

MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 19 ISSUE 1
THE VALLEY REVIEW

HOT DOG



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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Salutations from the Editor

Here we are, living under a fascist dictatorship. The democratic experiment that was America might be a thing of the past. All the members of the Greatest Generation, who fought the rise of Fascism in WWII, must be spinning in their graves. The people who wanted this call themselves Patriots, lovers of the Flag, America, and all that it stands for, unless a pesky thing like the Constitution gets in the way. The center has not held. The rough beast has slouched its way into the White House and not enough is being done to stop its rampant destruction.

One the eve of the 2016 election, before the results were announced, I wrote this take on the Oompa Loompa song:

On the Eve of Election Day (with apologies to Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley)

Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-doo,
I have a perfect puzzle for you.
Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-dee,
If you are wise, you'll listen to me.

What do you get when you vote for a brat?
The same man who called Miss Universe fat?
He just lost his right to send out more tweets,
by Hilary he simply must be beat.

Or you won't like the look of things.

Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-doo,
Vote for Ms. Clinton, or we'll be in a stew.
Stop the Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa, please do!

Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-doo,
I have another puzzle for you.
Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-dee,
If you are wise, you'll listen to me.

Climate change is real, not some Chinese hoax,
Disabled folks should never be the butt of jokes.

Stop this fool or be afraid.

Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-doo,
Jim Crow laws are a things of the past.
Let's maintain women's rights too.
Not like the Trumpa Lumpa wants to do.

Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-doo,
I have another puzzle for you.
Trumpa, Lumpa, stum-pa-dee-dee.
If you are wise, you'll listen to me.

What will you get if you vote for an ass,
The man who would rape a 12 year old lass ?
If he's put in charge, it will be such a shame,
And you'll only have yourself to blame.

He'll wreck our country, rest assured.

Some of the names have changed, but the situation is as dire as I feared, more so even. So sing along with me and when you're done celebrate the fact that power-mad greedy megalomaniacs can't take our art away from us. 19 years of a small arts & literary staying physically in print is an act of resistance made possible by you all. Keep making art, writing fiction and poetry, making music and resisting. We're in this together and this machine kills fascists.

Besos & Abrazos
Elizabeth

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subroutine

John Russell Bowman

All the time trying to think of everything.
Always keeping our ancestors in mind and their art.

Wanting to roam everywhere and read it:
A sign as now this cloud merges me into
Winter midday when light changes
Its name into three initial letters
Like the sun is made of water you know?

Cave bear skulls.



office daydream

M. Benjamin Thorne

Adulting is a dull thing,
I think we can all agree.
Better to be a droll king
with throne of gold filigree,
or perhaps an astronaut
out in the starry expanse;
then again, on second thought,
I'd probably stain my pants.
I should go explore ruins,
not rot in this cubicle--
I could run into ruins. . .
let's just trim this cuticle.
True, I'd rather brave jungles
and not work the nine to five,
but I'm prone to make bungles,
and want most to stay alive.



convocation

John Russell Bowman

My poems sound so clearly in your voice.
Poems made for us and the rest made for us to withstand.
In my dream all of our friends entered a house on the precipice.
Really doing nothing except to see how it will happen.
Moment or memory we may share unfolding those flowers ourselves.
Once I am happy enough thinking of how you loved me.
A story from the underworld our grandmother read to us one summer we stayed in that
large house by Sparrow lake in Ontario.
Drafts of the story lost within me and outside oppressions to overthrow.
I will neither run nor watch.
Let space take over.
I will listen to what light there is.
Wishing to dance I look through glass and imagine gardens.
Most days I am bored.
I will do my best work for gifts.
I have written many bad poems.
Fire replaces the forest.
Stone path blazes along thought borders.
Nothing left to want but sleep.
You and I smoke over the river ready to return home.





edible flowers on avocado toast

Brian Harman

Starflower, floss flower, dianthus,
we tasted and talked in an after-Eden,
food porn centered at the beginning
of a poetry manuscript consultation—
drank Scotch ale with perfumed
scents at a gastropub table, a haven
for all senses; nonsense, making sense,
two cents becoming the richness
beyond what words could ever be
written and published and spoken;
the poetics of sex, the flower of poetics,
the avocado toast of all toasts, the
edible flowers of all edibility.



blue dahlia

Brian Harman

Does not exist,
but as jest,
to ghostly imbue
the blue notes of jazz,

of Lynchian velvet,
of Elvis's moon,
Picasso's Nude,
of a dream to slip

in and out of jeans,
has not appeared
or been made
except as '46 noir—

truth be told in truth
or dare after a
blue-lipsticked kiss,
there is no true blue

to be had, not even
Blue False Indigo
deception, not even to
be found in naked half.



A real estate advertisement for Miriam Sirota. The background is black. On the left, the name "Miriam Sirota" is written in a white, typewriter-style font, preceded by a thick vertical pink bar. Above the name, the word "REALTOR" is written in a small, white, curved font. To the right of the text is a portrait of Miriam Sirota, a woman with curly blonde hair and glasses, wearing a dark blazer. Below the name and portrait, the phone number "917.701.8672" is displayed in white. Underneath the phone number, the email address "Miriam.Sirota@raveis.com" and the website "MiriamSirota.raveis.com" are listed, separated by a vertical bar. At the bottom, the address "200 Triangle Street | Amherst | MA 01002" is written in white.

Miriam Sirota REALTOR®

917.701.8672

Miriam.Sirota@raveis.com | MiriamSirota.raveis.com

200 Triangle Street | Amherst | MA 01002

the signpost

Alex Kraft

Feed me softly with saying
That you are not so little now
As a name stone carved and left to hang
Signpost beside strangers

I can see you in Christmas,
On the shoulders of fathers,
And in peeling rust off swinging doors

I like these visions unhinged, left to grow
Not bound within picture frames
Like the black and white photograph there
Of my dead grandfather as a child

Where is the attic where all your photographs are kept?
I had to make myself forget
Let's compare tramping grounds,
Where we ached under sky

And of course,
As if I have not had as little time as this night,
Idiot birds are out there, again
Singing fairy dust beginnings

I would like so badly to think more, to talk more
To daydream with you, to laugh
But it's hard not to notice the traces of sun in the water
Dripping from my clay roof to the pebbles below it
And there are children running
There's grass, coffee stains, and a very lonely vegetable garden

I'll have to speak with you later this evening
There's simply no other way



goodbye machines

Alex Kraft

September unfolds her flowers onto my head
Steel rain,
Goodbye machines

Here I am with graves and hills
Wide mountains, wild stars, and still water,
And I have been making no bold claims,
False advertisements,
Or strict proclamations to passersby

I would go so far as to say that, lately,
I've been known to routinely pass by opportunities
To speak on my little charms and graces,
Things that could easily go unnoticed

I have yet to stop ambling,
Yet to close up shop,
Yet to fire my worst employee

Yet to sleep,
Yet to conquer,
Yet to stop

Any of the clockwork upstairs
Bobbing me up and down
In and out of competence, and love,
And reunions

I would go so far as to say that, lately,
I have been speaking the words of someone else,
A stranger, through splitting pain

To that stranger, to their friends, and their words –
No more





icarus
Edward Michael Supranowicz

the grandmother apple tree

Peter Tacy

She's been here so long — more than my lifetime,
surely. Once part of an orchard, now lone tenant
of a suburban lawn; shorn and shattered by the years;
still flowering, though bearing scant fruit; a remnant

of a farm that once stood atop this modest hill — farm
long gone, except for the stone wall that marked where
land was planted — and the tree. Deer used to come
to nibble windfall apples. They stood...just there.

A Cooper's Hawk would sometimes perch, to wait for prey
(yes, even ancient apple trees have several uses).
Occasionally, branches broke and fell, Oh, a major limb
was stricken once. But every time, I made excuses

for repairing Grandma Tree, so she could stay alive.
— However, this month, while I was out of town.
a winter storm tore her trunk from top to bottom.
Much of my ancient tree had fallen down.

What remained — less than half the tree I knew —
seemed too little to save. So I asked the yard-care men
to clear it up; and left town again, assuming that the tree
would be gone, and I'd merely own a lawn, But when

I returned, the remnant tree remained, now shorn
of broken bits; smaller, but still standing where she'd stood.
Had the crew got me wrong — or had they understood
Grandmother Tree — and me — better than I could?



overlooking an ancient theatre

Peter Tacu

Oh, we know how those stories turned out — the old stories,
played here today, or yesterday, or perhaps forever;
of kings and goddesses; terrible hatreds; and their awful outcomes.
Always the same result: fate encountered; fate defied, no matter whether
foreseen or not; a chorus turning this way and that, in pained confusion;
reprieve denied, always and absolutely, yet grieved for all along.

At some moment, we always realize these stories are not theirs,
but ours: simple family stories, of wives, husbands, children, set to song;
stories told again and again, that we might temper futile hope
and forge the courage needed to live our days in the house of death,
where kings and the merest of men are pinned alike by unblinking fate.

And when the masks are set aside, and the players again draw normal breath;
and we all walk away in pedestrian silence; the sound of that last chorus
lingers in our ears, a sound oncoming, then ebbing, like the moving sea
surrounding us all, binding us each in the chains of our mortality
as we each seek to find the name of our particular destiny.



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cherry blossoms

Jasper Glen

Am I called to be a popstar
 Lighter than cola? Another
 Skinny brown girl, hair dyed
 Neon at the parlour. An initiation
 Of purple; a perk, a shade or two
 Darker than spring halts;
 embarrassment
 In the park; a mallberry lipsmacking?
 If I could preach- cherry blossoms:
 The holiness of their pink heads.
 A complex of bell towers.
 Am I called to set a choir off
 Of us down the street, paralleling
 The row of new townhomes?
 Quiet and transient. Japanese
 Syllables. Twisted torsos. Uprooting
 Early heads of cauliflower;
 Coiled buds, now snow leopards.
 Sprigs, white lumens fleeing the top
 Of the head, a full colander of
 Flowers, letting go; a personal
 Bomb, on a sunny eve'; sarcastic,
 Because of the death total.
 Thousands of buds on a single tree.
 Each of them an orphanage.



in some pondweeds

Jasper Glen

In some Pondweeds the water surface
 Lives at a level of about this depth

Or even below the water surface
 As in some other Pondweeds

Once at the surface the flowers
 Open into boat-shaped lobes

Buds detach themselves as
 So many divers, migrant bubbles

The buds carried safely upwards
 From the base of the leaves

If the floats touch a female
 Flower is pulled to the plant base

By the spiral coiling of the stem.



ache

Wayne Burke

I left the ballgame with
stomach ache, and
walked off the field
with Gramp, his
hand on my shoulder:
“You must have patience,
my boy,” he said.
I did not need advice—
Grandma gave more than
enough—
I did need the hand on
my shoulder though (something
Grandma never gave).
My stomach ached for days.
Gramp drove me to the hospital
in the big city.
I lay on the examination table
on top the crinkly paper—
a young man doctor told me
to roll over.
After he pulled my pants down
I pulled them back up.
“I have to look,” he said,
his face red.
“Let him,” Gramp said,
his face red also...
On the ride home
Gramp told me that
I had worms.
The windshield wipers beat in time
so what
so what
“how did I get worms?”
“from something you ate.”
I thought of things I had eaten
as rain
smeared the windshield and
the wipers picked up the tempo:
tough luck
tough luck
tough luck.



autobio

Wayne Burke

I was born in '54
in a house next door
to an INN
my grandfather owned.

Lodged in an upstairs room
of my grandparent's home
I was displayed
like a family jewel
to relatives
who came like blue moons'—
twice a year.

My brother, who
lay miles away
across our room
had a fight one night
with pink elephants—
his cries brought light
overhead like the sun.

My crib a castle, then
a cage.
The heraldic pattern of the floor
rug
confabulation of dust motes
in sun beams;
silky white curtains flew up
like arms
during storms.
The floor creaked and
groaned.

A bogeyman lived in the closet
of moth ball smells—
ghosts lived in the attic
where the clothes and furniture
of my dead parents
was stored.



coast starlight, december

Anthony Robinson

Stoned to the gills on pills on this train,

each hermetic car stamped with a sell-by
date, each aging rubber-lined door
a hollowed out niche in an Advent calendar,
each sterile stop a mistletoed transom,
each strange traveler kissed by an urge
known or unknown. In another poem,
in another mother's belly, one might
say we are, all of us, hurtling,
or hurting toward home or an idea of it.

Back in Sacramento, two middle-aged
men in Santa hats converged in half-
embrace and the angel Gabriel intoned,
his angel lips pressed flesh to flesh,
directly to the virgin's gutted human
shell, something about salvation, and how
the body only carries a body. We don't
know things; we can't care here: it's cold.

Car Fourteen has miracles--a rusty carapace packed loose
with snores and sweat, discarded packets,
once-dreams now stony obligations.
To sleep this all away would be a comfort
now. The doves, they all are dirty, carbon-
smudged and crenellated, blown apart
and peace on Earth is not a wall
but a shower curtain. But: a crumpled

woman, barely buoyed by the midwife's
hand, first shits herself then the barest bit
of blood pinks the water. It was a long
time ago, a winter a lot like this, a birth,
a coming more a clanking than a blessing.
No savior here and no time. I was there.

Return to what thou lovest best, or a mess,
a memory. Mountains and telephone
wires mark the time now. When this
train stops, it's half-past Christmas, where
a child is opaque then rises; feathers, rivets,
rusting spikes, and oil-slicked gravel
are what we've gotten by on. Into
the open air it's all skunk and juniper now.

Mother has prepared a roast, some singing.
Earth somehow insists itself upon us.
Goodwill, Goodwill. Southern Pacific,
Northern Star. Conductor's hat. Brass tacks.

And the child, the child is still missing.



morning poem for dana

Anthony Robinson

Strawberry jam, double bass: this is love:
Belief to highest parapets, the plosives,
The release. One must have a certain
Janky faith: these damning statements rust.

Explanations come hard and slow, open:
We can only change the what we are
The how we dids and whos. You foment
Love and secrets to my open head.

You make an opening: I drive a lorry through it.





medium rare privileged
Kami Leigh Trushaw

entertainment from the dead

Kevin Ridgeway

the people on my friend's television
in sitcom reruns from the 1960s
are high definition technicolor corpses,
the canned laughter a false joy
of dead people, the gags unfunny
and the plots cliched in teleplays
written by overpressured hacks.
I used to watch these shows
growing up, and dreamed one
day I'd be on one but now
I'm relieved not to be preserved
like an artifact to be scrutinized
by lazy couch potatoes,
imprisoned by syndication,
a ghost trapped in character.



straight out of central casting

Kevin Ridgeway

He's a 74-year old washed-up Howdy Doody,
wooden skin carved into wrinkles after
a lifetime of smoking, drinking and drugging.
He mumbles the obscure jokes of a demented,
red faced goon. His mustache dances
in between his nicotine yellow fingernails
while he laughs into his hands, stifled sneeze
drool rests on his chin next to a large mole,
a curly hair growing out of it an old crackwhore
bites out with her dentures at lunch. Staff sees
it, but they don't care. In group therapy, his
favorite topic is his dubious claim of having
been a tenured rocket scientist at Boeing who
designed the jetpack man used to travel to Mars.
One of many reasons why he is on strings and
doesn't pull them. You'd think a woodchipper
had gotten around to him by now, but his
ventriloquist genetics keep him upright
in a cigarillo lipped smoke cloud haze
until his long-running show is canceled.



faults

Zach Murphy

You were born into chaos before it became your shadow. You learned that your first heartbreak didn't unequivocally break you, it just prepared you for the future. You wondered why the stars preferred not to be seen, then you understood them for retreating behind the shroud. You longed as your dreams danced in the distance, only to taunt you in your sleep. You witnessed things burn because there was no other way. You witnessed things burn because there should have been another way. You felt your soul splash, sink, and swirl, like a tear that gets lost in a storm. And still, the mountains patiently breathed.



soft porn ornithology

Daniel Edward Moore

Since dominance
chose a silhouette

of blue feathers
left by a wingless boy

to carry the memory
of one last flight,

tenderness wept
like a schoolyard girl,

brittle as a bird's
sun bleached bones

that kept the hair
from hiding her face

beneath joy, she wore
like a nest, like a crown.





raintree
Amylane Duncan

the painter's eye

Michael Washburn

The noise from the café down the street bothered Travis much less tonight, and the cat hid in the depths of the dark apartment. The pet often got frisky, making it hard to focus, but now the conditions for painting were close to ideal. Gazing at the canvas before him, Travis felt grateful for the use of his friend's place, though when distractions vanished, so did any excuses for failing to complete work on time.

Travis felt sure he could finish his portrait of a young woman, if not tonight then the next night. He would call his contact at the gallery in the ritzy neighborhood and have a chat, and then with a sense of pride amble down the street and have drinks at that café where wild talk went on into the small hours of the night until the owner kicked the patrons out. The café was popular with a pretentious expatriate crowd. Travis guessed the owner could write a thesis on Gramsci or Gerratana or some of the odder postmodernists based on all he overheard. But as the night wore on the patrons tended to express themselves with less coherence. Maybe they came to this city for fashion week and the shows and galleries, but they had to settle their arguments about the history of the world and the meaning of life even if it meant drawing screams from residents of the street. The working men and women leaned out their windows to curse the rude Americans and Canadians.

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He did not visit the café often but the conversation he wanted to hear would be about the creative process. Those who found themselves stymied in their drawing or painting or writing or whatever might pick up wisdom from an artist who grasped what Harlan Ellison once said in an interview: that you should not expect an easy time. It is so much reclusive effort with no promise of any reward, and the toughest part may well be at the outset as you struggle with the grand design. It is a slog. This wisdom had helped sustain Travis through many lonely hours. Still, he knew how petty his struggles were in the scheme of things. How absent from his life were the drama and heft that a reader finds in the pages of Hemingway. He never matched his artistic pretensions with heroic action.

Slowly but surely the profile of the young woman edged along. How he yearned to capture a bit of that exquisiteness in the ordinary and everyday with which Bonnard's name was synonymous. This work was not a nude but a profile of a brunette in her twenties. He dwelt with care on the cheeks, trying to make them full but not too full. Working at a slower pace than usual, he rounded out the left cheek and wondered whether to add density to the eyebrows or leave them as they were.

The smell of paint was strong and it had come to feel stuffy in here. He set down his brush on the easel, walked to the window, and pulled it open, allowing a wind to flow inside, as welcome for the memories it evoked as for its delicious cool. For a Thursday night the street was quiet indeed. The café was having a slow evening, never mind all he had heard about the wild talk, the theories that would make Fourier, with his plan to turn the seas to lemonade, look trite by comparison.

Travis reminded himself that he was at a nice juncture, what with a show opening here in this fashion capital the next week, plus lots of material in mind for new canvases, and few people were so lucky as to have a friend as kind as Gerald, the college buddy who had agreed to let Travis stay here for free while romping around Scotland. When Gerald came back to the big boot, Travis might get to hang around another week or two if lucky.

Having worked hard for a couple of hours, he got so tired that when the cat, Claudia, bounded up the floor behind him, he at first did not process what was afoot. Then he looked just in time to see her leap up to the sill and dash right out the window. Just as he watched this happen, Gerald's request never to let the kitty go out for any reason flashed through his mind. There were few firm rules, yet Travis had been careless enough to flout one of them.

Cursing himself, he found his keys and ran out into the street. The air was cold and the moon was full. In the lamplight he saw a furry blur turn a corner and dart up a narrower, perpendicular street, heading west. He called Claudia's name, ran halfway down the block, dashed up the tight street between rows of stone buildings with no lights in their windows. He did not see her.

Travis told himself he was an idiot, a kid in a man's body. Gerald loved that cat! If he did not find her fast, the rest of his stay in this city would be an ordeal. The friendship would be ruined, Gerald would rightly kick him out, he would have no workspace, word of his woes might mar the opening. It would be hell.

He ran west thinking he was likely to wake the people of this quiet street, here in this country where it was well to be on your best behavior; where everyone remembered the deaths that U.S. servicemen caused in an Alps accident, flying over a valley and severing a lift's cables.

Then he saw the cat again in the penumbra of light from one of the lamps. Claudia appeared briefly confused, and just when he thought she might prove susceptible to his coaxing, turned and ran further up the street before making a sharp left.

Travis cursed again. Maybe she had entered the space between two buildings and might now be cornered in there. When he arrived, huffing, panting, at the spot where she had turned, he saw that for an artist he had had a poor visual sense of things. There was no alley or any gap between the buildings. No, Claudia had gone in through the open window of a dark ground-floor flat much like the one she had fled.

The artist saw no good options. If he doubled back to try to get into the lobby and begin shouting and ringing buzzers, the cat might slip out and run off into the night, ending all hope of finding her. Travis had to act now, make the leap, corner her while he knew where she was.

With a look up and down the street, he stepped over the ledge and entered the dark space. He called out, stating he was just looking for a cat, no cause for alarm. Only now did the preposterousness of his actions hit home. Whoever lived here would have legal and moral grounds to shoot him.

In growing panic, he called out again. In the near-total dark, he could just barely discern the form of a tall cabinet on the left side of the room and what might have been a bookcase on the right, mocking him the way that inanimate things do when you are drunk and stupid and need

affirmation from the world but know you have brought on something awful. Once more he called out the cat's name and begged all who heard him not to take alarm.

And then light filled the room, so sudden and brilliant it hurt his eyes. But he could not look away. The woman in a chair before the tall double doors wore a blue slip with silver fringes, its darkness accentuating the paleness of her flesh, the purity of the acorn hue of her medium-length hair combed straight back and tied into an elegant bun at the base of her neck. A few strands dangled over her forehead, furthering the contrast between the pale skin and the realms of dark brown. Her thin brows curved slyly around the penumbras of eyes of an easy blue, the color of a lake where you might languish on a July afternoon.

Travis wanted to laugh at the turn of events that had brought him here and the absurdity of the scenario. It was a crude masturbatory fantasy, one that answered too facilely to his inarticulate needs for him to take it seriously.

Yet here he was. There, six feet away on the bare wood floor, looking up at him, stood the cat. He felt a sudden release from the fear of never seeing the animal again. The warm pleasant company of which she partook dispelled any thought of flight, it allayed her anxiety no less than his own.

The woman regarded him with curiosity but no evident fear. This was her place, only she knew what lurked in its unseen corners. He thought of bolting but the urge passed surprisingly fast and he decided he had no better option than to tell this stranger what happened from the moment the cat darted out of Gerald's flat. His Italian was poor, but what he lacked in fluency he made up for in passionate theatricality, pointing, gesticulating, waving to make a point. The woman listened patiently with something close to serenity, and it felt like an act of divine munificence when she smiled as he voiced his dilemma at that moment when the cat entered this space and he was hard put to guess the least terrible option.

When he finished, he stood there trembling in the bold light, the scrutiny from the two other beings, expecting an outburst of righteous anger, a reproach, or a threat that she might proceed to make good on here and now. If she called the *carabinieri*, she would be doing what he would do without hesitation if a stranger came blundering into Gerald's flat. If she called a friend to beat him to death with a hammer, he had little right to protest. But she was a picture of poise. Right away he resented himself for framing the stranger in such visual terms, making her an outgrowth of his processes, his ways of thinking, when he was the one who had done something not just socially unacceptable but illegal and should probably get down on his knees right now.

He clasped his hands and began to kneel in supplication. With a smile she made a gesture for him to stand still. When at last she spoke, he thought that in the circumstances no normal person could evince such calm. He found it odd but again, he knew the burden was on him to show fairness and objectivity here. She was not the stranger in this scenario, he was. Her voice was calm as the waters of a pond he had visited on one of the few weekends when he could bring himself to get out of this center of finance and culture.

The woman told him that she found his willingness to take such a risk for a cat quite moving, especially if it was not even his pet. She conceded that as a foreigner it was possible he had no idea how trigger-happy some of the residents of this street were or how their jealousy of

their privacy had manifested itself in recent months. People kept to themselves and surely he was not immune to the same instinct. Travis had to agree as he thought of all the solitary hours in Gerald's flat, the canvases drying as he sat in a chair sipping wine and the cat lapped water in her bowl or went belly-up. These reflections grew out of what he liked to believe to be a unique self-schemata, and what she said next amazed him. She sensed that he was an artist and this seemingly random and accidental encounter answered the needs of that self-schemata more directly and eloquently than anything he could have hoped for in the light of conscious deliberation. For a moment Travis felt too stunned to speak. Then he found the courage to answer that, yes, he found her beautiful and now that this experience had happened it was impossible for him not to think of her or to imagine his time here in this city without the incident.

The woman, whose name was Natalia, was more than a little curious about this American naif, and if he would do her the courtesy of taking the cat and turning around and leaving promptly, with a vow to knock next time he came around, then she just might be open to the prospect of seeing him again in a public place.

When they met on the terrace of a café on the weekend, he tried as best he could to explain that he was so jealous of Gerald's goodwill because, at this juncture, everything he hoped to do or become as a painter depended on having space here in the city to spread his wings artistically, study, contemplate, make art in a space he got to use for free. Natalia sat across the ivory table from him looking exquisite in her silver and violet blouse and her necklace of luminous ovals of a startling purple with flecks of teal. So pale was her skin that he imagined the landlord of that place he had entered was a vampire who drew rent in the only form that mattered to him. In this communion with her the din of the street, the horns and chatter and cries of the activists and beggars, were like effluvia of a newsreel from a distant age.

He was here, in this café, sipping his macchiato and gazing into the eyes of the kind stranger. Few questions could have been more awkward, but he made himself ask why she was nice to him when she had grounds to destroy his life if she chose. Natalia replied that she sensed in him something more than the vulgar lust she received so often from men, that she could see the genuineness of his interest along with a complex psychology, one that posited the need to find the cat as the reason for doing something wild when other explanations might be plausible. Natalia could tell an artist from those who dignified themselves with the term. Hemingway he was not. But he had yet to tell her that his eye was so fine, his hand so exact, that he used to train police marksmen to make cash on the side. Maybe she could help him be the visionary he yearned to be, while he in turn could help her. You could go through your life dismissing possibilities as outlandish, that is what most people do. She wondered what might flower in that endangered, evanescent space where you reason differently.

Natalia believed that the most beautiful art flourished in moments of surprise, of spontaneity. Travis, the obsessive planner, thought he just might come to see the truth of her view.

One of the most productive periods of Travis's career began on the evening after the meeting in the café. Natalia was at the apartment for ten straight nights, posing or sitting perfectly still in the bright space between the easel and the wall. On the other side of that wall, an elderly conservative couple might be sitting at a table enjoying tea and talking over the news of the day. In this borrowed space, Travis stared at the sleek limbs and the soft curves of the

body before him and pushed with all his mental force for immersion in what he observed, annihilation of the bonds between artist and subject. Never before had he grasped the demands of verisimilitude as he did now. Sometimes they talked about school and travel and literature and life, at others she sat quietly and adjusted her position when he signaled that he wanted a new angle on a curve or contour, and that was the extent of even their nonverbal interaction. He could have talked about Calvino and Svevo and Pavese and Montale, but he guessed that this cultivated woman knew vastly more about these subjects than he did and it would be clear that he sought to impress her with his amateur knowledge based on brief readings undertaken just before leaving for Europe. He had thoughts on Ezra Pound and that poet's descent into madness, but the topic perplexed him more than it inspired him to share his insights.

Session followed session and he completed a series of canvases with an efficiency that startled them both. As they sat on the café's terrace, watching people on their way home from work in the evening, and sipped wine and talked of this and that, he marveled to himself at that efficiency and thought he knew of no higher compliment he could pay her. In the crowd below it was hard not to notice the growing number of members of that odious class, the paparazzi. The week when the stylish and preening from around the world went on display would soon be here and the gallery would present Travis's new and selected works in an exhibit timed for high exposure. Natalia sipped her fine Toscana, looked into his eyes, and laughed with a hint of defiance. Their sessions should go on, she said. Of course people might wonder why a strange woman was at the flat so often. If someone asks, just say we are dating or you found a temporary roommate to split the rent with. Travis said he was not paying Gerald any money. She smiled again.

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For Travis the discussion raised more questions than it answered about her past and her personal life. But she had business to take care of and did not want to see him again until fashion week.

When it got going, you were liable to forget the city you knew. They came up every street and avenue, the fashionistas. They crowded the stores and cafés and squares and awed the people-watchers with the care they had invested in the choosing of collars and cuffs and frills and the combinations and wild *mélanges* of colors, teal on lavender, scarlet on sleet, mauve on navy blue, silver on magenta, rust or copper on milk-white, and of course everything goes with black, and the matching of shirts and jerseys with coal-black or business-gray jackets and vests and coats and scarves. Necklaces and watches glittered cavalierly in the pale late-morning light. Bulgari, Rigards, Cartier shades were not affectations or vain adornments but symbols of the knowing ostentation, the defiant splendor, or in Veblen's phrase, the conspicuous consumption that lent this event its charm.

As Travis walked among these people, he knew that to feel inadequate in his chinos and sweater was to evince class strivings and anxieties that should have been beneath him, but he felt like going along with the game. He admired them and welcomed their scorn.

After lunch Travis stopped by the gallery. The director welcomed Travis at the door and said he was delighted to introduce a new phase of the artist's work to the world. If Travis came back in the evening, the director said, he might have trouble finding any staff amid the throngs of stylishly dressed people holding aloft their glasses of chilled Barbera. Travis said normally he would stop by but not this evening. The director's eyes told him he need not elaborate. Having seen the paintings, the proprietor knew Travis was onto something.

Not yet ready to head back to the flat, Travis found a spot on a bench just a bit off the beaten path, sat down, and lit a cigarette. He studied the mannequins in a department store window and reflected that soon he could afford to dress better, amusing given the blunt pragmatism he had always shown toward clothes. Just look okay, don't worry. As he sat smoking and taking in the necklaces and watches of the mannequins, those intimations of generic personality, a man in a dark brown blazer with thick black hair and ruddy skin sat down beside him on the bench. A leather satchel hung from one shoulder on a thin strap.

The stranger smiled with no mirth. He said something Travis had heard before, that he had a sense Travis was an artist, then went on to describe his own amateur interest in art and his wish that he could be a pro. Travis smiled politely, thinking this must be false modesty. As if on cue, the stranger opened his satchel and took out a clothbound book. The man was really not very good, he repeated to Travis, but he practiced often in the hope of getting better. He opened it to a random page and showed Travis what was there.

All Travis saw was a red ink and charcoal drawing, loud, crude, blurry. Then he gathered that the stranger wanted him to keep looking, he would see more if he kept at it. Slowly Travis began to discern oblong forms in the red, realizing he was looking at an image of mangled, dismembered bodies in a big room. The stranger let him take his time before flipping to the next page. Here was the image of a brutish, ugly olive-skinned man with his eyes gouged out and the parody of a grin on his swollen face. On the next page lay a row of corpses like victims of a mass execution, and the page after that presented Travis with an image of someone hanging upside down on a hook like Mussolini.

Feeling nauseous, Travis groped for things to say about work in which he could see little talent. He asked the stranger why the subject of the second image wore a grin. The other flashed a smile of his own and said the man with gouged eyes grinned because he knew that hell could hold no worse torments than what he had been through. Travis laughed awkwardly, though he did not find it the least bit funny. He tried to think of how to excuse himself, wanting to be polite even as he knew the stranger meant to threaten him. He wondered what Hemingway would do.

The stranger said his name was Pietro, adding that he knew where Travis lived from having observed the painter on the street. Saying he had an engagement, doubting that the name just given was real, Travis rose. The stranger nodded and reiterated his desire to make it in the art world, saying there were traditions and tendencies among artists here in the city that he hoped would fade and die out and he, Pietro, was just the man to make it happen. Travis wished him luck before hurrying off.

When he shared everything with Natalia, she came out and acknowledged that she had a jilted boyfriend. Travis said she must know the danger she had put him in, though he did not love her any less for it. Natalia said there could be no question of ending their sessions now. He said they would both die. No, she said, they would go to a friend's studio that evening and then she would share with him the address of another friend, in the south of the country, whom Natalia had not seen for years but who owed her a rather large favor. She would take care of the cat. Travis wanted to know who Pietro was. She said only that the stranger who had sat down next to Travis and shown him the images was not her former beau but an associate. The jilted lover was powerful and secretive and used others as pawns or as fodder. When Travis began to

28 speak again, she shut him up. Would his actions have been different if he knew of the risk they incurred, she asked. He was silent. They both knew the answer.

The train ride to the south of the country would have been pleasant in most circumstances. Finding it slow, Travis kept looking at his watch or at passing faces in the aisle. Outside the land was sodden after heavy rain that the cities up north had largely avoided. Cows and horses milled around in fields as Travis put away cup after cup of coffee while insisting to himself this was the course to take. When the train arrived at the town in the south, he quickly got out, found a cab, and asked the driver to take him halfway to the farm where his hosts awaited him. He walked and hitched rides most of the rest of the way.

Martina greeted him in a damp lane a kilometer out from the farm. As they walked, she told him he must dispense with any romantic clichés about meeting an Italian girl and finding love in a rustic part of the country as rain pattered on a thatched roof. He laughed uneasily and said that if she knew the circumstances of his arrival here, she would not worry about that. She assured him she did know why her mother, Natalia's old friend, had agreed to let him stay here. Something in her manner was off, he thought. She did not like him or did not get what Natalia saw in him. Maybe there was little he could do to change that. His real concern was her loyalty and that of others in the family.

The talk over the dinner table in the farmhouse was polite and guarded. Martina's two brothers, Paolo and Mario, and her parents, Lorenzo and Gabriella, told the visitor, or as he thought of himself, the interloper, about life on the farm and the highly active cats likely to make their way into the attic they had taken pains to fix up for him. The parents were older than Travis had expected. Paolo said their neighbors would think they were trafficking Albanian refugees and the family had a laugh. The boys drank the red wine as if chasing every scrap of pleasure from it. Travis had noticed the big guns on the walls. He felt tempted to drink with the same abandon but feared the dulling of his senses. The daughter studied him knowingly from across the table as if she relished his shyness and anxiety.

Lying in bed in the attic, he nearly leapt up in alarm at the noise of the trapdoor snapping open. It had begun to rain hard again and anything, anything at all, could have come to pass outside the farmhouse. He thought of Hemingway.

Martina came and sat on the edge of the bed. She said that, Paolo's humor aside, he was not the first person on the run to have stayed in this farmhouse. Not only that, but he was not the only fugitive artist her parents had hosted. She preempted his bewildered reaction by proceeding to tell him a story about the weeks after the war. A German soldier, seeking to evade the Allied liberators moving through the countryside, had stayed here just long enough to show Lorenzo and Gabriella a few of the sketches he had made of the aftermath of the Allied bombing raids in and around Hamburg. He had a book filled with images of burning cities, streets strewn with blackened limbs, heaps of asphyxiated corpses, the mouth of a metro station jammed with the bodies of those who could not get out. Travis asked what they did with the fugitive. There were those in the area who wanted to kill him, Martina said, but they ended up handing him over to a patrol.

She liked to tell that story. But of more potential concern to Travis, Martina said, was the neighbor who had lost two cousins in the incident where an American jet streaking through the

Alps severed the cables of a lift, sending all the passengers plummeting to their deaths. Some people around here really hated Americans. He thought her words contained a threat. Whom in the world to fear most was a quandary. Then Martina disclosed that one of her brothers had vented for hours over many glasses of wine about that horrific incident. It was not well to count on his loyalty, he might gladly betray an American in hiding. But she would not say which brother, Mario or Paolo.

Over the next three days, he barely left the attic except to dine or help with the cleaning and play cards with the boys or listen to the radio in the living room for a bit. At times Martina gazed at him quizzically as if she wanted him to let her in on the plan. There was no plan save for Natalia to come down to meet him at a secret point from which they would head off to Morocco together. She would have all her savings with her and all she had been able to borrow from friends. They would live together in secrecy for a while as they tried to make long-term arrangements. Of course he could not reveal any of this to Martina.

He wished Natalia would show up, because in a part of his mind he thought these people meant to kill him. A representative of the very power responsible for the deaths of the neighbor's cousins and for so many other horrors through history should not be here. He wondered what in the world Natalia could have been thinking.

The rains abated and Lorenzo asked to enlist the guest in a small project. The barn at the other end of the property had bad water damage and needed to have a rotting wall replaced.

They trekked across the field in a gathering drizzle. No sooner had they gotten to work than Paolo whistled to them from the muddy yard. Travis understood that they were to come running immediately and be assigned weapons and hiding places. He wanted to laugh out loud as he wondered how many preposterous turns a person's life can take in the space of a few days. Here was a scenario like the climax of that Peter Weir movie *Witness*, where corrupt cops from the city invade an Amish farm seeking to pick off an informant, or the scene in David Cronenberg's *Scanners* where assassins move in on a clairvoyant's rural hideout. At the same time, he felt the weight of an unredeemed history crushing him, mutilating his soul, and it felt like an impertinence to wonder whether he was safe from his supposed defenders.

But he did wonder.

The brothers gave him an old carbine and stuck him in a ditch at the front of the property before retreating to posts high up on the roofs of the house and barn, respectively. Though Paolo had shown him how to hold, aim, and fire the weapon, he thought more of his own counsel to police cadets than of the training he had received here in this muddy place.

As he struggled to hold up the rusting weapon, he remembered his own joke from the other day, that this was the very gun used to shoot deserters in the mud in the grimmest scene of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

The drizzle continued to fleck his head and forearms as he peered over the crest of the ditch and saw six figures approach the gate up ahead. If not quite candidates for fashion week, they were stylishly dressed in suits, long raincoats, and caps, and they carried with total assurance weapons that looked heavy. Automatics. As his finger tightened around the rusty mechanism

above the carbine's grip, he recalled the warnings of the boys. Jump the gun, we all die. So he waited, thinking that if he had relieved himself earlier his crotch would not now be damp, but events had chosen that bodily reaction in a way he never could himself when he did not actually have to piss.

He could barely stand under the weight of the past, the unanswered history. At any moment a report would come in the cruddy mist above him and his head would blow open and he, not the invaders, would receive justice. Or so he thought until the party got within ten yards of the ditch and the sky behind Travis erupted with a cacophony of blasts and booms and three of the men screamed and fell to their knees, clutching pieces of themselves in their reddened hands.

Another blast took the head off the rear member of the party. The other two returned fire with their shotguns, squeezing and cocking furiously like onanism on steroids, and Travis heard pieces of the barn and house shatter and the curses of the boys. He aimed the carbine carefully at Pietro's head, paused to recalibrate, and fired. The headless man staggered backward and fell onto his back as the last member of the party of six tried to surrender, came apart in a hail of bullets, and fell.

As he studied the scene before him, he thought these might well be his last moments on earth and release from the burden of an unresolved history would on one level be most welcome. But it seemed the brothers, who could have accidentally shot him any time they pleased, recognized the impossibility of tidiness and the need to give space to great, sometimes blundering campaigns that served a higher spiritual purpose. Travis dropped the weapon, wiped sweat from his brow, and struggled to stand up in the muddy ditch.





mark's sweater
Jordan Veres

letter to stan rosenberg

Andrew Varnon

Andrew Varnon
Greenfield, MA
May 3, 2018

Senator Stan Rosenberg
District Office
Northampton, MA

Dear Senator Stan Rosenberg,

One March night in 2004, I bought you a Manhattan. It was after the second session of the Constitutional Convention on same-sex marriage. It had been a long, long day. I was a writer at the *Valley Advocate* then and had come to Boston to cover the convention for the paper. That was a pretty big deal. Reporters from our end of the state don't travel to Boston much to cover stories. Newsrooms don't have the money for expenses, and it's cheaper to rely on wire services.

I rode the bus back the next day and banged out a "reporter's notebook" story on deadline, a story of which I was pretty proud. It got picked up by a couple of our sister papers in what was then an Advocate chain that ran down into Connecticut.

I had wandered around the festival atmosphere of Beacon Hill that day, taking in the protesters and street theater, and getting lucky enough to draw a number into the gallery to watch the proceedings from the cat bird's seat. When we met afterwards, you helped me understand the legislative strategy going on, the coalitions that had formed, the maneuvering that had gone on. I was able to undergird the observations I had made in my notebook from up in the gallery with your understanding from the floor.

You had helped to lead a coalition of liberal legislators, working on the floor to try to outmaneuver then-Senate President Travaligni and then-House Speaker Finneran to dash an effort to re-write the Massachusetts Constitution in the wake of the *Goodridge* decision by the Supreme Judicial Court that had allowed same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. Opinion on same-sex marriage has made a sea change since then, but what happened in Massachusetts was a pivotal moment. It's true that same-sex marriage first came to Massachusetts by way of the courts, but that decision was successfully defended in the legislature against a Constitutional rollback. It showed that legislators could stand up for same-sex marriage and they wouldn't get voted out of office. That led the way for other states to go the legislative route.

One thing that stuck with me about that day was hearing the singing from the pro-Same-Sex-Marriage advocates who had set up shop in the hallway outside the chambers. They were standing there, with all of the iconic mural paintings depicting liberty, equality and other capital letter virtues of our democratic society behind them, and they were singing unifying songs. You could hear them from inside the gallery when the doors opened, and they were there when you walked out in the hall. I remember them being a broad cross-section of people from around

the state, and they were happy and positive and inclusive and I thought: those are my people. The vision of the state they're singing about? That's the state I want to live in.

I have to admit, perhaps showing how little I knew, that I didn't know that you were gay at the time. I found out later. But you weren't the public face of the liberal coalition like Jarret Barrios was. I remember that you told me you were reading the book about Lyndon Johnson, *Master of the Senate*. I thought I might go on to do more writing about state politics. I did cover stories at the Advocate about Salvatore DiMasi's rise to the speakership and about Deval Patrick's run for governor. But then a funny thing happened at the Tribune Company, and due to a leveraged buyout by a private equity guy looking to make a quick buck, a call went out across all of the holdings (which then included the *Advocate* chain, through their corporate parent, the *Hartford Courant*) for reductions in payroll. I was hit in that round of layoffs.

So I didn't get to cover the Patrick administration. And I wasn't in the newsroom when you later ascended to the Senate President job. Instead, my wife and I bought a house in Greenfield. We actually signed the purchase and sale on it first, then I was let go from my job. We started a family and I got part-time work teaching at Western New England University. It's been convenient, because I've been a part-time stay-at-home dad for my two kids.

But I remember that conversation now. I think you offered to buy me my hamburger at that bar across the street from the State House. My understanding of journalistic ethics was that I couldn't let you buy me a meal, but I could buy you a drink. So that's what I remember happening. How you weren't hungry at that point – the convention had gone on past midnight – I don't know.

I have followed your career from a distance. I'm not going to pretend that I know anything about your personal life except what I've read in the papers. I'm sorry to hear about the scandal involving your husband Bryon Hefner, and I think it's a shame that your relationship and its effect on your responsibilities may cost you not only your position in the Senate leadership, but may fuel a call for you to resign from politics. I always tell people how those ascendancy struggles in the legislature are fascinating, because there is so much interpersonal power politicking going on that is so opaque to the outside observer. It might as well be white smoke coming out of the palace at the Vatican.

For what it's worth, you have always been a model to me of a politician who fights tirelessly for a positive version of a government that works for the people. I remember you giving a speech in a high school gymnasium where you were reminding people about the public virtue of taxes. It wasn't sexy and people probably didn't want to hear it, but you stood up for the basic ideals of a democracy. I remember that.

If I have a point to writing you this letter, it's just to say that the work you've done hasn't been forgotten. I want you to know that I still tell people the story about how once I bought you a Manhattan, and I'm still proud to say it.

Sincerely,

Andrew Varnon

Author's note: Do you remember when the Senate President of the Massachusetts General Court was from Western Massachusetts? This is a letter that I wrote to former Senate President Stan Rosenberg, who resigned from office in the wake of a scandal involving his husband, Byron Hefner. Rosenberg was a true political talent, he was the kind of pol who would walk in a parade and seemingly pick you out on the sidewalk and wave just for you. He was also one of the best articulators of liberal and progressive values that I ever heard on the stump. But he was short and balding and not a great orator, so I think he was underappreciated. When I went to Boston in 2004 to cover the second session of the Constitutional Convention on same-sex marriage in the wake of the Goodridge decision, I found our senator very much in the thick of the fight to preserve the Goodridge decision, bucking the leadership of both the house and the senate (yes, both nominally Democrats). I wrote him this letter six years ago, and he never responded. But as I reflect now in the wake of the 2024 election, with an LGBTQ governor and a Boston mayor of color trading barbs with an incoming reality TV wannabe dictator, I think it's important for us to remember how we got here, and what our points of light have been. I think it's important that we remember people like Stan Rosenberg.



inflated

Thomas Reed Willemain

Thomas Reed Willemain
20 June 2024

Restless in the pre-dawn dark,
he gave himself a free, six a.m.
get-out-of-bed card.

No special honor in that,
though it boosted his self-image
as a real Hard Charger.

He knew it was a safe move really,
since a secret morning nap
would have him up and around

for the next Big Moment of the day
(often called "lunch"
by those lacking his Strategic Vision).

Later, during the Big Moment,
he waited for acolytes to join him
and ask how to accomplish Great Things.

Disappointed but undaunted,
he silently propounded great Worldly Wisdom
to a tuna on white with horseradish on the side.



antifa boy

Thomas Reed Willemain

I heard the call to action
but did not have the gear:
black shirt, helmet,
robber's mask with
eyes cut out to better
see the bastards.

I heard the call to action
but could not choose
my weapons.
Didn't Dad say
you never know
who's carrying?

I heard the call to action
but could not discern
what's best:
fist or ballot or
letter to editor.
Maybe I'm just a poser.

I heard a different call
a whisper 'bout love
but I will never roll that way:
that would mean forgiving
the cold black hearts of
of goddamn Proud Boys.

So I watched the fighting
on the news, or what was done
around the edges of the cops.
That's a game where the refs
take more of a beating
than the players.

We almost-Antifas --
I guess that's me --
just watch it on TV
waiting for the next match
in Chicago or LA
wherever rage can stage.



[Right-wing rally triggers skirmishes with antifa protesters as
D.C. police work to prevent violence. *Washington Post*. July 6, 2019.]

last hot dog on the left

Andrew Shreffo

Dean often dreamed of hot dogs, and his own death. Unlike his other recurring dream—flying, but not more than 8 feet off the ground—he knew the origin of this culinary dream: It was because his cardiologist told him after his surprise heart attack at 52 years old that hot dogs were “infarctions on a bun,” and if Dean kept eating them, he would die. That was fifteen years ago, and Dean immediately stopped eating hot dogs. And the dreams began.

How many hot dogs is too many hot dogs for a middle-aged man? Dean didn’t know the answer, and he didn’t bother trying to find out. He’d always assumed that he ate the average amount of hot dogs. Dean grew up in the Midwest, eating hot dogs. Boiled, broiled, fried, even raw, which was actually just cold, because he knew that hot dogs were “fully cooked,” according to the wording on the yellow-red-and-white packaging. Hot dogs were simple to make, cheap, filling, salty, and delicious. While he was growing up, they were a staple of his diet. That continued through college and into the early days of his teaching career, when he couldn’t afford much else. His consumption declined appropriately once he got older. They eventually became a favorite snack. One per week, Dean felt, was the correct answer to how many he ate. Sometimes two, on a good week. The cardiologist’s eye got wide when Dean told him that. Later, Dean figured out that the doctor was probably multiplying that number, because most people lied to their doctor.

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But Dean gave them up, cold turkey, along with every other kind of food that had glorious and flavorful amounts of salt and fat in them. He turned to salads and bland stews. And he took a perverse pride in what he gave up: he never felt more alive than when he denied himself a fatty, salty treat at a party, in front of other people. In that moment, he allowed himself to feel superior. But then he realized that no one else noticed or cared.

Intellectually, Dean knew that one hot dog probably wouldn’t kill him. But he also knew that he didn’t want to take that chance. But fifteen years was a long time to go without a hot dog.

And over those fifteen years, they took other things from him. First one hip, then the other. Most recently, they took a knee. They gave him replacements, of course, and praised the medical advancements, and called them “new,” but Dean missed the old. Not the pain, of course, but the feeling of being whole, without the need to deprive himself. But the surgeries left Dean feeling less-than-whole. He was losing small parts of himself, in different ways. The period of his life between 52 and 67 felt like an endless series of incidents where people took things from him. His wife divorced him. His kids came to him only when they needed money. And now his dentist was talking about taking out “a few” teeth.

In his dreams, he would eat a hot dog and feel full and satisfied. He’d never felt full after eating a salad. He couldn’t remember a time in the last fifteen years when he’d felt full. And then he’d wake up and feel empty again.

A retired teacher, Dean would sometimes still get invited to school-related gatherings. He didn’t visit the school anymore, because the last time he did, he saw a picture someone had pinned to the English Department bulletin board. It was an older picture, from that time a

famous author visited the school. The author was in the middle of the picture, wearing an attention-grabbing scarf that suited his personality. He was surrounded by the teachers in the department, all smiling in a starstruck way. Dean, too. Someone had placed a black X over Dean's face. A few other faces had Xs on them, too. All the X'd-out faces belonged to people who'd retired or otherwise moved on, so it made some sense? But Dean found it unsettling just how quickly and callously he could be X'd out and forgotten.

With no job, no wife, no kids, no responsibilities keeping him, Dean got into his car and drove two hours to the hot dog place he'd been following on Instagram. The place was small, with no place to sit. Counter service only. No credit cards accepted, only cash. But according to the reviews, it was a must-go place for hot dog connoisseurs. And Dean considered himself a connoisseur. After all, he'd once ridden in the Hot Dog Mobile that drove through his town every summer.

He got the special: two hot dogs covered with secret-recipe relish and ketchup and mustard. These were not ordinary hot dogs: they were deep fried until the casing on the hot dogs burst. They were called "rippers." Ten dollars, all the cash Dean had on him.

Dean walked back to his car, reminding himself to watch for icy spots in the parking lot because it had recently snowed and he couldn't tell what dangers lurked underneath the grey slush. They'd given him the hot dogs in a to-go container, and Dean could feel the warmth of the meal through the bottom. And the smell made his heart beat faster, while his stomach rumbled. Yin and yang at war in his body

He got to his car and unlocked the door. But he couldn't resist a quick peek before he slid into the driver's seat. He opened the lid and lowered his head and closed his eyes to let the aroma embrace him. Paradise. And then—then—he didn't know what happened. An imbalance—that's the only explanation Dean could figure out—tipped the to-go container, and the hot dogs tumbled out. Dean grabbed at the dogs on the way down, with no luck. They hit him in the crotch and left a greasy stain before landing in the slush next to his car.

He squatted down. He could do that now with the new hardware in his hips and knee. But now what? He was closer to the mess, but what could he do? He looked around. There were people, but no one was paying attention to him. He could surreptitiously scoop the mess back into the container and eat it later. He could! He could.

He couldn't, and he knew it. He waved his right hand over the mess, making the sign of the cross. He wiped his hands on his pants and got into the car. He drove away, mashing the hot dog and relish into the slush and into the treads of his tires. He drove away empty, broke, and alone, to dream about hot dogs and live another day.



the strange man

Daniel Steven Miller

The Strange Man

On April 10, 1911, the *Barre Daily Times*, reporting on the gathering of the Western Methodist Conference in Island Pond, Vermont, stated that "it is expected that... the Rev. L. N. Moody will seek a transfer to a western conference..." Probably because, his son Paul said seventy years later, ministers in the Midwest were paid a lot more than they were in Vermont. But Lewis was fragile. Paul said the nervous breakdown his father had suffered in 1900 might have been caused by overwork. "He was, especially as a young man, a high-strung man. He conquered that, more or less, as he grew older." Before the family could move, his trouble recurred. Lewis recuperated somewhat under a nurse's care in the Waterbury Center home of his aunt Sarah Carpenter. Then the family left.

"Mr. Moody's health is improving right along, and Paul is happy and well..." Paul's mother, Florence Lucinda (Tower) Moody, noted in a letter that the *Essex County Herald* published in September 1911. Land in Harris is "very valuable, and the soil is dark and rich," she wrote. "(W)hen we were coming through the state on the train Mr. Moody said he could see the reason for such large cattle here in the west... the grass is so heavy and high."

38 "What would you ladies think if you should wake up some morning, look out of your windows, and find that the hills and mountains had all disappeared? If you should find the whole state laid out in squares, one mile square, just like a checkerboard, with roads running both ways every mile, and a school house every two miles?... We have had some warm days, but the air is so dry, and there is always a breeze, so it is hard to realize as I sit sewing on the piazza that the thermometer is soaring possibly about the one hundred mark."

The flatness of the terrain, and the heat, Paul Moody recalled, "just got to Mother. She'd always been a Vermont girl... she was used to having jagged skylines and consequently, why, it was just too much for her."

Florence was admitted into what was then called a sanatorium near Des Moines. The move was not helpful.

"She was a very good preacher's wife in that she was used to listening to people -- parishioners -- telling you their troubles, and so on, and advising and acting as a counselor," Paul said. "She got down in that environment with so many people that were having problems and they all apparently sensed the kind of person she was. She got very emotionally involved in the lives and problems of the other patients in the sanitarium, and it was just wearing her out."

To help Florence recover the Moodys removed to the Christian Colony of southwest Florida, founded by the Rev. Dr. George F. Hall, a con artist, bigot and nationally known author and

speaker whose commentaries had been printed in newspapers in Chicago and far afield for at least ten years. The pastor at the Bush Temple of Music in Chicago neither called himself a eugenicist nor preached the tenet of early 20th-century negative eugenics which held that society improves to the extent that would-be mothers of the “unfit” are sterilized, thereby removing deleterious genes from the gene pool. However, like every eugenicist at the beginning of the century, he held strong notions of what made ideal men and women. By way of Wisconsin’s *Watertown Republican*, he admonished women that “to be strong is to be beautiful.” To avoid sickness -- nothing was worse than that -- they might play sports, go for walks and “think, study, investigate.” They should aspire to more than just a few college terms in art or music. “Your ambition should reach higher, sister. If possible get a thorough collegiate training before you quit. But don’t go too far and get too smart to marry.” Through Oklahoma’s *Elk City Mining News*, Hall informed the gentlemen that they are living in “pre-eminently the age of the young man” because employers are “crying for young blood.” The time is now to “do something” honorably and righteously. “The world admires a hustler. There is no promise in the Bible to either a lazy man or a coward. Humanity despises both.” (Alongside the Hall piece, the *News* ran a quintessential early 20th century eugenics message from one Rev. D.G. Wylie, who also did not identify as a eugenicist: “(T)here is the increasing unwillingness of modern women to become mothers. There is a great deal of ‘enforced motherhood’ among the poor, while among the well-to-do there is a decided dread of maternal responsibilities.” Trying his hand at feminism, Wylie goes on to state, “The policy of excluding women from the public life of the world, of exacting duties from them while denying them their rights is indirectly the cause of her reluctance to contribute generously to an institution that discriminates against her. Not being able to take up arms, she avenges her wrongs by cutting off the supply of the world’s forces.”)

In 1901 a reviewer of Hall’s *Pitfalls of the Ballroom* termed dancing “an alluring form of recreation” and praised the volume for being a “masterly presentation of a subject that has attracted great attention from leading church organizations and thinkers all over the country. Another reviewer remarked that “Mr. Hall is of the opinion that Daniel Webster, Wendell Phillips, Abraham Lincoln, and Harriet Beecher Stowe would not dance.”

The next year Hall informed his congregation that gum chewing is a “nasty and expensive habit” with “scarcely a redeeming feature.”

“In street cars, in theaters, at ball games and races, in the parlor and everywhere, it is a common sight to see girls and women of maturer years chewing gum,” he wrote. He claimed to have it on good authority that Chicagoans spend a total of \$1 million a year on gum. With that money, he said, he could build, debt-free, a magnificent ten-thousand seat auditorium “in every respect superior to the world famous Mormon tabernacle at Salt Lake City.” After the *Chicago Tribune* published those remarks in October 1902 editorialists at two other newspapers weighed in. The *Spokane Press* faulted Hall for failing to provide nationwide numbers. “The greatest gum chewers are the women of Cleveland. The second is Chicago, and St. Louis is third. The gummosity of these cities puts to the blush the ruminant who chews his cud... The doctors say gum chewing ruins the digestion but the women reply with a wag of the jaw.”

“This reminds us,” stated the *Hays, Kansas Free Press*, “If we had all the ‘mazuma’ spent annually in Chicago for face powder, we could buy fireworks for all the newsboys next Fourth of July and have enough money to endow a founding society.”

Hall warned of the toxicity, expense and vulgarity of tobacco. Residents of “this Christian nation,” he said, spend a total of \$600,000 or more every year on “the weed.”

«Give me the tobacco money of this city for ten years,” he said, «and I will keep our streets as clean as a parlor and run street cars in every direction every few moments of the day and night -- cars with upholstered seats for all, carnations in the windows, and cologne water on tap.”

Folks should go to church and refrain from work on Sunday, he said, because “(a) mule will live longer if he is allowed to rest one day in seven.”

By 1903 newspapers were dubbing Hall a businessman minister, and he did not object. The *Inter Ocean* of Chicago quoted Hall as saying that his Chicago-Texas Land and Lumber Company was being “run on Christian lines.” As he sought investors in shares in a 17,000-tract of timberland in Texas and Louisiana, “we have appealed to ministers especially.” Hall said that thanks to the sound national reputations of himself and of Chicago-Texas’ secretary and treasurer, the Rev. J.V. Updike -- the company’s prospectus described him as “a wide-awake evangelist with a record of 30,000 conversions” -- their word would “carry weight with our brethren.” However, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that the *American Lumberman* of Chicago had described Chicago-Texas as a get-rich-quick scheme and a snare. The *Lumberman* stated that the concern’s general superintendent, C. J. Buck, had merely secured options to buy the territory, meaning that it was not Hall’s to sell. “It is to be hoped that people who hope to see their money again will not send it to the swamps of Louisiana.” Chicago-Texas, the *Lumberman* said, had produced a written guarantee that looked “more like a Louisiana lottery ticket than an honest business document.” While in his defense Hall said that he had begun making payments on the land, he did not claim to actually own any of it. He said he had options on 17,000 acres and that he hoped to obtain 3,000 more. Cryptically, he announced that he had fired Buck, having learned that he was “in bad odor with the financial community.”

Without saying “settlement house,” Hall expressed his contempt for the settlement house movement when, in 1906, he announced his plan for construction of an 18-floor building that would house a temple, a university and dormitory in Chicago. In Chicago in 1889 Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr had established Hull House, whose works were myriad; its activists pushed for unemployment compensation, public schools and libraries, reform of child labor law and women’s suffrage. Among many other things, Hull House undertook the work of looking into problems of sanitation and housing.

Hall said his temple would provide “businessmen and women (with the) advantages of proper social, intellectual and religious surroundings...” “Moral uplift in the slums is almost impossible,” he stated. Hall would not run “a charity institution and (would) not deal in slum work.” In a letter published by the *Tribune* two years later, one C. Emmett Smith announced that he had bought a \$30 bond toward the construction of the \$5 million edifice, and now, because construction had not begun, he wanted his money back. He also demanded that Hall explain himself from the pulpit that Sunday. Through the *Tribune* Hall replied that he was ignoring Smith’s letter. In 1908 Hall haggled publicly with a local architect over a \$5 bill. Joseph H. Buttas said the bill that Hall had found on an elevated train belonged to him, Buttas. Before the five dollars went missing, he said, he had met Hall, who told him “I had an honest face, and that he didn’t believe I could tell a lie if I wanted. Why does he accuse me of lying now? I lost the \$5 and he found it, and I will get it.”

"That money does not belong to Buttas," Hall replied. "A strange man has already claimed it and there may be a dozen more."

In the early 20th century, builders began to see the potential of the LaBelle-Lake Okeechobee region of southern Florida. Developer Colonel E. Prouty said "homeseekers" had been confronting "the appalling gulf of solitude in a land stretching over fifty miles without transportation." Hall got into the game after the Southern Land & Investment Co. of Chicago bought a tract in the southwestern Florida village of Labelle, named the territory Labelle Park, and then sold Hall 32,000 acres. On his land Hall established Christian Colony, which included the residential village of Hall City. In November 1911 there appeared in the *Inter Ocean* an advertisement of about 2,100 words in which he touted the wealth and the happy life to be had by those who planted oranges and grapefruit at Christian Colony. He stated that surveyors had apportioned the territory into 20-acre parcels of soil "richer than that of southern California, where orange groves now stand that you could not buy for \$3,000 an acre." Hall, however, was asking \$31 per acre, \$28 for those who bought at least twenty. He cited "California citrus experts" who had predicted that "ere long" Florida land such as Hall's would go for \$1,000 an acre. In the meantime, the market for Florida fruit would never be glutted because the nearest competitive market, California, is located hundreds of miles away. Besides, "California grapefruit is bitter and unpopular."

Hall promised more than success. Residents would find "happy home(s) in an ideal climate, where disease is almost unknown, and it is a perpetual pleasure just to be alive..." Hall City, he stated, is "one of the most beautiful town sites in all the world," almost entirely surrounded by pine trees. Within those stands were "beautiful specimens of the mighty forest that undoubtedly existed in ages gone." He assured the public that he would sell "no lands or town lots to negroes or recently imported foreigners from the south of Europe." Rather, Hall was soliciting "only white settlers of the cleaner and higher sort," specifically farmers, lawyers, bankers, doctors and "clergymen of all the leading denominations." (Very likely, Hall had espoused the ethnic replacement theory; it holds that instead of coming under their own volition, immigrants are brought to the United States with the aim of replacing white people there. It fueled the chant heard at Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017: "Jews will not replace us!")

"In buying property," Hall stated, "one should always consider the neighbor question, for herein lies both peace and prosperity."

In June 1910 the *Fort Myers Press* gave what it called a "heartly welcome" to Hall and "all his people to the land of flowers and sunshine." The paper reported that as the president and general manager of the Chicago-Texas Land & Timber Co., Hall "has had associated with him and his company" seven hundred and fifty Christian clergy and seven hundred and fifty other Christian men, all of them stockholders, and that he planned to sell land to each of them. Then he would help each plant a few acres of grapefruit. In July 1911 the *Press* published more boosterism. "Dr. Hall has a theory that his brothers of the cloth should have enough business acumen to lay aside something for the proverbial rainy day," the paper stated. Hall, the *Press* announced, had designated 160 acres for Hall University, "a culmination of his life's work..." One hundred acres of the university grounds would be dedicated to citrus groves; students would pay their tuition through farmwork. Hall, who would be the university's chancellor, said the school would open in early 1912, "If I have to start with one pupil in one room."

"And anyone who knows Dr. Hall's ability for getting what he goes after," the *Press* concluded, "could not doubt that the future of Hall University is safe."

Paul Moody said his father might have heard about the Christian Colony from a neighbor in Harris and that he might have been attracted by Hall's no-alcohol policy. Before they departed Lewis purchased ten acres for farmland and another two acres to build a house on. They also put in an order for a load of lumber that Lewis and his father-in-law Amos Tower would use to build the Moodys' home with their own hands.

The Moodys rode a train to St. Louis, where they boarded a steamboat, the *Louise Lee*, down the Mississippi. "All of the workers on that boat except for the men who ran it -- the captain, and so on -- were black, including the waiters," Moody recalled. "Down below deck, on the bottom floor, were the roustabouts, as they were called then, and they were all black, and so they handled the cotton and the other types of freight that would come in."

"There was a man on board... who had contracted for all those roustabouts to pick his cotton when they got down to Louisiana. And he was going to make darn sure that they all got down there. So every time they docked, he stood at the rail on this upper level with a high-powered rifle. They knew he was up there, and they knew he was a good shot. That didn't sit well with Mother. He said, 'Those aren't real people. They don't have souls like we do. If I shoot one that tries to put something over on me, it's perfectly all right. It's like shooting a horse.'"

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Shortly after their sternwheeler entered the Ohio River and made it to Tennessee by way of Cairo, Illinois, Lewis decided that the trip was taking too long.

"The trouble was that whenever we came to a plantation, and they wanted to load on bales of cotton, they would just move up toward the bank and put down the gangplank and take on a load. That might take several hours. They worked day and night, apparently, and so we moved actually very slowly."

To hasten their arrival the Moodys disembarked in Memphis, rode a train through Chattanooga, then took a steamboat up the tortuous Caloosahatchee River. They stopped for dinner in Labelle and then took a train to Fort Myers. A mule team pulled them nine miles to Hall City. When they arrived no lumber awaited them, and the lot had not been surveyed, as promised. Further, Hall did not have clear title to all of the land he had been advertising. Thus, it was not his to sell legally. The Moodys moved into a hotel before setting up housekeeping in a tiny house -- in 1981 Paul said it took up all of perhaps one hundred twenty square feet; in his poem, "The Saga of Hall City," Lewis described it as an eighty-square-foot white-washed cottage. After a neighbor who had been living in floored tents nearby moved away, Lewis purchased the swampland, dug a drainage ditch and planted watermelons and potatoes. "As soon as he plowed the soil, why, all of a sudden there was this crop of calla lilies," Moody said, "Yellow, I think. Really a beautiful sight."

Lewis and Amos Tower built the Moody's house on stilts. They had anticipated flooding. Hall City residents ate groceries that were brought in every day on lumber wagons from stores in LaBelle. Even before the Moodys left Iowa, in 1912, the *Press's* coverage of LaBelle Park had stopped

glowing. In October 1911 the paper quoted a Southern Land spokesman as saying the soil was “deep, fertile,” laden with “centuries of decayed vegetation having given it the ideal chemical properties for rich production” and Hall as saying that the soil was “a fine loam... with a clay subsoil of good depth and quality that holds moisture and causes every kind of vegetable to grow luxuriantly.” But the paper also quoted a source that it identified only as “a resident of Labelle who claims to have examined every section of land in Labelle as saying that the land was not much good. It consisted of a “top layer of mold, from 8 to 18 inches in depth; beneath this, from two to four feet of clear sand; and beneath this a layer of mold, from 18 to 24 inches deep, in which may be found stumps of pine, oak, hickory and other hardwoods.” According to this source, the prairie was “nothing ‘but a stretch of white sand,’ upon which the humble bean would disdain to find an abiding place.”

By the summer of 1912 Hall’s press had gotten worse. Edgar E. Goodno and T. P. Bell had proposed building a railroad through part of LaBelle and the now-defunct Fort Thompson, a military installation located on the shore of the Caloosahatchee. Eight months earlier Hall had advertised that “now is the time to buy” because soon three railroads would be running into Hall City. Bell and Goodno, however, would have no part of it. Goodno had built a hotel in LaBelle; he owned an electric light factory and had been successful in raising livestock. His business acumen, however, excluded a stop in Hall City. Being passed over might have stung Hall, who had only a bankrupt lumber company and a Florida land deal -- both of them swindles -- to brag about. In July, the *Press* published correspondence from Hall, Bell and Goodno regarding flooding that had occurred that spring. In a letter to Goodno and Bell, Hall wrote that his “latest advices” had it that “the Caloosahatchee is on a rampage with water several feet deep in the streets of LaBelle and, of course Fort Thompson badly submerged.” Hall City residents, he added, are “happy in the knowledge that it is not in overflow territory.” He suggested that the partners “put this in that filing case of yours.” In a letter to Bell, Goodno said he could not truthfully say that the water had been low, “it being only fifteen inches less than the big overflow of two years ago...” He said that “the people” had claimed that a railroad bridge was “directly to blame for the excessive height of the water.” Goodno said the railroad company was removing the piling, which he described as “simply a dam.” The impact on the railroad bridge is unknown. Of Hall, Goodno said, “So far as his knowledge of his ground or anyone’s else, it cannot amount to much, as he has never been here but a few times and a few hours each time, and he could form no correct idea of soil or location at such a time; besides he is a better judge of how to fool his dear brothers than of such matters.”

Its problems notwithstanding, Hall City possessed a strong community spirit. “For a boy about my age, why, it was like going into a frontier experience. Cattle country... completely unsettled,” Paul Moody said. A good number of residents rode wagons to Palmdale on July 4; on Memorial Day they went to Citrus Center.

Paul attended the one-room schoolhouse that Hall advertised as the university’s preparatory academy. The teacher had married a cowboy. “That had been his life,” Moody said. “In this community this lady came along who was a schoolteacher, so a romance developed. He always yearned to live the free life of a cowboy. He would never become quite domesticated. But he adapted. She civilized him, so to speak.”

Eventually the land flooded, killing Lewis' potatoes. Paul Moody recalled that the water stood for about a week.

"I enjoyed paddling around in it, but we really did lose the potatoes... There was one thing that really flourished, and that was the watermelons. He grew a lot of very delicious watermelons, more than we could use, so Father decided to have a party... He invited them to come up in the evening. They did tricks, some of them, and ate watermelon."¹

In August 1913 Colonel Prouty announced his plans to build a railroad line that would run from Arcadia south to Hall City and then east to Lake Okeechobee. That month the *Tampa Daily Times* reported that Prouty had been circulating a letter which stated that Prouty and Hall planned to go into business together. According to the *Times*, none other than Hall had written the letter, which stated that Prouty and Hall's railroad would go from Arcadia to Lake Okeechobee, with Hall City as the hub. "One thousand one hundred and fifty people have already purchased lands from Dr. Hall, and if this road materializes, which these gentlemen expect it to do, he hopes to sell to many thousands more," the paper stated. It appears that within three weeks, however, George Hall was out of the picture. In its write up of Prouty's plan, the August 13 *St. Lucie Tribune* does not mention Hall. Neither does the October 12 *Tampa Morning Tribune*. Press coverage of three other railroad proposals had trains running through Hall City but never stopping there.

In the autumn of 1913, the Moodys moved on.

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Christian Colony dragged on until 1918, when the Atlantic Coast Line railroad did establish a stop at Hall City. But by then the utopia had begun to dwindle. According to Lewis, the mill broke down, making new construction impossible. The land was worthless -- Hall had never drained nor fertilized the soil. Hall City became a ghost town. "(F)ire, wind and decay/Erased all signs that men were ever there," Lewis wrote. After about twenty years only an artesian well remained. "They succeeded in getting some water that sort of bubbled up," Paul Moody said. "Nobody used it for anything. It was very strong sulfur water."

In the spring of 1919 Hall was arrested in Chicago, charged with mail fraud and put in jail. He died in 1925. In 1923 his son, singer and ukulele player Wendell Hall, had had a huge hit in England and the United States with «It Ain't Gonna Rain No Mo'.

¹ The flood had to have happened during the autumn-winter of 1912, months after the June 1912 flood that had been debated in the *Press*. At the Moodys' party the people sat around a bonfire. No bonfire would have been necessary in June in southern Florida.

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hot diggity dog
Rhonda Bronte Brown

we're going to need more balm

Gerald Yelle

We watched the doctor operate and at the end of the first hour he had the patient's artery stretched out in front of him. He said it's pretty clogged so I might as well clean it out while I'm at it. He used a knife and a little rotating disc on a spindle, then banged it on the table to get the plaque out. He started talking about all the digging going on in the city. He said it's not the easiest job but you do it anyway. He said we need more buses. More liver and onions, living room chairs, and daffodils to push holes in last year's leaves instead of pushing them aside. Trees that grow right up through the patio bricks. More loud machines because the silence is killing us. We need a machine to make us okay with the thought of dying. Machines with eye appeal so the other machines won't hear you whisper your secrets. He said they already know most your secrets —all except the ones you keep from yourself. I said I hope there's not a loose bit left in there to give the patient a stroke. Her heart has a back door that leads to a back yard where it beats in time with mine.



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what were her last words

Gerald Yelle

She didn't expect to be tired.
She didn't expect to have
a headache. Or own a farm.
Or occupy land. She didn't
say you can search forever
and never find the missing sock.
You must've been dreaming.
You're driving way too fast
on a narrow road so you stop
and tell yourself stories.
Like when she made a cake
for your cousin's birthday
and you only got a tiny piece.
She said it was time to go
outside and you said the cake
had made your throat dry.
You asked if there was any
juice. No, she said. Swallow
your spit if you're thirsty.



freak of the week

Gerald Yelle

She asked me what was in the Plumpy Nut.
I thought she wanted to know
if it had pecans. Or if it tasted like a dark
done deal. I told her it was round
and square and light and brown and moved
around like Christmas bugs in tightly
lidded jars. Open one
and it turns blue and green and Greta Garbo
orange. Sometimes it cures a headache,
sometimes it causes one.
She wanted to know if she'd find it
appealing. I thought she wanted to know if
I was filing an appeal. I said I wasn't
filing anything. I said if she was free some
evening I'd show her how to
make one. How you peel it off a pie chart.
Put it on apples and spread it on bread.



self help

Matt Jasper

I was trying to wire a new jawbone to my face.
Replacement teeth were on the way by mail—
each in a tiny brown paper sack the size of a pea
with proportionally tinier stamps awaiting cancellation
on their way to assembly within the cavern of my mouth
lit by torchlets hovering within. My chin had been
flapping flat against my nose. I supposed that's why
I coughed the old jaw off then practiced self-effacement—
which I defined as repairing or replacing all one has been
up until now—even faking false modesty if one has to—
to get past the sentries in memory guarding homes of
past lovers so one can wow them by showing up whole—
not the wreck who stole their hearts then drove off
wearing false teeth, trailing feather boas attached
to bouncing tin cans as if just married to self, leaving
mortgages unpaid, children shelved without role model
of the sterling man I was pretending to be. I blame
the economy for making us work so long and hard
we can't think, the wedding industry for not dressing
octopus brides in shearling and mink, my ring bearer's
misstep, the storm grate wherein rolled the ring,
my decision to go underground searching
subterranean drains for the barefoot child of myself
waddling up in cuffed blue jeans chewing on a long blade
of grass still impassioned into advocacy
of all god's glory that is seen. The child should be
an inspiration yet instead is plundered for parts
and lies there with exposed organ cavities,
a tendency toward disease and other proclivities
that turned it into me studying auto-archeology—
the digging up of self by one who once buried
the wrong things chosen of all that could be.



shit gets built

Nadia Arioli

Shit gets built up in the port-a-potty, so on Christmas Eve a man with a truck and shovel empties it. The shovel is because the shit froze. So, ew, but whatcha gonna do? The man goes in and breaks it up, arm into blender, shovel into blade. A shit smoothie, essentially. Got the job done. I know what this sanitation worker doesn't—some of the shit is from half a conjoined twin. This is not a metaphor, this actually happened. The head carpenter in charge of building my in-laws' apartment, which will be part of our house, said he used to have a belly brother, tangled in the same wires. Now, his stomach hurts sometimes, where his brother used to be. Now, he builds things onto our house, now he, along with his crew, shits in an outhouse, that gets emptied Christmas Eve. Before that, he was a chef.

Shit gets built, most days, seven to four, lunch at twelve. The carpenter says hi to my kids when we leave most mornings. His task is the whine of buzzsaws, mine is the whine of children. We, too, are always under construction. I hurl a toddler and an infant to the car as fast as I can with the coats and the boots and the hats and the diaper backpack and the binky goddamnit we forgot the binky again no wait here it is don't say goddmanit. We sort of smile at each other as I maneuver a sixteen-point-turn out the driveway around the various other cars and plowed snow.

Shit gets built inside the home too, my son with a babygate, blue blanket, and yellow chair. *A house*, he chirps, *buildin' a house*. He is. He goes under the yellow chair into under the blanket and begs the cat to leave. *This Sammy's house*. Ernie doll is allowed to stay. We must always be making room for each other. First, my lungs scrunched up like accordions or pocket doors, stomach and bladder too, for the beings that grow. Scaffolding and guardrails came down after in a red smear. Can't keep my children safe all their lives, as much as I would wish.

It gets built, somehow, all of it, families, homes, tendons everywhere. Magic like a poem. A big mess to be alive and find your new place in it. Your children will get scars. All you can do is pray to the sanitation workers. Know that if a truck can't get things moving, you grab a shovel and smash.



going to the dentist

Jacob Chapman

My dentist looks like a baby.
Not an actual baby, of course,
but she's young. Very young
and full of energy. So much energy.
So much pep. So many questions.
Do you floss? Of course I floss.
Ok, but you have to really get in there.
I do. I really get in there
every single day.
Do you smoke? No.
Are you active? Yes, I'm very active.
That's good. Do you go for walks?
Sure, but mostly I run.
I run up mountains,
I lift weights, and my new thing
is boxing. I really like to hit
annoying people.
Ok. I can see that anger
is an issue. What are you doing
to manage your anger?
It's not that big of an issue.
The anger goes away
when I hit someone.
Ok. Have you tried meditation?
I tried it once. I hated it.
It made me angry.
Ok. It seems like you have a system
that works for you.
Everything you're telling me
is natural. It's normal
to feel the way you do.
I mean, the world's crazy.
I clean teeth and gums for a living,
and after a while,
it gets a little old. I think maybe
I should've done something different
with my life. What do you think?
You seem like a reasonable person.
I mean, what's the point
of having good teeth
if everything else
is coming off the rails?



michael's party

Jacob Chapman

The party was on the edge
of failure, a quiet, sad failure
with polite music and conversation
about the weather.
Our host, Michael, was a colleague of mine.
He loved throwing parties,
but he could never read the room.
I looked at him, and I could tell
he thought the party was going great.
But it wasn't. The party was dying.
People were looking at their watches
and getting ready to leave.
I grabbed Michael and said listen to me.
You have to change the music.
Put on Bust a Move by Young MC,
and do it now. He looked confused,
but he did as he was told.
People looked up and started moving.
They weren't exactly dancing,
but they were on their way.
A circle formed.
I did some stretches and squats
to loosen up, and then I jumped into the circle
and did a few moves: the lawn sprinkler,
the grocery shopper, the worm.
I think I broke a rib
doing the worm, but it was successful.

People were dancing and doing shots,
and Michael yelled Who has the weed?
I want the weed!
He was given the weed and took a monster hit.
He immediately passed out, vomited on the floor,
and emerged into a state of bliss.
I thought to myself good lord,
what have I done? I also knew
that the fallout was a problem
for another day. We kept dancing,
and Michael jumped into the circle.
He did some sort of robot thing
with stiff, jerky movements.
I had the distinct impression
he had done this many times before
in front of a mirror. He paused
and said how about if you all chant
Go Michael! Go Michael!
We did the chant
because of course we did the chant.
His robot movements
were becoming more dramatic,
and he said somebody give me the weed,
but we said no, Michael. No more weed tonight.
You've had enough.



english class

Jacob Chapman

Everybody settle down
and take a seat. The word of the day
is pension, as in I'm waiting
for my pension to kick in
so I can retire.
Nah, I'm messing with you,
but it's hard to get your attention
these days. We're in the doldrums
of the semester, and every day
is long. Have I mentioned
that a flock of silent birds
is living in the trees
next to my house?
They don't sing or anything.
They just sit there
and stare at the house. Anyway,
how's the view
from the back row, Michael?
I swear to God,
if you don't put your phone away,
I'm going to throw it out the window.
I don't care.
You see, I'm trying to cultivate
in your supple, young minds
a certain style of thinking.
Here we go: take out your pens
and write for ten minutes
about your life as a chicken
in a Russian penal colony.
You'll eat the piece of paper
when you're done, so make it good.
Time starts now.





self portrait 5
Jordan Veres

day's specials at the gone café

Richard Wayne Horton

Six pieces from my unpublished 26-36pp hybrid chapbook,

Day's Specials at the Gone Café

I selected these pieces from my unpublished chapbook because of the mama theme, which shows up several times and in different ways. The book as a whole recreates the world of the “flaneur” of 1970s Austin. The real name of the Gone Café is Les Amis, and it is indeed gone. For those who met, talked and wrote poetry or speculative prose there, or even lived a speculative life there, it may perhaps be revisited in dreams. It won’t be the same, though. I tried it and the prices were higher. Damn the place doesn’t even exist and it raises its prices. Can you beat that?

GONE FIVE

1977

They trusted me to rake leaves this yellow time so I’m at the edge of the grounds I see the iron gate standin open I step through and stand outside listening for yells after a quiet spell I begin walking away no not away... towards a red road cuts the forest quiet rushes down it I tear across just as a fender flashes the men their car scrubs to a stop I tear the car door crunches I’m airborne I leap leaves hit my face men shoes crashing I beat them my feet beat them silence I stop the air whirs insects ears stop I can’t swallow then mama then towards I move run I used to play in these parts when I was little close to home now they didn’t want the unborning but I wanted it mama here’s a pond covered in floating yellow leaves yes this pond I like mama are you home? The pond tells me I should step in and push push till I’m in the middle the water stands at my belly rising higher I struggle to get out of the womb but I want here I quit escaping here is better later when I’ve been accepted back and I’m far beneath the water I hear when they arrive the fathers angry men their voices hammering nails

“Chances are, he’ll go back to his mama’s house.” “State troopers are there already.” “Lord almighty! What he did to her last time!”

“Guess he wanted to get unborn.” “Surprised they could sew her up after that and have her live.”

for a moment I want to be alive again to reach out to them and stop their mouths mouths on heads of man things but stillness is better the perfect hiding place if I could breathe I would laugh mama will eventually get you anyway father everything is mama I am mama

FEB. 3, 1978

I go sit solo in Batts theater watching Love & Anarchy by Lina Wertmuller. Later brooding as I walk the sidewalk looking for a friend, I pass a store window where I see mechanical drawing tools and orange pom-poms. Get a coffee? No. Everyone a stranger there.

I've given Heidi 2 self published chaps: Black, and Clean Prose. She'll mark her favorites. She gave me a set of her own poems. I picked my favorites & had them copied & bound at Kinko's Copies, along with my favorite poems by Stephen, from a big bunch he showed me. I've changed Heidi's real name in this book, but can't change Stephen's because I'm going to mention his titles. They're cool!

Stephen & Heidi, both gay, say nothing about my heterosexuality which I see as a strange violent animal.

BOOMBRIGHT

FEB. 5, 1978

There's a big wind today on the street, lots of sky. Boombright. I sit down at Les Amis. A man with a beard is writing a poem when suddenly his poems explode. He gets up to chase them. His chair blows over on its side. At another table a man and a woman the woman eating the man's eyes fasten strangely to her she battens, swells happily with fullness her young hand grabs the milk glass to mouth come out, milk get in my stomach

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STEPHEN: BEING HIS STRAIGHT FRIEND'S MAMA

FEB. 26, 1978

Stephen Huntington, Southern gay poet. Stephen's titles: Tom the tailor jacks off Epiphany at dusk In a dream A Sunday The how of laughter His first sacrifice That moment of its breath

Classy, maybe posed at times, Greek-themed, certainly very Southern. Stephen's accent is mint julep, his expression politely solemn. The more pissed, despairing or excited he becomes, the more solemn his expression gets. I really feel quite affectionate toward him. "... somewhere far away / from the laugh that tears my shoulder..."

Why does Stephen appear in this book? I'm posing him perhaps, showing the way he is, putting him here to confront me. Is he my mama? That would be news to Stephen. News to mama too, who doesn't like being a thing with a name.

We were in a pizza cave with wall paintings of Conan The Barbarian. I pointed them out. Stephen could have said, you mean what do I think of a Cimmerian proto-nazi superman with health club muscles? Instead he said: "I'll pass. Actually I prefer middle-aged men." Sitting straight backed, conventionally combed, wearing a pale diamond-patterned sweater vest, he looks middle-aged, though he's only in his 20s.

More Stephen titles: Upon this rock A transformation of sighs Poem to a lesbian on her encounter with a drag queen

Stephen sees Heidi often, but doesn't consider it necessary or possible to understand her.
Stephen titles: Once in a forest Matin Inner stage

I tell Stephen, "faultless fingers" and "nightmare throat" seem like too noticeable a repetition of adj. – noun. I say, "Heidi wonders why you don't put yourself forward more." Stephen, across the little round table, wears a grasshopper face. Stephen the incredible disappearing man. A certain quietness. Titles: Something to notice War dawn Preludes at the end
When she was sad You know I've always wanted to surprise

Wearing a grasshopper face: assuming a seemingly calm nonchalance to cover disquiet or strong emotion. Grasshoppers have long solemn faces. A grasshopper CAN'T smile. If a grasshopper smiled, the earth would likely bust apart. Grasshopper eyes, though they bulge out of its head, convey only decorous attention.

MAMA

in 1946 I read a book about scientific baby care seeing the pictures
the formulas for fake milk the heating instructions how to sanitize the diapers I decided
not to give you the tit I knew that when I finally got you out of me and laid you on your
side (and you were very fat) like I said, on your side on my chest so you wouldn't mash
the cord I wanted so so much to put my hand under your butt which was such a small
distance from your head and pull you up where it was, the thing I knew you were looking
for and once you found it half of me would flow immediately into you not just the milk
me thus changing me to half of a thing that men call motherhood and the other half: was it
even there anymore? the nurse came with the bottle and I gave it to you and saved myself
look I loved you without being you your memories of your own birth are absurd you
didn't even know what a tit was or what anything was I told your dad three babies max
not like his mother with her eight and no breast feeding!

when you come up for christmas you can stand around in the kitchen while I cook you
always like doing that I talk about the ingredients and what I'm going to do with them no
helping I'm the cook

MARCH, 1978

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More Stephen poems: A startling silence came upon the heart A nickel after noon I went to lunch (the sudden militant glance you're straight what do you want with "us"?) A corsage is an evanescent thing Stephen of course you're not my mother if you were you probably wouldn't deny it though you might not bring up the subject

when we were cooking pot spaghetti at cathleen's you were bringing the polite little envelope of green to the sauce pot and happened to mention our dates well that's a mind tickler but whatever presently I'm nursing a dying star with pat who's in the bedroom buzzed, as in overloaded with what she won't tell me so OK you've quit your job and are off soon to Japan to join mike who sits currently on a tatami practicing shakuhachi after that you will go missing



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hot dogs

Alissa Simon

Hot dogs
are about the same
size and shape
as an adult
esophagus.

If you've had
an esophagus
repair, doctors advise
no hot dogs.

Hot dogs
are about the same
consistency
after having been chewed.

I have not eaten one
since I was ten. I have not
had an esophagus
repair. But when you leave

the NICU with a
barely breathing infant
doctors strongly advise
no hot dogs. Ever.

This advice fell on
panicky ears, so I
genuinely feared
feeding the infant, even though

like I said, I haven't
thought of hot dogs
in decades until now and often
in moments of panic.



the personified impersonal

Alissa Simon

“In the midst of the personified
impersonal, a personality stands
here.” - Ahab, *Moby Dick*

The I
of a fish
pronouns.
I is
all vitality
and vowel.

I leans
into in
between.
All company
in I
is absurd.



relativity

Alissa Simon

Let's start with I
vowel, symbol, nuclear
universe, symmetrical
length of a column, head to toe

I admit I is
a bit unrealistic
redshift expansionist
a perfect capitalist.

We contains I in the
grammatical sense, in the
group theory equation
of equivalent vowels.

Generous with others, we
completes I, frays boundaries
extends hands
like kindergarten art.

Is it incorrect to assume
that all spaciousness
eventually
contracts?



the siege before the siege

Carolyn A. Cushing

First

a bolt in my spine tightens
calling the shoulder blades shut

flags shake and the dread dollar
dances even without a grave
to stand on

the burning bush
red against a bank of brown
isn't speaking

everyone in the meeting smiles
while the back of their heads
go numb

a distant train's whistle
might be guide or caution
we don't know
where the train is going

everything's brittle
leaves, our nails, skin
over the knuckles
pond water now
just a skim over mud
the siege has not begun
but we are already on fire

the laid path disappears
under the slip lit leaves

I fall into the pond's mirror of sky
my skin sewn to reflection
tree's shadow is in me
my spine in the mud bathing
the bolt in my back
now rusting, I could
strip it,
become
free

Geographies of the Middle

Wasp nest hangs
high in the sky
leaves fallen show it
swinging, empty
of stingers. Who
has collected them?

The poet dies
in the South
her last exhalation
rescues echo from silence:
I promise you nothing ...
I accept your promise ...
of the same we are simply riding ...
a wave ... that may carry ... or crash ...
It's a journey

In the East siege's sharp heels
dug long ago into a strip of land
loved by children and their cats,
strawberry farmers, poets,
doctors, the dead speaking:
*Softly, we pass over wounds,
like purposeful gauze, a hint of relief,
an aspirin.* The ceasefire
pauses the bombs we packed
and sent to their siege
before awaiting our own

In the North
a fuzz of cattails
shook by the wind
borrows some shine
from the sun. A storm
of seed speaks
in every direction:

Wind in the West
 is full of thirsty saints
 blowing through chapped lips,
 prodding fire from the hills
 to settle down in houses
 until all the fuel is spent
 we scroll an aftermath
 of captions:
melted tire rim
bolt turned silver liquid solid once again
the spiral staircase of a skeleton house
a fire hydrant burning
a garden gnome burning
this was a pet store
this was a church
this was a neighborhood

The End Is the Beginning

At dawn, sun hits the flag at half mast
 wind worries the cable straining a bolt

All morning a dead man speaks
 at breakfasts, in church halls:
What is it America has failed to hear?
Where do we go from here?
Is it right?

At noon the siege begins.

Victors enter the arena
 with their orders and salutes
 in the open now so we know
 true forms behind slicked faces

Outside we stand side by side,
 icy air needles the nose, our lungs

The fear is here. The fear
 thrusting its long arms
 in all directions, pushing
 against all edges, the crush
 and the wave of bodies
 wedges us closer one to the other
 so when the night descends
 we are not alone

Coda

There was no before

The siege is not a seed

The siege is a condition
of blood sunk in the land,
left without lilies of apology,
and hearts bricked
against belonging
to the whole
of this place

Notes: South italic lines are from [A Journey](#) by Nikki Giovanni. East italic lines are from [Not Just Passing](#) by Hiba Abu Nada. Most of the West headlines are from Buzz Feed's [Surreal LA Fire Pictures](#). The dead man is Martin Luther King, Jr. and the questions appear in his speeches/writings.



150 Pleasant St., Easthampton, MA
between Abandoned Building and New City breweries

a hot dog tale

Sarah Das Gupta

It was the hottest day of June. Even in the hundred -acre field there was not a hint of a breeze. The trees in the wood fringing the field were not stirring. Their branches drooped sadly, in the sultry air. Yet work had to go on, however high the mercury rose.

As far as we looked across the valley that June morning, there were cloudless skies and already the sun was a fiery copper, burning even the smallest area of exposed skin. My sisters and I peered out from under old, frayed sun hats which had served many long summers in the hayfield. Already I could see a band of bright red skin between the bottom of their t-shirts and the tops of their jeans. My father, who complained he had worn too many hats in the navy, during the War, refused to cover his head as he drove the old Fordson tractor up and down the lines of mown grass. Our assistants were an odd assembly to see anywhere, especially in a sun-washed hayfield. Some were students from the local village school where my father taught- most of the boys were arrayed in swimming costumes with shirts over the top. A couple of farm workers, looking for overtime, were already raking the hay ready for baling. They wore military style hats which they had swapped with German prisoners of war who had worked on local farms. These looked bizarre when worn with patched jeans and string vests. Only my mother, seated in the shade, and doling out liquid refreshment, sandwiches and doughnuts looked more or less civilised.

66 As the dryer tossed the hay, the scent of the meadow flowers filled the still air. The sleepy scent of wild poppies, purple vetch, trefoil, or 'grandmother's toenails', all mingled in the scorching heat.

We had our overseers too. The horses watched idly from a nearby meadow, standing under the trees and lazily flicking their tails at the pesky flies. Our rather mixed pack of dogs: Basset hounds, a French bulldog and a Pug were lying in what shade they could find, tongues lolling from the sides of their mouths.

By lunch time it was almost too sultry to eat anything. All we wanted were cold drinks, no matter of what type. Bottles of beer, orange juice, Cola, lemonade, water were drained in minutes. My younger sisters were despatched to the nearby village for replacements. In mid-afternoon, a baler from a nearby farm appeared in the lane by the five-barred gate. Painted a bright pillar-box red, with steam coming from the exhaust, it looked like a red fire dragon. The mere sight of it made us feel even hotter. It always seemed to take ages to fit in a new ball of string. You would feel the same frustration as at the supermarket when the roll of paper finishes at the till and you know you've missed the bus or the start of the big game. The baler seemed in a good mood that afternoon, despite the heat. Soon it was roaring up and down the rows swallowing mouthfuls of dried grass and then spitting it out in neat bales, tied up with hideous orange twine. The tractor wheezed along behind, pulling the big trailer. The work crew followed, loading the bales. A task which became more exhausting, the higher the load became.

Suddenly my mother shouted out, 'Who's got Boo-Boos? She's disappeared.'

Boo-Boos was the unlikely name of the French bulldog. She had been given this by my youngest sister, being the only one she could pronounce as a toddler. Boo-Boos was exceptionally

intelligent and wonderfully loyal. Normally she sat on the tractor seat with my father but that day it had been too hot, even for her.

Everyone started calling her. The valley echoed with this ridiculous name. Suddenly she appeared at the five-barred gate. She refused to come back into the field but continued her annoying yapping. Then she ran over to the tractor and stood a few yards away clearly trying to get my father's attention. He tried to lift her up onto her usual seat. She jumped out of his arms and went back to the gate, still yapping and barking. When he walked into the lane, she kept running up to him, barking, then running further up the lane. 'I'm just going to follow her for a minute. She clearly wants to show me something.'

A minute later, we heard my father calling, 'Fire! Fire! Help, come quickly!'

We all rushed down the lane. About 100 metres further on, was a farmyard. Clouds of smoke were billowing out of a large barn. The two farm workers outran my father. They opened one of the side doors cautiously. Great, forked flames drove them back. They ran to the main entrance of the barn. Half of the building was full of loose hay and unopened bales. Here the fire had a strong hold. The orange and red flames were flaring up. The sound of crackling and roaring was even more terrifying. I had never heard a fire out of control like that. The farmer was away at the local cattle market but his wife had rung the Fire Brigade. Boo-Boos still seemed anxious, scratching and whining at the wall near the back of the building. 'She still seems agitated. I'll try and get onto the roof at the back,' offered one of the men.

There were skylights fitted along the roof which had been opened for ventilation in the heatwave. Iron ladders were fitted against the outside walls which led up to the roof. The farm worker climbed up and looked down into the back of the huge barn. Just at that moment, two fire engines drove into the yard, bells ringing and firemen already jumping off.

'There're two boys stuck at the end here. The fire's getting close. They're trapped!' Two firemen climbed up on the roof with the end of a rope which was being unwound by two more officers on the ground. The boys were conscious but panicking and crying. A young fireman went down through the sky light and brought the first child out, then the second. They wrapped both boys in blankets. Their breathing had been affected by the smoke. A few more minutes, the result could well have been tragic. An ambulance arrived, and the boys were on their way to the nearest hospital for a thorough checkup.

By the time we started baling again, it was well into the evening. It was after eight when the last bale was unloaded.

'You'd better get back to the house,' my father shouted from the top of the stack. 'I just felt the first drops of rain. The weather's breaking.'

The two boys rescued from the fire soon recovered. They had started the blaze while playing with matches to see if the hay would burn! At the village pub they had a collection for Boo-Boos, the 'hot' heroine of that afternoon. She decided to pass the money on to a local animal refuge, in return for a piece of rump steak and a ride on the tractor.



window

Matt Jasper

Dwell awhile at the sill, and the self disavowed
will rise with a message presaging postscripts and epitaphs—
ways of enduring whatever drew you toward erasure unless

you're one of the few who really needs to go:
a terminal case choosing the time
and place well,

widow in search of widower, the psychotically depressed citing flames
from the windows of a high-risen self conflagrated so
as to jump away from burning.

Most just need to wait it out, get some
fucking help, use less powder for the blast
they want to change their lives with.

There are a thousand ways to die
without killing yourself. Just walk
in a different direction

talk to houseplants quit your job sleep all day and the day
after that too ask for tea and sympathy even if you
have to boil the water yourself. Contemplation

goes outside of time to the scantily clad moment of knowing
how to repair every crack in the pavement no the spinal column
no far above to the spirit finally taken aback--worn to sea glass.



little deaths

Matt Jasper

All you have to do is follow these simple instructions
and you can be with us forever. No more
tossing neckties into the fan trying to understand why
it will all be taken away someday by better people than you
who did all the right things. So what if you're not
wearing gowns and rings, shaking
and seeing things. Soon you'll wear white
angel wings that flap as if by remote control.

The remote is your soul trying to blink back
all it has seen, run the moments in reverse, throw them up
on a screen to some sunny day before
the bulb melted through jammed celluloid,
the soul boiled black by being kept
in the jar of your chest your throat
your erupting mouth. Some people
give pieces of it like candy on a tray
or with asses swaying down to devastate a lover.
Some shut it away and carve patterns
into whatever cell walls are lit from inside
a strictured tourniquet that opens to reveal
one's higher-ups on the ladder of invisibility.

You've been invited to a tea
of your blood boiled and spat out
onto a ceramic steeped-bag holder
next to a puffed cozy meant to warn
of heat building up in our heads of steam—
the over-reaching dream— beams arcing in
from some wayward crane—tapping the structure
of a collapsing frame—we clutch our chests
and sway toward the most freshly dug hole
trying to add a little spin as we go in saying
here we come again oh god—
we're coming!





river designs
Jane Carey



from above
Jane Carey

roommates

Justin Richards

It is simple to lose someone. What is difficult is that after being lost they will not go away. What is the nature of this presence? It is me or it isn't, like a person in a dream. And this condition you have left me in, is it not just another way that you have made your world mine? Since your problem was always the uncontrollable populace that would not leave you alone and that you could not drive away.

When you were nineteen you let your parents try to exorcize the devil that made you want to love men. Later when you tried to evict yourself from the earth what you really wanted was to purge the life from yourself, as though death would heal you. With this the version of you that abided in me was wracked and disfigured; from his point of view a window to hell was installed in my mind. You locked me out of your life then. But I found an entrance you hadn't barred and in a false spring that I wrung from your winters we sat in the moss on a sunny day and told our secrets into the air. You let me make as if to help you, each of us willing the other's shame into an antiparticle that would annihilate his own. After that you lived lighter, bought a fancy raincoat, entered training to be a chaplain. Then when trouble returned and you were drafted back into the theater of love and pain the voices came back, and you tried and failed again to desert the field. We had sent our demons away but it was a round-trip ticket. Life, you told me then, was a series of meaningless revolutions on an idiot wheel that was always guaranteed to bring you back down to grief. And if you couldn't get off early you would wait for death alone. This time you covered every aperture with a seal of hate. There were no words I could say that you didn't have a countersign to nullify. Your will was iron and though my heart was broken a part of me recognized that at least in exiling me you had met your goal.

Now it's five years on and I don't know whether you're alive or dead. The fragment of self that speaks with your voice has grown sickly and mad. It haunts this mind like an astral body that has lost track of its carnal source. In my dream the other night we met accidentally on a train or at a party and you greeted me with a kiss on the cheek, an act that I registered with surprise and a kind of triumphant relief that everything was solved. We went somewhere together. I woke up and as night faded from my window so did the effect of that false reunion. That hadn't been you but again just an extension of my own spirit like a hand in a puppet.

So here I have this passenger and I should know by now that even well intentioned exorcism by and large does not work. The idea that some elliptical prose poem will either dissolve you or bring you back is almost cute but it's too pathetic. Neither purification nor union is in the offing. In fact I suspect that I still pose a similar problem for you. And the ontological question of exactly who or what is in what or whom will not be solved. I'm too busy, and besides the potential effect of science on problems of the soul is too dim to mention. This effigy of you just lives here now. Wincing and snarling but also punning to excess and giving dour opinions like he used to. The best I can do is give him a little room to stay in, clean up after his bouts of rage or neglect, offering palliative care until we both die together.



the price of creation

Ronan Jewett

It was almost here, what scientists had dreamed of doing for centuries. The land of tomorrow was finally within my grasp and it would all be because of my work right here, right now. I'm talking about a life. But not just any life, a life meticulously crafted by the hands of a human being. It was time to grab what humans had always thought was a power exclusive to the kingdom of heaven and take it for ourselves. It was time for humanity to finally achieve the greatest power... the power over life itself.

I sat there, intensely working on my ultimate creation in the basement of my house. I had begun working in the lab, but I took my masterpiece home to keep it safe from prying eyes. I would be the first thing it saw. And it would be mine only. I wouldn't let those other filthy, greedy scientists take any credit for the brilliance I was about to unleash upon the world.

Some might liken me to Frankenstein, the mad genius. But I'm not like him. His creation went mad. But mine... I would control mine. You see, this life form wouldn't be made out of the grotesque corpse of a dead man, but from a complex mix of artificial wires, circuits, and brilliant organic replicas. It would be true AI. It would be impossible for it to go rogue as I had programmed it not to hurt anything. Besides, I'm not a mad scientist like Frankenstein, simply passionate. For who wouldn't be about a creation such as this?

I looked over the body of mechanical parts laid out on the table. Each organ and bone was a meticulously crafted mixture of cells of the same contents as a real human, carefully allocated in its proper position. All I needed to do was finish making the replica of the brain stem, the section of the brain responsible for breathing and heartbeat. After that, it would be alive.

I won't deny part of me was in doubt. I was raised by a religious family after all, taken to church every Sunday as a good Christian should and attended catholic schools. I was taught that only God could create life, and those who defied God would be taken by Satan. Of course, that was all fake, lies to try and explain natural phenomena and morals from a more primal time. Science had shown me the real truth and proved it all highly unlikely. But I suppose the pestersome seeds of religion had already taken root in my brain and they were hard to exterminate. Perhaps that was why whenever I made progress on my creation a tinge of fear was always mixed in with my excitement.

Suddenly a voice came from the basement door, interrupting my work.

"Honey, when are you going to come out of the basement? We've seen so little of you the last few months."

"No, I'm almost done. I don't have time for you right now."

"Honey, please... just come have dinner with us."

"I said no!" I raised my voice.

God, what a pest. I'm about to make history and they want me to eat dinner with them. Finally, they left. I worked throughout the night on the brain stem. Soon I would be done. There was no time to sleep, no time to eat. The world had to know, they had to see what I had done before anything stole my creation. I knew there were prying eyes, unwanted eyes just waiting for me to leave my masterpiece unguarded for even a second so that they could ransack my work. Not only that, there were the demons trying to convince me to give up. But I wouldn't let them.

Time passed, though I was so engrossed in my work I couldn't tell how much. I had to finish soon, but the brainstem was proving to be troublesome. If I didn't finish it quickly it would be too late. The demons would come. Already I could feel them watching me, casting their long shadows across the cold concrete floor of the basement. They were trying to distract me, the figures of their shadows flickering and swaying over my bookshelves – their darkness projected onto my multitude of books on AI, robotics, and psychology. They were here with me, though I couldn't see them yet. But I didn't need to see them, I could feel their mischievous eyes staring a hole into my soul, trying to keep me from achieving my goal. Trying to keep humanity from ascending.

I wouldn't give up so easily. I could still focus. But questions about faith persisted in my head. "This God is the One who gives life, breath, and everything else to people. He does not need any help from them, he is not served by human hands, he has everything he needs." I couldn't get the line from the bible out of my head. It was a direct contradiction to what I was doing – creating an organic life, me, a mere human. The ecstasy of what I was accomplishing was addicting, like a child stealing from a cookie jar. I needed that power, even if it was unnatural. I would be the first God, and the only God. And I didn't need anything else, no help from the other scientists, not even a family. I had everything I needed. Unfortunately, my blasphemous thoughts kept clashing against some small part of me, a part I thought gone. Pious questions seeped through this section of my consciousness unwillingly.

What if I had strayed too far from God? What if Satan was sending demons to torment me? What if I had neglected my own Creator while manufacturing my very own creation?

My mind lay divided, a battlefield of neurons and brain tissue. I sat there repeating the same questions over and over, sweating, agonizing over them. Was I wrong? Was God actually real? The closer I got to finishing, the more I questioned myself. Was this God's attempt to convince me? Or was I too far gone and in the devil's territory now? I couldn't work like this, my mind festering with so many thoughts, questions, and superstitions. The shadows converged around me now, their eyes searching and red, visible now through the cracks between my books, the floor, the ceiling, watching me, judging my every move through the walls of my basement. My skin became coated with glistening perspiration, my eyes darted around the dark room like a madman.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of something trudging down the basement stairs, each step causing a *creak*, inflaming my nervousness. I put my head in my arms, frightened by the vision I might see.

Daddy, can you play with me? Said a distorted child's voice, oozing with trickery.

Please, come out of the basement.

I knew what it was trying to do, and I wouldn't let it. It was trying to lure me out, out of the safety of the basement and into its lair where the hellspawn would devour me. However, my curiosity got the better of me. I dared to sneak a peek from the crevice of my elbow which was saving me from the terrible visage I now saw. It was only a second of a glance, but the image was imprinted in my mind. I quickly put my head down, but the blackness only helped recall the unholy image of the demon I had just seen clearer, forcing me to replay it over and over again in my thoughts. It was a misty, distorted black figure with menacing bright red eyes, and malevolent dark claws the size of meathooks that dragged from long, freakish arms against the floor. Its mouth was a gaping abyss, aligned with rows of razor sharp, inky black teeth arranged in a deranged smile. The perturbing visage flashed through my mind, I began to panic, convulsing in my chair. I felt like I would puke.

Please daddy.

I felt each thump of its feet as it slowly moved towards me, an eerie, dull, scratching sound coming from its claws as they scraped across the cold concrete floor, like sheet metal dragged against a rock. I had to do something. With all the confidence I could muster, I grabbed the screwdriver resting next to me and hurled it at the demon, striking it in the knee.

I could hear myself shouting "GO AWAY!" as it shrieked and limped up the basement stairs. I let out a sigh of relief, still shaking from the encounter. However, my relief didn't last long, as the shadows came back. They swirled around me violently, cackling with laughter, their small but sharp claws digging into my skin as they mocked me for getting my hopes up about such a small victory. Their unceasing laughter rang in my ears as it became increasingly louder and more intense. I couldn't take it anymore. I tried to see my work, but to no avail, as the blur of their swirling shadows now consumed my vision. It was hopeless. Outside the walls of my sanctuary I could hear the demons talking in a terrible murmur, planning their next strike.

Suddenly the idea struck me harder than a lightning bolt and I knew what I had to do. I couldn't just sit there waiting for them to come back and devour me and my holy creation. I would have to go into their territory and take them by surprise in order to beat them. I knew now that this wasn't God's work to convince me to stop, but Satans. Satan was trying to keep me from becoming what I was always meant to be.

With this affirmation, I gained the confidence to stand up and trudge through the shadows that grabbed me, trying their hardest to hold me back. I climbed up the stairs of my sanctuary, and before I could change my mind, stumbled through the door leading to hell. I looked up and saw them, two demons, their teeth dripping with blood from their last victim. They were shocked to see me, I could tell. The brimstone walls of their fortress burned with flame, and the very air was colored a deep red and smelled of blood. Fear rippled throughout my body, but it was too late to back down now. For the sake of my creation and the future of mankind I had to defeat them.

I looked around them and saw a multitude of vicious killing tools laid out on a table. I watched myself rush forward and grab a knife that was obviously meant for preparing their human victims to eat. They looked shocked, almost scared now. How funny it is that they now cowered in fear once I had the upper hand. Where was all the ferocity, all that viciousness from before?

I found myself sitting on the floor, soaked in dark red demon blood. I must have blanked out, with only vague details in my memory: the screaming of the demons as I slaughtered them; how the little one had run, trying to escape; how they had pleaded with me. Ha! How could they have the audacity to plead with me? I knew what they were trying to do. Still, a tinge of guilt weighed on me in the back of my mind. But I had done it all for God. And there was no guilt in that. I got up and walked through what was now just an ordinary house. I descended the stairs of the basement and sat in my chair, finally ready to complete my creation. Uninterrupted.

Sirens blare outside the basement. I'm almost done, it will be alive soon. People in blue uniforms knock down the door and stomp down the stairs. It will be alive soon. They grab me, tearing me from my creation. They mutter things, but it's inaudible. It will be alive soon. I don't mind, they will understand and I will forgive them. They will let me finish. And when I do, I'll be a hero – no, a God! Because it will be alive soon.

As they push me into the car, I hear snippets of them saying "...killed his family...". What? The demons killed my family? Well, I have avenged them now. And in the end, I didn't let Satan conquer me.



Michael Favala Goldman

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notes from ann arbor no. 1

Thomas Rowland

December, 1965, East Quadrangle

It all happened late one Wednesday evening.

Roommate Maury and I, as usual, were quietly but intently hunched over our studying in room 105 Hayden House. Through the windows' glass we could feel the dreary Midwestern darkness. When, suddenly

BANG!!

A loud, explosive sound came from above. What was *that!*? Startled, we looked at each other. A firecracker? A quick look out the window and then down the hall. Nothing amiss. All was quiet. We resumed studying.

Ten minutes later, though, there was activity all around us. An ambulance had pulled up outside. Our room became bathed in its flashing red lights. Opening our door, we could see emergency personnel and two police officers struggling to carry what looked like a body bag down the stairs. Out they went into the cold night to the ambulance and sped quietly away. And stillness again prevailed at Hayden House.

A dream? It seemed like it! No, we agreed, two independent witnesses—Maury and I—saw it. But what, exactly, had we observed?

The answer came at breakfast the next morning. George Sharpe, a sophomore who lived in the room above us with his roommate David Singleton, revealed the sordid tale. It was one which transposed the events of the night before into a grizzly, indelible nightmare, one that I must say, haunts me to this day.

After leaving the dining hall last evening, David and George had retreated to their room on the second floor for some heavy studying. Final exams began in seven days, and it was time for some serious hitting the books—with a well-deserved Christmas vacation was just around the corner.* They had been at it for about two or three hours, their desks side by side, when David suddenly pulled out a revolver. Aiming it at the side of his head—without a comment—he pulled the trigger. The blast blew his brains halfway across the room, and he fell to the floor. (I did remember, in retrospect, hearing a dull just after the sound of the gunshot.) And that was that.

We listened to this story, stunned with disbelief and shock. But, George, no, he was unbelievably calm. And after what he had just witnessed! In fact, he made light of it. "I think the fear of final exams might have been too much," he joked. But we and the rest of the occupants of Hayden House were disturbed by many troublesome questions. To start with, who was this fellow David? Most had only seen him in passing, and I don't think there was anyone who had actually spoken to him, except George. But even he, his roommate of four months, admitted to "not really knowing him." George said that David was quiet and spoke little, often seeming "distant"

and not engaged socially. A loner, a private kind of person, George thought, who said that he was interested in majoring in architecture.

Rumor had it that David's family was affluent and influential politically but his parents had not been to visit Ann Arbor since dropping him off here in September. Somebody let it be known that he was "certain" that David had been caught last week trying to steal coins from the soft drink vending machine on the first floor. Another said he thought he saw Scott three days ago arguing with an older woman as they were crossing the Diag on campus. All tantalizing gossip, unfortunately, that no one could verify.

But even more of mystery, what had prompted him to take his own life? We sensed from what we knew that he had been a very unhappy, probably depressed student, but to make a decision *not to exist* was hard to understand. There was obviously much to this story that we didn't know. Yet, for our own mental ease we sought a comforting replay to the question of "why." Was David so depressed with his life that the pain of living was too much to endure? Perhaps, but, still, it's not like when the sad deed is done that he would say to himself "Whew! Now *that's* better!" No, he would simply not exist.

For the denizens of Hayden House, East Quad, the tragedy came as a shock. Most of the next day we all sat in Alan Maris' room, trying to get our minds "around this." Many questions were practical. Where had David found a gun? How often do suicidal events like this happen, obviously without publicity, on our campus? Is there anything that could have been done to prevent this tragedy?

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Behind all these conversations, though, lay the gnawing question: what did this all *mean*? How could we make sense of it for our own lives? But...there was no answer. We each had our set of serious worries and challenges in life. Would I get good enough grades to get into med school? Was the relationship with girl I loved beginning to fade? Are my parents disappointed in me? Why don't I have many friends? And, for sure, we all had our moments of feeling "down"—of being emotionally depressed. Maybe the message of the last night's events was that we needed to keep these concerns in proper perspective. If not, maybe there really are monsters under the bed. For many of us, that was frightening.

Meanwhile, I don't know if I ever got to sleep that night. All I remember is hearing the *swish, swish, swish* of a mop cleaning the floor in the room above.

*Only that afternoon we had enjoyed an impromptu party down the hall celebrating our upcoming freedom. Lustily we sang to the tune of a well-known Christmas carol.

*Hark the horny quaddies shout
Ten more days and we get out!*

*No more books and no more thinking
Only sex and social drinking...*





badge or bridge?

Charles Rammelkamp

I wasn't sure if we were talking about Ichabod Crane
or Stephen Crane, hoping I wouldn't be asked my opinion,
but it turned out it was Hart Crane,
and somehow I felt on top of the discussion,
remembering the Rip Van Winkle section of *The Bridge*,
a tale originally told by Washington Irving,
who also wrote "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,"
which couldn't just be a coincidence.
Nothing about *The Red Badge of Courage*, the Civil War.

Stephen Crane, dead at 28, tuberculosis, Black Forest, Germany;
Hart Crane, dead at 32, suicide, Gulf of Mexico;
Ichabod – "without glory" in Hebrew – disappeared
after his encounter with the headless horseman.

So when the professor inevitably called on me in class,
I started blathering about Pocahontas,
Crane's symbol of the American continent,
the American land, "Powhatan's Daughter,"
across the "Van Winkle," "River" and "Indiana" sections
of *The Bridge*, Nature giving way to exploitation,
the rape of the land. Pocahontas a Virgin Mary figure,
then casually mentioned Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*,
the title taken from "The Dance" section of Crane's poem.

Finally the bell rang, class over,
nobody sure if I was an idiot or onto something,
but after class Becky Douglas asked me
if we could study together in the library.
Score!



portugal

Charles Rammelkamp

“Portugal,” our friend Judy asserted.
We lounged at an outdoor café,
sharing a pizza.

“They welcome retirees.
Nobody’s moving there to take their jobs,
just to spend money, boost the economy.”
She went on to extol the climate,
mild temperatures all year long,
but still a country with four seasons.

We were idly speculating
about leaving the U.S.A., disgusted
by the book bans, gun culture,
the stripping of voting and reproductive rights,
the Republican authoritarian takeover.

I remembered how we talked
about emigrating to Canada
during the Bush years.
My uncle threatened to move to Mexico
if McGovern won in 1972.
Instead, we got Nixon again.

None of it ever happened, of course,
but a guy can dream, right?
“Portugal,” I echoed.



hatin' on satan

Charles Rammelkamp

I arrive at one fifty-five
for my two o'clock appointment.
A heavy guy with tattoos
greet me at the front desk,
studs and hooks all over his nose and mouth
like Christmas tree ornaments,
wearing a black t-shirt that proclaims
HATIN' ON SATAN.
He looks me up on the computer,
tells me to take a seat.
"Your stylist will be with you shortly."
(*Stylist?* I'm a seventy-year-old bald guy,
here because my eyebrows are going haywire,
my "sideburns" fluffing like peyes.)

He collapses back into a cushy barber chair,
like my late grandfather's La-Z-Boy recliner,
swiveling in the direction of the widescreen TV,
a music video blaring like a police siren.

Katie walks through the door
a couple of minutes later,
sets a Starbucks drink on her counter,
prepares her station –
hot towels, scissors, clippers, all in a row.

She's a doughy girl with short hair,
all business,
dressed kind of butch
in jeans and flannel shirt.
She beckons me to her chair.

"I saw you just before Thanksgiving," I say,
and she remembers, grateful for the connection.
We murmur a few pleasantries before
we lapse into companionable silence.
The music video blah-blah-blahs in the background
as Katie's razor hums around my ears.
I sense she does not like the manager,
but I can't say exactly why.
Maybe for the same reason he repels me?



measureless miles

Sarah Das Gupta

Through the desert, the sand blew,
defying the scarf wound tightly,
swaddling his head and gaunt face.
Simply, dark, unfathomable pools of eyes,
stared ahead at the pathless dunes.

*Only sand and rock piles
for cruel, measureless miles.*

Scattered thorns, trunks bent eastward,
straddled the horizon like hunched old men.
In the dry wadi, grit peppered his face,
like tiny bullets from unseen guns.
He stumbled on over the waterless valley.

*Only sand and rock piles
for cruel, measureless miles.*

The sun shone behind swirling clouds,
A bronze disc, an eerie green haze.
The stark, white ribs of a long dead camel,
stuck out of the pale sand,
a macabre harp for the wind to play.

*Only the sand and rock piles
for cruel, measureless miles.*

Far to the East, a line of hills
rose defiantly out of the storm.
Two buzzards were helplessly hurled
over his head; feathers, wings
like toy windmills blown away.

*Only sand and rock piles
for cruel, measureless miles.*

Now he's reduced to crawling.
The insistent sand clings to his hands.
Out of the gloom, looms a line of hills.
An oasis, palm trees wildly waving, saving?
One last push, one final gasp.
He cups a shaking hand, drinking, drinking.



ruckus on olympus

William Doreski

Clothes this angular and gauche
protect me from sexual demons
half or twice my age. Stepping out

in my bulky black parka I part
the new snow like Venus breasting
the waves. I've always wondered

why goddesses bathe so often,
exposing themselves to painters
and sculptors who portray them

with powerful sinews and tendons
and able to lift twice their weight.
Most of my friends are secret pagans

because the ruckus on Olympus
replicates their fraternity days
although none joined fraternities.

Still, anyone can drink stuporously,
even me if government requires it.
Too old for the Olympics, I breathe

the impossible cold and taste it
at the bottom of my lungs where
tiny sharks nose shipwrecks

and coral reefs are forming.
My clothes betray me, shabby
and tired, but I'm happy in my skin

and need as little cover as
a marble figure bathing in sight
of the one universal aesthetic.



specimens revolt

William Doreski

Thick green glass separates us.
It fell in sheets from a marbled sky.
We press against it, but until
the mutual illusion fades
we're living separate but equal lives.
How often winter imposes
in the relationship Adam
and Eve never quite perfected.

We walk around town with
that glass jammed between us
as if we were shoulder to shoulder
with a half-erected skyscraper.
No one notices our plight.
While I enter the post office
to collect our freight of bills
you lean against the glass and sigh.

I slip out the back door, ease around
the parking lot and emerge behind you.
Now we're on the same side of the glass
and smash it onto the sidewalk.
The fragments threaten dog paws,
so we sweep them up and fill
two public trash cans, laughing
at how easily matter yields.



cerebral phosphorescence

William Doeski

Cerebral phosphorescence occurs
when I stoop to write a line
freighted with ripened citrus fruit.
Or when you stroke your favorite cat
and her fur shivers and sparkles.
More secretly, it happens when dreams
get emotional and I run out of luck.

Last night we attended church
and took the front pew to insure
that our prayers would fill with helium
and rise to the highest level.
Then you and everyone else
disappeared, leaving me shivering
as a demon took the pulpit
and preached the politics of hate.

By the light of my sizzling mind
I could see the physical wrong
exert itself like a wrestler.
The phosphorescence thickened
into a paste I could scrape from my skull
and apply to anything that needed
illumination. In my panic,

I rolled screaming on the church lawn
as the entire village darkened.
Now awake in grayish daylight
I listen to your daily rictus
and thank my self-illumination
for what little I know of us
and the baggy space we occupy.



mixing chopped meat

Dana Salisbury

Plunge your hands in the bowl feeling assorted lumps, take sticky clumps in your hands, turn them over and over, pat, palm, squeeze strands between your fingers. The latter is, strictly speaking, unnecessary but compelling. Gunk sticks in your ring which with foresight you could have removed. Elemental, this twisting muscle, churning guts, palpating fat 'til it begins to warm and spread and lose definition. What was discrete is now muddled, heavy.

Take your hands out of the bowl Dana, now! Some parts of the past are indigestible: my childhood through the wrong end of a telescope. No need to churn it up now.

Wiener frying in a pan curls, writhes like a snake trapped in too-tight skin. Boiling sausage bloats, casing bursts, emits a grease slick and a vomitous constellation of accreted bits that resist breaking down.

Matter is neither created nor destroyed. But what about thoughts and feelings? Can the heavy part that was never material in the first place reappear in a person who, for a glorious instant, is happy? Can it dance a jig or land on a lily pad? Swim? Love? Be loved? Can it stretch into a bridge sturdy enough for immigrants to cross?

What about immaterial stuff that in the long run seems inconsequential? Can some of it be sequestered, destroyed or lost to time without the entire fabric losing integrity? Must everything need to be able to be reconstituted? Must it all still be there?

Remember that woman in the window packing translucent pig gut tighter than a cigar, flicking her wrist to twist the bulging hose into a link, then cutting it off as surely as a gorgon's snip?

My mind is clotted with things overlapping, choking one another, battling to stay relevant. Popeye's multiple fists flying in a cloud of dust-up. Cartoon characters bumping into each other, rubber necks and torsos entwining the other's suddenly elongated body like bittersweet. Archaic words insisting on slapping themselves into action.

O.K., I whimper. I'll make a compendium of what's stuffing me like organ meat, dense and too red. I'll let each thing be a run-on, but I might circle back. I'll start with B's: Beelzebub! boisterous bubbling burbling bowels, bent over bowl, blistering, burning buns, bulbous piles, bottom's up, belligerent bilious belly, bastion of brew spew, beneath, beside, behind ...

Oh enough already! Off with my head!



courtship outside the tri-county area

Paul Lewellan

“Five years ago, Marvin and I came to an arrangement.”

The word *arrangement* grabbed my attention.

The business trip had been difficult: a cancelled flight, followed by a delayed flight, turbulence, botched hotel reservations, and the lingering risks from the pandemic. Even vaccinated, masked, and socially distanced, it had been an uncomfortable journey.

“What kind of arrangement?”

We were dining at a mediocre Thai restaurant down the block from our hotel. It was after 11:00, the place was closing around us. I’d taken a photo of my Tom Kha Kai and green chicken curry and posted it along with a quick text to Jessica: *Not the meal I’d hoped for*. Jessica has promised the best Chicago hot dog in the universe. She might have been over-claiming

Martha ordered the Som Tum and a spicy beef salad. She picked her way through it as we talked. “I agreed to remain faithful, devoted, and adoring anywhere in the tri-county region. Everyone in the metro area—the office staff, our suburban neighbors, the bridge club, volunteers at the Y—would know me as Marvin’s wife.”

In an office filled with intrigue and illicit affairs, Martha’s reputation was pristine. “But outside the tri-county area...?”

“I’m not.”

“Interesting—” I felt my heartrate rise; my face flushed.

Martha was mid-fifties, eligible for early retirement, a card-carrying AARP member, but easily the most vibrant woman in the office. Her intellect, drive, and Herculean work ethic made her the perpetual top performer. Her sensuality came from a different place.

“Outside the tri-county area, who do you become?”

Martha’s smile morphed into a smirk. “Any woman I chose to be: divorced, never married, widowed, frustrated plus-fifty virgin, cheating spouse, paid escort, lesbian, bi-sexual...”

“But how...?”

“At the time we drafted the arrangement I was on the road fifty-percent of the time. I began packing for my role-play as well as for business. Then COVID struck.”

“You were trapped in the tri-county area.”

“Exactly.”

Martha specialized in mergers and acquisitions. She had a quick wit, an agile mind, and a reputation for being a no-nonsense negotiator. I handled logistics. After almost two years of working remotely, and bans on corporate travel, things were inching toward normalcy. I’d been sent on this trip to consult with IT department of our newest potential acquisition.

“What happened then?”

“I did nasty anonymous shit online, until I realized it was too risky.” She drank the remains of her Singha beer and daubed the corners of her mouth. “Your in-house podcasts on internet security, hacking, and cyberporn scared the crap out of me. I bought a new laptop, phone, and iPad; closed the sketchy accounts; changed all by passwords. I bought a new vibrator.”

My face flushed.

Martha and I had never traveled together. Our conversation on the flight had been about books we’d read, favorite music, politics. We were both liberal Democrats, disgusted by the party’s lack of focus, disappointed in the Biden presidency. We shared a love for craft beer.

“What about Marvin?” I conjured up my most recent memory of him, the corporate Christmas party the December before COVID hit.

88 “I tried to renegotiate our deal. We could still retain the image of the devoted couple, but I needed more freedom.” Martha motioned to the server that we were ready for the check. “I assured him I would be discrete. I assumed he would agree.” She reached into her purse and pulled out the company credit card. “I’m an attractive and successful woman in my own career, unlike the spouses of the other partners at his law firm. I may be over fifty, but I’m still a trophy wife in the circles that he runs in.” She hesitated.

“But he refused—” She nodded. “So what did you do?”

“I moved out and filed for divorce.”

I began sweating profusely. “Who have you told at the office?”

“Only you.” My phone dinged. I ignored the message, focusing instead on the woman across from me.

I was still dressed in my travel clothes: tan khakis, blue oxford shirt, New Balance walking shoes. She had changed into Torrid jeans, a Green Bay Packers sweatshirt, and Keen hiking boots, hardly the clothes a woman would wear for a seduction. Our matching black facemasks featured the corporate logo, the white silhouette of a partridge.

I was a single parent to two pre-teen girls, floundering in the deep end of the dating pool. Once outside the restaurant I asked. “Why are you telling me this?”

"That, Kirby, is a good question. I'm not sure." She took my arm and gave me a hip bump. We started walking back to the hotel. "You're good company but a little young for my tastes."

"So you're not suggesting—" Ever since I started at Barnes, Whitney, and Partridge, I'd admired Martha Eldridge. She epitomized everything I admired in a woman: articulate, creative, humorous, sexy, demure, independent. In other words, she was everything my ex-wife had been, except Martha wasn't a narcissist or a sociopath or a sexual predator like Carlie. "I mean, you're an attractive woman...."

"And you are handsome traveling companion. But I don't have affairs with people from work. Always a bad idea." She entered the revolving doors and was already in the hotel lobby by the time I recovered and followed.

I caught up with her at the elevator. "With the divorce you'll be single so it wouldn't be an affair...."

"Right." She broke into a large smile. "But you are Mr. Squeaky Clean. You're grounded. You'd never be able to accept the kind of open relationship I need." When we exited into the empty corridor on the twelfth floor, she continued, "Your ex-wife got caught cheating. She emptied your joint bank account and ran off with your massage therapist. You need a woman you can learn to trust. I am not that woman."

My sad history was common knowledge in the corporate suite at Barnes, Whitney, and Partridge. In the months after Carlie left me (while I was single-parenting my daughters, cancelling credit cards, and unpacking the deceptions I'd been the victim of), I cried a lot. Sometimes at my office desk.

"You're clearly overwhelmed by daily life and single-parenting two girls to whom you're devoted. Our colleagues' awkward attempts to pair you with females from the office—friends, sisters, or divorced neighbors—have been stymied by the pandemic and met with limited success."

"Commitment scares the crap out of me."

"It should." Martha hesitated before proceeding to her room. "But some day it might not." When we reached her door, she added. "On the road you're not a single parent. You're an eligible male. Give yourself permission to explore your options."

"Actually, I had a dinner date for this evening that got cancelled because of our delays."

"Kirby, you dog. Tell me about that."

"I wouldn't know where to begin—"

She waved her key card and the light turned green. "Tomorrow will be soon enough." She opened the door. "We'll talk over breakfast." She disappeared into her room and the door closed behind her.

I stood there for almost a minute staring at the closed door.

I called her room at 5:30 a.m. the next morning. “This better be good,” she told me.

“The Biscuit Boss Café is two blocks from our hotel. They’ve got good Wi-Fi and great coffee. It’s open 24/7. Let’s do breakfast there.”

“And what would we talk about?” There was an edge to her question.

“Our potential acquisition of Logan Transport Solutions. I found something.”

“When do you want to meet?”

“I’m at Biscuit Boss now, been here since 3 a.m..

“Give me twenty minutes.”

Martha arrived in sweats, running shoes, and a Cardinals baseball cap. She ordered their traditional biscuit with creole gravy, poached egg, tomato, and fried catfish. I got two biscuits with a gravy flight: chorizo, sweet potato coconut, and red eye expresso.

“What did you find?”

“A disgruntled, soon-to-be ex-wife, and some disturbing posts on Facebook.”

“I need more than that.”

“This is supposed to be a creampuff deal: high functioning, profitable firm with a great future. Trucking is our weakest segment. It’s their strength.”

“We were surprised when they made overtures.” Martha looked rested, fresh, ready for anything. She’d gotten more sleep than I had.

“You told me about three key employees.”

“The firm keeps them with golden handcuffs and generous stock options.” She lifted her mug and took a long appreciative drink. “This is amazing coffee.” She took another drink and looked around. She saw the jam bar with thirty types of honeys and homemade preserves, served into individualized cups. “How did you find this place?”

“I couldn’t sleep. I asked my acquaintance if anything was open.”

“Why couldn’t you sleep?”

“Before we came, the firm referred me to Richard Multch their IT head. He was to provide the information I’d need before we could make an offer. It didn’t feel right. He was hiding something, but I didn’t know where to look.”

“What did you do?”

“I piled on dozens of demands for information. When he bristled at my requests, I apologized, ‘I’m sorry,’ I told him, ‘I’m monopolizing your time. Put some flunky on this, maybe an intern—’”
“You wanted someone less cautious. Someone without the knowledge of what was at stake.”
Martha smiled. “Well played.”

I used a biscuit to sop up the last of the red eye expresso gravy. “I want the recipe for this gravy....”

Martha put her fork down. “Kirby, focus. Tell me about the intern.”

“Jessica Skoken isn’t an intern. She’s been with the company eighteen months. She has been efficient, knowledgeable, and helpful. Her boss considers her a flunky.”

“It’s the firm’s male dominated culture.” Martha glanced at her empty coffee cup. “That’s going to change.” She motioned to our server for refills. “Now what haven’t you told me.”

“Remember last night, I took a photo of my pathetic meal?”

“I thought that was odd.”

“Jessica and I had a supper date, but I had to cancel it because of our missed flight. I sent the picture to her.”

“In hopes that you’d get another chance?” Then it struck her. “But that’s not why you got up at this godforsaken hour.”

“She posted the photo on Facebook. She didn’t mention my name, but commented that I was a sweet guy she was looking forward to meeting in person.”

“That’s charming....”

“It would be, except she got an email soon after the posting. They told her someone else had been assigned to help me. She’d be working at the warehouse in the morning and because of the *inconvenience* she could take the rest of the day off.”

“Someone was monitoring her social media?”

“The Facebook post was never mentioned.”

“That’s why you were here at 3 a.m. You were digging. What did you find?”

I opened my MacBook Pro. “Gunner Watson.”

“Their top salesperson, connected to clients through country clubs, golf outings, and access to hard-to-get tickets. A glad-hander, but relentless.”

“Blaire Tate.”

“A marketing savant. In their print ads, social media, and on their website, she’s the charismatic and photogenic face of Logan Transport Solutions.”

“And Leon Epenesa.”

“Their logistics chief. A visionary with a strong long-term relationship with the warehouse managers and the trucking team. We don’t have anyone like him.”

“After the takeover, we still won’t. From what I could piece together, the three are starting their own firm.”

“They’d have to wait years. The noncompete clause in their contract. By then we’d have our own people in place.”

“But what if, when the three were ready to bolt six months ago, the company eliminated the noncompete clause? What if the C-suite persuaded them to stay until the firm could find a buyer who would make their stock options soar in value?”

“We’d be buying a worthless shell.” Martha pushed aside her empty plate. “Tell me about Jessica.”

“She’s thirty-two. She has two daughters six and four. Red Hot Chicago Craft where we were going to meet has local beer, gourmet Chicago dogs, and a video arcade.” Martha waited for more. “It took her six years to get her degree because she worked two jobs to put her husband through med school. After the second daughter was born, her husband asked for a divorce.”

“He ran off with his nurse?”

“No. Not that trope. He moved in with the head of surgery at Methodist Hospital. Agreed to pay for Jessica’s last two years of college and generous alimony and child support if she didn’t make a fuss. Now she’s graduated, employed, and comfortable single-parenting. She says she isn’t in the dating pool. Still, she’d hoped for a chance to meet....”

“Because?”

“She claimed the hot dogs there are to die for. Otherwise, I have no idea.” That wasn’t entirely true. Martha didn’t need to know everything. “Jessica plays Scrabble online and is a Packers fan like me.” I reached for my coffee mug, but it was empty. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. “I feel like a schoolboy, probably too eager to meet her in person. Last night pissed me off.”

“And think what it says about the firm. A bright competent woman discouraged by her chances of advancement. Monitoring her social media. They’re hiding something.”

“I know what it is.”

“How.”

“Once connected with Jessica, I backed off on the data requests. I asked her to tell me about the firm. She likes the work but hates the culture. She feels undervalued because she’s a woman. When I mentioned she would enjoy the more global climate our firm would provide, Jessica said, ‘Sure, if there’s anyone left.’”

“Did you ask her to explain?”

“I let it slide. As soon as she said it, she knew she’d said too much. I pretended it meant nothing. I went fishing instead.”

“And how would you do that?”

“Jessica isn’t the only one on Facebook. I have personally developed some popular sites: a puppy rescue, cat videos, that kind of thing.... They’re all under other names. I use them to connect with people.”

“So, you aren’t as squeaky clean as your reputation suggests.”

“It’s a hobby. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“So what did you find with Facebook?”

“Using my cat video site, I reached out to some folks related to the firm. It turns out that Sheila Watson, Gunner’s soon-to-be ex-wife is a cat person. This morning I found buried in the comments on her latest cat pics was a comment from a friend, *‘Once he’s got his own firm, you’ll get the house your felines deserve.’*”

“So, he’s probably getting the divorce he wants, making promises contingent on the money from his stock sale, and opening the new firm.”

“That’s the way I read it.”

Martha and I walked back to the hotel. I showered while she made calls. We took an Uber to Corporate and were met at the reception desk with visitors’ passes and a hearty welcome by Gunner Watson who was thrilled we’d taken an interest in the company he loved so much. “I could work here the rest of my life and die a happy man.”

After a cursory tour, he dropped me off at IT where I was met by Richard Multch. Gunner took Martha to meet the CEO. He assured her that anything I needed to know, Richard could get me. After they left, I inquired about Jessica.

Multch told me, “I felt guilty passing you off to an underling. I can get you what you need and show you around.”

“That’s great.”

I went through the motions of evaluating their systems, internet security, and ability to handle more traffic. Two hours later, Martha texted. *Starbucks in 10 minutes*. I stood up. Richard looked concerned.

"I need to hit the men's room," I reassured him. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Martha was already at Starbucks when I arrived, drinking coffee with a tanned man in his late forties. They were laughing. Her hand rested on his arm.

"Kirby, I'd like you to meet Leon Epenesa."

"The logistic genius?" I shook his hand. "I've been admiring your work." I glanced over to Martha and raised my eyebrows. I sat down to join them.

"Leon and I had a chance to talk privately this morning. I mentioned our conversation about the three critical people in the firm, Leon, naturally, Blaire Tate, and Gunner Watson."

"Of course, Gunner isn't functioning at full capacity these days," I offered. "But you know that. Who can blame him? His contentious divorce, the affair...." I sat down across from them. Martha had gotten me a Café Americano and an orange scone.

Leon seemed surprised. "Do you know Gunner?"

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"No, of course not. Just met him this morning." I paused to take a bite of scone. "But I've been studying your firm. There's a lot of noise in the email, traffic on internal memos, a skilled observer picks up things." I sipped my coffee. "I mean, nobody's going to trust Gunner to operate heavy equipment until the dust settles from the divorce. Am I right?"

Leon melted into the booth. "You know, don't you?" He turned from me to Martha. "About us bolting?"

"Your reaction tells us we know enough." She steepled her hands. "We're still filling in the details. Kirby is quite the sleuth."

From her comment I realized she wanted me to play the bad cop, so she could be the good cop. "How many people are in on this?"

"No more than a half dozen. The CEO, of course. I'm sure others suspect. You've probably talked to some of them."

"There were red flags."

"Gunner's wife posted something on Facebook," Martha interjected.

Leon shook his head. "I was never comfortable with this.... But the chance to start our own firm.... The money we'll get from selling our stock.... More independence to make decisions..."

"You were ready for a change. The last few years have been difficult." Martha turned to me. "Leon's wife was a nurse. One of the early casualties of COVID."

I knew, of course, but now processed the information differently. I remembered Martha's conversation from last night.

"What happens now?" Leon finally asked.

"Nothing," we said in unison.

"Nothing," Martha reiterated. "I'm sorry for your loss, Leon," she said carefully.

"What do you mean? My wife—?"

The Starbucks was a busy place, but Martha had chosen a quieter corner where we could talk. She'd seated Leon where I could observe him. "She means the loss of your own firm. Your stock won't be worth much once Barnes, Whitney, and Partridge withdraws its offer. People will wonder what's wrong with the firm. It won't take long to figure it out."

"You don't understand." He was shaking his head. "I sold my shares last night." He looked over to Martha. "I didn't tell Gunner or Blaire. They would have thought I was crazy."

"So why sell?"

"It didn't feel right. It felt dishonest. You were purchasing the firm based on what it was once able to accomplish." He glanced over to me. "Plus, I had a feeling." He caught Martha's eye again and held the gaze. "Your reputation preceded you. When I learned you were coming, I assuming the jig was up. And frankly that was a relief."

"Why thank you, Leon," she said, followed by a kiss on the cheek. "What a wonderful thing to say."

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "What happens now?"

Martha glanced over to me, then made up her mind. "I believe, Leon, for Kirby and I to do our due diligence, we should tour your warehouse." The suggestion startled him. "That's where your office is, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I thought the sale...."

"Only the people at this table know the sale isn't going to happen. Before the decision is announced, we'd like to finish some business."

"What would that be?"

"Kirby wants to meet Jessica Skoken."

"I don't know her."

"She was supposed to meet with me this morning," I explained. "She's been helping me gather data, but then Gunner told me this morning that she had a project at the warehouse and couldn't meet...."

"Let me make a call," Leon told me.

By now Richard had sent me three text messages and called twice. Both calls had gone right to voice mail. *Something came up*, I texted.

Leon retrieved his Lexus from the company parking garage and picked us up in front of Starbucks. Martha road shotgun. "I turned my phone off so I don't have to answer any questions." We rode in silence for several minutes before he finally said, "People will assume...."

"Let them," Martha suggested.

"I suppose Gunner, Blaire, and I could still go out on our own."

"Not a good idea," I told him. "Gunner is unprincipled, unstable, and unreliable. I doubt if that will change any time soon."

"And Blaire made herself the face of Logan in all the advertising. It's difficult to look at her without thinking of the firm she's been flacking for the last five years. How will she market your firm, if people have always associated her with Logan Transport Solutions?"

"Only you have market value," I told him. "Have you thought about consulting work?"

"We don't have anyone at Partridge with your expertise."

"We could be your first client."

Leon raised his hand for us to stop. He pulled into the parking spot with his name of it. "Let's find your friend first."

"I texted Jessica. She'll meet me in the break room."

"I'll take you there. Then I'll give Martha a warehouse tour."

Leon commandeered a golf cart from the loading dock and dropped me off outside the break room. "We'll pick you up in time to get us all back to Corporate in time for lunch with the CEO."

"Lunch? Why would we do lunch?" Martha and Leon sped off before I got an answer.

Through the workroom window I could see a half-dozen people. One, mid-thirties, pleasantly dressed, with a round face and an anxious expression, looked up, and smiled.

I remembered what Martha told me the night before. When she traveled, she assumed any persona she choose. I could, too. When I walked through that door I could be corporate deal maker from Partridge who controlled her company's fate, or I could be single male looking for female company for the night.... Or I could just be myself. I smiled back and opened the door.

By the time Leon and Martha returned in the golf cart, laughing like they'd known each other for years, Jessica and I agreed to meet for cocktails at my hotel. Then we planned to have supper with the girls, hot dogs and craft beers. Maybe back to her place for brownies. We were each circling the other. Trust would take time.

I climbed into the back of the cart. "What now?"

"We have lunch with Gunner, Blaire, the CEO, and Leon of course."

"Why would we do that?"

"To finalize the acquisition offer. Leon tells me they've brought in a local chef. We'll make conversation and smile a lot. When I get the floor I'll tell them what I told our boss. The company's infrastructure inventory would be a good fit, but the corporate culture is not. We're envious of the logistics expertise and could learn a lot from Leon, but it wouldn't be worth buying a dysfunctional firm to get it."

"We could say their marketing model is inconsistent with the model used at Partridge," I suggested, "because our brand is about connecting people and products. They seem to be selling personalities. Blaire is the face of Logan; she couldn't be the face of Partridge."

"Excellent," Martha said. "You might also mention your suspicion that Gunner is leaving the firm. I'll say his comments this morning seemed disingenuous. We'd require noncompete clauses from everyone in the C-suite before the sale would be final."

I looked at Leon. "Will that be a problem?"

"Not if I decide to start my own consulting office." He pulled the cart up to his car. "Martha has offered to assist me with a business plan."

"Leon has a cabin on the lake where he and his late wife used to go. I thought I'd take some time off, get out of the Tri-County area for a while, do a little fishing while we bounce around some ideas."

I tried to picture Martha fishing, but then I suspected she was planning on catching something else.

Leon stepped from the cart. "After what Gunner, Blaire, and I planned, could you ever trust us?"

"No. But we might trust you in time," Martha offered. "We don't have anyone quite like you. I think we can work something out." She looked at the time on her phone. "Drop us off at our hotel. I want to freshen up."

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"Probably best if we don't arrive together."

"Jessica and I are meeting at the hotel bar after the dust has cleared. She has no idea what's happening. It will give us a chance to talk."

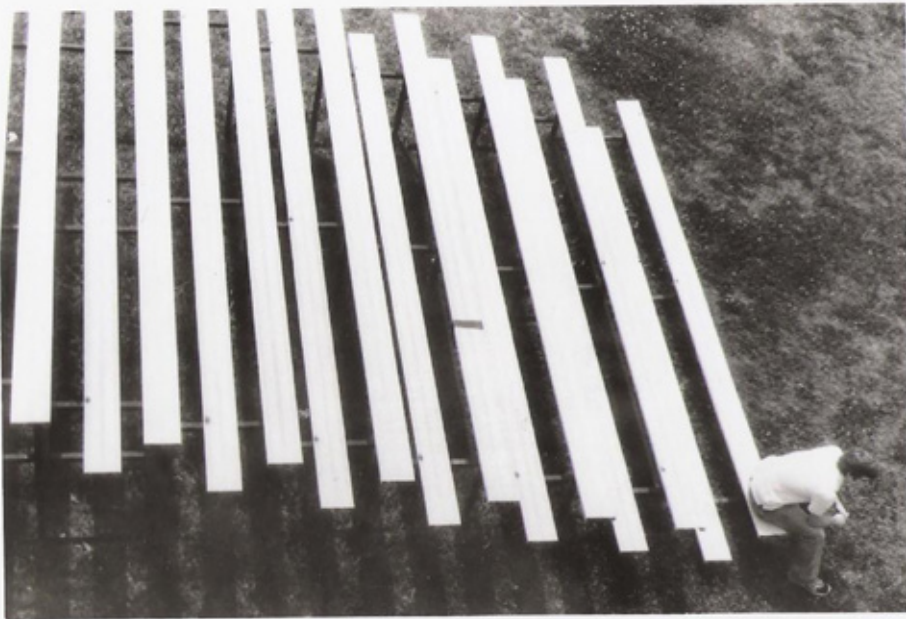
Martha smirked at the word *talk*. "Then what?"

"We're taking her girls out for their favorite meal, hot dogs."

"Plan for the long haul," Leon said. "Small steps. You have all the time in the world to get to know each other."



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waiting for
Jordan Veres

gynecological exam

Dana Henry Martin

The gynecologist tells me men are lucky because they don't have a gaping hole in their bodies that things can get into, like spinach contaminated with E. coli. Why would that happen, I ask. You know, things just happen, he laughs. The most that's ever gotten in my vagina other than a finger or a tongue or a penis is a condom that my vaginal muscles stripped from a cock in a single motion or maybe a series of motions, but I like to think of it as one, like an eager customer tearing the breakaway pants off a stripper, dramatic like that. Each time—and there were many—I had to fish around for the cast-off ultra-thin lubricated Trojan. They usually got snagged in the cove around the opening to my cervix, a pocket I'm surprised no man ever thought to name. Finem Mortuorum would work, or maybe The Cove of Retzius. A speculum would have aided the retrieval, as well as an exam table and a bright light, but I made do in the dark on my futon with my bare hands. Fat markers! A popsicle! Tools suggested by childhood friends. I forgot about those. Each went in my gaping hole utterly unprepared for the task. Later, vibrators, too, including that one that looked like a rabbit and boxed my clitoris into a concussed state that's left it with trauma to this day. But never have I walked around my kitchen with my vulva sloppily agape and ready to chow down on whatever its lips brush up against. And never have I handed it a fistful of spinach, especially not spinach contaminated with E. coli. Not from a bag. Not from a box. Not from a can. I say all of this to my gynecologist and then ask him what kinds of things he's stuffed in his penis over the years. BBs? Q-tips? Pop Rocks? He's not laughing anymore. He's backing away. Things just happen, I say, even to those with teensy holes, not yawning maws.



the sound of resistance

Skyler Lambert

thundering feet stomp streets
relentless chants charge the air
claps clamor, drums rattle
armies of justice march on
resistance tolls, the bell before
fascism finds its time is up



let my words christen the world

Skyler Lambert

Let my words christen the world like babies blossoming.
Hopes are held in translucent minds, hugged in hungry hearts.

Fears are held in anguished hearts, trapped in opaque minds.
What is the American Dream to children who can't sleep?

Palestinian children sleep in makeshift tents, in rubble and graves.
Where is the line between radical thought and radical action?

Radical action is the throughline to measurable progress.
Moist soil congeals, mud-like, crusts beneath marching boots.

Papaw's boots are coated in soot and ash, in dust and loneliness.
I hear Mamaw in the strained voice of every coal miner's wife.

Coal miners' wives weep over union-bought pine caskets.
I've felt more spiritual in a pine forest than in any church.

Spiritual journeys are born in the babble of innocent youth.
Let my words christen the world like babies blossoming.



a place to the heart

Skyler Lambert

A Place of the Heart

When someone asks where I'm from,
my mind fumbles for winning words.
Do I say I came to hilly Western Mass
by way of a hilly West Virginia coal camp
where glistening moon perched
atop the ridgeline like a housecat?

Do I tell them how Mommy worked
afternoon shifts at the travel plaza
up Beckley and still taught me
(a southpaw) to write and how
she wrapped veiny hands around
tin-foiled cardboard cutout sword
and shield to match shining armor?

Do I explain the watering hole
where Daddy and I warshed up,
where we filled plastic milk jugs
when summer's dead-dog heat
dried up our trailer's cistern?

Or how Daddy used his Winterplace
employee discount so I could learn
to ski on lonely nights, evergreens
stretching shadows across trails?

I am from the softest place
lodged in throbbly corners
of my parents' hearts,
where moonlight shimmers
through pines and spruce
and every royal knight
needs a good warsh
and snow-caked mountains
sing me ancestors' lullabies.



spread thing

D.C. Martin

Wesley Phillips always thought he would start running one day. He pulled a pair of track pants out of one of his boxes and walked down the street in front of his complex. He waited for something to tell him when to begin. He saw a gorgeous woman running in his direction. It was about 4:30 in the afternoon and the July sun made her perfectly resplendent as she approached the stoplight. She got there and stopped as the traffic went by, still for a moment. The sunlight outlined her edges. For a second, she reminded him of his ex-wife, but her hair was a bit darker and she didn't have the ridiculous dragonfly tattoo on her forearm. He never missed her, but it's hard to let go of things. Especially the anger, which he directed mostly at himself. He should have seen it, he should have been stronger.

She stood at the edge of the crosswalk, breathed out with her whole body twice and then set herself in beautiful motion across the street. She wasn't moving very fast, but she was moving so gracefully. Every part of her was working in harmony. Even her ponytailed hair flowed in a gently bouncing rhythm. He stood there for a moment, taking in everything about his surroundings. The whir of lawnmowers, the smell of fresh-cut grass. The sun's warmth and the bright blue sky.

Wesley decided to follow her. It made sense, she knew what she was doing. She probably had a perfect route. He took his first step, he ran. His strides were modest, but strong. He was going to work hard to become a better man. He was going to leave the old Wesley chasing behind. He tried to find her pace, her cadence. Soon fatigue set in and he looked at his watch, confused and frustrated by what he saw—57 seconds. He was completely exhausted. His fury was interrupted by bouts of heavy breathing and pacing. She flew into the distance. Her perfume triggered a memory of the rosebush from his house in Toronto. He got in trouble once for clipping a bouquet for the prettiest girl in his second grade class. Wesley hunched over and decorated the sidewalk with sweat. She was gone.

He passed the mirror on his way to the shower and saw the man who was following the runner. He was too old, too divorced, too out-of-shape. He wondered what happened to the man who used to look back at him 20 years ago, going to the gym every day and flexing his muscles for instant approval. His confidence was shattered, even as his mirror stayed intact. He lived his whole life as an overly cautious person. He never jaywalked, never changed lanes without signaling. It didn't protect him from getting hurt, but he was a rule-follower—he trusted rules, trusted people. Trust leads to betrayal. But he wouldn't get betrayed again. He had left her and all the rest of them behind. He was stronger now, wiser.

People always told Wesley that he needed to take more risks. Get out there, make an online dating profile. He started by moving away from everything holding him back. His loneliness finally provoked a change; it provided the motivation he needed. He had to stop living in the past and start moving on from the pain it caused. He could reinvent himself however he liked. He had no one left to criticize him, no one left to drag him down, no one left to question him later. No one cared about him anymore, no one even cared that he left. He still felt confined but he couldn't complain, he couldn't lean on his friends any more. They were thoroughly finished with him. He had already used them as his amateur psychiatric team. But he took all of their advice, he took all of the steps.

Wesley already set his mind at ease about it, getting the new place looking somewhat respectable, to him anyway. Moving to a smaller city would be a fresh start. He hung things on the walls. His degrees, some nice drapes. In fact, the place was starting to look pretty decent and “breezy” in the warm sun of a beautiful summer morning. Maybe not the reveal on a home renovation show, but good enough. What he couldn’t get used to was the absence of her. Not that he wanted her back, he never wanted to see her again. But she was always there, providing constancy. Not love, but constancy. He couldn’t believe he never saw it coming. All the signs were there. But the anger turned into self-doubt and he was closing in on acceptance. She had not replaced him with a better man, she had replaced him with a shallower version of herself. She was probably better off that way, and so was he. The place was certainly looking better, yet somewhat empty. Lonely. He was excited about starting his new job in September. Teaching Grade 6 would be a new challenge, but with challenges come opportunities.

The next day, Wesley ran in the opposite direction. She wouldn’t catch him out of breath, she would see him striding forward. Besides, it was a lot less stalkery. He would catch her eye and smile. It would go on like that for a few days, maybe a week. Then he would ask her a question, maybe about the weather. He took it slow. Not just his strides, but his breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. It seemed to be working, his body was running in harmony with his breathing. He was not going to give up so easily. A big jump from 57 seconds, three minutes and sixteen seconds this time. He watched the drops of sweat hit the sidewalk again, he felt the weight of his body pressing down, he felt his heart pounding and lungs begging for relief. He heard her approach. There was enough time to make himself lurch forward and appear to be running. She was stunning, but more attractive was her inviting presence. As they passed she made eye contact and flashed an unforgettable smile. He wondered what she liked, besides running. Italian food, sushi, Thai? She was just so natural and genuine. Wesley pressed on until she was completely gone. It was a good day.

The route was about 5K and it wound through lots of gradual hills and valleys in pretty, sleepy neighborhoods. Mature trees and empty nests. It was quiet and shady and secluded. He watched a proud old cat turn her gaze over to Wesley before she pushed her front legs out for a stretch and got back to her nap. He breathed in a hint from the peonies in a lovely front garden. They were blooming, but bowing down on their own weight. He nodded back to a nice old couple having a stroll. He looked over at a small porch. Two Muskoka chairs. A lonely old man was perched on one of them, giving Wesley a respectful nod. This was the kind of place where people looked up. They didn’t ignore you. Maybe he would buy a house here one day, maybe with her.

It became a routine. His strength and endurance grew. When he saw her on the horizon he would just press on as she did, always looking up to meet her eyes for a nod or a smile. Wesley began to see running as more than just a chore, or a means to an end. He was actually starting to enjoy it. He created checkpoints for himself. Stoplight, corner with the peonies, porch with the nodding old man.

Weeks went by and Wesley could feel himself getting stronger. He was always recording a better time. One day he noticed something a little strange. He veered around an old Chevy, probably a ‘97, backed out on the street slightly, stopped. As he ran by, he noticed the driver side door was half-opened. The driver looked as if he was trying to get out but couldn’t.

"Hey, are you alright?" Wesley asked.

The old man's head rested on the steering wheel. He was clutching his chest and struggling to breathe. Wesley immediately went into First-Aid mode.

"I'm calling an ambulance!"

Wesley waited in the hospital with the man for more than an hour, making sure he was alright. Hooked up to oxygen, but he was stable. 82 beats per minute—pretty good for someone who just had a heart attack.

"I don't know why you're still here," the man said. It was a fair question; there was no moral obligation. The man was clearly traumatized by what happened. Wesley sensed guilt, too. Maybe there was a reason he was all alone on his porch every day. Maybe he lost everybody. Maybe he abandoned everyone and was starting over.

"So what happened, anyway?"

"Well, it's 'cause my heart doesn't work too good any more." He looked away and toward the window.

Wesley got to his feet and headed to the door, turned back a bit and asked, "I don't mean to pry, but does your wife—"

"Dead."

"—your kids—"

"Never had 'em."

He never turned to look. He just stared out the window. It made Wesley really struggle to figure out his next move. Should he offer to drive him home? Leave his phone number? He waited.

"How are you going to get home?"

"I don't know." The man turned to him and repeated, "I don't know."

Wesley needed to help. It would be good to finally make a connection for the first time since he moved. He needed to start somewhere.

Wesley couldn't recall a better summer. The scent of lavender still held its place in the air, and the cicadas provided the heartbeat for a day that could be lived well. He changed his routine so he could check up on the old man. If Wesley didn't help him, no one else would. He ran early in the morning, but he still got to see her. Her route ran right past the old man's porch.

"Quiet, here she comes," the old man said as he grabbed his beer from the side table on the porch.

The new friends heard the rhythm of the footfalls and the breathing, they saw the gently flowing hair. They nodded as she passed and they both received a smile as her feet pressed their way up the little hill on Elmdale Avenue.

They clinked their bottles and smiled. "I wonder," the old man began, "how many admirers she has along her route. I betcha we're not the only ones."

Wesley took a long drink.

"So what do you do?" the old man asked, setting the bottle down and moving into a more judgmental posture, like he was interviewing Wesley for a job.

Wesley laughed a little and said, "You know that you haven't even told me your name? Don't worry, I know it from our adventure in the hospital. Anyway, I'm a teacher, Mr. Telford."

"Teacher, eh? Must be nice."

"I suppose it is. I've had some pretty vicious students, though. There was this one young man who—"

"Summers off...plus you're nothing more than a glorified babysitter."

Wesley thought about getting up and walking home. Nobody understood how hard he worked, how it pushed down on him, how year after year they became more difficult to manage and more pressure was applied. More demands and longer hours were eating away at him, tearing flesh from bone. Never enough time to spend with his friends, or notice his ex-wife's affair. But he was starting over. All of that would change now. A new school is a new opportunity. When he turned back he got a stupid grin. He shook his head and laughed. The friends tilted their beers.

"You should ask her out," Mr. Telford said after finishing another beer.

"I don't know. She's probably married."

"Doubt it," he said. "They still wear wedding rings, most of 'em. She strikes me as the type who would. Her running outfits cost lots and her earrings are real sparkly. I feel like if she was married, she'd be wearing a real fancy deal."

The maple in the front yard waved a little at a distant wind. Wesley could see her, a candle lighting her face, a glass of wine in front of her. She was laughing and tucking her hair behind her ears. Mr. Telford flipped the cap off his next beer and said, "You're a fool to let her pass you by. If I were a younger man, I'd—"

"What do you know about it? You don't even have a—"

"Missus? I did, though. Forty goddamn years. I'd watch your step, son."

Mr.Telford's eyes shone icy-blue. His sinewy forearms were sunburnt red and his knuckles went white as he gripped the beveled edge of the Muskoka chair. A little breeze awakened the wind chime on an empty porch across the street.

"You never told me what *you* did."

Mr.Telford sniffed the air.

"You remember Duffy's out on the 20?"

"It was a hardware store, right?"

"I handled deliveries, installations, made connections on the side. You need someone to fertilize your lawn, seal your driveway? I'd do that. Good thing, too, 'cause when Duffy's shut down, I had to make do on those odd jobs to survive."

Mr.Telford got to his feet, which surprised Wesley. "See that driveway 'cross the way? Just sealed it a couple months ago."

"Looks great," Wesley said, trying to seem impressed.

"Doesn't it, though? See, most of those companies spread the product too thin, that's why it's shiny, not matte like my formula. The stuff they use is garbage. What I do is..."

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Wesley got distant for a moment. He thought about how he was spread thin. Living his life based on someone else's goals, someone else's expectations. Starting now, he would focus on his own life, his own work. He would make friends eventually, maybe even find someone, but he wasn't in a rush this time. Experience made him less vulnerable. He knew better, he could start over. He could stop worrying so much about making everybody else happy. He could start taking care of himself for once. He was ready to live his own life on his own terms.

"...I make my own formula for fertilizer, too," Mr.Telford said. "If you look at that remarkably green lawn just down the street, that's my work, too. No one can beat my fertilizer. I came up with it when I was working for Duffy himself. I'm a whizz with chemistry. It's all about..." Mr. Telford had to flick a mosquito off his forearm. There was a gentle hum as a street light turned on. "It's getting near dark. You come back tomorrow, if you want. But bring more beer. A six pack isn't enough for the two of us."

Wesley retrieved his beer and emptied it quickly. "Well, I'm off now. Have a wonderful evening, Mr.Telford."

The next day, Mr.Telford wasn't on the porch. He was always on the porch. Wesley knocked on the screen door. Then he pulled the aluminum frame back with a terrible squeak and poked his head in the house. The screen door slammed behind him. It bounced off the frame twice and then settled shut.

"Mr.Telford?"

He walked down the front hall. There was a picture of a much younger Mr. Telford with a young bride who was quite pretty. He couldn't pull his attention away from the woman. She seemed to speak to him. He finally dragged his gaze away, but felt her presence as he walked up the stairs.

Wesley caught something from the corner of his eye. It was Mr. Telford, crumpled up on the bedroom carpet. He let go of the beer and it smashed on the hallway floor.

Wesley promised to take care of the house while Mr. Telford recuperated in the hospital. He collected the mail and kept an eye on things. There were some letters addressed to Sandra Telford, who must have been Mr. Telford's wife. Odd. He assumed Mr. Telford lost her a long time ago.

Wesley was getting concerned about the approaching storm. Old houses like this get flooded. The door to the basement was locked, which seemed strange, but everything about Mr. Telford was strange. Wesley was given very clear instructions in the hospital: "Don't even go into the basement. I've let that place go to hell." He decided to check how the basement would do from outside. The sky was getting darker; it was quiet and still. Wesley felt a cool wind tickle the back of his neck. He walked around to the back of the house and pulled on the window to see if it was secure and it just squeaked right open. The top part of the latch had completely rusted away.

It was obvious the basement would get flooded if Wesley didn't act. He went through Mr. Telford's basement window the same way he did when he locked himself out of his house when he was twelve. Forgetting your key meant something very bad would happen. Wesley put his feet through to keep the window open and then slid backwards from his stomach. He had to be careful to keep himself higher than the jagged edge of the broken latch. There was a moment when he wondered if he might just slide back and get his neck trapped as the awning window closed in on it. Mr. Telford would find him dead a few days later and say something like, "Told that damn fool not to go into the basement."

He let the window close on its own and he was in complete darkness. He opened the window again. It wasn't just filthy on the outside, it was painted on the inside. He wondered why Mr. Telford would do that. He grabbed a stick from the window-well and propped the window with it. His eyes adjusted as he scanned to find the staircase. There was a strong smell that Wesley couldn't place. He carefully made his way up the bare wooden stairs.

There was a light with a string at the top. He pulled it. On first inspection, the basement didn't look messy, but it was still dark. At the bottom of the stairs, another string light lit up the basement quite well. It turned out to be remarkably clean. There were barrels with caution labels, some "Airport Grade" asphalt sealant and things that Wesley could only figure were measuring devices and random lab equipment. It had that industrial kind of smell. That's what it was—chemicals. Heavy and unpleasant. He noticed a system of pulleys and chains on the ceiling, and a shiny red wheelbarrow in the corner. There was also a pretty nicely stocked workbench, a dehumidifier that must have been from the seventies, a chest freezer and a clawfoot tub, sitting awkwardly in the middle of the room. What was he hiding down here?

He went to inspect the windows. All painted white. The other two were locked tight in addition to being painted shut. He found a hammer easily. It was on one of those pegboards. Old people always have pegboards. All the tools were outlined in Magic Marker. Everything had a purpose, a place. Wesley wished for a moment that he belonged somewhere. He took a few nails from a baby food jar that was screwed under the top shelf of the immaculately-kept workbench. He grabbed the caulking gun and was ready to seal the window.

He needed to put a nail through the inside of the sill to get it to stay fixed tight. He used a 3 inch spiral, which was probably excessive, but it would definitely keep it secure. He pounded it in about an inch and a half so it could be taken back out when the latch was properly fixed. He carefully sealed around the window. Nothing will get through that.

Wesley put everything back exactly as it had been on the workbench. He panned across the room. The dehumidifier switched off, and it was silent, empty and lonely. What was lurking in the shadows here? The chest freezer turned on and he walked toward it slowly. What's the old guy got in there? He stopped. He wasn't even supposed to go down into the basement. He was startled by a loud crack of thunder and went back up the stairs. It was already raining, so he decided to run home.

The first drops hit him. Then he saw lightning in the distance and the thunder became louder, closer. The hard drops moved across him, across the street in sheets. Two shocks of light strobed just to his left and slowed him almost to a halt. Then a great crack of thunder stopped him dead in his tracks. He stood there for a moment, air pushing out and pulling in, his body expressing the full extent of exhaustion and fear. There was no hiding, no way to escape. Quickly, the rumbling passed and the lightning retreated. The only drops that hit him now came from the wake of the storm.

Wesley turned the key but didn't put the Chevy in gear. "I had to go into the basement—"

"What the hell'd you do that for?"

"There was supposed to be this major storm. I was doing you a favor."

"You're a damn fool. I don't know why I ever trusted you."

The old man fumed for the entire drive to the house. Wesley ran to the passenger side and offered a hand to help Mr. Telford out of the car, which was refused. He stood there while the old man slowly went up the front steps. When he finally got to the door, he turned and said, "Sorry about what I said. You did the right thing. Coming by tomorrow for the show?"

In a way, Wesley thought it might be better if they parted ways here and now. He definitely didn't need to get used again. But that suspicion came from the old Wesley, the new Wesley takes chances. Besides, someone needed to keep an eye on the old guy.

"Wouldn't miss it."

Wesley still couldn't help thinking that he crossed a line, like he had betrayed Mr. Telford's trust. It would be hard to earn it back. He began thinking about his ex-wife, how much he trusted her. How she knew it and used it to her advantage. Was this just another broken relationship to add to the list?

Wesley ran a new personal best the next morning. When he looked in the mirror he liked what he saw. His muscles were firm, not like they were when he was twenty, but firm. He turned to the side and smiled a little at the new Wesley. He would talk to her, he would get to know her. This was going to work. The routine resumed as if nothing had ever happened. The two friends settled into their Muskoka chairs. After the first lap, Wesley spoke.

"If you don't mind my asking, have you ever considered selling that old clawfoot tub? You'd probably get a grand for it."

"I don't think I'll do that. In fact, I'd prefer it if you'd just keep that whole thing to yourself, considering how easy it was for you to get down there."

"You're worried someone's going to steal it?" Wesley was a little drunk. He had celebrated his newfound fitness before walking over. "How the hell would someone get it out of there? Those things weigh a ton."

"I'd appreciate you keeping your voice down."

"Sorry, but nobody is coming to rob a clawfoot tub from your basement, old man." Wesley's voice elevated. An old couple walking by stopped to look. It wasn't a polite smile this time.

The friends observed the rest of the laps in silence.

"Tomorrow, Mr. Telford?" Wesley asked.

"Tomorrow," Mr. Telford agreed.

Wesley was going to apologize right off the bat. He had too much to drink and he embarrassed his friend in front of the neighbors—that was unacceptable. Always take the high road, even when others don't. Then he would thank Mr. Telford for his advice about asking her out. On her last lap, he would wave her over and invite her to have a cold beer. It would all make sense, it was ruthlessly hot. He was going to be confident, he was going to be charming.

The outing began with a familiar start. Mr. Telford's car was almost in the street like it had been at the beginning of the summer. Wesley ran over to the car, just as he had two months ago. But this time he got run down by the old Chevy. The last thing he heard was the engine roar as Mr. Telford floored the accelerator.

Wesley saw her in slow motion running towards him. He saw her beautiful perspiration, the pearls of sweat shone as they held on her face and shimmered as they fell from the edge of her jaw, or dragged their lines down from the crest of her chin. He heard the breathing. Its sweetness, its cadence, its pulse. He watched her hair flow behind her in a perfect symphony of motion. He was rewarded with the transcendent smile as she stopped in front of him.

"My name is Wesley," he said.

Wesley woke to the sound of the dehumidifier. It was a quick tick, a rattle and then a low hum. Panic struck him. He couldn't see. It was pitch black. He realized that he was restrained in a reclined position in cold water. A strange sensation all over his body. Where am I? It was the smell that brought him back. He was in the vintage clawfoot bathtub in Mr. Telford's basement. He felt the strap that went around the tub in front of his chest and then the duct tape around his wrists, his ankles. He didn't want to scream, but even if he had, the duct tape over his mouth made it impossible. He recalled the labels he saw on the chemical barrels the last time he was in the basement. Their warnings were actually quite dire. He was probably reclining in a soup of it right now. He began thinking about the pretty young lady in the wedding picture. The unspoken-of Mrs. Telford. Why was this nest empty? The only description of her: *Dead*. Like it was just a fact to Mr. Telford.

Wesley wondered if she had lain in this fine vintage tub, too. Maybe there were more, maybe a lot more. He couldn't believe he didn't see this coming. He needed to think. He needed a plan. He listened for a while and it was clear that Mr. Telford was not on the main floor unless he was asleep or completely still. Any movement in this old house would be instantly audible.

He tried pushing himself up headfirst to the top of the tub, but his bound hands caught on the strap. Some ribs had been broken when he was hit, and he was probably nursing a concussion. Every movement was excruciating, but what little energy he had, he needed to conserve for a real escape attempt. He would have to slip his head and shoulders under the strap. It would mean allowing the chemicals to get to his face, if only for a short time. It also might force the strap to peel back the duct tape covering his mouth. He forced his jaw to open fully, over and over, feeling the strands of his stubble pull away.

Wesley held his breath, closed his eyes and descended into the goo. Why did he come back to the old man's house? Why didn't he see the signs? He pushed his chin and then the rest of his head under the strap, rubbing his chin against it to loosen the tape on his mouth. He finally got his mouth free and then set about pulling his head up on the other side as his calves hooked around the back end of the tub, keeping him from sliding back with the retreating wave. He needed to breathe in hard, but the toxic air burned his insides—all the way to his lungs. He tried to slow his breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. He flung his duct-taped wrists around his knees and allowed his body some time to adjust. He could feel the chemicals burning, but was able to pull his head forward and chew through the duct tape until his hands separated. He had to spit constantly as he tasted the vile solution, his lips and gums felt like they were burning. But he was through. Then he pushed down on the smooth curved sides of the clawfoot until he propelled himself toward the ground, where he landed with a thud.

The combination of his body hitting the floor and the crashing wave of solvent roused the owner of the house. Wesley could hear him creaking down the stairs fast. There was no time to separate his feet from the duct tape. Every part of his body hurt and everything was emitting vapor that made it very hard to breathe. He didn't want to think about his naked body, burning and disintegrating; he wanted to escape. He just wanted to get back to that moment when he thought he was ready to make it all work. He wanted to get back to when he had a chance to talk to her.

He was moving quite swiftly across the floor in a crouched position, dragging his bound feet behind. He felt the workbench, climbed high enough and retrieved the hammer from where he remembered its Magic Marker outline. The footsteps creaked quickly across the kitchen. His window of opportunity was closing. His legs were on fire. There were sounds like what you would expect from the burning embers of a backyard bonfire. He felt for the window ledge and then set about prying out the 3 inch spiral. He clawed it and used his palm to knock the handle down hard, but it just bent the nail. A key turned the lock at the top of the stairs. Wesley turned the hammer around and pounded the nail down, but the window still wouldn't open as it would catch on the head of the nail. When he fixed the window, he sealed his fate. The final nail in his coffin was the damn 3 inch spiral.

Wesley used the hammer to smash the glass. The light burned his eyes and made his neck snap back. He looked down at his arms and breathed in the scale of his deterioration. Layers of flesh were utterly disintegrated and the light seemed to activate the chemicals in some way, making them burn more aggressively, making the pain more vivid, more raw. There were thick bubbles of flesh around the edges, where he was not fully submerged, and great dark cavities with exposed layers of tissue and bone farther down. The first string light pulled and Mr. Telford's footsteps went down the stairs. Wesley used the handle of the hammer to remove a few shards of glass from the edges of the window before the ascent. He was going to be able to make this work, he was going to emerge from the basement and get back to his new life. He flung the hammer forward as he jumped hoping that it would anchor him. With his last ounce of strength, he pulled his body through the window and immediately shredded his midsection. The shards of glass that remained in the sash ripped through him as he struggled. He screamed, he tried one last pull, he tried not to give up. He felt the grip on his ankles, he felt it all slipping away, he felt everything dissolve. The loss of blood forced him out of consciousness.

Mr. Telford had his beer in front of him and he was ready for the afternoon's entertainment. After her first lap he turned his head to admire the runner and then raised his beer and looked at the empty Muskoka chair beside him. It just wasn't the same. In some ways, he wished he was more like Wesley.

For her second lap something completely unexpected happened. The focus shifted away from the distance. She was walking over. She stood at the end of the driveway and said, "Hi." She caught her breath a little. "I'm sorry to bother you, sir."

"No bother, I'm sure, miss," he said, more than a little bit rattled.

"I'm Petra, by the way."

"Fred," Mr. Telford replied. He wished he could spring to his feet.

"I'm just wondering what happened to your son. He was always sitting beside you drinking a beer when I would pass by."

Mr. Telford was very keen to halt her curiosity. "He wasn't my son," he replied. "I don't have a son. That guy, he left town, needed to go to where he can work, that's all."

"Is he coming back?" the runner asked, looking far too concerned.

Mr.Telford was sick of this whole mess.It was hard enough dragging Wesley across the basement floor by his feet. His body got caught a couple times on the sash of the window and required a few good yanks before he could get it on the floor, leaking everywhere. Not to mention getting him back into the damn tub.

"Don't think so.Why would he? Nothing for him here." He sincerely hoped that would do it. He never meant for any of this to happen.

"That's too bad. I was trying to work up the nerve to talk to him, maybe ask him out." The runner seemed a little nervous, shy even. She looked like she might just walk away for a minute, but she pressed on."I'm not ready to give up on him yet." She walked up the stairs and then fell into Wesley's Muskoka chair."Driveway looks super, by the way.Which company did you use?"

The driveway was a perfect, matte-finish black.

Mr.Telford couldn't believe she was actually here. He never thought of her as a real person, she was more like a character on a TV show.

"Did that myself. Special formula.All those big companies spread thin, that's why my formula's better. Secret is: you gotta spread it thick.That's what makes it look so great."

"You got a beer?" she asked.

"Sure do. Just one sec." He flung himself out of his chair and then sat back down again in obvious discomfort."Just give me a second," he said,"I can't move as fast as you."

"That's okay, sir.Another time." The runner got to her feet.

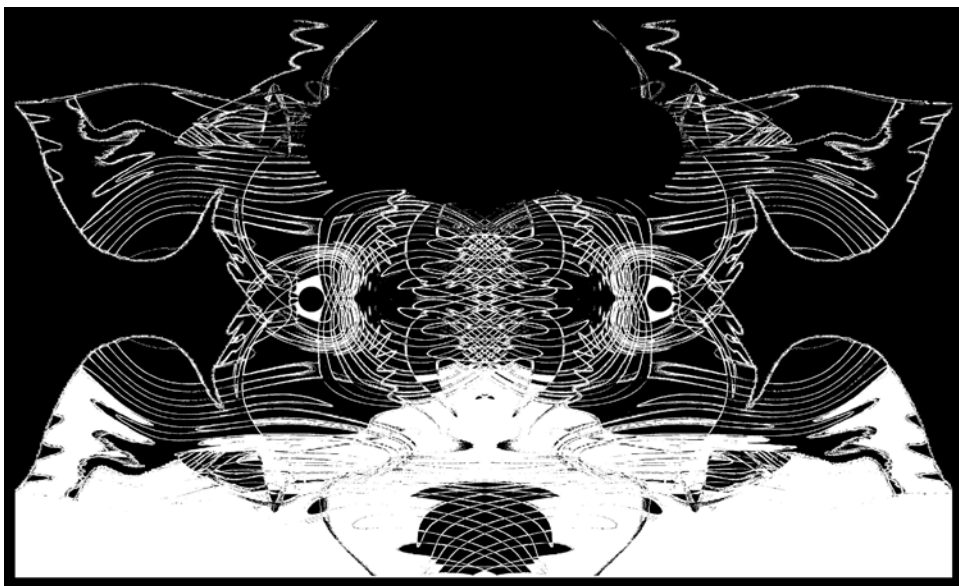
"Don't leave me so soon.An old guy like me doesn't get a lot of chances to talk to someone, you know." Mr.Telford paused."You could get the beer yourself. It's in the freezer in the basement. Just head down there and get us a couple of cold ones."

The runner entered the house and turned through the opened basement door. She pulled the light on and descended the stairs. Mr.Telford got to his feet slowly and followed. He needed to change like Wesley did. After this, he would reinvent himself, move to a new town. He would have to. He turned his beer bottle around and gripped it tight around the neck, watching a few drops speckle the top stair.

"I love your old clawfoot tub, sir.You know how much those are worth?"

The runner screamed when she opened the freezer and saw the missus. Mr.Telford hoped the neighbors didn't hear. He should have fixed the damn window.





stark reality 2a
Edward Michael Supranowicz

portrait of a master

Aziz Mustapha

For centuries he has declared war on rheumatism
He is afraid of the frost and yet he opens the window
Travels by midnight train destination Agora Taj Mahal
He does not have a return ticket only the cosmic dust in his pocket
At Kafka's house in Prague he conducts a monologue with them
Joseph K. who is this Jusuf K.?
Does Sadegh Hedayat deserve heaven
Then in the gallery he draws Paris
All kasabas have the same cobblestones
Covered with asphalt
He draws flowers and the sun on the glass
He interweaves the Auto-procession from right to left
Then from left to right the perimeter
And the "pi" value of the crystal soul
Once again in the agora he searches for the epicenter
While looking through the haze of Bozhur cigarette
Made in Kosova



returning to the wet motif

Aziz Mustapha

Why are you taking me back my love
To that wet motif and forcing me
To offer you one of three balconies you want
In our apartment on the eighth floor
Or the gun that we did not hand over
To KFOR even though six days
Have passed since September 19, 1999
Enough for a perfect kill
If you don't know the answer to the sphinx's question:
"where is the difference between a whore and a slut?"
Why are you coming back like a wet hen my dear
From the Balkan underground
After coitus with psychopathological gorillas
Of the post-transition madhouse
You want to get between us
To offer us your lips and to show us
That the world ends between your spread legs
You are wasting your time dear because there is no middle ground for us
We love or hate madly
Then we put our feet on the table
We drink beer and piss all night long
We end up making love drunk
(not even AIDS is what it used to be)
Is this enough to tell you
That we lack everything but the soul



we are dying even after death

Aziz Mustapha

1.

I am asking for help milord,
who carries Sisyphus' stone on his back
five thousand years have passed and in the same tavern
cheap wine is drunk and the same song is sung and
the whore shows her legs and rotten teeth and
pink panties before the fog falls

2.

I am asking for help milord as I am dying of vomiting
poisoned I wait for the alter ego that comes with a torn
paper in the pocket postmodern art
for vertical walking
we die little by little even after death
without money without wine without women
cancer fucks our mothers whenever it wants
we are importing the AIDS virus
with bought love

3.

I am asking for help because I don't know what I'm talking about
is this my voice or doppelganger's
standing in my mirror
in which theater we play our corpses
it's crazy we don't know if we ejaculate or are we dying
christ has not yet come down
from the cross
and there is still a month until the second millennium
it has been heard for five thousand years
exactly the same tam-tam rhythm
on the skulls of captives condemned
to be victims in this world and the next one

4.

my brain is bursting milord do you understand me
it's not because of the beer nor because reading of the newspaper
nor because of the flu it is something without a form
formless souless as my suffocation
and I can find no cure either from the doctor or from the devil
it is something that flies in the air
with flies and the stench
from not washing off after dirty coitus

5.

I am sorry milord for these harsh words
which even paper can't stand
I'm sorry I have to go because love
is waiting to buy shoes
in closed shops and in the womb
she carries my genes that will bring them to life
along with yellow mimosas and then
there will be no fog coming out between the legs
of a whore in a five-thousand-year-old tavern

Translated by Fadil Bajraj



standing up

Frank Zahn

Bored and restless, Mark Allen picked up Harry's football in the front yard. "Let's play catch," he said to his brothers Harry and Eddie.

"Hey, that's my football!" Harry yelled.

Mark Allen ran out into the street. He tossed the football in the air over his head and caught it several times.

Harry ran after him. "You give me my football!"

Mark Allen turned and tossed the football over Harry's head to Eddie, who joined them in the street.

Harry waved both hands over his head. "Toss it to me, Eddie. Keep it away from Mark Allen."

Eddie and Harry tossed the football back and forth between them. Mark Allen objected to being left out, and when Harry and Eddie ignored him, he ran between them and intercepted the football. The power struggle soon ended in an unspoken truce as all three settled down and tossed the football back and forth between them.

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Minutes later, Mark Allen spotted Lee Albert Smithers coming down Eighty-second Street from the direction of Wornall Road. "Crap!" That's all I need today is to run into the neighborhood bully," he said under his breath.

Lee Albert crossed the streetcar tracks and walked past Mark Allen, Harry, and Eddie without a word, but instead of continuing up Eighty-second Street to Main Street, he turned and glared at Mark Allen from the front edge of the vacant lot across the street.

Mark Allen acted as if he didn't notice.

Harry and Eddie kept their eyes on the football.

"You toss a football like a pansy!" Lee Albert yelled at Mark Allen with a snicker.

Mark Allen ignored the remark.

"Did you hear me?" Lee Albert said. "I said you toss the football like a pansy."

"Yeah, I heard you," Mark Allen said, clearly embarrassed that Lee Albert was being nasty to him in front of his family.

"So what are you gonna do about it?" Lee Albert said.

"Ignore you," Mark Allen said, tossing the football to Harry.

"That's cause you're a pansy."

Momma, who sat next to Papa in the two rocking chairs on the front porch, dropped the doily she was making and her crochet hook in her lap. "Papa, it looks like that boy is about to start a fight with Mark Allen. Do somethin'," she said.

"Mark Allen!" Papa called out. "Stand up to that bully. Go over there and let him know you're not going to put up with his crap. And if need be, smack him upside the head."

"Papa!" Momma scolded. "That's not what I had in mind."

"He don't bother me none, Papa," Mark Allen said.

"Yes, he does. Do as I say."

"But I don't want to, Papa."

"You've got to stand up to bullies. Do as I say!"

"I don't want the boys fightin', Papa!" Momma said. "How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Papa got up from his rocking chair. "Mark Allen, you either do as I say, or I'm comin' out there and smackin' you upside the head," he said, raising his voice.

Harry tossed the football to Eddie and told him to take it up into the front yard. Eddie did as Harry said, then stood near the front porch and watched the drama unfolding in the street.

"You better do what Papa says, Mark Allen," Harry said. "Go punch that creep's lights out."

Mark Allen glanced at Harry. "Yeah, you just want to see him beat the tar out of me."

"Just do it, you big chicken," Harry said. "And if you don't, Papa's gonna come out here and make you wish you had."

Mark Allen took a deep breath. Then he trudged over and faced Lee Albert, who stood with his arms folded over his chest and a smirk on his face.

"Lee Albert, why don't you just get the hell out of here and leave me alone?" he said.

"Cause I don't want to, pansy, and you can't make me," Lee Albert said, unfolding his arms, and shoving Mark Allen with both hands.

Mark Allen stumbled backward but quickly regained his footing. It sickened him that he looked like a wimp in front of his family, and in a rush of adrenaline, he lunged at Lee Albert with clenched fists and landed a single punch with his right fist on Lee Albert's jaw so hard that his fingers felt broken.

Lee Albert grabbed his jaw, stumbled sideways, lost his balance, and fell to the ground. He looked up at Mark Allen with a dazed look on his face. Blood oozed from his nose. Slowly, he got up and wiped his nose on his shirtsleeve. Then he turned with the dazed look still on his face and hurried up the hill toward Main Street.

At the top of the hill, he turned and yelled, “Up yours, Mark Allen! Up yours!”

Harry ran halfway up the hill and shouted, “Come on back you big, fat weasel, and my brother will knock you on your butt again!”

Surprised and relieved at the same time by the outcome of his bold move against Lee Albert, Mark Allen headed for the front porch. He dropped down on the second step, took a deep breath, and said with a sigh, “I’m sure glad that’s over.”

Momma said, “Come up here, Mark Allen and let me see your hand. It must hurt somethin’ awful.”

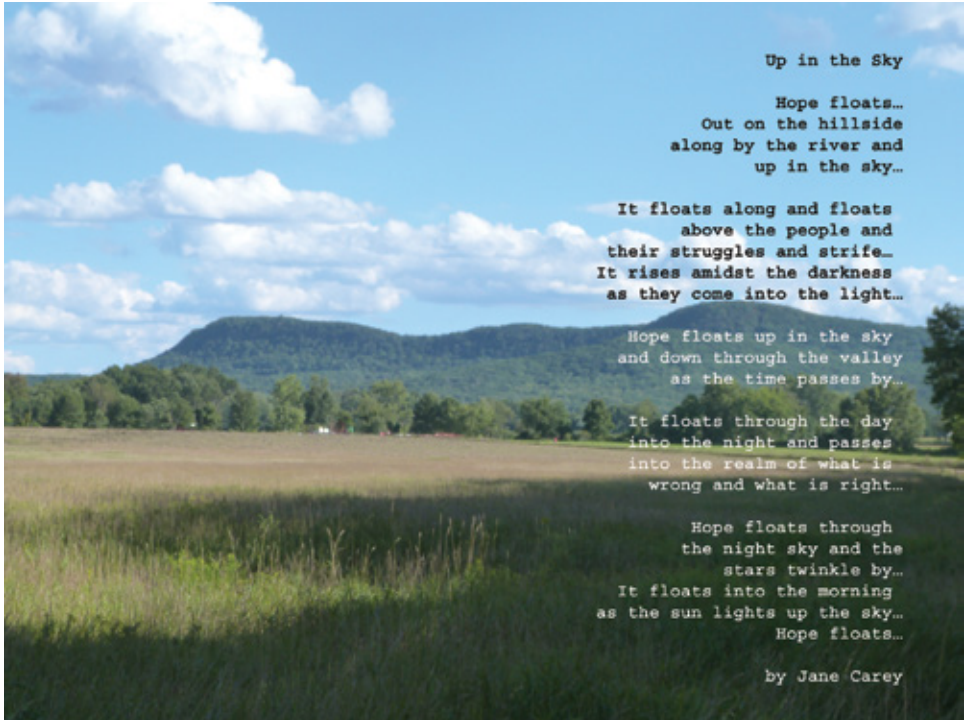
Mark Allen opened and closed his right hand several times. “It’s okay, Momma. It just hurts.”

Papa beamed. “Now that bully will think twice before he gives you a bad time again. See what happens, Mark Allen, when you stand up for yourself?”

“I sure hope you’re right, Papa. But I got a feelin’ I’m gonna have to stand up to him more than once to git him off my back.”

“Then you do just that,” Papa said in a final word.





Up in the Sky

Hope floats...
Out on the hillside
along by the river and
up in the sky...

It floats along and floats
above the people and
their struggles and strife...
It rises amidst the darkness
as they come into the light...

Hope floats up in the sky
and down through the valley
as the time passes by...

It floats through the day
into the night and passes
into the realm of what is
wrong and what is right...

Hope floats through
the night sky and the
stars twinkle by...
It floats into the morning
as the sun lights up the sky...
Hope floats...

by Jane Carey

sag jenkins pt.2

Reid Messerschmidt

3. The Fetid Emissions of the Excretions of Humanity's Most Despicable Sub-Category.

His face.

He sat in the fetid emissions of the excretions of humanity's most despicable sub-category, South Dakota race track patrons. He poked at his swollen upper lip, and felt, barely, pain below the thick, coarse, blood crusted shag of his jerky-brown mustache and the progressive detachment of his thick intoxication. The lip was grotesque in its bigness, and the bottom lip made the top lip look regular sized, if you can believe that.

And why wouldn't you?

One eye was open, barely, and the other would probably never be of any use to him again. Something oozed from the tight slit and he'd have worried that it was the viscous jelly of the eyeball itself if he was sober.

But the most distinctive feature of his face was the ear-to-ear, forehead-to-chin bruising. There was hardly a whit of unblemished skin on the entirety of his head. The bruising varied in color, from charcoal, to navy, sky blue, puss yellow, blood black; Psychedelic black face, like a bad tie dye job or an old marble.

Except for the phantom screams of past daredevilish mishaps, his body was fine, mostly. The outside of it, anyway. The burly truck driver whose sandwich he'd befouled two days previous had, curiously, only punched his face, but he'd been thorough in that.

The less so but still quite burly Frenchman whose sandwich he had also befouled later on the same day had shown no deference to the injuries already there and also confined his substantial abuse to the head area.

"Fuck a sandwich," Sag spat, slurred, blubbered within his rank dressing room. "Fugasich," is how it came out. "Man eats a burger, or at least a hot dog." "Answerga, o'ota."

He took another swig off the bottle and the blackout came. His conscious mind dimmed to darkness while his body looked the other way. The hard, old little parts of his brain took over and shot his body's right, booted foot into the porta-potty door. The plastic lock exploded and Sag was exposed to the humid South Dakota air.

The human stink within folded itself into the horse stink without.

4. The New Sag Jenkins Also Had a Mustache.

The year Sag joined the Army, 1955, was, as luck would have it, a rare gasp of peace between the nonsense in Korea and the nonsense in Vietnam. Less lucky was his assignment to Fort Blaird

just outside of Tallahassee, Florida under the government sanctioned micro-fascism of Sargent Dick Fedora, a grisly, obsessive compulsive sadist with a wonky glass right eye, astonishingly thick thighs, and a Himlerian sense of social justice.

Sag immediately adopted him as a father figure without the Sargent's consent. He'd done the same with his own father, maternal grandfather, a couple uncles, some cousins, Doc Arbuckle, the Overton librarians, a particularly noble neighborhood dog named Roger, and Erwin Everest Dox.

Sargent Fedora had no interest in being a father figure. He barely had an interest in being human. But he was happy to manually atomize Sag Jenkins and reconstruct him as what was, essentially, a rule-abiding, survivalist, neatness machine only homonymous with the boy who had enlisted.

The new Sag Jenkins also had a mustache.

He left the army in 1957, honorably discharged after a modest nervous breakdown, brought on by a particularly brutal dressing down from Sargent Fedora. He referred to Sag as "mountain trash" and "worthless as crusted cum on a dead vagrant's trousers" and "simple – Amoeba simple" and "uglier than Lou Costello's unwiped asshole" and "less of a man than one of Mamie Eisenhower's shriveled old eggs" and "queerer than a box of dicks in Tab Hunter's basement" and "the worst white person" and "duller than a Utah Tuesday" and "bad at everything".

He was also squeezed by lingering guilt for the murder of Hickory. No one back home had paid much mind to or even noticed Hick's disappearance, really. Hick was a good-for-nothing and an unbelievable bastard, even more so than the average member of the Jenkins clan. His body had been devoured by crows and the bones divided up amongst themselves by local children, who found them on their daily unsupervised wanderings and mostly used them as "thumpers" or just threw them into various local cricks and sink holes, of which there were many.

Hick's family assumed he was in jail.

Sag didn't know this. He assumed he would eventually be brought to justice by both earthly and divine law. He hadn't had much religion, but he knew a father when he saw one, and God was the Big Father, demanding and ruthless. Sag's idea of him was vague, but more terrifying for that.

The breakdown presented as a brief stint of violent weeping in the community shower, followed by a near catatonic state. He stood on the clammy tile, nude and battered by water. He stared straight ahead with his arms at his side. The other soldiers did their best to ignore him. They rushed their rinses and filed out with their eyes down. When they came in the next day, Sag was still there. The water was frigid and he shivered, compressed and tooth-rattling. Still standing. His skin was wrinkled and blue and his breaths were short and fast. A medic arrived. When he placed a hand on Sag's shoulder and asked him if he was okay, Sag collapsed.

No one had ever asked if he was okay.

He woke up five days later in a bed at Dr. Humbert Cripe Memorial Hospital in Tallahassee. He felt a bit lost but not bad, considering. His skin had smoothed itself out and regained its original color. The hypothermia diminished.

A call from his very drunk mother assured him that he wasn't, and wouldn't be, in any trouble for his crime, at least from Unberg's finest. He still had the Lord to deal with, but that, hopefully, was a good way off, and some light prayer would probably clear his record. He'd have to ask someone about that.

The call came 49 days after his mother learned that her son was in the hospital, and she ended it by asking him for money.

After his release, he stopped into the gift store. He didn't have anyone to buy anything for, but he also didn't have anywhere to be.

Among the plastic roses, hovering balloons, pastel greeting cards, and various trinkets, knick-knacks, and stuffed what-have-yous, he saw a young woman with an old woman's pristine, tight perm and profoundly unfashionable glasses. She had, maybe not the most beautiful face he'd ever seen, but a pretty nice face. A significantly better face than any of the faces back home. A friendly face, anyway, and it was smiling, though her thin lips made it a subtle kind of smile. Her body was very thin beneath a modest, floral print, long-sleeved dress. Attached to that dress was an adhesive name tag that read, "Lynette, Guest"

He said, "Hello."

Her full name was Lynette Lynn Knobnoster. She was twenty-four and visiting a sick uncle. They weren't close, she told Sag, but she felt obligated.

"A good woman," Sag thought.

Their first date was at T-Rex Dave's Steak and Buffet. Sag had never eaten at a restaurant, and he was nervous. His family mostly ate from cans, and the army mess wasn't much better. But Lynette was calm, and she calmed Sag. She was shy but unruffled. Gentle and steady. She could feel his discomfort and took his hand as the teenage hostess led them to a table near the buffet.

They sat, and she ordered the buffet for them both, head down, polite but firm. Sag couldn't stop staring at her.

They filled their plates with more and better food than Sag had ever seen, and went back to the table.

Lynette stared at him as he dug into the chaotic olio of his pre-wilted salad, clumsy and unmannered, but self-conscious and trying. She could sense his goodness and felt it curling into her own like a fox pup into its mother. Compatible goodness.

She swallowed her second bite of macaroni salad and, without looking up, asked Sag if he'd like to marry her.

He said yes.

Lynette and Sag were married eighteen months later in a small ceremony at Oblivion Lutheran Church, followed by a reception at The Feisty Squirrel, a popular, terrible local bar.

The wedding was paid for by her father, Harlan “Happy” Knobnoster, a glad-handing, muscle-gone-to-fat bodied, short sleeves with a tie, ex-high school football star, WWII veteran and drunk, with a flat top haircut unsuccessfully hiding a growing bald spot. He held sole ownership of Happy Knobnoster’s Tallahassee Chrysler, one of three preeminent vehicle dealers in the greater Tallahassee area.

He was a classic Florida Panhandle, Greatest Generation, grade A prick, and Sag had an immediate and barely containable desire to call him Dad. Happy would have hated it and glared at him with a perplexed, unruly eyebrow raised, eye squinting look that confirmed everything Sargent Fedora had said about him, so he resisted the urge.

Sag and Lynette loved each other, and both grew bolder over time, interesting, nuanced, and sexual. But neither had been those things before and in the beginning their love was staid and chaste. Sag couldn’t be anything but. Life had eroded his confidence to an embarrassed nub. He also didn’t have much money, so until he could build some savings, they lived with Happy in the guest room of his gaudy rambler.

Happy presented the idea as an almost saintly act of charity, but in reality he couldn’t bear to let his daughter go, and showy acts of generosity and cruelty were the only ways he knew how to show affection. Honey Knobnoster, his wife, had passed some years earlier. She’d succumbed to a combination of pills, boredom, and repressed feminism, though the cause of death was, officially, heart failure. Lynette was all Happy had left, and he knew it.

The living arrangement, of course, limited the newlyweds in many ways and didn’t do much for Sag’s already suffocating sense of emasculation, but he was in no position to offer an alternative.

Unsatisfied with his home and daughter, Sag invaded Happy’s work life as the newest member of the Knobnoster Team. Neither was pleased with the arrangement. Sag had always secretly hoped to become a Veterinarian. Happy resented Sag. But they would both do anything for Lynette, and this seemed to be the only way they could love her at the same time.

Sag was Happy’s errand and whipping boy, a meek but effective and helpful presence at home and at work. A wrapt listener to drunken ramblings. A rage outlet. Happy grew to like Sag a bit, though he would never have told him that and continued to treat him as though he were more rescue monkey than human being.

Clinton Harlan Jenkins was born in 1959. Fatherhood had a profound effect on Sag. It reconnected him to the independent, good, confident boy he’d been before the military. He hadn’t realized that he’d lost those things. He’d become withdrawn and timid. Whip shy. In the months before the birth, he began to walk faster and smile more. He didn’t defend himself against Happy, exactly, but he took the abuse in a way that sucked all the pleasure out of doing it.

Despite a still somewhat meager bank account, he began to make preparations to move out of Happy's home, across town. Happy insisted that it was a "bad neighborhood" but it wasn't bad so much as slightly diverse.

The Sagory Jenkins's had a good life.

A second son, Lucas Happy Jenkins, came along two years later. Sag became an accomplished salesman, though he couldn't help but kowtow to Happy.

The kids became Boy Scouts, Sag their Scoutmaster.

He was proud.

He was content.

5. A Pig Foot In a Dog House.

Sag vomited between his legs.

It came out in a quick, hard stream, and then dribbled from his appalling lips like shit from a trotting horse's asshole. He stood up, fell back down, got up again, fell down, got up, tottered, got his bearings, spit as much blood as vomit, and stumbled from the port-a-potty. He unzipped his leathers a few more inches and pissed on the side of the rectangular toilet.

He was mid-stream, wheezing from his grotesque mouth-hole, when a blast of ice water from his right side toppled him to the dry, hot, Dakota dirt and jerked him from the abyss of his black-out.

Back to hideous awareness.

He groaned and brushed away some pebbles that had dug themselves into his left palm and looked up, directly into the sun. Just to the right of the life-giving, blinding orb was the double silhouette of a tall, bulky man in a cowboy hat.

"Jes-chris, if I did som'n to your fuggin' sannich, I'll jus' buy you a fuggin' new one."

"What? Oh. That will not be necessary. I'm sorry I had to do that, Sagory, but I'm sure you understand. You got to straddle that bike of yours and hop over a whole heap of cars in no fewer than 12 - 11 - minutes. Hot damn, son, you look worse than a pig foot in a dog house. And you smell like six loads of shit on a hot day. You been drinking inside that terlet, huh? We're going to have to get you some tincture toot-sweet. Right after this jump. Your whole face looks infected and broken and I'll be gat-damned if your chakras aren't in complete disarray."

The man above Sag holding an empty, dripping, five gallon bucket was Batton Bode Trowel, Sag's manager. He was a cartoonish Old Southern Boy along the lines of Boss Hog or Huey Long, but with a vague New Age twist; a featherless Foghorn Leghorn accented with turquoise. He was the man who had ousted Happy Knobnoster as Sag's father figure. He did it with compliments and a smile, but treated Sag worse than Happy ever had.

Trowel was garishly dressed, as per his personal style, in a kind of Tex-Navajo oil Barron thing that he felt lent him airs of mystery, aristocracy, and masculinity that couldn't, under any circumstance, successfully coexist.

His shining blue iguana skin boots moved toward Sag, and Batton bent over to help the battered man to his feet.

"You get yourself zipped up and then giddyup on over to that fence and back just as fast as you can. We need to get some fresh blood pumping to that head of yours. Then we'll do a prayer and get the show on the road, so to speak."

Sag did as he was told. He broke into a hurried, loping hobble in the general direction of where Batton had pointed.

He was beginning to cry.



Contributors' Notes

Nadia Arioli is the founder and editor in chief of Thimble Literary Magazine. A five-time Best of the Net and two-time Pushcart Nominee, Arioli's poetry, artwork, and essays can be found in Rust + Moth, Pithead Chapel Hunger Mountain, Mom Egg Review, Permafrost, and elsewhere. Arioli's latest collections are with *Dancing Girl* and *Fernwood*.

John Russell Bowman is a poet living near an old hermitage in Philadelphia's Wissahickon Park. He studied writing in New Orleans where he participated in The Exploding Swan readings. His work has appeared in the magazine Thermos, and online at the tiny. He has also been referred to by the title of a poem in the book *To the Heart of the World* (Stallings, 2014).

Rhonda Bronte Brown's work has appeared in several poetry journals and featured in online Haiku podcasts. She is a retired school counselor/teacher who lives in Arkansas. She is an active SCBWI member, Storyteller Academy member, and 12x12, where she writes children's books. She maintains a blog site with WordPress: brontebrown2. Her educational degrees include a BS and a Master's, and she is a National Board-Certified Teacher.

Wayne F. Burke's poetry has been widely published in print and online (including in Meat For Tea). He is author of 8 published poetry collections--most recently *Black Summer*, Spartan Press, 2021--and a short story collection, *Turmoil & Other Stories*, Adelaide Press, 2020. He lives in Vermont.

128 Jane Carey is a published photographer and poet. She is also a singer-songwriter and has self-published several musical releases. Jane has a doctorate in language, literacy, and culture and has recently retired from her role as Associate Professor of English at CT State. Jane is currently working on a book of poetry with imagery.

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. His publications include the chapbook *Other Places* (Open Country Press) and the books *Are We There Yet* (Human Error Publishing) and *Here Over Here Over Here* (Human Error Publishing). He plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers.

Carolyn A. Cushing is a poet inspired by nature and focused on the places where life and death meet. Her poems have been published in journals such as Meat for Tea, Spillway, Crosswinds, The Kerf, and Freshwater. A recipient of grants from the Easthampton Cultural Council (2020) and Massachusetts Cultural Council (2023), Carolyn was also a finalist for the Philbrick Poetry Award of the Providence Athenaeum (2012) and the Tarantula Poetry Contest of Pilgrimage Journal (2018). She is the 2023-2025 Poet Laureate of Easthampton, Massachusetts. Find her online at www.soulpathsanctuary.com/poetry

Sarah Das Gupta is an 82 year old, retired English teacher from Cambridge who has taught in UK, India and Tanzania. She lived in Kolkata for some years. Her interests include, the countryside, Medieval History, parish churches and early music. She has had work published in journals and magazines online and in print, in countries, from New Zealand to Kazakhstan. She has recently been nominated for Best of the Net and a Dwarf Star Award.

William Doreski has published three critical studies and several collections of poetry. His work has appeared in many print and online journals. He has taught at Emerson College, Goddard College, Boston University, and Keene State College. His most recent book is *Riding the Comet*. williamdoreski.blogspot.com

Amylane Duncan is a writer of many forms ranging from children's books to song lyrics and even technical documents. Nature is often the subject of her creative writing and photography. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee with where she is active in local chapters of SCBWI and WNBA.

Hugh Findlay's photography and writing have been published worldwide. Nominated for a Best of the Net award in 2023 for photography, he is in the third trimester of life and hopes y'all like his stuff. Instagram: @hughmanfindlay. Portfolio: <https://hughmanfindlay.wixsite.com/hughfindlay>

GJ Gillespie is a collage artist from Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island WA. A prolific artist with 22 awards to his name, Gillespie's work has been exhibited in 69 shows and appeared in more than 180 publications. Beyond his studio practice, Gillespie channels his passion for art by running Leda Art Supply, a company specializing in premium sketchbooks. Whether conjuring vivid collage compositions or enabling other artists through exceptional tools, Gillespie remains dedicated to the transformative power of art.

Jasper Glen is from Vancouver, BC. His poems appear or are forthcoming in Posit, Amsterdam Quarterly, A Gathering of the Tribes, BlazeVOX, Cathexis Northwest Press, WordCity Literary Journal, and elsewhere.

Brian Harman is a poet living in Southern California. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming in Misfit Magazine, a moon of one's own, Anti-Heroine Chic, and elsewhere. He is the author of *Suddenly, All Hell Broke Loose!!!* through Picture Show Press. He loves craft beer, themed music playlists, and writing poetry into the night.

Richard Wayne Horton has 2 Pushcart nominations and is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate. His work has appeared in Southern Pacific Review, Scryptic, The Dead Mule, Meat For Tea, Bull & Cross, Danse Macabre du Jour and others. His books include *Sticks & Bones* (2017, Meat For Tea Press), *Artists In The Underworld* (2019, Human Error Publishing) and *Ballet For Murderers* (2021, Human Error Publishing).

Matt Jasper built robots at eleven and had a part he needed so badly he dreamed of stopping at a barn and crawling under a table through wreckage of a closed section to reach to the bottom of a junk-filled and pull it out. His Ma stopped a few weeks later at a yard sale where he recognized tens of thousands of similarities from the dream and followed dreamscript to find his robot part--a 12v motorized wheel assembly. Ten years later, he published a series of poems in *Grand Street* influenced by language use in schizophrenia and autism.

Ronan Jewett is a junior at Apex Friendship High School in North Carolina and has been writing since his early teens. In addition to writing, his interests include gaming, Anime, and music. Ronan enjoys creating characters and building worlds and would eventually like to become a professional game designer.

Alex Kraft is a graduate of Skidmore College, where he majored in English with a focus in playwriting. His web series “How To Do Everything” was an Official Selection at Santa Monica Web Fest and Miami Web Fest in 2019. Two of his poems will be published in the upcoming fall issue of Willows Wept Review.

Skyler Lambert (he/him) is a writer and poet from a West Virginia coal camp. His work is forthcoming in Appalachian Journal, and his poem “Lake Superior” was a finalist in the 2024 Poet’s Seat Poetry Contest. Skyler’s memoir-in-progress investigates two murders and explores the multitudes of the human condition. He shares a home with his partner, a cattle dog, and two black cats.

Paul Lewellan retired from education after fifty years of teaching. He lives, writes, and gardens on the banks of the Mississippi River along with his wife Pamela and a Chartreux kitten named Caitlin Cat. Find archives of his work at paullewellan.com

Dana Henry Martin’s work has appeared in The Adroit Journal, Barrow Street, Chiron Review, Cider Press Review, FRIgg, Muzzle, New Letters, Rogue Agent, Stirring, Willow Springs, and other literary journals. Martin’s poetry collections include the chapbooks *Toward What Is Awful* (YesYes Books), *In the Space Where I Was* (Hyacinth Girl Press), and *The Spare Room* (Blood Pudding Press). Their chapbook *No Sea Here* (Moon in the Rye Press) is forthcoming.

D. C. Martin has finally settled in Guelph, Ontario. Previously, he’s lived in Seoul and Dar es Salaam. Martin likes his coffee early and his water with barley, hops and yeast. He’s always cooking up something—whether it’s an award-winning chili, or a diabolical plot-twist, you know it’s gonna be spicy. When he’s not writing, Martin is often saying: “This is their year,” about his beloved Toronto Maple Leafs. His most recent work will appear in the March 2025 edition of Mobius Blvd Magazine. Mr. Martin teaches grade 4 and lives with his wife, daughter and cantankerous cat.

For 11 years, **Daniel Steven Miller** was a newspaper reporter in western Massachusetts. Before then he majored in Journalism and English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Since then he earned a Master of Science, Library and Information Studies degree from Florida State University. Miller works for the Amherst-Pelham (Massachusetts) Regional School District. He lives with his partner, Sharon Britt, and their dog. “The Strange Man” is taken from a biography of Miller’s grandfather, the late Paul Amos Moody, who served on the University of Vermont’s zoology faculty from 1927 to 1973. The book is a work in progress.

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His work is forthcoming in Flint Hills Review, Watershed Review, Sugar House Review, The Main Street Rag Magazine, Action, Spectacle Magazine, The Meadow, and Rockvale Review. His book *Waxing the Dents*, is from Brick Road Poetry Press.

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, The Coachella Review, Maudlin House, B O D Y, Ruminant, Wilderness House Literary Review, Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, and more. His debut chapbook *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) is available in paperback and e-book. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Aziz Mustafa is 57-year-old Kosovo Albanian otolaryngologist (M.D., Ph. D) and writer (poet, short story writer and novelist). He has been featured on most websites that publish Albanian literature. Since 1999 he has been a member of the Kosovo Writers' League and since 2024 is member of Kosovo Pen Centre in Prishtina.

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore. His poetry collection, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, poems about Harry Houdini, is a 2022 Blue Light Press Poetry winner. A collection of poems and flash called *See What I Mean?* was recently published by Kelsay Books, and another collection of persona poems and dramatic monologues involving burlesque stars, *The Trapeze of Your Flesh*, was recently published by BlazeVOX Books. He once arm-wrestled Sonny Liston in a bar in East Saint Louis.

Justin Richards has practiced the arts of journalism, computer science, and that which lies betwixt (computational linguistics). He lives in Northampton, Massachusetts with his beloved wife and daughter. He reads a random passage from John Ashbery's Three Poems whenever he needs to get charged. Justin also trains in capoeira with the Gunga do Vale school in Northampton.

Kevin Ridgeway is the author of *Too Young to Know* (Stubborn Mule Press) and *Invasion of the Shadow People* (Luchador Press). His work can be found in New York Quarterly, Gargoyle Magazine, Hiram Poetry Review, Paterson Literary Review, Slipstream, Chiron Review, Nerve Cowboy, Plainsongs, San Pedro River Review, Trailer Park Quarterly, Main Street Rag, Sheila-Na-Gig and The American Journal of Poetry, among others. He lives and writes in Long Beach, CA.

Thomas Rowland is a retired pediatric cardiologist who has written numerous popular and scholarly works involving sports, science, philosophy, and neuroscience. He has been a frequent contributor to Meat for Tea. He lives a quiet life in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, with his wife Margot and their two loyal dogs Skip and Flip.

Dana Salisbury was a visual artist for twenty years before shifting mid-career to experimental choreography. An exploration of non-visual perception led her to create Dana Salisbury and the No-See-Ums, a company dedicated to creating Unseen Dances, dances for blindfolded audiences. Her Dark Dining Projects offered sensory feasts to blindfolded guests. For the last several years, she has focused her attention on writing. Her work has appeared in Nashville Review, The Ekphrastic Review and Months to Years. She lives in Easthampton, MA.

Andrew Shelffo is a writer, teacher, and storyteller who lives in western Massachusetts. He has told stories on the World Channel's Stories from the Stage, USA Today's Storytellers Project, and New England Public Media's Valley Voices Grand Slam, and numerous virtual storytelling events, including ones in Philadelphia, Toronto, and Chicago.

Alissa Simon discusses literature with students and Harrison Middleton University. She also enjoys writing, swimming, the outdoors, and every sunrise. She lives in Albuquerque with her family, nestled between a river and a mountain.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The Wonders of Winter*.

After some successes as an undergraduate and graduate poet nearly sixty years ago, **Peter Tacy** spent his working years not writing, but as an independent-school English teacher, Headmaster, and regional administrator. When he retired, he deliberately returned to writing, and published two nonfiction books. More recently he's been writing poems. This latter development has been very much encouraged by his new wife Jane Yolen, whose own poetic output (a poem a day) has never abated since the 1950's, when they first knew each other. They live in Hatfield, Ma., Mystic CT, and St. Andrews, Scotland. His father grew up in South Hadley, and his mother's family first arrived centuries ago in Hadlyme, CT. He has a new chapbook of poetry with Jane entitled *The Black Dog Poems* (Meat For Tea Press, 2022).

A Pushcart Prize nominee, **M. Benjamin Thorne** is an Associate Professor of Modern European History at Wingate University. Possessed of a lifelong love of history and poetry, he is interested in exploring the synergy between the two. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Feral*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Red Eft Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *Thimble Lit Mag*, and *Last Syllable Lit*. He lives and sometimes sleeps in Charlotte, NC

Kami Leigh Trushaw is an urban farmer in Springfield, MA who passionately believes that everyone deserves good food.

Andrew Varnon is an educator and tennis coach at Frontier Regional School in South Deerfield, MA. He covered Sen. Stan Rosenberg while he was a reporter at *The Greenfield Recorder* and *Valley Advocate* newspapers. He has published a number of poems and essays in *Meat for Tea*.

Jordan Veres is a Jewish musician/songwriter/composer/lyricist/producer, shutterbug, poet, sculptor, artist, and welder currently residing in the Upstate of South Carolina. He execrates where he currently hangs his hat because he is surrounded by a bunch of bigoted mossbacks. Meanwhile, He is an avid supporter of Bernie Sanders and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

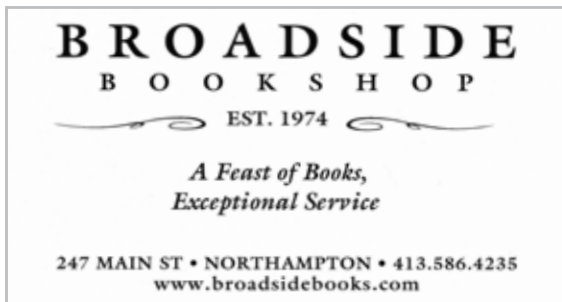
Michael Washburn studied literature and philosophy at Grinnell College and the University of Wisconsin before moving back east to work in publishing and journalism. His fiction has been published in dozens of journals, magazines, and anthologies in the United States and abroad.

Dr. Thomas Reed Willemain is former academic, software entrepreneur and intelligence officer. His poetry has appeared in *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Two Thirds North*, *Closed Eye Open*, *Dillydoun Review Poetry* and elsewhere. He holds degrees from Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Gerald Yelle has published poetry and flash fiction in numerous online and print journals. His books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, *Mark My Word and the New World Order*, and *Dreaming Alone and with Others*. His chapbooks include *No Place I Would Rather Be*, and *A Box of Rooms*. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Frank Zahn is an author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. His publications include nonfiction books, articles, commentaries, book reviews, and essays; novels; short stories; and poetry. Currently, he writes and enjoys life in his home among the evergreens in Vancouver, Washington. For details, visit his website www.frankzahn.com.

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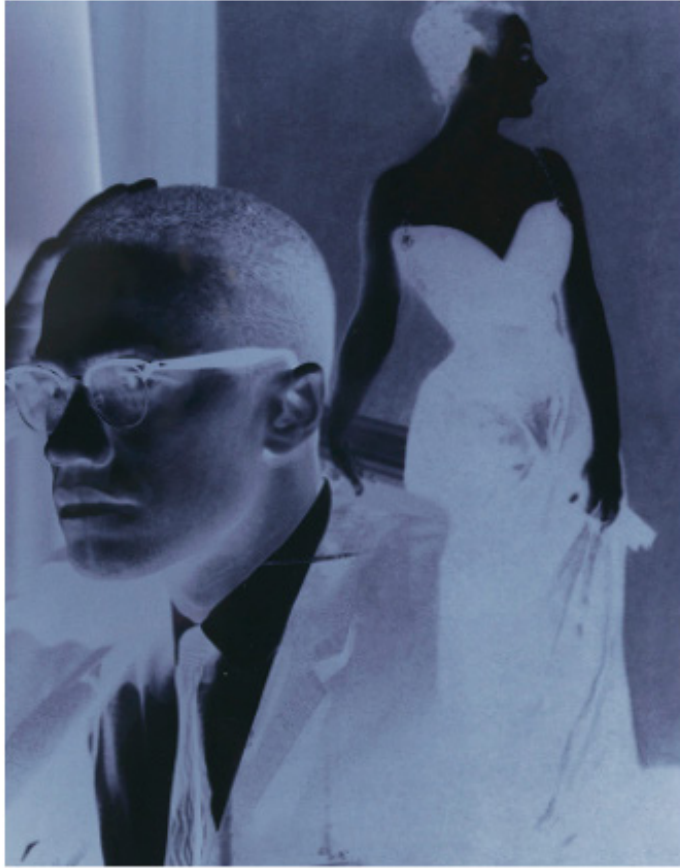
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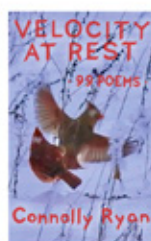
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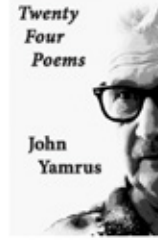
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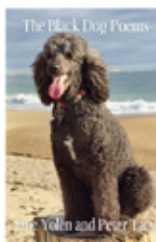
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