh she took her hand away.

“It’s like he’s...really bored,” Chloë said.



“Not just that, this guy’s suffering from the boredom.”

“I guess War isn’t enough for him.”

“Seriously, look at all these other guys,” Napoleon said. He started to point to the other figurines, trying to contain his laughter. “That guy’s firing the cannon with his pissed-off face and that guy over there’s totally dying. And this guy, drinking brandy in one hand and shanking somebody by bayonet with his other hand.”

He put his finger on the bored figurine. “But this guy—”

“So bored,” Chloë said.

“Maybe he’s upset that he’s only a toy?”

“You’re suggesting that he’s aware of his state of existence as a toy?”

“A figurine.”

“And you’re suggesting he’s unhappy about it?”

“Right.”

“Well, who would buy him with that attitude?” Napoleon asked.

Chloë started laughing. A bright smile.

“He is one complex...existential...little guy.”

“No, he’s not. He’s just off in his own world,” Chloë said.

“You know what? We should take it easy on him. He’s probably more of a lover than fighter.”

Chloë put her hand on top of Napoleon’s. “I think he’s a philosopher and I think you should buy him,” she said. Napoleon took it into his hand, weighed it a little, pulling his face with deep consideration. Then he pulled a bulldog face, biting his upper lip and said “okay.”

“Okay,” he said to himself laughing and walking over to the counter.

The cashier rang it up and Napoleon signed his copy of the receipt. A moment later, Napoleon walked back with a grin and a giftbox.

He handed the box to her.

“Oh, come on. I can’t take this—I didn’t mean—”

He winked at her.

“Did you just wink at me?”

“I did.”

“And you did the little gun thing.”

He did the gun hand-motion again and this time he added a little click with it.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said and took the box reluctantly. “Fine...but you’re ridiculous.” He walked toward the door, turning slightly with a smile. And then he was gone.

She laughed and followed after him slowly, trying to break the tape on the box.

Outside, she opened the box. There was no figurine inside, only the print copy of the sales receipt. She pulled out the copy and looked at it. He’d written “You don’t want him...trust me.” It was followed by a phone number. A smile crept across her face.

She looked up and saw Anton walking morosely down the stairs, absorbed in the last act of some tragedy that was unfolding in his own imagination. He made his way over to her, replete with an air of utter defeat.

Chloë was still smirking.

“What’re you smiling about?” he asked her.

She pitched the box in a trash bin and pocketed the receipt.

“You know what? In the giftshop, there was a little figurine that reminded me of you—”

Shortly after, Napoleon gave his creeped-out little sister from Minnesota the tiny figurine he’d bought in the giftshop. She wasn’t very impressed, but she kept it.

On the ride home, he made sure to answer his cell phone when it rang.







# Soggy

by Harmony Neal

I am eating my usual meal: soggy Wheaties soaked in 1% organic milk made from happy cows. I cannot go vegan because I love milk, it is my elixir, but I also cannot drink non-organic milk anymore. It tastes of sorrow, full of antibiotics, pesticides, and the pain of being confined in small quarters day in and out, kept pregnant, denied your calves, strapped into metal machinery.

I am eating soggy Wheaties out of a coffee cup with a serving spoon. My bowls and teaspoons sit crusted with rings of old milk. As long as I can find reasonable substitutes, I see no reason to fill the kitchen sink with soapy water. There is too much effort involved, dedication. Washing dishes would be like admitting life is worthwhile.

The Wheaties offer little resistance to my molars, but I chew slow, a lethargic grinding. I am exhausted from reading books and watching movies, but I won't go to sleep. If you sleep too much, it becomes impossible to sleep, and I cannot bear the idea of actually needing to sleep and not being able. I am awake twenty hours a day, sometimes more.

I'm not even sure if I dream anymore.

My kitchen table is cluttered with bills and unread New Yorkers scattered to opposite ends, coffee tins, molding coffee mugs with spoons now stuck to their insides, crumpled napkins, a ceramic ashtray overflowing butts. I am paralyzed by all the things I cannot change, the things that are terrible and wrong and snowballing into each other. I am paralyzed by the things I'll never do. I will never go skiing. I will never eat caviar. I will never read War and Peace. I will never see Brazil.

I'm not even halfway through the small meal I poured, hand grasping spoon as if it is all that ties me to this world. It's easy to lose any real sense of hunger when you eat the same meal three times a day, then two, then one, then one only halfway.

I'm holding my Wheaties mug, clutching the spoon, my string, but can't seem to get the spoon from the cup to my mouth. I'm looking at the window, but see only the dusty, nicotine-yellowed blinds. I grip the cord and the blinds creak up, revealing the darkness of winter. I peer through the glass, a ghost, staring into the empty somber sky, broken blue with a few distant twinkles.





# Covering Qasim

by Chad Senesac

When Agent Jones came with his legal pad and pressing questions, I told him about everything except the last afternoon I saw Qasim. It was our senior year in high school and our last lacrosse practice together. Drills that October afternoon were over early, but the team didn't head to our dormitories on the campus. Instead, Brenton Haywood, team captain and Brown University-bound, led us past the cafeteria and the chapel and over the rod-iron, ivy-covered wall that separated the girl's campus from the boy's campus of Highlands Preparatory School. Like covert operatives, we infiltrated



the thicket beyond the wall, panting at the thrill of putting our scholarships, our college acceptance letters, our parent's good names at risk, and Qasim followed – he always did. The mission: hang our jock straps inside the girls' locker room. What most of us didn't know was Brent Haywood planned one more prank, and he had a pair of handcuffs inside his own jock strap for that very purpose.

We reached the locker room; it was after five, so the girls' sports teams would arrive at any moment. We hurried in and immediately started to lasso everything – shower heads, light fixtures, hat hangers, everywhere jock straps hung like limp party confetti. We reveled in our clever display of manhood.

Brent Haywood and Qasim went into one of the stalls. Only Brent came out.

Only a half-hour off a U.S. Army cargo plane, a military police office escorted Agent Jones and me across an air strip at Guantanamo Bay. We entered through a series of reception areas fitted with desks and chairs and through sets of double doors.

"We really do have a great facility here," Jones said. "I'm glad you've decided to come."

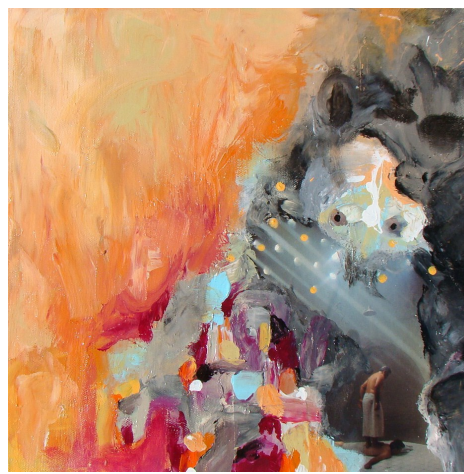
I didn't really have a choice: Uncle Sam wanted to put me in a chair across from a notorious enemy combatant, the uncoordinated, out-of-shape Qasim Al-Jad, mighty benchwarmer for the Highland Warriors lacrosse team.

"The facility is fully secure, and the combatants have the freedom to worship and exercise. Out there. We even allow them to read the Qur'an together, those that are low security. But that's at the other facility."

The military police opened one more door, and we entered a room, a locker room. Two men turned to us; they wore country-club dress, polos and khakis. The others, five in all, wore full military outfits, M-16s slung across their shoulders. They stood at attention, their backs straight. Two of them stood before a glass wall looking into another bare room. I tried to peek between them before Jones cleared his throat.

"The combatant has requested this meeting, but I remind you, we're controlling everything, Mr. Anthony. Everything." His





voice dropped.

“Please undress now.”

Slowly, I pulled off my shirt in front of the uniformed men. The two men in polos began blowing into miniature microphones and fidgeting with velcro straps. Jones gave me his full attention, though: “You’ll tell him nothing about the flight; nothing about what you’ve seen since you’ve arrived here at Guantanamo” and the list went on. I pulled off my pants, too. The men looked hard at my body. Jones told them I was cleared. The polos began strapping me up with the wires like snakes and their miniature black mic-heads.

“Good,” Jones said. “Like that. I want to hear an ant fart.”

With the polo men around me now and the uniformed men stone-faced, the locker room got small, and the musty smell of body odor hit me. I tried to speak, to make a joke, but all I could do was think of a scream, Qasim’s scream. From a locker room twelve years ago.

But first, Qasim laughed, a husky guffaw, a masculine giggle – he never got half the jokes we played on him. That same laugh transmitted through the locker room and delightfully drew us down the row of stalls where we peeped into the last. There was Qasim, both hands awkwardly pulled underneath the inflow pipe connected to the wall, and around each wrist, handcuffs. His shorts lay around his ankles. He laughed; we laughed harder. Brenton Haywood stood, arms folded, and watched us watch Qasim.

Chaz slid into the locker room. “Girls coming,” he cried.

At the toilet, a smile evaporated and utter horror coalesced on our captive’s face.

The room exploded. Boys shouted, shoved, cursed, crashed. I turned around and around; I shouted Brent’s name, I really did, I swear. All I saw though were the thrilled, disappearing faces of my teammates. With the hot room broke open and draining pubescence, I was soon left alone.

But not entirely. The pleading from the last stall still trickled. I returned to it. Qasim babbled, and I did what I would never have the guts to do at any other time: I reached down, grabbed his shorts, and pulled them over his husky waist. He babbled, saying, “Key – Key”; and I was babbling, too, apolo-

gies, mostly. I couldn’t look in his eyes; I couldn’t get the keys. They were probably bouncing around helplessly in Brent Haywood’s shorts. Brent and the rest of the team would be over the fence by that time, so I turned and ran. Qasim screamed.

When I had redressed, one escort let me into the last room. In it, there was one ceiling light, one table, two chairs, and on the other side a man, handcuffed. He was thinner, his skin umber, like dark leather beat under a furious sun. Muscles on his forearms were defined ridges, and locks of full black hair rained in thick curls over his ears and forehead. A formidable, dark beard obscured the visage of Qasim Al-jad.

He spoke only my name.

“Qasim,” I said finally. “Are you okay?” He nodded, and I sat down. “They said you’d asked for me.” I stared back into his blue eyes. I waited, but he stayed silent. “They said you wanted to see me.” I glanced at the glass and kept on, “That you would give them information if you got to see me.”

I watched the corner of his eyes slide to the glass and then blink again. He simply grinned – it reminded me of that goofy teenager. I sucked in my breath and arched my back straight.

“Qasim, I’ve traveled a long way to be here –

“As far as Afghanistan?” His hands clenched.

I sighed. “No. Not that far.”

He tossed his hair away from his eyes and nodded.

“I will tell you a story about Afghanistan, then.” He leaned back in his chair, the chain of the handcuffs sliding back across the metal table. “About fifty kilometers or so, south of Gardez, along a range of mountains, we’d captured an American, a soldier whose humvee we wrecked with a bomb. My group tortured him in our way, but did not kill him. We gambled for his belongings, but there was one item I found and let no one see. It was a postcard from a little fourth-grade school girl. You’ll never guess the picture it was from.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“The Blue Ridge Mountains. Gray and green as I remembered them.” From underneath his prison suit, he placed in front of me a dirty, frayed post-

card. “When I saw these mountains, I remembered North Carolina, I remembered what happened.”

“Qasim, I’m sorry –

The card had survived, traveled to the other side of the world and back again. The edges felt soft in my hands.

“My secret is this,” he said, and a queer smile came over his face. “Oh, I’ve killed many men, American and other,” he lifted his hands, “I found I could kill easily, so I came to believe Allah had blessed me with the ability to kill; then I saw the postcard of our mountains. That same night, I helped the American escape. That same night, I was captured.”

I thought I heard a noise behind the glass.

Agent Jones and the men in the polos entered the room.

“Mr. Reynolds, we need to take a break,” Jones said, but I ignored him.

“What’s happened, Qasim?” I said.

“Mr. Reynolds?”

“I mean, what’s happened?!”

“Mr. Reynolds?!”

I felt clamps on my shoulders, and I was lifted from my chair. I shouted and pulled away – the hold grew tighter. In response, I wrenched away just in time for a thick arm to come under my right arm from behind. Qasim shouted, came from around the table, and was tackled. Against the table they pushed me, and I pushed back, adding my own deep howls to the decibels. We became an interlocking mass of arms, and legs, and torsos, and I struggled until I caught the blue stare of Qasim. We both faced each other, both bound in the ferocious arms of the men around us. I stopped moving. He held hard my arm. “Mercy,” he gasped.

Slowly and firmly, Jones and a second man carried me from the room. “He said something to you. What did he say?” asked Jones, his voice peeked and heated. For hours while I waited for my plane he asked again and again, and I told him I didn’t know, that I thought he had said, “Mercy.” Jones tilted his head, thinking hard on the word, and scribbled something onto his legal pad.



# Paper Wait

by Travis Wildes

There are many reasons you could be reading this: curiosity, nostalgia or boredom. The fact that you are reading this means you're being exposed to something long before your time. You are peering into the depths of history.

During this work's original printing in 2010, it was highly regarded by readers. Although I have never written a preface to any of my works, especially a publication as old as this one, times have changed and it has become a necessity to include in any book. What you hold in your hand now is the prefaced edition of my only surviving book, as it was republished in 2183 — nearly 100 years after my death.

In case you're unfamiliar with my career, I started writing during the early 21st century when the personal computer was at its apex. Anyone could write and everyone did, and anyone wishing their writing to be viewed by a mass audience could do so, via the internet. Looking back on this era, most in the literary community (if that term still holds any significance) considered this the beginning of the end for print publications. During this saturated period, user created content existed everywhere. The expansion rate of this material was super-luminous, to put it lightly. Authors not only wrote books, but they had blogs as well. And bloggers had blogs about the author's blog: everyone wanted their voice to be heard. There was a website for everything and any taste. People were orbiting away from being 'readers' and were concentrating on being 'creators.' Stacks and stacks of new data got piled on top of the old data, and as fast as something was new, it was delegated to being old even faster.

The monstrous buildup of content finally reached its peak, when the entire history of the human race — anything and everything that had ever been written, drawn, typed or created — was indexed and easily referenced from any computer on the planet. In the end, though, no one cared about this monumental feat. People had already become too absorbed in their own personal bio-domes of creation. The result was an overload of information and not enough readers. Quality was

also a concern, as published works were still head and shoulders above most user-created material. Authors continued to write books, just as people continued to create their own work on the web. Everything was concentrated in such a high volume that the general consensus was formed that a crash would be eminent. Then, four decades later, AppleSoft introduced their revolutionary word processing program, ThinkWrite.

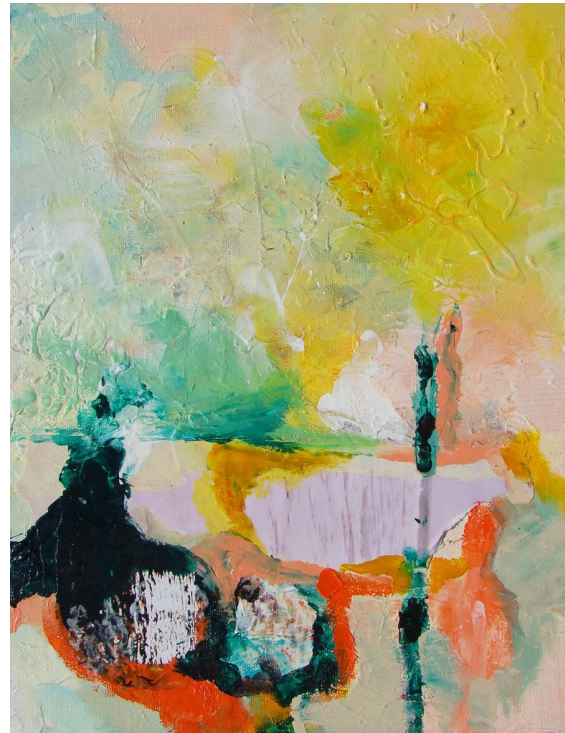
ThinkWrite used nanotechnology; the same tiny machines that, in 2035, cured the first cancer patient in Switzerland. With ThinkWrite, writer's block was no longer a term that held any meaning, and as far as the act of writing was concerned, the words talent and creativity ceased to exist. How could they? Those astonishing little machines plugged into your neural pathways and extracted the thoughts and dreams needed to produce a perfectly written work. No longer did a vision exist that couldn't be expressed in the written word. ThinkWrite could also translate your work, flawlessly, into any language. After ThinkWrite, no one typed and no one wrote by hand. It's not just that people stopped writing, they stopped talking, too. Everyone on the planet communicated in cyberspace using the universal code of ones and zeros. Language barriers were completely dissolved.

The program was a revelation. It let anyone become a world-class writer. Within two years, ThinkWrite became the best selling software of all-time. It eventually outsold the Bible. This jet-tisoned the publishing industry into oblivion. Individuals such as L. Frank Baum, Kenneth Burke and Philip K. Dick were no longer recognized as icons of literary history. They were all forgotten. ThinkWrite could create any book you'd ever want to read: all you had to do was think it. All physical media, like books, were deemed useless. Print was finally dead. As a side effect, many became sickened by the glut of old printed works that still existed. No one wanted to read these decrepit relics, not anymore, so everyone burned their books. The few books that survived were seen only as a child's curi-

osity or a nostalgic collector's item. No new books were published.

It wasn't until the forming of the World Publishing Association, nearly a century after the crash, that the word 'book' had any renewed meaning. The WPA was formed in an attempt to revive published works as a viable medium. They were a global organization which employed meticulously calculated tactics. In a way it was a success, but at the rate of only one book published per month, it will take decades, if not centuries, to completely rejuvenate what the crash destroyed.

When I received notification in cyberspace about winning the annual republication lottery, my digital-self would have felt excitement had I still possessed traces of human emotion. It should be noted that since no book was published for a span of 100 years after the crash, authors selected for republication are now, for obvious reasons, digitally sentient. So here you read the book from my catalogue that the World Publishing Association has approved for resurrected circulation (according to WPA's 'one work per author' law of 2157). Whether or not you like my work isn't important. What is important is that you're reading someone else's book. These were my thoughts, and although they are from nearly two centuries ago, they have no expiration date. I've noticed that 'writing by hand' has garnered a cult following in recent years (according to recent data), so you may find yourself intrigued and motivated to jot down your own thoughts after reading my work. Maybe you'd like to critique my story, or perhaps you can write a better one. Your own writing may not be perfect at first, but that's the fun of it: striving to become better. This is a concept that ThinkWrite, despite its quintillions of calculations per nanosecond, could never comprehend. Even as I exist now, I can only ingest new information. The lingering ideas and thoughts I can articulate are ones that existed before I was downloaded. Unlike you, I no longer have the luxury of new thinking, so don't take what you have for granted. Why let a program steal the experience from you? Write something, and have fun doing it.





# Lauren's Sparrow

*by Stephen Williams*

"What are you thinking about, Dad?"

"I was just remembering the time we saw that bird."

"That one that landed on our table?"

"You were three and we were eating lunch."

"I remember."

"A bird landed on our table."

"I remember."

"You gave him part of your sandwich."

"I remember."

"He ate right out of your hand."

"I remember, Dad."

# Juan Alonso Cavale

by *Tim Gilmore*

One.

a.

Even bad politics makes good tilth. The earth is that gracious! Bury overt deceptions in the potash of fireplace ash, blanketing them with the nitrogen of just-rotting green. The earth accepts their homecoming, nothing lost and nothing wasted.

b.

Even bad living makes good tilth. Decadence consists with growth. Because the earth contains the world, the soil absorbs happily our tedious melodramas, and truly to be baptized is to be composted. The chopping down of the drunken Jack-in-the-Green makes good tilth.

c.

Even shameful memories and regret make good tilth. So too does a quiet, contented life. Because the earth contains the world, we all are pagans here, even those who don't know it, who hold out for the hereafter, because, yes, there is afterlife: (Compost the afterbirth.) every life is afterlife after lives after lives after lives, infinite regress and eternal return, broadcast in both directions into the soil.

d.

Even ideas of eternity make good tilth. Draw your goodness from the goodness of the earth. I cup up a dozen earthworms when I put my hands in the ground. This place is a good place. This earth is good earth. Let us stay here, happy. Abide. This good place is delicious earth.

Two.

That again I was a child, though the rocks and trees in memory seem now without color in a grey light, the wind moaning against them, open the window that I might fly out and haunt the dark cedars against the delirious

moon, my hair and limbs all purple and red and yellow billowing about in the grey world, my lips opened for the green, green leaves growing up from my tender core, their branches and tendrils encircling my face like acanthus frozen on a goblin's on a Roman shrine, green child swinging through the trees in your mind, hermaphrodite Christ, but older than him, and young as the shining spring.

Three.

Then it was cold. The air was crisp. The moon shone brighter than I remembered. All the people had locked themselves up in the heat of their dwellings, but outside every single thing appeared hard and real and clear. It made sense in that cold that oldworld forces and spirits and witches occupied secret locations in this January 2010 city. You had always said the newest parts of American cities grow old the fastest. Then the Green Man walked past us on broken concrete under cold lights and was gone into shadows of rotten trees, gone into the freezing pipes, gone into the wiring, gone into the hidden rooms in houses occluded by fig trees, honeysuckle, and overgrown shrubs on the streets you've never noticed.

Four.

Though you saw him watching you, for all that he is in love with you, he was only a face on a corbel on an old and moldered church, its decay itself belying this church against his interloping pantheistic fructifications. He has all the time in the world. For me, it is too late now, though I will not be lost, though I will not be wasted. That again I was a child, a goblin's face on your earthen shrine, open the window to the cold green night, and I will watch you too, from high up among the faces in verdigris on the church slowly rotting into its damp and persistent vegetation.

Five.

How long outside the tall house on a central corner of the old capital has the barred owl called from the old dead tree in ascending whoops in the middle of the night with the voices of the ghosts of monkeys? How many tens of thousands of years?

Six.

To ramble in the dark in that small-hour quality of quiet down Willow-branch to Sidney up James Street to Downing toward King Street to the river, to feel your flesh crawl with influences and archetypes, a Johnny Appleseed with satyr horns, and the Green Man is here, Sylvanus in the trees of exquisitely



shabby city, and as Ferlinghetti writes, in *Northwest Ecolog*,

At the Public Market  
Seattle wintertime  
A big shaggy bearded man  
like Walt Whitman  
standing still in the cold rain  
with his shivering dog  
and a cardboard sign on him:

I AM OVER 70  
MY DOG HAS THREE LEGS  
NOBODY  
WANTS US

The hard rain pours down  
There is no tin cup.

So walks in the quiet dark, outside your sleepings in bungalows and foursquares, Mission Styles, Tudors, colonnaded apartment courtyards, Queen Annes and shotgun shacks, those never-dying hobo poets, and some Carnival figure turns to me, beneath the sprawling arms of an oak tree older than the United States, and suggests the way this capital dies and grows and so fertilizes itself, balancing its vegetation and its housing, every house so unlike the one beside it that sometimes a house appears here at night, old,

where no house had been in daytime, only to disappear the next morning, without room for a driveway between two nineteenth-century cottages, the Carnival Diablo hisses to me that the balancing randomness of the capital mirrors the infinite inventiveness of the biological world, which selects not just for survival but also by happenstance, so that in the capital it's purely possible to find any kind of anyone, the hippie, the priest, the Wife of Bath, Amelia Earhart's here somewhere, walking, walking in the three a.m. in the streets within the streets with the slaves who worked beneath the seven magnolia trees still standing and rooted from the 1836 cotton plantation sown from the 1790 land grant from the Spanish government.

"Tell me," said El Diablo, "what's not happened here, what does not constitute its tilth? In all these trees and windows, you find gentleness and grace, and you may look into the deep ugly of the human heart and hope that you can still love it. God-in-heaven-or-god-in-earth knows who and what walks here. Or does she? On second thought, I doubt such an inventory is possible."

Tomorrow an accountant on Ingleside Avenue will wake up and rake the leaves that have been falling between his present fencelines for centuries.

Seven.

Poetry is the long narrative, the strange traveling through which your ordinary life is shown as wondrous as the trajectory of Jesus or John of the Book of Revelation. Likewise that pilgrimage across Riverside in the middle of the night where I met the Green Man and ran holding hands with the gopis.

Eight

If you could distill your whole life into one word without losing anything, that would be the poem.

Nine

There's something we need to talk about, such a matter it is, it must be said down at the Derby House, the neighborhood greasy-spoon. It's going to have to wait until we can meet there. I cannot speak of it here.

Ten

Hallway in the apartment house, the light is sickly as bad skin, the plaster reeks of lives lived against it, but bears no paintings, photographs, no representations, naked walls in a naked hallway in the inside of the inside of a building that must have stood into the ground here since the first chapter of Genesis.

Eleven

The Green Man stands against the buildings against the plants, against the verdure amongst the buildings in a night that is green in a green that is deeply night. He's the ghost against all old buildings, the mold, the resurrection ferns, the damp creeping patina on old walls. Out of the ghosts of old buildings amidst their green and the ghosts resurrected green amidst old houses, the Green Man stands in corners and leers from the corners of his eyes.

Twelve

Doth not the spring make hippies of us all?

Be patient. There is more than enough for everyone. When I forget patience, I forget the goodness and the truth of spring earth. I walk among old things making new, to myself saying, "Slow down. Go slow. Take time. This walk is your one chance. Look at what you see. Listen to what you hear. This is the first time. This is the last time." The earth does not speak, but her words never fail us.



When communication fails, and it always does, communion.  
 The deep freezes left dead reductions of summer vegetation, and now  
 their bodies litter the ground that softens with spring.  
 Over the capital comes ylang ylang and cedar, frangipani and frankin-  
 cense. Dawn comes like the spring comes. Spring comes like the dawn.

## Thirteen

As the poet's childhood mentor says in Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Poet Assassinated*,

Entire races respect the animals and proclaim metempsychosis, an honorable belief, evident, but exaggerated, since it does not take into account lost forms and the inevitable dispersal. Their respect should have been extended to vegetables and even to minerals. The dust of the road, what is it but the ashes of the dead? It is true that the Ancients did not ascribe life to inert things. Rabbis have thought that the same soul inhabited the bodies of Adam, Moses, and David. In fact, the name Adam is composed in Hebrew of Aleph, Daleth, and Mem, the first letters of the three names. Yours lived as did mine in other human bodies, in other animals or was dispersed and will continue after your death since all must be used again.

## Fourteen

Everything that happens is part of the collection.

## Fifteen

I remember the time I stood on the beach, the time I stood on the bulkhead of the river, and I felt there was nothing I could not do, I felt capable of a vague and universal capability, and another time I recall feeling a pride of place that allowed that one small almost-lovely thing I might have done to be worthy of a little patchwork of the organic geometry of the beauty of the aerial view.

Your first steps, my sleep-defying anxieties, my days at work on no sleep, all might be quaintly component of a bigger mandala from above.

But now I seek to see from multiple scales at once, as this evening we stood beneath the tumored and muscular trees and watched the small hawk jerk back its beak from its catch on the branch above our heads. Just once we saw blood red. We watched from the ground, down there in the circuitboard shape of the city seen from the clouds.

Though we are but silverfish skittering among a rotting beam in the foundation of a grand house built generations ago, my love for you is real as



the curvature of the globe.

I was real here, holding your hand, talking to you about that week's plans, and if you are afraid of what you might or might not achieve, I too dreamt and dreaded. I spoke though I was always afraid to speak.

I wish to lose myself in place. I wish to mark place with myself. I dilute and persist in the sea like the old city's collective plumbing.

I speak as a man I never thought to find myself and speak as a man I yet had always been and speak as a man who has found himself to be a little boy and never found himself more than an astonished little boy.

Who knew I was born with a green man in me? Who knew the little boy would never mature? Who knew the baby was born an old man? Who knew the green man would gradually gain confidence and speak for the boy?

### Sixteen

Little Fishweir Creek runs down Azalea Avenue through the trees on the hill from the highway and empties into Big Fishweir Creek that sloughs into the Ortega River that flows into the St. Johns River, flowing North like the Nile, pouring into the Atlantic Ocean.

In the trees stands the old, old man in the young man's body, a cypress tree Osiris, or some old young archetypal hero, never recorded, of the Timucua, a people removed from the scene before the scene received our setting.

My mother told me we were descended from the Timucua. By 1595, Spanish missionaries had diminished the Timucua by three-fourths through disease, war, and proselytization.

By 1700, 1,000 Timucua remained.

The British began to enslave the Timucua.

In 1752, there were twenty-six Timucua still living.

Sixty-nine years later, the land of the Timucua was annexed by the United States.

I am one of the 1,000 Timucua alive in 1700.

I am one of the twenty-six Timucua alive in 1752.

I am the ghost of a people, when a foreign country tentatively calls my nonexistent descendants its citizens. I am the Green Man.

By the time I reached adulthood, I had rejected my mother's claim that we were of Timucuan descent. I understood by then that the last Timucuan had disappeared with the annexation of this peninsula by the United States, that the last Timucua were exiled to Cuba.

The last Timucuan did not have a Timucuan name. The last Timucuan had a Spanish name.

Juan Alonso Cavale, the last Timucuan, was taken by the Spanish, in cession of the state of Florida to the British, to Guanabacoa, Cuba. Juan Alonso Cavale, the last Timucuan, died in Guanabacoa, in eastern Havana, Cuba, in 1767.

Last night I saw the Green Man slip around a corner in a side street off Lancaster. This morning I met with Juan Alonso Cavale in exile. He had been stripped of his language. He accompanied the spirit of the green woods and pale limestone and coquina. He died in Havana 243 years ago. He was the last of a tribe he had never seen.

## Author Biographies

**Daniel Buyanovsky** is a junior at New York University, and occasionally DJ's under the stage name Julius Pleazer. He aspires to be an auteur and loves to play Connect 4. Passersby often tell him he's fascinating.

I write because there's something missing, and because that certain something is needed.

**David Greenwood's** awards currently reside in the Best PEN/American Push-piddly-twiddly-tweedle-woo-cart fellowship and hail from MFA, where he received 2009 and appeared in his first novel, alongside Brooklyn College. He writes in Pink Sherbert. [You can find more fresh Greenwood in the current issues of *Hot Metal Bridge* — hot-metalbridge.org — and the *Brooklyn Review*, and staler but prize-winning Greenwood in last spring's *Dislocate*].

**Russell Gift** recently graduated from the University of North Florida. He currently works in a library and spends much of his free time surfing the beaches of North Florida.

**Tim Gilmore** is the author of *Horoscopes for Goblins: Poems, 2006-2009* and *Flights of Crows: Poems, 2002-2006*. His poetry has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Jack* magazine, *Thunder Sandwich*, *580 Split*, *Eat*, *Fiction Fix*, and a number of other publications. He teaches literature at Florida State College of Jacksonville and has a PhD from the University of Florida. He edits *deadpaper.org*.

**Marianne Mckey** was born in Gainesville Florida. She is a second year Junior at the University of North Florida. Majoring in English Literature and minoring in French, she hopes to get a Phd and make a living teaching and writing. She enjoys reading, writing short fiction, and making ceramics.

**Malcolm Murray** teaches philosophy at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and has published four philosophy books including *The Atheist's Primer* (2010). Although he has won three fiction contests (two short stories and one play), and had a play produced in 2008 ("Chop Wood, Carry Water"), "The Wheelchair Pusher" is his first published short story. Thanks *Fiction Fix*.

**Harmony Neal** recently adopted a puppy named Milkshake. He has eaten her massage chair, modem cord, belt, roommate's cellphone and laptop power cord, twice, table legs, shoes, box springs, notebook, and every pen in the house. He does these things while she's writing. Harmony's been published or is forthcoming in places like *Georgetown Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Sou'Wester*, and *Prick of the Spindle*. Sometimes she thinks she has super-powers, but this is probably not true.



**Chad Senesac** lives with his family in Jacksonville, Florida where he teaches high school English. He also studies literature and composition as a graduate student at the University of North Florida.

**Travis Wildes** is a 3rd year English student at UNF. He enjoys writing fiction short stories and nonfiction essays and likes reading old school Sci-Fi from Philip K. Dick and essayists such as Joan Didion and Susan Sontag. He is very active in the UNF writing community and loves supporting anything English related on campus. Recently he received honorable mention in the nonfiction category of the 2010 UNF writing contest for his piece "Mind the Gap." Upon completion of his Bachelor's degree he wants to pursue an MFA. His hope for the future is to continue writing and eventually become an author. He is currently working on completing a collection of essays on his experiences traveling overseas.

**Stephen Williams** has a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from Central Michigan University. His academic concentrations were mathematics and psychology. He worked as an engineer, a financial analyst and a marketing executive. He has developed residential real estate and managed a vineyard. Publications: "Happy's Pies," *GLAWS Review*, forthcoming. "Priam's Progeny," *Redlands Review*, Spring 2010. "Iphigenia's Execution," *Strange Mysteries II* — anthology 2010. "Computer Simulation for Urban Planning," *Vance Publications* 1978. "Database Management for Urban Planning," *Vance Publications* 1978.

## Artist Biographies

**Devin Balara** was born on Halloween night in 1988 in the city of Tampa, FL. Raised as an only child with a single mother, Devin had a good amount of time alone with her imagination. Her earliest creative moments were spent finger painting in a plastic pool in the living room, learning to draw whales and elephants with her grandfather, and collecting strange rocks, shells and wood pieces from around her neighborhood.

Throughout grade school in Tampa, Devin was passionate about music and excelled at playing both the bass clarinet and tenor saxophone. She received a number of awards in both Hillsborough County and the State of Florida. In High School she was on the dance team for three years and received recognition at a number of competitions across the state. She always found herself drawing and assembling collections of small pieces, but art was not a true passion until she moved to Jacksonville, FL to attend the University of North Florida.

Initially enrolled as a psychology major, Devin soon discovered that the art world offered an incredible combination of psychology, music, movement, introspection, science, and all of the things which she had found interest in throughout her life. She also found that her close community of artistic friends offered constant inspiration and collaborative opportunities. Devin found her true niche in the sculpture department at UNF, inspired by the intense process of welding and manipulating metal. Painting also became a passion of hers, finger painting in particular, because of the relaxation it offered in contrast to the hot, dirty and dangerous lifestyle of a sculptor. The challenge of that lifestyle and the community aspect of making objects large and small led Devin to choose sculpture as her major concentration. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in the Spring of 2010 with her sights set on traveling the country and pursuing a Master's Degree outside of Florida.

**Louise Freshman-Brown** is a painter and mixed medium artist whose works have been featured in exhibitions in museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. Solo exhibits include; Piirto Gallery, Helsinki, Finland, Everson Museum, Syracuse, NY, The Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, FL, The Deland Museum of Art, DeLand, FL, Monique Goldstrom Gallery, NYC.

Group exhibitions include Galleria Vetro & Arte, Venice, Italy, Edsvik Konsthall, Sollentuna, Sweden, Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, DC, Women's Art Cooperative, Van Nuys, CA, The William Whipple Art Gallery, Marshall, MN, New York Academy of Art, NYC, Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL, Montgomery College, Rockville, MD, The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, Jacksonville, FL, Barbara Gillman Gallery, Miami, FL, Park Plaza Castle, Boston, MA, Childs Gallery, NYC, and the Polk Museum, Lakeland, FL.

Her works are in private, public and corporate collections including the Voorhees Museum, NJ, Queensborough Museum, NY, Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, AL, The Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art, Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, NY, Montgomery College, MD, Syracuse University, NY, The Federal Reserve, The Cleveland Clinic, Vistakon, Bank of America, SuperStock Inc., Pan Am, Orlando International Airport, Tupperware International Headquarters, Southern Bell, John Schreiber Group of New York, and Bankers Trust of New York. She completed commissions for Mayo Clinic, Merck and Co., IBM, North Carolina National Bank, Embassy Suites Hotel, Arvida Corp., and Shell Oil Co.

Freshman-Brown received her BFA in Painting and MFA in Painting/Printmaking from Syracuse University. She is a Professor of Art at The University of North Florida, Jacksonville, FL where she has been awarded for excellence in teaching and scholarship. In 2005 she received the Outstanding Faculty Scholarship Award and in 2007 the Distinguished Professor Award. She conducts workshops and lectures nationally and internationally.



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