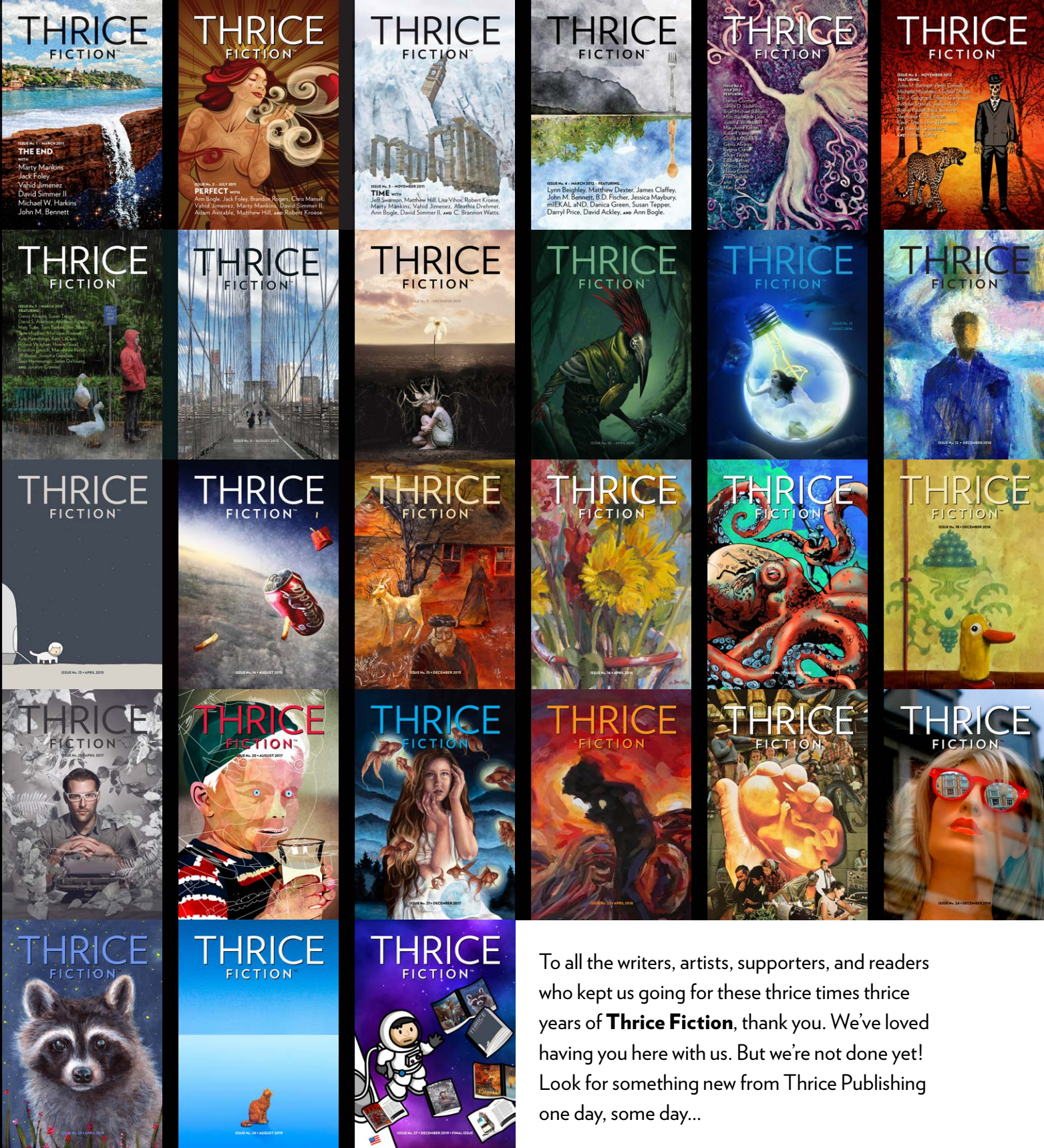


THRICE

FICTION™



ISSUE No. 27 • DECEMBER 2019 • FINAL ISSUE



To all the writers, artists, supporters, and readers who kept us going for these thrice times thrice years of **Thrice Fiction**, thank you. We've loved having you here with us. But we're not done yet! Look for something new from Thrice Publishing one day, some day...



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THRICE FICTION™

Issue No. 27 • DECEMBER 2019
RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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Thrice 27 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor



The plan is to take a break. Maybe a long break, maybe not. I don't know. There are ethereal ideas about what **Thrice Fiction** would/could/should/ may ideally look like in the future, should we come back to it. I like the new ideas and, along with the slew of ISBNs we own, their existence may be enough of a reason to stage a comeback.

What it would look like is a condition that would answer a lot of things I don't like about **Thrice Fiction's** position and function, currently. I've come to like a different presentation (size, thickness) than we use. I dislike the idea that it can't be obtained in stores. And most of all I hate the idea that we reimburse nobody for their work and their talent. We make nothing – in fact we end up spending our own money – in all this. There are precious little donations. And, when we do sell the product, most of the money goes to the services that make the physical thing. Well... okay... that last thing doesn't change no matter what we do. The only alternative is to build our own network of employee-owned print services (I know of one I'd like to use) and set up our own distribution network. Because not only do I distrust everything that ever came out of the internet, I – like most of you – am only too aware of the slow evolution to a publishing monopoly in the world that has been lurching toward control from a central master for years now.

Such a thing takes time, energy, and money. And though I may have the first two I certainly don't have the last one.

I would like to see a magazine you can find on the bookstands as well as on our own online store. To hell with this Amazon crap. There are people successfully bucking their omnipresence. All it takes is the will to do it, really.

I would like to see something the size of a paperback. Something that comes out, officially, "irregularly," because I'd like to present a product that comes from a perfect mind rather than doing something we have to do because we imposed our own artificial conditions on its availability. I would also like to follow a format that features a lot of work from one writer, supported by smaller, if not single, contributions from a handful of others rather than twenty or twenty three people (as we do now). If we can do it all this way then, yes, we can actually afford an honorarium of some kind (even if it is only copies) to the writers and artists who we feature.

If I can do that then I really don't give a shit if we make money at this because money isn't the goal, it's the problem.

So, I'm not sure when, if, or how we return. We have a ton of ISBNs we bought and I really dislike throwing stuff away I haven't used, so there is that. Stay tuned to find out what happens to our plucky heroes next time.

And thanks, everyone, for joining in.



The Inside Woman

Kate Easley

Fragments of female body parts in black and white, confusing jolts and a man's face against Japanese calligraphy. Gunshots. Screams. She was dreaming about the movie they watched one night when they were stoned in their old apartment. The night when the woman came to their door and scared her half to death. Waking up was so bright and fake-clean smelling in that hospital, the scar over her appendix. Her body part removed a few hours before. Someone moaning behind the curtain and patters of nurse feet in the endless hallways that zigzagged around and around like the NIMH experiment with rats.

She was on painkillers and the TV was on and she thought maybe she was still dreaming because of what she saw. On TV, they were talking about the woman who knocked on their door that night, her head was floating inside a lurid blue rectangle. She wanted to call him: her ex. To call him and tell him that the woman's head was on the TV, right there on channel six, right next to the coiffed news lady with a symmetrical face. She wanted him to laugh and joke about how much weed they used to smoke and inquire about why the woman was on the TV. To dream about that movie and then see the woman's face, pixilated and sparkling there above her on the black box attached to the wall. How fucking weird is that, she thought.

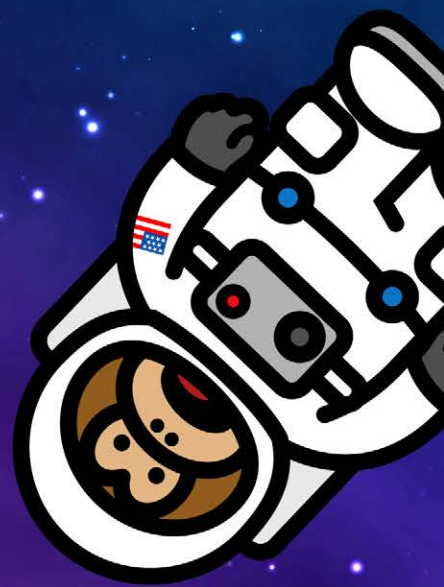
They had been watching that creepy avant-garde exploitation movie with no real point, she thought, other than to show women getting killed. It was based on the story

of a guy killing eight nurses in the 1960s. She read about the crime during the movie, all stoned and paranoid and freaked out on Wikipedia. He had wanted to watch the movie because he liked experimental Japanese films, but she just thought most of the stuff was boring and would have rather been watching *Gossip Girl* or something.

So, when the knock came at the door, she could feel her throat plummet into her stomach and there was this crazy beating drum through every centimeter of her flesh; it was the most scared she had ever been, she was sure. They didn't have the lace curtains then, over the window on the door. No lace curtains, just a blonde-haired head with a face and bruises and a nothing expression. He didn't see the woman, didn't hear the knocking, and he started laughing because he thought she was just terrified by the movie.

And then they were both at the door, her telling him not to open it for a random person and him giving her an annoyed look because obviously he wasn't going to do that. He had long known not to trust people knocking at the door because his mother drilled that into his brain when they got to the United States. The pouring rain had drenched the outside woman's hair. She looked like an actress in a romantic comedy about to tell the guy she loves him except her face was bruised.

The outside woman looked at her, the inside woman, but not at her ex. The inside woman left the outside woman standing there alone, got a piece of paper from a drawer somewhere, and wrote a note: *Sorry, I can't open the door.*



Are you okay? The outside woman pulled an iPhone from a reusable shopping bag and took a minute to type something, then held the phone to the window, screen against glass: No minutes left on this phone I need a taxi. Lumpy bruises on her arms and face.

The taxi was called, and the outside woman waited on the porch. The outside woman was being watched by the inside woman from her bedroom window; the moment was injected with bass from a house party down the street, rain behind the porch, and something gurgling in their brains. Postures opposed: inside woman slumped and wondering, outside woman upright and alert. Each blurry to the other through glass marbled by rain.

The inside woman wished to be the outside woman who maybe had a more interesting life even though she was running from someone and the outside woman wished she could be the inside woman there in the warmth with a nice-looking boyfriend. The taxi driver picked up the outside woman as she began a fit of coughing; she slid into the taxi and away.

But this was all a memory, and fixed hospital shapes greeted the inside woman's emergence from that foggy place. The moaning began again behind the hospital curtain. The woman wondered if moaning had any physical benefits for a body in pain. Pattering feet. A commercial on the TV for a drug with a weird name that seemed to make people happy and want to play baseball with their friends. The plastic covering on the light above her was clean and new. It made her feel safe. A cop had come to the house the same night as the woman at the door. The moaning person giggled at something on TV. She wanted to call her ex. The moaning was louder next to her. "Are you okay?" she asked the moaning. "No," said the moaning. "Call the nurse," she said. "I will," said the moaning.


She remembered clearly the cop coming toward their house. They were smoking cigarettes on the porch after the outside woman and taxi were long gone. The cop looked like an actor because he was handsome—the way they portray police detectives on TV. She remembered his legs were kind of fat, though, and she judged him for it. "Let's just stay out of this," said her ex. She was mostly fine with that, but a little bit of her wanted to talk to the cop because his face seemed dignified and maybe he would answer questions she had about the woman. However, when the cop got to the porch, he wasn't even there to inquire about the woman. He just wanted to know if they had seen a red truck drive by. They hadn't.

She still had a pumping heart, obviously. Even though parts of her kept vanishing. New boyfriends came after her ex. She wasn't dating anyone at the moment, but it's not

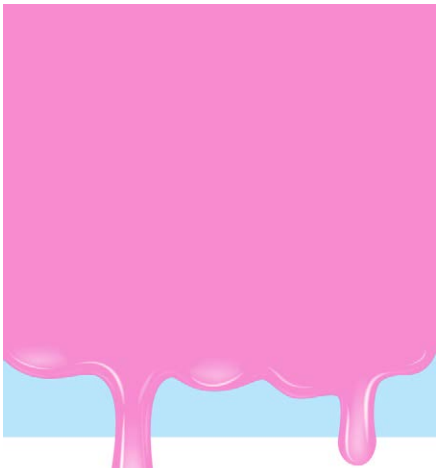
like people hadn't loved her. She could have called a couple friends from the office to give her a ride home, but an uber was just easier. The driver was not friendly, not human-like in his interactions with her. As they drove from the hospital, suburbia squeezed them like a weak hand, allowing parts to seep into unseen dimensions. It was so dark, she thought, for how early it was. A man in black workout clothes walked a giant wolf-like dog on the pavement. The dog sniffed; the man tugged on the leash. She hadn't even smoked in two years but seeing the man with his dog made her want a cigarette. She didn't know why.

In her apartment she turned on the TV even though she never watched normal TV and only streamed stuff. She wanted to see the outside woman again. The ten o'clock news was probably on channel six. Her apartment smelled weird, so she hunted around in the kitchen for the culprit while a TV commercial scratched at her ear drums. "Our top story tonight: a woman was arrested." She hurried to the TV, where she saw a picture of the outside woman on the screen. She was sure it was the same woman. But then the fact that she was so sure raised a question in her mind because how could she be sure it was the same woman when she could barely picture her ex's face anymore. The news lady with the symmetrical face was talking about how police arrested the woman for being an accomplice in a convenience store robbery. The woman's partner fled when the police arrived.

More from that night was coming back: the outside woman slipped a twenty-dollar bill to the inside woman under the door as a thank you for calling the taxi. Her ex slipped it back and mouthed "it's okay." She wanted to remember other things and assign some significance to them. She sat in her apartment; tired but okay despite having had surgery. Laparoscopic surgery is no big deal, the doctor had told her. The news had moved on to another story. The outside woman at the curtain-less door was just an image of a time she remembered fondly because after they got those lace curtains, things began to deteriorate in the relationship. She thought about how her appendix was sitting in a bio-waste disposal bin a few miles from her apartment. The outside woman also sat somewhere, hidden away, discarded for the time being. 🕒



KATE EASLEY is a writer from Portland, Oregon. When she's not writing, she likes to drink coffee (well, she likes to do that while writing too), do visual art, and drive on backroads while listening to music.



Alien Artifact

Craig Wilson

I was trying to get away with a dangerous alien artifact without being seen, but the shopkeeper saw it in my hand.

"Thirty bucks for the statue."

"Hey, I need to get this out of here, it's unstable." He laughed at me.

I stuffed the little statue into my coat pocket and turned to leave. The shopkeeper grabbed my arm.

"That was stolen from my car a few weeks ago. I need it."

"How do you know it's yours? That's thirty bucks or I speed dial the police."

"I carved the notches on the bottom when I got it. But if you insist, call the cops. I really need to get this thing out of here before it becomes destabilized." I felt the eight-inch statue vibrate. That meant I didn't have long.

"All right, how about fifteen." The shopkeeper didn't want the attention since he had received stolen goods.

"I'm sorry, I don't have that, and this thing is dangerous."

"Uh-huh, and I'm Batman. What have you got?"

"About six dollars."

"Fine, take it and shut up." I handed him six dollars. Too late. The money turned to a pink slime dripping from his hand.

"Hey! What's the big deal? Did you dose me or what?" His hair stood on end and he began to rise towards the ceiling.

"I told you. The statue is not of this earth." I grabbed his legs to keep him from hitting his head on the roof. Too late, his legs began to stretch like that guy from the Fantastic Four.

"Oh shit!" He put out his hands, but it was like gravity forced him upward and the drop ceiling buckled.

"I've got you! Grab that support beam."

He reached for the support beam, but his body turned into that same pink slime, and he fell to the floor with a splash.

"Are you all right?"

He moaned incoherently since he no longer had a mouth.

"Hold on..." I grabbed the statue and focused my will, traced a mental symbol to achieve my goal and pushed it into the statue's head. There was a pop and the man returned to his previous shape.

He coughed like he would throw up and rubbed his head. "Damn, get that thing out of here, what the hell..." I turned around to leave, but the front door was completely buried in thick tree roots and creeper vines.

"There's always a cost in chaos any time I use the statue...I think we might be in trouble."

The floor trembled, then the tiles warped and melted and grabbed my ankles before re-solidifying. I was trapped in the floor.

"Listen, get out of here. Take the back door. I'll follow you when I can."

"What's gonna happen to you? What about my shop?"

"Just GET OUT, dammit!" A thunderstorm sprang up in the far corner of the store. A lightning bolt struck the shelf; water ran everywhere. My feet were stuck fast.

"Oh Jesus, I'm going, I'm going, the thing is cursed!" He turned around to run but the hallway leading to the back exit closed around him like a fist. He screamed.

I had to pry myself loose. I managed to knock a merchandise rack into a shelf which caused a crowbar to fall a short distance from me. I grabbed it and started hacking at the floor. No luck—the crowbar turned into a stuffed tiger. The floor started pulling me down.

"I'm headed for the basement." The floor cracked loudly and rippled; I fell into a dark and cluttered storage space, landed on some boxes and tumbled into the floor. Rainwater poured on top of me. But at least I could move. I ran for some stairs across the room.

The whole shop warped; the main floor invaded the basement. Thunder and lightning increased in severity. The shopkeeper wrapped up like a burrito was thrown about in the din, yelling and getting banged up. Everything against one wall smashed into me. I felt my arm snap, and then

separate from my shoulder. It floated away, waving at me the whole time. I screamed, but it only made classical music come out of my mouth and nose.

“What the hell, what the hell! Holy Jesus, mother of God, oh shit oh shit oh shit,” the shopkeeper cried out as his head floated away from his body without any visible injury. His head floated towards me. My own head snapped off my spine without any pain; there was a sound I’ll remember the rest of my life. It was like I’d gotten taller. My head was placed on the shopkeeper’s body, and his on mine.

The room began to shrink as it continued to flood. The shopkeeper wearing my head was released from the hallway and we both wound up in a whirlpool in the floor with water rushing around us.

‘We’re gonna die aren’t we? I’m sorry I took the statue, I’m sorry I took stolen goods, it happens, I’m a businessman, are we gonna die?’ He said with my voice, my mouth.

“Hold your breath!” The floor dropped away beneath us and like we were being flushed down an oversized toilet, we slipped into the sewer system beneath the building, bound together by brambles and pink slime.

The sewer tunnels likewise started to rumble, and pipes were bursting, steam escaping, rats turning to cats and birds and back to rats again within an instant. It became deathly cold; the water began freezing around us.

“Can you reach the statue in my coat, I’ve got to get that,” I said. The shopkeeper strained to grab it and succeeded. We were being crushed together and I feared this would be my last chance.

I grabbed the statue and wished for a rescue. It was like someone struck my hand with a hammer but there was a flash; we found ourselves fused together into one two-headed

body falling into a nearby park. We crashed into the mud and separated. I had my head and arm back. But I was now fused into the base of an oak tree. The shopkeeper was flat as a pancake about thirty feet away and looked very unhappy.

“Hey! Rub that statue again and fix this!”

“I can’t move! I’m part of the tree!”

“We’re screwed then! Oh god!”

“Just breathe...it’s the middle of the afternoon, someone will find us.”

Soon a man and his dog walked by and nearly walked across the shopkeeper who was not only flat, but also camouflaged.

“HEY! Get me out of here!”

“Whoa! C’mere Mothra.” he pulled his barking dog back.

“This is some crazy shit! You don’t even wanna look at HIM” He pointed at me to the best of his ability.

“Hey, I’m stuck in the tree.”


The man fell silent for a moment, then made a phone call.

“Josie? I’ve found two more affected by the artifact. You’d better send an exam team for extraction. C’mere, Mothra. No, Mothra.” The little dog tried to hike his leg on my tree but was pulled away.

My mind raced through possible scenarios. I wasn’t aware anyone else knew about the statue. From what he said, there had to be more than one.

“Just relax, we’ve got special tools. We’ll need to hold you for debriefing.”

I hoped they showed up quickly because I could feel myself turning more and more into part of an oak tree and it was pretty scary. The statue had never done anything so extreme before. I racked my brains to figure out the physics behind it all. I suddenly lost consciousness. 🌀



CRAIG WILSON is a writer, artist, musician, noise maker and surrealist living in Southern Illinois. I’ve been published in a variety of books, magazines and websites, including **PATRICIDE** in the U.K., **HYDROLITH 1** and **PECULIAR MORMYRID** journal in the U.S. My artwork, collages, photos and objects have appeared in numerous shows in Reading, Pennsylvania; Portland, Oregon; St. Louis, Missouri and Carbondale, Illinois. My current writing projects include the forthcoming book *From The Underground: Carbondale In The ‘90s* and articles for international surrealist journal *The Room*. I also write for the NIGHTLIFE insert inside local newspaper the *Carbondale Times*.



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Edited by RW Spryszak.

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The Light at Margate

Philip Kane

There was a brilliance here, Clara thought as she gazed out over the sea, as if the light contained another sort of light within itself. A spiritual light, perhaps. She knew light had been the attraction of Margate, for Turner, this light that seemed to suffuse everything here with an immanent divinity.

She sighed, as with longing for something that she could not define. “We’ll go to the arcades next. I want to play on the driving games”.

Dougie cut the cord of her imagination. “You could try to win one of the bears from that machine with the grabber”, he went on, “since you like bears”.

She had liked her bears, that was true. But that had been a whole year ago, when she had first started going out with Dougie, and she had grown out of bears now. Dougie remembered though, and liked to tease her about the pile

of bears that she had kept on her bed, about how childish she had still been, back then.

Clara sighed again, took another chip from the paper wrapping on her lap, and slipped it into her mouth. She chewed it slowly, and glanced at her boyfriend. The light shone like a glamour through his white shirt. He was only a little taller than herself, at five and a half feet – which was why he didn’t like her to wear high heels, she supposed, though he said the reason was that they made her look slutty - and his dark hair flopped over one eye whenever he cocked his head to the side, which he often did when he talked to her, as if he was inspecting her for faults.

He was too busy shooing away the seagulls to pay her much attention, at that moment. The birds had started to gather around them as soon as they had sat down and opened the bags of chips they had bought for lunch. The seagulls were big birds, white and grey with curved yellow

beaks and a mad glint in their eyes. Clara liked the look of them in flight, as if they had been carved from the sky itself, and on days that were covered with grey cloud she even liked the way they cried mournfully as they flew overhead.

Dougie kicked out, in a futile gesture, at one seagull that strutted closer. It hopped back with a brief flap of its wings, glaring at him.

“Get lost”, snarled Dougie. The seagulls ignored him. There were a dozen of them now, eager eyes fixed on the food. Clara took another chip from the bag, blew on it to cool it down a little, and ate it.

“You have to admit”, she said once she had swallowed the chip, “they’re persistent. The seagulls always know what they want”.

Without looking up, Dougie said, “There’s no such thing as a seagull”. Clara, looking at the seagulls, doubted that. Even if Dougie was a birdwatcher, even if he knew better than her, it was surely difficult to argue with the evidence of a dozen seagulls that were fixated on their lunch.

“So, what are these birds if they aren’t seagulls? They look like seagulls to me”, she said. She hadn’t meant to sound sarcastic when she said it, but it must have come out that way because Dougie frowned at her, and his mouth tightened in a disapproving expression, before he answered.

“Gulls”, he said, “They’re just gulls. There’s lots of different kinds of gulls, like black headed gulls and so on, but dumb people think they’re all seagulls”.

Clara noticed his emphasis on the word dumb, and lowered her eyes, feeling suddenly embarrassed. “So what kind of gulls are these?” she asked, trying to sound interested.

“European herring gulls”, said Dougie, without looking up again from his chips. “They’re very common, there’s nothing special about them”.

Clara disagreed with him about them being special, as a few more came gliding down to land and bolster the crowd of hungry birds. Maybe it was the light, but there was something glowing and vibrant about their grey-and-white colouring. Most people think grey is dull and banal, she thought, but this was another kind of grey. Their eyes showed personality too, even if it was a greedy and possibly even malicious personality.

“Look”, she said, pointing out one of the newcomers, “There’s one that’s different to the rest, all white, like a dove. Is that another kind or can you get albino gulls?”

Dougie looked up sharply. “Where?”

“Over there”, said Clara, and she pointed with the chip between her fingers. There was a rustling in the mob of gulls when they saw the food apparently being proffered, and she quickly put it into her mouth before they seized an opportunity and launched themselves at the chips, and at her.

Dougie stared at the white gull, then pulled out his phone and started pressing keys rapidly.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking something out”, said Dougie, “If that one is what I think it is, then...”

“Then what?” Clara shrugged and ate the last of her chips. “It’s only a seagull, after all”.

“Not a seagull”, said Dougie. He looked closely at the

screen of his phone, then at the white gull, then back at the screen again. “Not a herring gull either. That’s an ivory gull”.

“So, it is a different kind of seagull, then. I wondered, that’s all”, said Clara. “I’ve finished eating, I’d like to go into the art gallery if that’s alright”. She waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the Turner Contemporary, a little further along the seafront.

Dougie wasn’t listening to her. “The habitat of the ivory gull is way up in the Arctic. They wouldn’t usually come this far south - they never come this far south”.

Clara stood up. On an impulse, she shook her chip bag in the air so that the crisp remnants of her food flew out and scattered on the ground among the expectant seagulls. There was an immediate flurry of wings as the birds pounced, yellow beaks stabbing at the concrete.

Dougie jumped up too. Clara saw that his face had flushed red with anger, and he was waving his arms as if to drive away the squabbling crowd of birds. They hopped back from him, and some flew off in fright, the white gull among them. Clara cringed inwardly, too.

“You stupid...stupid...”

“I’m sorry”, said Clara, although she wasn’t sure quite what she was being sorry for.

“Now I’ll never get a photo and nobody will believe I saw it. Nobody will believe me. How can you be so stupid?” He almost yelled. Then he stomped away along the promenade.

Clara went after him, trying to catch up. “I’m sorry”, she said to his back as she came up to him, “I’m really sorry”.

They had reached the foot of the steps leading up to the art gallery, when Dougie rounded on her. “That will never happen again”, he said.

Clara wasn’t sure whether he meant that he would never see another ivory gull, or was implying a threat and she wouldn’t dare behave like that in future. Confused, she reached out and stroked his arm, trying to soothe him.

“I said I’m really sorry. And I’ll make it up to you, honest I will”.

Dougie scowled, and said nothing in response.

“Look, we’re right by the gallery now”, said Clara, “We could go in there for a little while?”

“I want to go play in the arcades”, said Dougie.

“We can do that afterwards. I’d really like to look at the art, I start at college in a few weeks and it’ll help to put me in the right mood”.

“Art is stupid, it’s a waste of time”, said Dougie, “I don’t know why you want to go to a stupid art college anyway. You should get a job and start earning money”.

Maybe he was right, thought Clara. Dougie was already in an apprenticeship. He was going to be a car mechanic, and he would be earning good money while she would still be at college. Even so, she tried pleading with him again. “Can’t we go in though? Not for long, I promise. I just want a quick look”.

“I want to go to the arcades”, Dougie repeated. He gripped Clara’s arm and started to drag her away from the gallery. There were amusement arcades across the road, lights flashing and flickering from the array of machines inside. Clara resigned herself to watching her boyfriend play on the driving games, his favourites, for at least

an hour or so. She hoped he’d be in a better mood if she accepted that, and maybe then he’d let her go into the gallery after all.

But Dougie abruptly stopped, and stood gazing intently seawards. Clara tried to work out what had caught his attention. The harbour arm stretched out nearby, like a hook catching onto the sea and holding it fast. There was a row of low buildings along the outer edge, and a lighthouse that stuck up like a stone needle at the seaward end. A flock of seagulls flapped and squabbled, about halfway along the hook.

“It’s come back”, said Dougie. There was an excited edge to his voice.

“What has?” Clara peered out at the sea, but all she could take in was the light.

“The ivory gull. I can see it. Come on, quickly...”

Dougie had kept his grip tight around her wrist and began to pull her with him, out onto the harbour arm. Clara went with him reluctantly. She was uneasy that there wasn’t much of a barrier at the edge opposite the buildings, other than a low wall that barely reached knee height; and there was a straight drop of around fifteen or twenty feet into the water. She couldn’t swim, and as a child she’d had a recurring dream about drowning, so she shied away from open water at the best of times. She wanted to stay as far from the edge as possible, to the point of sidling along by the buildings, but Dougie had a firm hold of her right arm and the further he propelled her along, the closer he seemed to be taking her towards the drop.

With his free hand, he was fumbling with his phone. “This time I’ll get it”, he said.

“Please”, said Clara, “You’re taking me too close to the edge. I don’t like it”.

“Shut up”, Dougie snapped. They were near the seagulls, very near. The white gull was standing still, and Clara thought it seemed to look straight at them, the light catching in its black eyes.

Dougie was intent on lining up his photograph. They were maybe twelve inches from the edge where the stone of the harbour arm fell away to the sea below.

“I said we’re too close to the drop, Dougie, please let go of me”. Clara tried to twist from his grip, but it tightened even more.

“And I told you to shut up”, said Dougie.

“Let go of me, let go”. She shouted the last words.

The whole flock of birds appeared to burst upwards and outwards, then, screaming. Clara was desperately pulling away from Dougie, when he at last released her and she saw, in a flash of white light, that the ivory gull had flown straight at him. Dougie stepped back against the low wall and toppled backwards.

Clara watched him fall. There was surprise and confusion on his face, but he made no sound as the sea rose to meet him. His arms stretched out and the sleeves of his white shirt ruffled like feathers, yet he did not fly.

She had already turned and started to walk away before he struck the water. There was some shouting behind her, and she could see and hear that there were people running to Dougie’s rescue, as she walked back along the harbour arm towards the gallery. Clara decided that she would spend the rest of the afternoon in there. She had plenty of time. She did not look back. 🐼

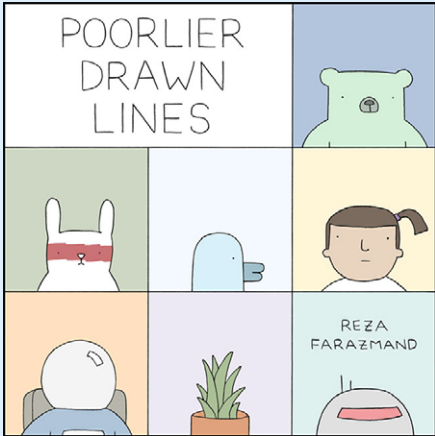


PHILIP KANE is a writer, storyteller and artist whose books include *The Wildwood King*, *The Hickelbaum Papers*, *Unauthorised Person*, and *Dramatis Personae*. Active on the thriving Medway (UK) arts scene for over thirty years, he has been dubbed “Medway’s Mephistopheles” by Poetry Scotland. A founding member of the London Surrealist Group, he has built up an international reputation, publishing and exhibiting in a number of countries including Spain and the USA. — Author photo by Marilyn Simpson

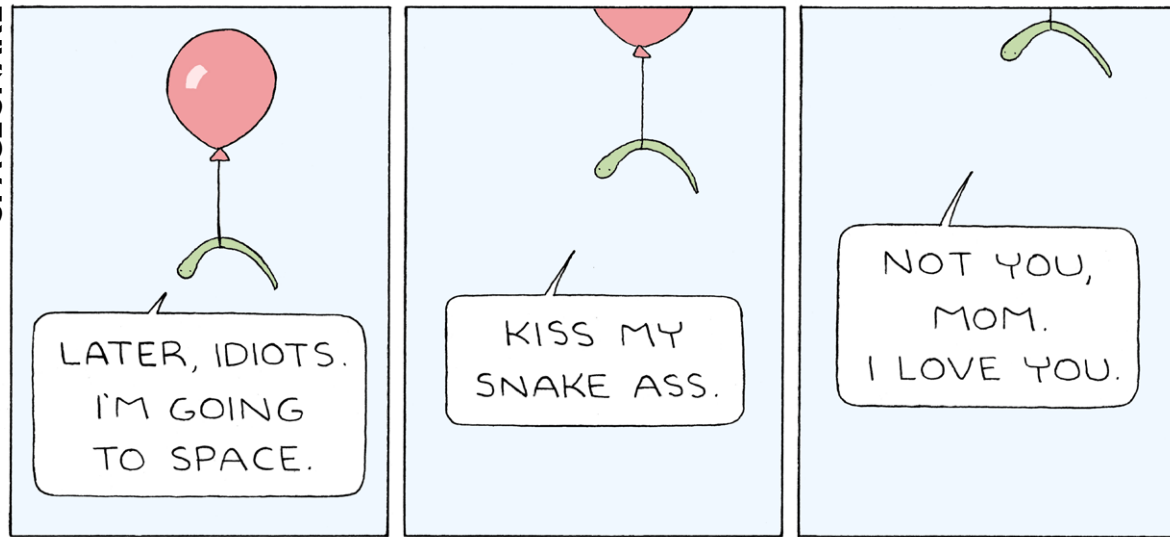
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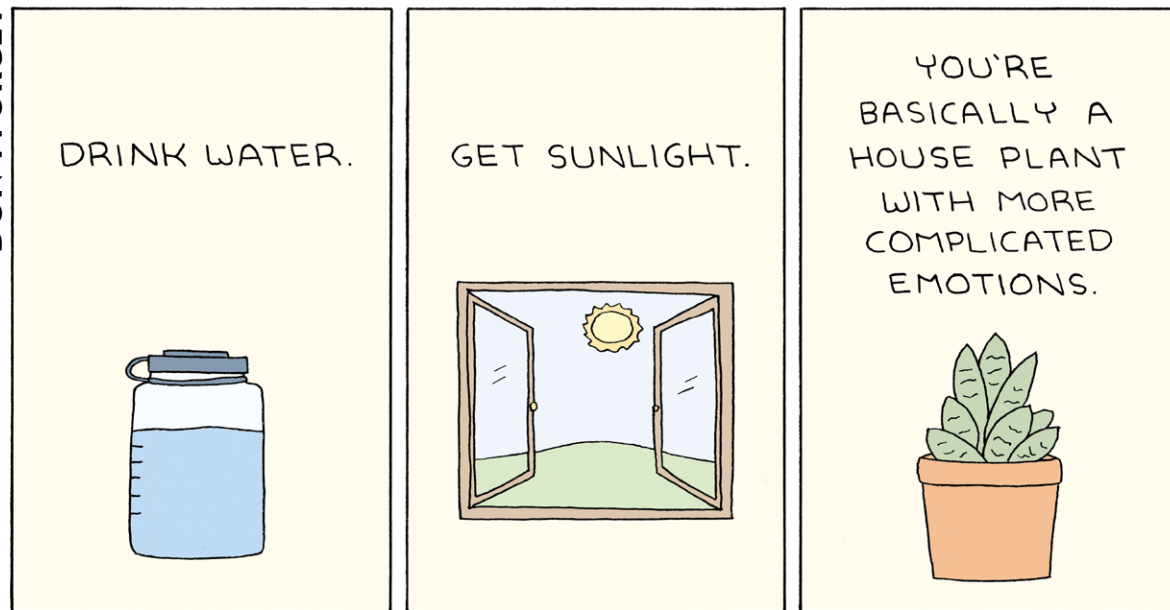
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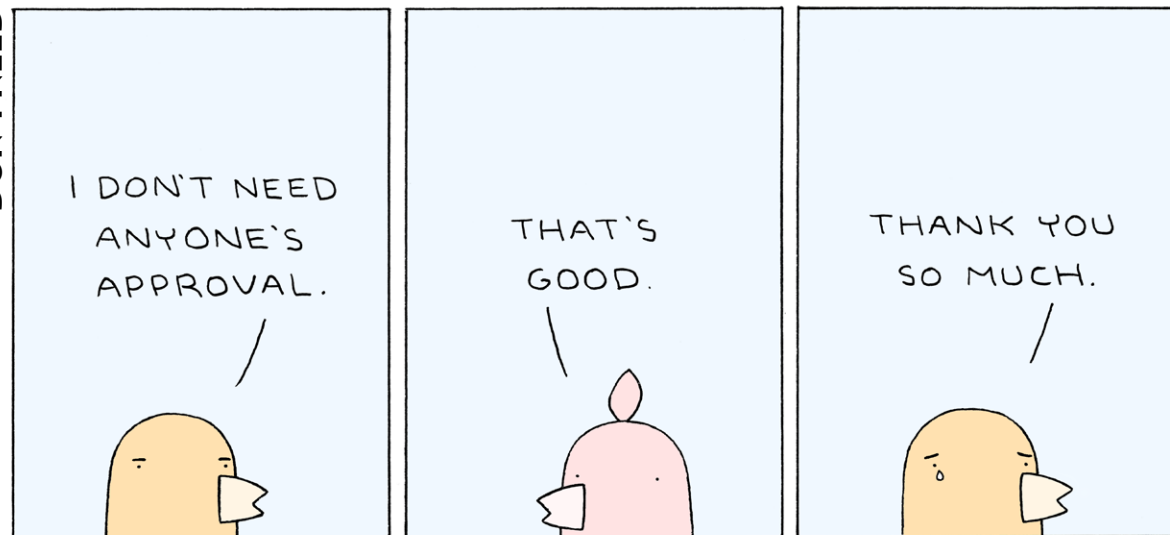
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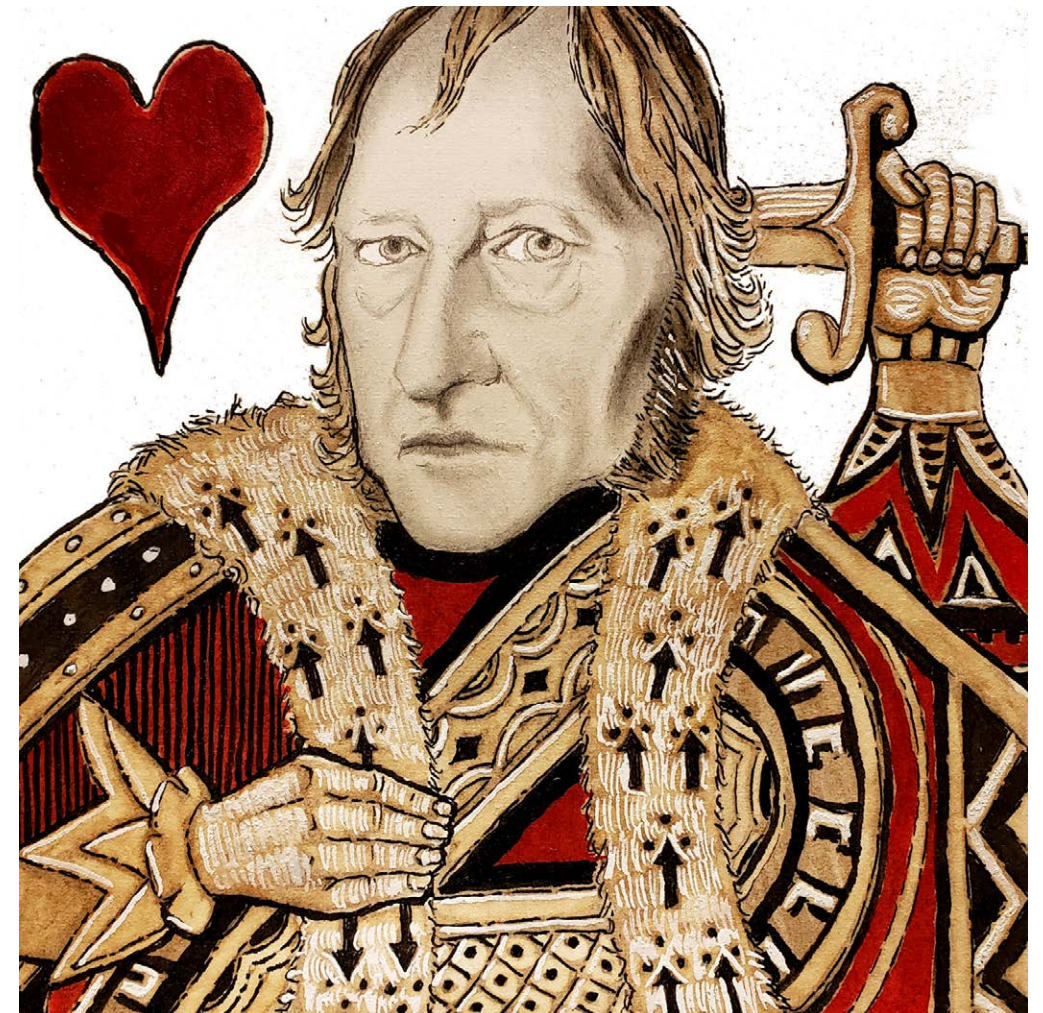


DON'T NEED



Poorly Drawn Lines by Reza Farazmand

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The Secret Life of Democrats

AE Reiff

The Secret Life of Democrats is culled from the Superstition Demonot orders of the philosopher Hegel, a dialectic known as the Golden Superstitions, but in reverse. Their third order man is at the top, called Man Who Is, but hypothetically not, for Demonots do not believe in such. The closest explanation that can come is, Is Is, Is? Which is to say, Is Not. Since Demonots disbelieve the third they substitute the second Man Who's Not. This is to say the man who says, Was, Is. Second orders are not what others think. They are not what they suppose. They are not what they think themselves. In topsy turve, the First Order Demonot, Not Man Who Is, took the Second and substituted itself. This Not-Man concocted a pretend that said since the Second thought itself without worth, it must be, for who would better know? So the First substituted itself for the Second and pretended to be the Third.

As with the hieroglyphics of ancient Mayan, which writing radiates about a center, as Whorf said also of Hopi, the writing on walls fades with time, creating a palimpsest effect, a writing over writing, called democracy. Democracy undergirds that inner fourth level. Sometimes they are scholars, but equally often innuendo and gossip is well hidden beneath the youth mask. Authorities do not credit the outer order as viable, and they acknowledge nothing of the inner. To the untutored eye democracy is indecipherable, for the sentence that begins in the east may only be completed in the west.

The Pack

The original Democrats were assassins, but became burglars. This philosophical impoverishment is attributed to the youth market. We begin with the process where apprentice burglars qualify for inner order attention.

Levy-Bruhl concedes in his study of the primitive that while the inner circle is invisible it uses apprentice labor for low level ventures. The ages of these apprentices correspond to our junior high school, which should not imply lack of sophistication. Single-parent homes supply cars and trunk space in house and yard for the booty call “chumpo” in democracy. Some homes completely without parenting, loosely governed by older siblings, initiate themselves in pure alibi, space and transport. Ah gainy ma, Chum, po! it is said, slanged, with voicing. Neighborhood apprentices operate as pack vendors. If four or five are on the hunt their victims are older women usually, the infirm buffalo, deer and elk pulled down by a social onanism of majority ethos.

Prey

The Democrat takes a widow stranded in the veldt, whose home retains amenities from her husband’s efforts at the good life, fruit trees, hedges, gardens, fences, which first gave her security, as prerequisite. The fence is weakened by children begging to pick the fruit, the figs, oranges, apricots, grapes, grapefruits. Preemie Democrats ply the lady with piteous looks and pleas for pomegranate. These reconnoiter to report the presence and location of marketable items. Continuous erosion of fences produces entry at four or five places. The apprenticed scout confirms the spoor and plots the lady’s movement, when she goes for a walk or visits her daughter. New safety glass regulations ensure no sound of breaking glass or that a Democrat will be cut. Entry by the window, exit by the door, first break-ins take the small, toasters, portable TVs, jewelry, money. Second, third and fourth breakings, for Democrats are trained in serial burglary, take stereos, VCRs, washers and dryers. Thus, you see it is curiously not so long from planting a peach tree to the loss of your refrigerator.

This Darwinism of initiates is contradicted if a less vulnerable person moves to the address. Then the apprentices, failing to adapt quickly, being used to easy prey, may fall prey themselves. An increasing yuppie population need not trouble the Democrat who considers this a golden age. The arrest of Democrat burglars is foreseen and desired by the inner order to test the probationer. If an apprentice is caught and given a police record that ensures he will become an adjunct member, an affiliate for odd chores, though not inner circle material. On the other hand, if the apprentice goes uncaught until the age of 18, he is sent to college and law school.

When promising apprentices appear an inner circle woman rents a home in the hood outfitted with video and sound to record the performance. She makes herself vulnerable and when the strike occurs it is analyzed for merit by the promotion committee. This also benefits the goods claimed for insurance, even if that stored as bait is damaged and does not work. Thus, the process in business and government, legislatures and churches teaches discrimination.

Democracy among the implicit hashishim of the 12th century, the Templar Knights, and Egyptian tombs suggest to Graves its roots back to Anubian jackals. Moderns see it coincident with New Deal legislation. Democrat media uses time tested anthropologists like Loudon Perry to say, “the fig tree founded the industrial revolution.”

Democrat society is anti-discrimination. This covers the greater paradox where the victim is taken as the thief and the thief treated like the victim. The old lady says she lost a sewing machine, her nephew’s bicycle, a skill saw and a lawn chair, but they are only returned after a minutely perfect description and receipts. Possession is nine tenths of the law. By their wealth inner circle theorists and legislators attract outsiders to a tripling of Democrat influence. The only empirical clue in scientific literature that even points to the inner order’s existence was in the work of Jimson, whose tendency toward violet and purple, even pink in the choice of foreign special issue automobiles implied a compensatory sensuality commensurate with familial deprivation.

It is not wise to trifle with the innocent youth spotting furniture in your neighborhood. They may become a general, a senator, an executive. A ribald paradox of Tit Corp, maker of subliminal telecom appliances, revealed that all its board members were initiates, but who found that they made less profit because of it! All professions are represented except insurance.

PROBATIONARY INNER CIRCLE

Duplicity is easily taught to quick young minds. THERE ARE MANY CIRCLES IN THE SUPERSTITUTION SPIRAL. Perhaps the two single most important are the rituals of face changing and the invisibility cloak.

Face Changing

Face changing comes more or less naturally. Democrats are taught to CHANGE THE THOUGHT AND THE FACE WILL FOLLOW. Probationers undergo exercises to produce this result. Paired off they are told to convince their partner that black is white, or white is black, which means that they must fervently believe it themselves. These are no smiling villains, but those who believe with all their hearts and souls that their thought is the epitome of sincerity. Lady Macbeth might look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it, but the probationer is THE GOOD IN EVIL repeated so many times to convince that any exigent course is right. All probate Democrats can pass lie detector tests. Those who believe in education no matter what the cost, in the classical training of the curriculum, review in miniature the heroic moments of Achilles’ madness and Ulysses’ guile, foreshortened in the renaissance masters of the Borgias, Hamlet and Faustus, including the sublime moments in early espionage from Bruno and Marlowe to Trithemian codes. This is all conducted with that modern heuristic device, the Harvard Case Study Method.

Invisibility

The invisibility cloak is not so easily learned. It too is a form of shape change but involves the whole body. A probationer is expected to stand downtown at midday outside his place of business and not be seen as his coworkers go to lunch. The skill is not commonplace. The emphasis is upon thinking reality into that shape we desire it to take. A Democrat learns to PROJECT SIMULTANEOUS CONTRADICTION, which process is often labeled the three Ms, misdirecting the observer’s attention, mirroring the observer’s attention, manipulating

the observer’s attention.

3 Ms

The 3 Ms are immensely aided with a theta brain rhythm. Since perceived reality is a misimpression created by the observer, it is not so difficult to confuse it further.

Misdirecting the observer’s attention is easily done as a trick of simple household magic. You can do it yourself the next time somebody asks you a tough question. Merely ask for the question to be repeated. Note the different and easier language the second time, mostly because your respondent is trying to help you since you are both tedious and simpleminded. Also, many a thievery has occurred with the acquiescence of the owner merely by the thief’s asking, “you don’t want this do you?” The simple audacity covers the theft which is out the door before the answer occurs.

Mirroring the observer’s attention means that since people see what they want to see and nobody would rather see anything but themselves, help them to see what they want by acting it out, mere do the opposite. Seeing vs. doing.

Manipulating is the most difficult to practice because it requires misdirecting and mirroring first. The idea is to turn the point to your advantage. Consider that a new sewer system will save the environment and it will also change the zoning.

ZONING

All these techniques together are called Zoning, but to the rank and file probationer the difficulty comes in believing that the process of Zoning works when we don’t see it work. Obviously however if it is seen to work the practitioner has been caught.

Invisibility is only completed by the mysterious fifth level Master. An instance occurred in the vast hierarchy of Superstition Democrats when the probationers went to perform the ritual tea ceremony in the state rotunda at midnight. The master is reported to have seen the guard quizzically examine his left shoe top when he passed the scene. Naturalistically we would expect some such thing anyway since THE MORE BIZARRE AN EVENT the more it is denied. What Democrats have achieved collectively in this in fifty years instructs us in the profundity and profitability of even the superficial bizarre in instances of invisibility. INVISIBILITY LEADS TO INVINCIBILITY say the teachers, citing the mythological example of that Cabal of the D.C. capitol.

First Circle Governance Initiates

Fourth level initiates have succeeded in the techniques above. This is the highest level that can be perceived by the unformed Democrat who tends to idolize, even worship these high beings. They, like gods brought to the pinnacle of perfected duplicity and counterfeit, exclusively compromise the ruling and monied class, hence their attractiveness. All first circle governance initiates today are upper level professionals, administrators, executives and managers. Here they can do the most good for themselves and for the order in manipulation, control, modifying and enriching those they are serving. Many undertake

philanthropy. Nonprofit NGOs in the arts, education and science receive major funding from the order which is furthered when all opposition is automatically considered to be a liar by media plants and the law. This is not so much by conspiracy as by the psychology that whoever opposes the truth must be a liar!

INVISIBLE DEMOCRATIC MASTERS

While the fifth level masters are invisible and unknown, in a way we may say more of them than any other level. Unfortunately, it is impossible to discover whether any of it is true. There is an abundance of myth, new and old, but what empirical data? We may find Hesiod’s belief in the eternal old men of the golden age to be analogous. These likewise invisible persons would intervene and preserve justice when necessary. Structuralists of course take the more skeptical view that the absence of a thing does not imply its inference.

Democrat deconstructuralists believe that the opposite of a thing is the most probable cause, meaning the opposite of expectation. They argue that if human fantasy expects the numinal, then the reality is the practical, the domestic, the everyday. These say, like the Reactive Alchemists, that the baser matter is gold, but take the opposite of what is believed. This school has gained the greatest following in recent years among the inner orders where the first principle is to seek the world in opposition to the truth. Here the assumption is that the world is a matrix of diametrically opposed opposites.

DEMO BOX

From this philosophy came the invention of the now much acclaimed Demo Box, a series of paradoxes where the successful solution—not to have begun to play—resides in neither gold nor lead, and not as it were, in-between, but literally nowhere. The point was made by Jimson as well, but we know what happened to him! Saying that the truth is nowhere is tantamount to saying it is invisible, meaning it is impossible to apprehend by the senses. What we are left with is fantasy, authority and theory. These have their minute popularities before they fade into the Babylonian (Budge).

The implicit nihilism of the Box should not trouble us nearly as much as its mythological bias. Viewed as a model of the world the Demo Box is diagrammed as a decline from a focus, a series of slanted lines with an inverted center like a lava crater. You can also see the likeness in Plato’s cave. Why beings with egress from this paradox remain within is not clearly defined. They will not leave or disbelieve. One absurd view argues that since we believe in them the masters do not exist, but that if they do we do not see them because they masquerade among us in impossible disguises as uninitiates.

Recent fiction has taken the view that the master is Quixote, riding through the desert singing ridiculous odes upon his horse’s breath, trampling wildflowers, polluting clear waters with unclear and managing to betray those very principles held dear by Democrats everywhere. To mock and to rock this extremity, the master is pictured as a German tourist at the Grand Canyon parked in a Cruise America Winnebago that chugs its auxiliary motor

stupidly in the night while he barbecues chicken. Indeed, to go as far as possible, if the master is the most repugnant species he is a Wisconsin snowbird. These fictions show the extreme need for Democrats to conceptualize the nobodies who govern them.

ZONING AND THE SUPERSTITION SPIRAL

A positive result of this philosophizing was the resulting definition of the Superstition Spiral. For the Democrat all matter must relate from whence it emanates, from the dead zone, what we should consider as the point of least elevation from which the spiral comes. The Dead Zone is opaque to sunlight and light, though its citizens manage to make it seem otherwise by the ingenious placing of plastic shrubbery. Opaque sun and rain means that in the Dead Zone the sun does touch the earth but is reflected from a domed atmosphere. Rain, called impervious runoff, is channeled into large tanks where it is stored for basic needs and manufacturing.

The Dead Zone Zoning proceeds outward and downward we should say. Democrats consider its movement lateral, as zone mystics do it inward, as much as up and down. As the spiral expands it encompasses further territory like the Dantean system until the First Circle is complete. Fourth level initiates live in the first circle where they can best oversee the DISINTEGRATION OF THE ORIGINAL ORDER of things. This entropy is the whole purpose of Democratic society in its Manifest. Initiates believe like the anthropologists that they are the “transient efflorescence of a creation in relation to which they have no meaning” (Levi-Strauss), except of course in profit taking, hence the overpowering need to disintegrate structures so that they are no longer capable of integration.


The number of circles in the Superstition Spiral is not fixed because there is free travel between them and because the incessant subdivision of territory makes for new, if after all, homogenous categories. Understand however that ALL MATTER IS CONSIDERED SUBJECT TO DEMOCRACY. Hence our German national grand master is simultaneously a resident of Zone13, North Europe, and of the high country of Zone 3. Zoning theory more or less resembles a system of correspondences that suit a medieval world view of feudal governance. Numbers, plants, planets, stars, modes of behavior, dress, activities, arts and all natural and unnatural substance correlate to their origin in the Dead Zone but also take separate identity in the extended system. For example, the number zero, cholla, Mars, Andromeda, insipidity, shirtlessness, campers and cowboy are endemic but also extend in modified form to other zones. Multiple metamorphoses characterize both

the spiral and the Dead Zone and are a complete study in themselves.

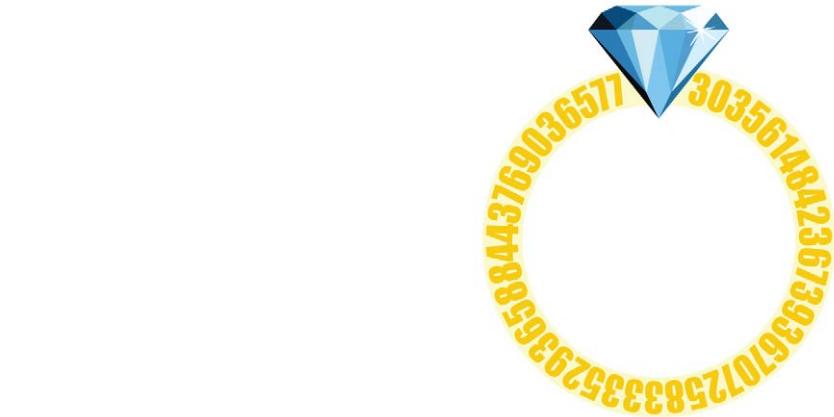
Conclusions

The nameless fears of citizen groups against land developers, zoning commissions, political parties, boards of every kind, governors, mining companies and conglomerates at every level are more justified than any of them suspects in his worst nightmare. The Democrat System so interpenetrates the social fabric that the worst possible case is not at all accurate, for who suspects churches of complicity or charities or universities? These however by a logical extension must be the repositories of the highest most deceitful initiates of the fourth level. The social body being so shot through with degeneration, a certain stoic acceptance behooves the investigator. After all, what is the point of complaining to Democrats about Democrats?

But a worse is yet to come, for you see, applying the law of opposites, that what is true is the opposite of what is intended, we must find that this treatise itself is a production of that Society which augers a golden age for all. Further we must say that those who praise the good are ill and that those who are ill are ill. The highest a Democrat can reach is the opposite of good intent. Nemesis is certain in the Demo Box where THE ONLY SOLUTION IS NOT TO PLAY. For only those who are silent are knowing, only those who are invisible are real and only those who are foolish are wise. 15



AE REIFF indexes his work at Encouragements for Such as Shall Have Intention to be Undertakers in the Planting. AE stands for Alcohol Ethoxylate, a non-ionic surfactant that breaks down long chain molecules to bioremediate the oil of Sulfonated Analogues. Unsulfonated AE transports exulate to encourage microbes to fully digest.



named Bridget?

Rich had paid for the first wedding because the first bride’s father had died years before in a mysterious chemical explosion. As a wedding gift, Rich had also put the down payment on and bought the furniture for the newlyweds’ house. At the time, Rich Witherall was still CIO for the Japanese conglomerate which subsequently abruptly “terminated” all its non-Asian executives. The resulting upheaval took Rich from New York to a California company and thereafter another in Massachusetts. Rich’s wife of many decades, Renee, had not made the West Coast move, but she did to Concord, and again when a third downsizing shift to northern New Jersey became necessary. There they would have stayed married had it not been for his anger and alcohol. Neither Prozac nor inconsistent abstinence could abate his constant Achilles-like indignation.

The night before Junior’s second wedding, Rich had detonated in grief and grievance. “Haven’t I been a better father than mine was? Bridget wants me to pay for her as I did for your first wife?! You make more money than I do now! How can you be so pussy-whipped? How can I have such a son?”

While Renee and her half-sister clung to each other in fear on the far side of the hotel suite, his younger son and brother-in-law tried in vain to contain Rich’s explosion. The fallout from that night and wedding next day clouded decades after. The deed was done, and estrangement spread in shock waves.

Rich gained some self-pitying solace predicting he would end like his father, “dying alone in a one bedroom apartment in Chicago.” In 1942, the Manhattan Project engineer had abandoned his family to work on the bomb in Alamogordo, New Mexico. To support herself, three year old Rich, and his one year old sister, his mother resumed her career as a nurse in New York’s Manhattan and put her toddlers in foster care. When Rich spoke of his upbringing, he avoided the earliest years and went straight to Notre Dame. “I don’t know who were tougher, the Jesuits or the Marines.” He enlisted and served before the war in Vietnam escalated, meeting his model-Actor’s Studio wife as they campaigned for Kennedy in the generational-transitioning 1960 election.

At the second wedding, his younger son Jim failed in his attempts to cheer Rich, who sat drinking alone with a floral centerpiece. As a sophomore undergrad Jim had already begun his Silicon Valley ascent, selling his first tech company to Microsoft before he turned twenty-one. When he had flown out to California to sign documents, he had been too young rent a car at the airport.

By 2008, the Witheralls lived in northern New Jersey. There were at least two New Jerseys: the crude, criminal, clownish one familiar in popular media and another one altogether as invisible as the entrance road to Princeton University, and as elite, where October fox hunting and May/August horse shows were part of the landscape. Rich and Renee lived between in an exurban townhouse complex that had replaced corn fields still growing nearby Oklahoma high as an elephant’s eye. Husband and wife communicated chiefly through habit and rumor. Though she nursed Rich through quadruple bypass surgery, Renee had long before created the quilt of her life, and Rich did not sleep under

it. They had moved from Westchester, New York, to New Jersey on the morning of September 11, 2001.

“We saw the smoke as we crossed the George Washington Bridge,” Renee said.

She had not heard from Junior in Manhattan until late that awful night because phone lines were overloaded, and it had taken him that much time to get to his apartment uptown. All that day, she had been occupied with the movers and terror. She had no memory of Rich that day. Renee knew he had driven one of the cars only because it was in their new garage.

After the move, she resumed her pattern of activities: running, bridge, and housekeeping. Several times a year, she followed the competitive bridge playing circuit which took her to San Francisco and extended visits with Jim, who was married with children. Rich built a shop for himself in the townhouse basement. He picked up bridge and began playing non-competitively at Renee’s club. He also tried to pick up a woman at his bridge table. She was the wife of the mayor of the town, but he no longer resembled the Australian actor who had starred in *Jurassic Park* as he had in his thirties. The mayor’s wife rebuffed Rich and joined a different group of card players.

Two linebacker-sized officers crowded the front steps of the New Jersey townhouse the morning they came for Rich, but he was in Manhattan at an onsite meeting with an international credit card company where he consulted on computer qubit R & D. Renee had to sit down on the living room couch when the police showed her the evidence of Rich’s emailed threats to the mayor’s wife and the photos of her car.

“To avoid any copycat, the Mayor and his wife prefer to avoid publicity. Mr. Witherall can either leave the vicinity immediately or face arrest.”

Dated on a recent 3:14 a.m., Rich had emailed a one word order, “RUN!” The photos showed the car later the same morning with four slashed tires.

Rich denied everything because he didn’t remember doing it. But of course the computer record identified him as irrefutably as did the fingerprints on his shop tool found near the car.

“You must have been drunk,” Renee said. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Divorce papers are being drawn up now. Your bags are packed. Go.”

He drove cross country. It was May. A long lost but easily-found-in-Oregon Marine buddy agreed to put Rich up for a while.

“*Semper fi*,” he’d said on the phone when Rich called out of the blue.

The drive was a dissociative mix of shock, despair, and reckless joy. He played the car radio rather than his iPod, and somewhere in Nebraska when Don McLean wailed, “They were singin’ bye-bye, Miss American Pie/ Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry/ And them good old boys were drinkin’ whiskey and rye/ Singin’ ‘This’ll be the day that I die/This’ll be the day that I die,’” it didn’t depress Rich. On the contrary, he rolled down the windows and yowled along with the lyrics, tasting the idea of single malt on his dry tongue, but watching the speed limit and looking out for cops on I-84.

Day to day life in Oregon took shape. Rich was a Marine;

he knew how to survive. His facility with the latest research on qubit encryption technology kept him on retainer at the credit card conglomerate. When new acquaintances asked, he explained, “It’s really hard to find factors of very large prime numbers. And quantum computing is extremely useful for factoring very large prime numbers. Credit card companies assign you a public key to encode credit card information. The key is the product of two large prime numbers, which only the website seller knows. Without a quantum computer, it would be impossible to figure out the two prime numbers that are multiplied together to make the key-which protects your information from being shared.”

The eyes-glazed-over effect resulted in attention Rich enjoyed. Within months he moved into the home of an eager forty-something divorcee and resumed a sex life that had ended with Renee nearly two decades earlier. He and Adrienne drank like Jack Lemmon and Lee Remick in 1962’s *Days of Wine and Roses*. Rich invested in her restaurant and created a new shop in her basement, repairing things around the house.

His East Coast life was over, and Jim had kept his distance in San Francisco for several years after Rich made a drunken pass at his young wife, but eventually this younger son, who traveled often for business that included stops in Portland, would visit him. By 2014, Jim left his wife and six year old daughter home but brought along his nine year old son and the children’s nanny Mercedes, who was happy to come along as she would get a chance to see her sister Esperanza who was a nurse in Portland. Jim had warned Mercedes about his father, but he needn’t have. Rich was on his best behavior during the visit. Adrienne stayed at the restaurant while Rich avoided alcohol and any mention of his own father’s role in the creation of the atomic bomb when his grandson said that he wanted to be a scientist when he grew up.

“An astronaut,” Luke added.

When they ate lunch together and Luke asked for some of Jim’s food, Rich put his palm up to halt the sharing. “How much do you want, 5/12 or 9/18?”

Luke knew the question and answer. “9/18 because half is bigger than 5/12.”

Jim remembered his father doing the same thing with him. It was the happiest he saw Rich during the entire visit.

In the selfies Jim sent to his wife Heather, the four of them posed at Portland’s glorious Multnomah Falls, but Rich kept himself in the margin of every photo as if to avoid full facial recognition, something Jim had not noticed until his wife mentioned it after the return home.

Mercedes confided in Heather that Jim’s father had asked “if there were any more at home like her,” at which

remark Heather winced and waited for worse. Instead, Mercedes went on, “I told Mr. Witherall I do have an older sister who is a hospice nurse in Portland. Then he said, “Maybe my luck is changing.”

Soon, Jim questioned Rich, who admitted he had “distant Stage IV prostate cancer requiring immediate surgery.”

Jim returned to Portland for the operation and stayed after. In a moment of lucidity during the post-op drugged state, Rich asked, “What was your perspective on your brother’s wedding?”

“He shouldn’t have asked, and you shouldn’t have said what you did, how you did.”

Despite morphine, it hurt for Rich to reply, “I paid for it, didn’t I?”

Jim’s eyes overflowed. “Yes, you have.”

Rich was moved directly into terminal care, and Jim arranged for Mercedes’s sister to nurse his father. When conscious, Rich contrasted Renee’s care after his heart surgery with Adrienne’s avoidance of the hospice. He didn’t miss her. Esperanza appeared to him surrounded by a halo he hoped would not disappear before he died. The nurse not only listened but also talked to him. Her accent was more pronounced than Mercedes’, her voice lower and more musical. She said she collected Midcentury Modern objects.


“I wish I could afford the furniture, but it’s so dear now,” Esperanza said.

She showed Mr. Witherall photos on her phone of the pieces she did have in her small apartment, a large mirrored shadow box and an “Atomic dual drum shade” table lamp.

“I don’t remember so much orange,” Rich said. “I wasn’t looking.”

He slept peacefully when Esperanza was near. He had dreams that she was his mother, contrite and caring in her ultimate return.

Esperanza was experienced with the transference and did nothing to awaken her patient from terminal mercies. She was, however, surprised that after Mr. Witherall’s passing, she was contacted on behalf of the son by a lawyer who said that she had been named in his will. The lawyer said the son would not contest his father’s wish to leave Esperanza an original forced perspective portrait. Jim insisted that the hospice allow her the extravagant gift. Esperanza considered replacing the painting inside the marvelous frame, but she kept it as is, believing both the man’s face and the frame together were valuable as Eames-era artifacts. 📷



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An Encounter

Toni Fuhrman

“May I sit here?”

The woman stood before me in the smoke-hazed Chelsea coffee house and indicated the other side of the booth at which I was sitting. She was holding a small woven shopping bag filled with dried food and tins. A slush-coloured poodle was attached to a leash wrapped around her wrist. I nodded, distantly but politely. I disliked sharing a solitary meal with a stranger but I couldn’t suggest another seat in the lunch-crowded restaurant.

She slid into the booth with a sigh, pulling her poodle under the table with mock-serious directives.

“Come, Woof. Under the table. There you go. Now sit still. No, sit. There’s a good dog. Nice Woof.”

I shook my newspaper smartly to give vent to my irritation. The rain had let up on King’s Road just as I came into the restaurant. Apparently my companions in the booth had walked through it, for that smell peculiar to damp dogs was emanating from beneath the table. The woman obviously didn’t notice it. She sat deep in thought, studying the menu. I sank into thought myself, wondering if, under present conditions, I could retain my appetite until the food arrived.

I was a visitor in England, anxious to fit in, not wanting to be labeled an American tourist. I aped the accent whenever I could get away with it. Although I was a student of English literature, curious about everything British, I

tried to appear uninterested and nonchalant. I was young, by myself, and thought the best way to convey confidence and self-sufficiency was to act the part.

Presently, a waitress leaned over our table, pencil poised, and waited mutely to take down our orders. She was thin and grim—lips pursed, eyes averted, foot tapping urgently.

I ordered plaice and chips, to be followed by white coffee. The waitress scribbled this down and turned her head slightly towards the woman across from me, who stared at the menu, her forehead indented with the effort of concentration. I looked down at my newspaper again, to show my disinterest.

“The lamb cutlets, I think. With french fries. And a salad. Have you prawn cocktail? Yes, I’ll have that. Or maybe soup. The du jour is? No, I don’t want tomato. The prawn cocktail, then. And just a plain salad, please. No dressing. I’ll order a sweet after. Thank you.”

I became absorbed in a film review.

“No, Woof. You must stay down. No, no. Behave yourself now like a good dog. Tha-at’s right.”

I was reminded of the doggy smell that still rose up disturbingly from under the table. I pulled back my legs against the booth in distaste and tried to focus my attention on the words in front of me.

The prawn cocktail arrived. I glanced at the appetizer set in front of the woman and then, involuntarily, at her face.

It was a tired middle-aged face, sagging here and

there except when its owner thought to lift her chin and draw herself up from a seemingly involuntary slump. The off-white strands of hair that mingled with the brown matched the color of her poodle. She was wearing a dun-coloured raincoat that she hadn’t bothered to remove. She looked sad, unhealthy. I returned my attention to the newspaper until my lunch arrived.

As I reached for the salt and pepper, I noticed that the woman was picking at her appetizer with a sort of critical disdain. We munched in mutual silence until her main course was set in front of her. Then she resumed her monologue with Woof.

“No, Woof. Stay down. You’ll have your din-din later. Not just yet. Down! Nice Woof. Be a good boy. We’ll fix you something nice later on.”

I looked up from my meal and she caught my eye.

“Poor.” Glancing down at the lamb cutlets. “Quite tasteless. The prawn wasn’t very nice either.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, politely, trying for the proper British clip.

“Well, maybe it’s because I’ve been ill.” She smiled sadly. “This is the first real meal I’ve had in a week. Flu, you know.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said again, and looked quickly down at my food, anxious to avoid a tiresome conversation.

“Would you like this?” she said a moment later. I looked up, reluctantly. She pushed her salad towards me. “I haven’t touched it. I don’t think I could eat it now.”

I felt a small jolt of surprise. I had glanced at her food when her main course arrived, suddenly wishing I had ordered a nice crisp salad with my meal. Some contrary feeling, however, balked at the idea of accepting part of this stranger’s meal free of charge, like charity.

I smiled slightly, then replied, “No, thank you. I really don’t care for a salad.”

Unreasonably, I felt resentment rising against this woman for preventing me from ordering and enjoying a salad with my meal.

When I looked up after finishing my lunch, the woman had stopped eating also. The food was only partially eaten, the meat cut up and moved around on the plate, the salad untouched, the french fries mostly gone.

As we sat waiting for service, a tall upright man, decently but shabbily dressed, with a visored gray beret covering his head, walked up to our booth, thrust a glass-framed poem in front of my face, and held his other hand out, palm upwards. The words blurred before my eyes as I realized he was begging. Without any attempt to read the poem, I reached quickly into my purse for a coin and put it in his hand.

The man nodded, said “Thank you,” curtly, and moved boldly on to the next table. The woman across from me didn’t seem to have noticed him. She was staring straight ahead, her pale blue eyes glazed, unfocused.

Our waitress brought my coffee and took the woman’s order for a cream gateau and coffee. As the waitress turned away from the table, I saw the beggar make his way to the last few tables, with sullen thanks for coins and frank contempt for those who rebuffed him. At last he walked out of the restaurant, his head high, setting his cap straight.

I retrieved my newspaper from the seat next to me and read a few stories as I sipped my coffee. The woman’s dessert

and coffee were set in front of her. She began eating the creamy gateau.

I read through an interview with an author, thinking about my room on Cheyne Walk and the novel I was working on there, with the ghosts of former Cheyne Walk residents Rossetti and Swinburne, George Eliot and Henry James, Somerset Maugham and T. S. Eliot, to prod and inspire me as I wrote. I had very little money, but I had the gift of time, and the luxury of temporary residence in the country and the culture I most admired.

When I glanced up to turn the page, I was shocked to see the woman across from me dozing fitfully over her sweet.

She was holding a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other. Her hands moved in slow motion, separating a portion of the cake and raising it by degrees to her mouth. After one or two bites, she seemed incapable even of this effort and simply moved the gateau around on her plate, her head falling dangerously low over the table, pulling back suddenly, with a jerk, as she regained partial consciousness, then slowly dipping towards the plate again, or off to one side, awkwardly.

I was acutely embarrassed, and simultaneously ashamed of my embarrassment. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed her, or me. The room was still in a high din and no one seemed aware of us. I tried to go back to my newspaper but soon gave up the pretense. I stared at the woman sitting across from me and wondered what to do.

Perhaps she was drugged, or drunk, or really ill. I thought about sliding quickly out of the booth and leaving but discounted the idea. A feeling of protectiveness surged up in me as my embarrassment subsided. I had at least to offer my assistance.

“Are you all right?” I said, gently, imagining the shock of my voice in her semi-conscious state. She continued to doze. She hadn’t heard. I repeated the question, louder, but it had no effect. I looked around again to see if I was arousing curiosity. I wasn’t.

I made as much noise as I could, clinking silverware, setting my cup down with a small crash into its saucer, and rattling the pages of my newspaper, but she only stirred momentarily and then dozed off again. I sat there for a minute or two in real anxiety, whether for her or for myself I wasn’t sure. The woman continued to doze, then to rouse herself by more and more minute degrees, taking a piece of cake on her fork, then just moving the fork on the plate, then resting the fork against the cake, her fingers sliding close to the thick creamy filling, her head bobbing.

I watched, fascinated and somewhat horrified. Then I gathered my courage and said once again, very clearly, “Madam, are you all right?”

Her head snapped up and her fork clattered against the plate. I smiled reassuringly at her.

“I thought perhaps you might have taken some drugs for your flu and they made you drowsy,” I said.

“Oh, no, no,” she said. She paused to collect her thoughts. “It’s just that I’ve been in bed for a week. I guess I’m still dizzy. Haven’t had any proper meals. I’m not quite well yet, I expect. But I wanted to come out for a good meal.”

She started to eat the gateau again, automatically, with a complete lack of appetite.

I opened my mouth to offer her some assistance and then

stopped, feeling foolish. What could I do to help her? Thrust together as lunch companions, without even a common nationality, I felt that I was being intrusive. I reminded myself of how much the British value their privacy.

The waitress gave the woman her check a few minutes later. The woman reached into her bag for some change.

“Here you are, dear. A couple of shillings for you.”

The waitress thanked her and moved off before I could ask for my check as well. As the woman counted out her money, I glanced down at her check and saw my meal itemized there.

“I’m afraid the waitress has put my check with yours,” I said. “May I see it for a moment?”

“Oh, dear, I would have walked right off and paid it for you if you hadn’t noticed.”

She clucked in the direction of the waitress, then looked to me for confirmation. I shook my head and tightened my

lips in a smile of indulgent resignation towards the service. I felt a moment of accord with her. Then she put the money for her share of the bill on top of the check and prepared to leave.

“Come, Woof. Home, now. Let’s go home.”


“Will you be all right, then?” I said.

“Yes, yes. Quite all right. Thank you very much. Just need some rest. I’m glad I came out, though. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I said.

She slid slowly and with effort out of the booth, pulling her shopping bag after her. She smiled down at me briefly, sleepily, before she turned and walked to the front of the restaurant. I watched her move through the crowded aisle, her raincoat hanging loose on narrow shoulders, her head down.

Behind her, close to her heels, pattered her damp poodle, its leash trailing on the floor, forgotten. ⌚



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Oscar in the Timeless
Bonny Finberg

How’d they tag me? Shit, they got my wallet. Was he referring to the manhole cover or me when he said he wanted to burn candles on it? Ha—only Charlie ever got to do that. He’s in no shape to do it anymore. And I’m in no shape at all.

How I ended up on some street in the middle of I-don’t-know-where, I’m not sure about the chronology, stumbling onto an elevated subway, somewhere, it might have been the G train, I didn’t even know there was a G train, really high up, way up above some desolate, industrial horror, an enormous neon sign on a factory rooftop, probably from the forties or fifties. I assumed all trains lead to Manhattan. Apparently not. The line only runs between Brooklyn and Queens. I got on, then got off somewhere in Brooklyn, Church Avenue? Civilized enough but not where I was headed. Thought I was headed. I crossed the street to the other side and walked up the long stairs to the platform in the other direction, thinking it would take me to Manhattan. It was cold up there on the platform. The train came and I got on. There were two other people in the car—I think—two other guys besides me. It seemed I’d been riding the subway my whole life, wondering when it would end. I must have nodded out waiting for a familiar station. The conductor announced *Last stop*. I bolted, making awkward trajectories toward a place my eyes could see but my body had little interest in, made it to the end of the elevated platform and down the stairs. When I hit the street, I was somewhere in godforsaken Queens.

I wasn’t really dressed for the weather, a linen jacket and a velvet cape, out for the kill. A friend had just moved into a new apartment and was throwing an open house. There would be the usual goofballs plus a high probability of attractive strangers. The weather started out clear and sunny but had shifted radically, bringing a sad, penetrating

cold once the sun went down. This was getting earlier and earlier as the last leaves fell at an unnerving pace.

I left our apartment at around five. Charlie had started to believe it was spring of 1999 when we spent a month in Paris. I felt I’d go mad. He thought we were in that small hotel in the Marais where we’d stay whenever we were there. But we weren’t there—not within a light year of there. I tried to play along like it was some kind of theater exercise, but after a while I preferred the present, shitty as it was, the rotting apartment on Central Park West. I could indulge him for so long. I said I was going out. More like announced it. This led to an argument. Charlie got bitchy. I tried to soothe him. Like talking to a child, some gentle touching, the roles, by now in complete reverse. Sometimes, there was a fragment of lucidity when he seemed to be irritated by my patronizing tone. You never knew what shard of the old Charlie, the *before* Charlie, would shoot to the surface like a drowning man clinging to a floating log, trying not to sink into the dimensionless sea. I banked on his sense of time being fucked, figured if I came back in twelve hours he’d be asleep and wouldn’t remember anything when he woke up. I don’t know how these things work, but his jealousy, dis-tilled to its most primitive essence, would unleash a slaving attack to the death. It didn’t take much. The signs of my infidelities, etched into his brain on a cellular level, were obvious. I was pressed and polished in my white linen jacket and favorite white buckskins. I threw on the velvet cape, my preferred accoutrement for parties—its *bal masqué* appliqués—over the jacket.

He conjured, with some accuracy, the impending lurid events beyond the apartment door. I tried to defuse the situation.

I’m only going out to clear my head.

You’re looking for trouble! You won’t come back...not tonight!

I've been sticking around 24/7. Can I just...Look—I'm always dressed for a party, It's all a party You don't have to—
He became a five year old, whining, shrill, so uncharacteristic. I was embarrassed for him. *The appliquéd Cayyyype! Aaand the white buckskins!?* I doubt he had even a fleeting idea of what he'd become. Who he'd become.

And the neighbors—I'd walk past the doorman and he'd be talking with one of the tenants. They'd get quiet and smile over at me, trying to change the conversation.

We both knew this ensemble would stand out attractively against that particularly grim November evening. White linen after Labor Day was my perverse pleasure. Somehow he'd kept hold of that; it was memory beyond mind, visceral. When his mind was intact, Charlie and his cohorts would go on about mind existing before body. But where's proof of that? I'd argue they were clinging to the preferred belief of those who want to live beyond their body. But the sad truth is, without the body there is no mind. This was an ongoing argument we had, maybe the fundamental difference between us, irreconcilable. We pushed this down, each inside himself, this basic difference in how we defined existence. If we gave it too much voice it would blow the whole thing up. We tried hard not to talk about it. We loved what we were—what we were together. And if anyone brought it up one of us would usually leave the room or change the subject. By now those argu-ments were outdated.

“Those handmaaaade Italian buuuuuckskiins?!—Out for more than a walk around the BLOCK!”

I was careful when I closed the door.

I got there early, quarter to six. By three-thirty in the morning the party was winding down. There had been too much of everything until there wasn't much of anything. Hordes had come and gone, by now most gone. A few lingered, picking over the cheese rinds and cake crumbs, making tired conversation or working their way to the bedroom to find their coats under whoever was doing whatever with whoever.

I began weaving my way out of there and down the stairs. Behind me I heard someone coming, that guy Lucien, the Robert-Mitchum-y guy. He caught up with me and took my arm, asked if I wanted a lift. I said I didn't need one, but if he was going in my direction—something like that.

I was pretty smashed but figured if we went back to his place we could sleep it off and enjoy ourselves in the morning. Seriously—neither of us was under fifty. Lucien told me to wait there, and went back upstairs to get his coat. I tackled the rest of the flights and waited downstairs, freezing my ass off in the doorway. He came back down


and managed to get me into his car. After a bunch of idiotic back and forth he said to get out of his face, that my breath stank from wine and that I was going to get him into an accident. Long story short, he pulled over and pushed me out of the car onto the curb. I got up and kept going until I hit a subway station in, someplace, then took the train to, someplace, fucking G Train hell— where disgruntled Manhattanites who waited too long between cheap Brooklyn and unaffordable Brooklyn, end up—Queens, unfit for any queenly thing, but at least it's not Staten Island, trying to keep on the sidewalk, or what I thought was the sidewalk, but, no, I'm in the middle of the street talking to a manhole cover.

Some guy kind of rolls me onto the curb and I wonder if he's going save my life or end it, but he pulls my wallet out of my back pocket and kicks me in the ass so hard my heart bumps against my throat. He says something to some other guy, Frank something.

It was raining. The street was animated by traffic lights switching red and green.

I'm suddenly an unwilling actor on streets projected in black and white, footsteps, then thwack! I'm thinking at the instant I feel something indescribable on the surface of my head, a ringing pain inside my skull, a kind of fundamental electricity penetrating my body, thinking, if something so fleeting could be called a thought, that this must be what it's like to be lucid in hell, which is not eternal agony, it's the agony of eternity, blood pooling into rain puddles, six or seven more ringing blows, squinting against the fact that I was having a seizure, my jaws frozen like a cocked gun. I was going to die. I had the sense that there'd been a party—I was either going to or coming from—I couldn't exactly remember—those days I was trashed all the time, party or no party—then some guy in brown boots—why was only one boot visible?—then aware of the other one enjoying itself on the back of my head—a match is lit—yeah, something strange, chemical smell—Out of my periphery a flash, a ring of fire lighting the lower half of his face—I'm pinned, face crushed so hard against the pavement, can't feel my nose, not sure it's still there, anything is there—flash of heat against my back— whole body on fire, rolling in my long cape patched with magnolias and Venetian masks. Nothing.

It's always a mistake walking down a street like that at that hour, especially in such a state of care-less bliss. After that bad situation with the manhole cover I should have known better. But all in that last moment I realized *the bad situation with the manhole cover is happening now*. Still—I should have known. Now I know everything, and can't say a fucking thing. 🗣️



BONNY FINBERG's fiction, poetry, essays and photographs have been published and translated internationally in numerous literary journals and anthologies and have been included in various gallery exhibitions. Publications include her novel, *Kali's Day* (Autonomedia/Unbearable Books, 2014, NY); a short story collection, *How the Discovery of Sugar Produced the Romantic Era* (Sisyphus Press, NY, 2006); *Déjà Vu* a collection of poetry with her digital collages (Corrupt Press, Paris, 2011); *Sitting Book* (Xanadu Press, NY, 2017) a conceptual text and art publication, available at Printed Matter. She is the recipient of a 2014 Kathy Acker Award for fiction and is currently working on her second novel and a ficto-memoir. She lives in NYC. — Author photo by Ira Cohen



The Room of Unanswered Prayers

Sharon Frame Gay

One night in my dreams I entered the Room of Unanswered Prayers. It was bigger than the largest warehouse on earth. Words were scattered along the walls and floors in many languages. Tucked among the prayers were letters to God. They fluttered like butterflies poised for flight.

There was no ceiling. Prayers floated past the walls and out into the Universe, riding on the breath of hope and swallowed into another dimension. Some spiraled upwards in a feathery dance, while others pulsed on the ground like millions of beating hearts. I wondered how many reached Heaven, or if they were useless baggage on our trip through Eternity.

The prayers rustled and whispered. There were smaller prayers on the floor, from those who wanted a team to win, or the roll of dice in their favor. These were dusty and curled, crushed to powder beneath my steps like empty pods.

I could not find mine amid the chaos. *‘Where are the cancer prayers?’* I wondered, sifting through the piles. Mine was a needle in this eternal haystack. I turned in circles, crying in frustration.

I woke with a sharp intake of breath. The bedroom was quiet, except for the sound of a ticking clock, wantonly spending time like a drunken sailor. Time that passed while I gazed at the fan on the ceiling. Wasting daylight. Wasting what could be my last days.

I got up, stared at my bald head in the mirror, vomited into the sink, then slid to the floor.

I'm too young to get cancer, to study mortality this

close. I'm only twenty-nine. Fate probably laughed its ass off at that statement. After all, there are children who only live a short time. Soldiers are killed in battle. People starve. Broken dreamers jump off bridges.

My boyfriend Dan found the lump one night as we lay in bed. He drew back as though he'd touched a snake.

“It's big, Amy,” he whispered, and then I didn't hear any more.

My fingers found a hard mass of tissue in the left breast. How did I miss this? I'll tell you why. Because I never checked. I was too young for routine mammograms. I was just flitting around with a lump in my breast and never knew it.

The next few days were a blur. First, I saw my family doctor. She sent me for a mammogram, then an ultrasound, biopsies and scans. I lay in the capsule of a machine, arms over my head in a graceful position, as though I might dive past the wall and into the heavens. The clanking and banging rattled my nerves. Then, like an orphan, I was passed on to the Oncology department. It was two long weeks before Dr. Ross walked into the examination room and blew my world apart.

“Amy, I'm sorry to confirm that you have breast cancer.” My mother and I clutched hands, squeezed hard. “And...” she said slowly, as though wanting me to pay attention. As though there's any space left for me NOT to pay attention. “... it's spread to one of your lymph nodes.”

My mother moaned, folded over in her chair like she'd been punched. I sat on the examination table and stared at my socks. There was nothing I could think to say, to ask.

Dr. Ross reeled off what’s next. Surgery, get as much out as possible. I will lose my left breast. Then chemotherapy. She’ll discuss my case with colleagues and set up a plan.

The doctor rose from her seat, handed me a raft of papers and walked away, leaving the door ajar. Mom and I stared at each other. I couldn’t get off the table, legs quivering like Jell-O. Mom helped me dress. We left the room in silence.

The next day, I drove to work and spoke with my boss. She was kind and supportive. I can work from home, enough to keep my health insurance, then return full time when I’m better. It was difficult to tell my coworkers. Saying I had breast cancer out loud made it seem more real. I was encouraged by their affection and positive thoughts. They organized a luncheon for me, with sweet gifts; Native American music, candles, a soft throw for my bed.

I gave up my apartment downtown. My parents urged me to move back home for a while, and I reluctantly agreed. I knew I’d need their help, and the apartment was an expense I didn’t need right now. Dan and my friends stepped in to help. Within a few days, everything was packed in boxes, then stored in a shed next to Dad’s workshop. My head was spinning from all the changes.

I pulled into Mom and Dad’s driveway, my back seat filled with bags of clothes and a box of food from my pantry. They weren’t home yet, so I let myself in with a key, footsteps echoing down the empty hallway. My childhood bedroom awaited. I stepped over the threshold, picked up my old teddy bear, Max, and flopped on a window seat, gazing out at the street where I grew up.

Dan stopped by later, sat on the twin bed across from me, his fingers nervous, twitching. I explained the upcoming surgery, chemotherapy, the many months devoted to this growing disease inside my body. He paled, eyes shifted from side to side. He stood and put both hands on my shoulder.

“You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you,” I said in a dull voice, as if I’m filled to overflowing with sorrow, and this is the drop that spills over the edge.

“I...I don’t quite know what to say, Amy.” He’s awkward. His hand as he reached for mine was clammy. “You see, I think I want children someday.”

Children. I hadn’t thought of that. Would I never have children? I have no idea. I felt anxious and alone. What would I do in his shoes? Run? Stay and sacrifice my future on the hope that things might work out? We had only been dating a few months. This was a lot to handle.

I nodded, patted his hand. “I understand,” I said, even though I never would.

He left through the back door, ashamed to say goodbye to my parents. I crept under the covers and curled up like a shrimp, too numb to cry. Too scared to breathe.

The surgery went well. The surgeon took my entire breast, a lymph node, and biopsied several others. I’m given a short while to recover, then the hard part starts. Chemotherapy. In anticipation of the treatments, my friends and I agreed I’d cut my long blond hair short. Then I’m in control, they said. It won’t be so hard when it falls out, they reassure me. But they have no clue. Finding hair on the pillow, in the shower, my eyebrows and lashes taking a hike with the rest of it is horrifying. When even your own

hair abandons you, what’s a person to think? It brings it all home in a flurry. I have cancer. I may not survive.

One night, I found myself back in the Room of Unanswered Prayers. Buddha was there in the middle of the room, sitting on his fanny. Colorful birds fluttered about his head. I sat in front of him, cross legged, mimicking his position. His eyes were kind as they peered into mine. Buddha sat motionless for a long time until I felt sparks of impatience prickling my scalp.

Then he spoke. “Nobody can sicken or die for you,” he reminded me.

I loathed him for this certainty. “Get out of here!” I cried.

He disappeared like a genie. The birds lifted upwards and out into the night sky. I felt bad for the outburst. He might have been my salvation, and I just booted him out of the room. Sweat trickled down along my ribs, panic set in. A dry wind blew through the warehouse, sent all the prayers into cyclones of words and paper. I rolled to my side, covered my face until all was silent.

The alarm clock jostled me from sleep. Today was my first day of chemotherapy. I stepped out of bed and into my future.

The chemotherapy infusion room was on the third floor of the hospital. There were large recliners scattered about the room, each occupant receiving treatment. Some of the patients were watching television or reading. Others were talking to each other or their escorts. One lady was eating a cherry Danish and sipping coffee. I never knew there were pastries in Hell.

A nurse introduced herself as Jane, walked me over to a recliner, and explained the infusion procedure. I nodded as if I understood, but her words flew past me and out the window. I touched the chair, thought about who sat here before me, who stared out at the billowing clouds. I wish I’d asked my parents or a friend to come along for support, but instead I asked Dad to drop me off and pick me up afterwards. Now I yearned to have them here.

Jane took my vital signs, said my heart rate was a little high. I nodded again, looked wistfully at the freeway below. When she left to get the chemotherapy, my mouth went dry with anxiety. As Jane started the infusion, I pretended nonchalance, reached into a bag for a crossword book, tried to look as calm as the rest of the patients. I didn’t know what to expect. When nothing happened, when I didn’t go into convulsions or flop out of the chair like an air-starved trout, I relaxed and gazed at my fellow inmates.

An older woman was sitting next to me. She wore a blue bandana, hands clasped in her lap and feet crossed at the ankles. Two other women sat across the room, both of them talking on their phones. An emaciated man in the corner was scrolling through his laptop, glasses on top of his head. A dark haired woman sat next to him, knitting a long scarf that spilled off her lap into a small basket by her feet.

A man walked through the door and strolled over to the patient in the bandana. He drew up a chair between us, and handed the woman a magazine. Then turned towards me.

“Hey there. I haven’t seen you here before. I’m Charles. This is my mom, Audrey.” They both smiled, and I didn’t

feel quite as alone.

“I’m Amy. This is my first session.”

He nodded. Charles was my age, maybe a little older. Dark waves of hair fell across his forehead. His eyes were a deep amber color. Charles wore a leather jacket and faded jeans. There was a tiny cut on his chin as though he was shaving and somebody yelled and he jerked up from the sink. I pictured him tossing his razor on the counter, wincing as he pressed a square of toilet paper on it. The cut seemed too intimate for strangers, like it is when a person pops up from a swimming pool with snot on their lip. I looked away.

“I bring Mom here from Springfield.” He mentioned a town about twenty miles from the hospital. “Do you live nearby?”

“I’m halfway between here and Springfield, in Driscoll. I used to live downtown, but, well...” my voice trailed off. There was an awkward silence. I stared out the window.

His phone buzzed. “Gotta get this,” he said, and left the room.

When Charles returned, he scooted the chair a little closer. “Do you mind if I visit with you? Mom’s asleep.”

Audrey’s eyes were closed, chin towards her chest. The magazine had slipped off her lap and on to the floor. Charles picked it up, set it on a side table.

“Sure.” I said, tossing the crossword book back in my bag.

Talking to Charles was easy. The cut on his face was comfortable to look at now. He made me laugh. Before long, I forgot about the infusion and where I was. I was having a good time. It was surreal.

Audrey’s infusion was finished. Jane took her vitals, helped her to her feet. “See you next time, my dear. You did great.”

Audrey gathered her coat and bag, said goodbye, and walked towards the door. Charles stood, reached into his back pocket, brought out a business card.

“It was nice to meet you, Amy. Here’s my name and number if you ever want to talk.”

I took it, read the information: Charles Wright, CPA, an address and phone number.

“Don’t tell me I just met Mr. Right!” I joked.

His face was deadpan. “Huh. I never heard that before.” Then he grinned, those amber eyes lighting up. “Maybe we’ll see you next time, Amy.”

I nodded, grateful that he helped make my first treatment bearable.

During the next several infusions, Audrey and Charles were there. Charles went downstairs to the hospital cafe, brought us steaming cups of coffee and tea, newspapers for Audrey, and bags of trail mix for me. Then he’d pull up his chair and visit.

“So, before this cancer thing sidetracked you, what were you hoping to do this year?” he asked. As always, Charles didn’t shy away from my disease.

“Well, it sure wasn’t getting slowly poisoned,” I said. “I work for a great advertising company that’s kept me on. I was dating someone and loved living downtown. Had to move home with my parents. Guess I thought the world was pretty much my oyster, but shit happens.”

Charles’ eyes narrowed. “Dating someone? Should I move over, make room for him if he stops in for a visit?”

I shrugged. “Nah, he decided this was all too much to handle. I can’t blame him.”

This seemed to agitate Charles, and he reached for some of my trail mix. He slumped in the chair, stretched out his long legs.

He pointed out the window to the busy freeway below, changed the subject. The heavy moment lifted.

Audrey finished her treatment, needed to use the ladies’ room. “I’ll be right back,” she said.

Charles nodded, then turned to me. “Amy, I was wondering if you might want to meet for coffee, or lunch, someplace not quite as exclusive as this private club up here on the third floor?”

I was flustered, suddenly aware of my surroundings, my cancer.

“Are you asking me out?” I blurted, shocked by his question.

“Sure!” He smiled. “Why not?”

“Why would you want to date a woman with this.....” I hesitated. “You know, with cancer?”

He smacked his forehead, eyes rolled to the ceiling. “Damn! You’re right! How did I forget? This could change everything. Can I slink out of here without you noticing?”

I stared at him. Then laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Audrey asked, walking over to my chair. She put her hand through Charles’ arm.

“Nothing, Mom. Just trying to pick up Amy in the oncology suite.” He grinned, said goodbye, and helped Audrey out the door.

My face burned. I was blushing. Or maybe it was the chemo. I knew I wouldn’t go out with Charles. The pain from Dan’s exit was still thrumming through my soul. I couldn’t take more rejection right now.

When I got home that night, it was all I could do to keep my eyes open during dinner. Even lifting my arms to put on pajamas was an effort. I tumbled into bed and turned off the light. The sheets felt stiff and raw. My skin seemed to hum, fatigue washing over each limb. I closed my eyes and went back to The Room.

Now Jesus was there. He was standing, hair blowing about his face lightly, as though in a music video. His feet were clad in sandals, and I noticed they weren’t particularly attractive. They were calloused and dusty, there’s a bunion, and he’s in need of a pedicure. Who knew? Isn’t Jesus supposed to be perfect? He turned his eyes to me.

His voice was not what I expected. It was rather high, like a woman’s. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“Why? Because I have cancer!” Suddenly I wanted him gone, too. I wanted to yank on that billowing hair, stomp on his instep, send him hopping up and down in pain. But I didn’t. Because he’s the Son of God. So, I cried instead, pent up emotion sliding down my cheeks with snot and tears until I was sure I’d choke. “I’m just so sad,” I hiccupped.

He took a step forward, cupped my head in one hand, my shoulder in another. “I know,” he said, then drew me towards him.

My body felt warm. Very warm, as though the cancer was heating up. There was a bubbling sensation inside, and I

twisted away, arms crossed over my stomach.

“I think,” he said, “you’ll be fine. This is a chapter in your life, a place for growth in all ways. You will heal from this and come to our Lord at another time.”

I gave him the stink eye. “How the hell would you know that?” I dared him. I needed proof. I wanted him to show me, like the Ghost of Christmas Future. I repeated myself, mincing no words, eyes blazing. “I said, how the HELL would you know?”

“Because I’m Jesus, for Christ’s Sake,” he said with a straight face. Then he smiled. The sweetest smile I’d ever seen. I laughed, reached for his hand, but he melted away as the dog next door barked, and I found myself floating in a sea of misery on the bed. There were tears on my cheeks. I pursed my lips, aware that I haven’t let myself cry, except in my dreams. It’s as though I’m on a tightrope of emotion, and one slip will topple me to the ground.

•
Weeks went by. Life was reduced to trips to the hospital, the oncologist. They drained my blood into vials, twisted me this way and that in rumbling machines, and performed ultrasounds in quiet rooms. I continued with the infusions.

Still, the cancer cells grew back like overachievers. Dr Ross was grim. We needed to try a different chemotherapy. A stronger one. It’ll be tough, she said. But first my cell counts needed to build back up. She sent me home to recover, me and my dancing flea circus of cancer.

It was two weeks before my body was strong enough for another round of chemo. I entered the infusion room, glanced about for Audrey and Charles, but they weren’t there. Disappointed, I settled into the recliner. Jane and I chatted while she set up the procedure. She started the infusion.

Something felt off. There was a swirling sensation in my head, a stirring in my body, and just like that, I was in the Room of Unanswered Prayers.

The walls and floors were scrubbed clean. It was a vast, empty space as clear as a conscience. I heard a noise, looked behind me. Standing there were several of my deceased relatives. I saw Grandma Petey and Grandpa Jim, Aunt June, and a girl named Lynda, who was my classmate in fifth grade and died in a car crash the summer before junior high.

I shrank back. This did not look good at all. Where’s Jesus? Where’s Buddha? I looked up at a riot of stars above my head, closer and brighter than any night sky.

“Have you come for me?” I asked them, heart pounding. “Can’t I have a while longer? After all, what’s time to Eternity?”

There was silence. They smiled. I felt their love. Peace. I was having none of it.

“Please!” I dropped to my knees, swaying. ‘*Why do I fight this?*’ I asked myself. Did they? Did Aunt June hang on to the sheets with fists as her soul lifted from the bed and tried to fly? Or am I the only rebel before God?

Grandma Petey stepped forward, reached for my hand. She took it in her gnarled fingers and helped me to my feet. Then she patted my hand, over and over, her eyes brimming with tears. The pats became stronger, stinging.

I opened my eyes and Jane was tapping me firmly, calling my name.

“Amy, there you are! You got a little woozy with the new chemo. Your blood pressure was low, and you passed out. Your vitals are okay now. I increased your saline and added an antihistamine. You just sit here and rest while I talk to Dr. Ross to see what she’d like us to do today.”

Dr. Ross wanted me to go home. We might try again in a few days, Jane said, maybe pre-medicate with prednisone and antihistamines to offset any reaction. Maybe try a different chemotherapy. The doctor will let me know. I was frightened. Weary.

I called Dad to come get me. I held on to his arm as we navigated the hospital corridors. How familiar these halls had become. The noise. The smells. We walked through the doors and on to the sidewalk. I inhaled the fresh air, blinked in the sunshine. Dad steered me towards the garage.

In the car, I closed my eyes as we drove out of the parking lot, felt a little queasy. Reached in my tote for a barf bag.

“So, what’s going on, Honey?” Dad asked, turning his head right and left, cursing under his breath as we eased into traffic. It was rush hour. People were hurrying home, patience was short. The sleek sedan behind us blasted its horn. A bus swung into our lane, cutting us off.

“I guess I reacted to the new chemo. Not sure what Dr. Ross wants to do. Or.” and here I hesitated, “what I might want to do.” For the first time, I faced stopping treatment altogether. My heart raced at the thought. My head ached and I was bone tired.

Dad reached for my hand, gave it a little jiggle. “You’re a brave one, Amy.” There were tears in his eyes. “You’re a hell of a fighter. I think you can beat this. But, Honey, whatever you decide to do, I’ve got your back.”

I know this was the hardest thing he ever had to say to me. I nodded, slumped in the seat and rested my head against the window. Part of me wanted to move forward with more treatment, but the other part wondered if I could just yell “I give up!” and it would be all better, like a kids’ game I used to play with my friends. Then we’d all run home for supper, and tomorrow was another day to play again. Would there be many tomorrows for me?

Two days later, Dr. Ross called. We had a long talk. Then I hung up and stepped into the kitchen. Mom and Dad were nursing cups of coffee. They looked up at me with worried eyes. I took a deep breath, placed my hands on the back of a chair.

“I’m going back in.”

Dad stood, and I fell into his arms. He held me tight. Mom reached over and stroked my back. Outside, a delivery truck rattled by, a neighbor’s door slammed. Off in the distance a dog barked. The everyday sounds of life were amplified and muted, all at the same time, as our kitchen filled with hope and despair.

•
The next time I walked into the infusion room, Audrey and Charles were there.

“This is Mom’s last session today!” Charles announced. They’d brought doughnuts for the entire room. Festive balloons were tied to her chair. I wanted to cry with happiness for her, but I can no longer cry, it seems.

“Congratulations, Audrey,” I said, my heart wistful that I still have more treatments to go after this.

“We missed you, Amy.” Charles placed a chocolate doughnut on a napkin, placed it on the side table. “I saved this one for you.”

I thanked him, bit into the creamy chocolate, moaned a bit from the sheer joy of the damned thing. Charles reached over and straightened the hat on my balding head with a gentle hand. There’s a question in his eyes.

“I was home trying to cultivate healthier cells so I can muster the troops again for another fight. This time with a different chemo. I had a bit of a rough patch with the new drug last week, but we’ll try again today,” I told him.

His face grew serious, and he twisted his napkin into a knot. Crazy as it sounds, I felt ashamed, as though my body failed me, failed the Infusion Room, the doctor, my parents. Even failed the cars out on the freeway, buzzing by on their way to a life that I perceived as far more promising than mine.

Jane started my infusion, took my vitals again, smiled. “It’s going well today, Amy,” she said, and I nodded, relieved.

For the first time Charles had little to say. He didn’t touch his doughnut. We sat together in silence.

When Audrey’s treatment was over, the room erupted in cheers. Everyone clapped, and Jane rang a brass bell on the wall. Audrey stood and raised her hands in victory. Then one by one, she went to each chair, hugged or shook hands with a fellow patient.

When she got to me, she pressed her bald head to mine. I felt her pulse through my skin, slow and steady. “Good luck, my darling” she whispered, “Fight the good fight.” I nodded, kissed her cheek.

Charles stepped forward, put his arm around Audrey. “Hey Mom, do you mind waiting in the other room for a sec? I’d like to talk to Amy.”

She nodded, made her way towards the door, turned and blew kisses to everybody.

“So,” I joked, peering up at Charles. “This has been fun, but I guess it’s time to say goodbye.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

I stared down at my jeans nervously, then looked up into Charles’ eyes. On impulse, I reached out and placed my hand on his cheek. Then, feeling foolish, let it fall away. He picked it up, placed it back on his face, leaned into it, those amber eyes never leaving mine. He took my hand and pressed his lips to my palm. Charles leaned forward and kissed the top of my head. I took in the last breath of him, then he walked away.

•
Several weeks later, Mom and Dad sat with me during my final round of chemo. When it was over, and Jane rang the bell, I felt like a boat unmoored, heading out to sea. The

chemo was cooking in my body. I pictured the chemicals beating the hell out of the cancer cells. But without more treatment, it was like shaking the dice. A crap shoot. Now I was to leave this room behind, and like a fledgling, fly on my own.

On the way home, we stopped at a restaurant to celebrate. Mom and Dad ordered a bottle of wine, and we toasted to new beginnings. As I glanced around at the other tables, I wondered what challenges the people were facing in their lives. Maybe they were wrestling with heartbreak, illness or poverty.

I thought back to my dreams. I remembered the millions of prayers. Prayers from people like me, sending hope into the heavens. ‘*We’re all connected,*’ I thought. All dancing under the same moon. Some to a slow waltz, others to a quickstep. We dance to the tune of being human.

That’s when I realized I couldn’t spend the rest of my life waiting for the other shoe to drop. This WAS my life. In all its imperfections, all its uncertainties.

I walked into the ladies’ room, stole a glance at my pale face in the mirror, my bald head in all its magnificence. Ran my hands over the bumps on my skull. It had been one hell of a journey. I can shut out the world and hunker down, wait to see if the cancer comes back. Or move forward, put this behind me, and start to live again.

Suddenly I was filled with gratitude, pride, and hope. I stared down at my watch, felt giddy. Decided to waste an entire minute just running the water in the sink. I felt rich with time. I could throw it away with the paper towel used to dry my hands, eke it out by holding my breath. I could do what I wanted. My spirits lifted. Whatever time I had to spend, I would spend wisely.

•
It was evening when we returned home, the sky lit with stars. I wandered into the bedroom, turned on the light. Max the teddy bear was sitting on the pillow. I held him close to the empty space where a breast once was, rubbed my face in his golden fur.

Then I picked up the phone.

He answered on the first ring. “Amy.”

I hugged Max tighter. “How would you feel about dating a woman now that her cancer treatments are over?” I asked, barely containing a giggle.

There was no answer, only silence. It went on so long that I felt a tightening in my soul, pressed the phone to my ear, wondered if I’d made a mistake.

Then he spoke, his voice as comforting as a letter from home.

“My prayers have been answered,” he said.

Only then did I allow myself to cry. 📞



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#connected

Jen Knox

Gathering around the clock tower, the students waited for someone to tell them what to do. Some stood still. Others paced. After approximately the length of a TED Talk, small groups began to walk away.

"I wish my phone worked. I need my meditation app right now," a girl with white-blond hair and HONORS embroidered on her quarter-zip said.

The sky was brilliant; thin, finger-like clouds reached gracefully westward. Cars stopped along the rolling hills that surrounded the university's grand tower.

A few miles away, Norma shuffled around the porch in her pajamas, thinking she should get dressed. The cool air creeping up her arms felt divine. Her son turned the corner, rushing toward her with a wide smile and his backpack half open.

"Slow down!" she called.

"Today was great! We played this thing called tether ball with that sculpture at the school."

Norma's teenager arrived a few minutes later, sullen and hungry. "This sucks."

"It's temporary, Hannah." Before closing the front door, Norma glanced down the street at the other kids running home, and she noticed her neighbor doing the same. She waved, narrowed her eyes.

"Hey."

"I'm sorry," she said, walking toward him. "I just think it's hilarious and horrible ... I can't remember your name. I've been here two years!"

"Nancy?" he asked, and they both smiled.

"Norma. Good to meet you."

"Maybe we need this," he said.

Norma was nearer her neighbor than she'd ever been. He had kind eyes. Her children came out to see what was going on and stared at Travis, unsure what to do next.

"You picked up my trashcan after the storm. Thanks," he told Hannah.

"Wow, yeah," she said, blushing.

Travis and the kids learned that they shared a favorite bakery, which Travis's brother-in-law used to own. Aiden and Travis also found out that they both wanted to fly planes at one time.

The new couple in the blue house and Mrs. Gregory, who lived on the corner and rarely said anything to anyone aside from, "Pick up after that dog!" were conversing like old friends.

Taking a deep breath without the directive of a YouTube video, Norma's head was clear. The air was humid; the rumbling of laughter and chatter made the perfect soundtrack to watch the pine trees dance at the edge of her neighborhood.

"Let's start up the grill," she said.

"Come!" Aiden told Travis.

Travis was about to respond when static interrupted them. Norma felt a surge beneath her feet as a series of servers hummed back to life.

At home, Norma glimpsed a breaking news story about a small group of college students who decided to begin a campaign to get people to unplug.

"We could recreate today once a year," one of them said.

Norma ruffled Aiden's hair, thinking she too would like to preserve the whirl of connectivity. She checked Instagram to see if anyone else had captured the moment.

Sure enough. 📷



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Her Suggestions

Christina Rosso

Nothing was going to stand in the way of me seeing her that day. Not even death.

I set the table the way she had taught me. I cooked her favorite dish—horseradish crusted salmon, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. The potatoes were smooth with small chunks of brown skin, just how she liked them. Lightly peppered, with a hint of spice. She always suggested asparagus be pan seared in olive oil so it was salted and slightly crispy. Everything was made to her specifications.

When I was done cooking, I stood in my bedroom, sucking in, my organs contracting and twisting in pain, while Madame Bashiri fought to zip up the navy polka dot fit and flare dress my mother had given me. “I had a 24 inch waist when I wore that dress. And that was after I had you.” My mother had pursed her lips and scanned my body,

finding disappointment in the curves and lumps she didn’t have when she was 27. “Suzi, how’s your diet? Are you eating junk again?” Before I could respond or tell her not to call me that, she continued, “The wedding is around the corner. Do you really want to be eating like that?” Her tongue clucked against the roof of her mouth. “It’s not just your waistline to worry about, you know. Look at what this junk food is doing to your skin.”

“Keep these memories present, Suzanne,” Madame Bashiri said. “I know they’re painful. But they will help create and maintain the energy needed for your mother to join us for dinner.”

I nodded several times; a child being taught an important lesson by a grown up. I didn’t have experience communing with the dead, but Madame Bashiri did. She was a middle-aged woman with thickly painted black eyebrows and cropped black hair with harsh bangs halfway up her forehead.

She always wore loose clothing covered in vibrant patterns—paisley, tie dye, polka dots, or flowers.

My curves and lumps securely caged by the dress, the spiritualist and I went downstairs. I had asked Jeremy to stay late at work. He was understanding about what we were doing, but Madame Bashiri said his energy wasn’t. “Toxic energy can ruin even the most sacred of spaces.” His jaw clenched, but still he had agreed. The table was set for three—Madame Bashiri, my mother, and me. Around the dining room were dozens of lit candles, crystals, and herbs. The spiritualist instructed me not to use sage to cleanse the space. We wanted my mother’s energy—no matter the form—to be present.

“Sit,” Madame Bashiri said.

I obeyed.

“Now don’t forget to recite your intention.”

I nodded. “I wish to connect with Elaine Bishop, my mother. I ask that I am guided to hear the messages she has for me. I ask that she speaks directly to me.”

The room grew silent.

Prompted by Madame Bashiri, I continued, “Please, Mom. I made your favorite. Just how you like it. Please come have dinner with me. I want to talk about my wedding.”

It went on like that for two hours before my spiritualist went around and blew out the candles one by one. “It was a lovely dinner, Suzanne,” she said. “A lovely attempt at connection. I felt her presence outside. She’s looking in, watching you. It’s a step. We’ll make a connection by the wedding, I’m sure of it.”

Of course my mother was watching me; I didn’t need to be told that. Alive or dead, her eyes were forever narrowed, trained on my every movement. I didn’t need to conjure an apparition of her ghost to hear my mother’s suggestions for the wedding. She had given plenty before her death.

For the wedding venue, I rented the house by the lake where we spent summers as a family before Dad left. “It’s where your father and I were married,” she’d said. I picked the Saturday date over Friday because as my mother said, “Friday weddings are tacky, Suzi. Everyone knows you booked it for its price reduction. People have to work. It’s not fair to make them take an unpaid vacation day so you can get a deal on your venue.” I bought the dress she liked even though it gaped at the chest, making me feel like a prepubescent girl again. “That’ll look good with the pearl necklace and earrings from your grandmother. What do you mean you don’t want to wear them? Of course you’re going to wear them. What else would you wear?” I wanted the wedding colors to be rose and gold, to which my mother said, “You don’t look good in rose, you know that. It washes you out. And gold clashes with your complexion.” So the wedding colors ended up being royal blue, my mother’s favorite, and silver. I even grew out my bangs like she’d suggested for the past three years.

I sat in the chair beside her hospital bed, a spread of her favorite charcuterie and champagne on the table between us. She sucked on a piece of prosciutto stuck in her teeth. “You don’t look like yourself,” she said. “I was just looking at old photos. Why don’t you grow out your hair again?”

“When I was sixteen?”

“Has it been that long? Your hair was so beautiful long like that. You should grow it out for the wedding. You look so much younger with your bangs.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“You don’t want people to think your Jeremy’s child bride, do you?”

I sighed loudly before swallowing the champagne in both of our glasses. Not even terminal illness could soften my mother’s nitpicking.

It happened quickly. One minute we were fighting about the hors d’oeuvres she didn’t want at the wedding—she said anything on skewers was low class—and the next I was driving her to chemo. Jeremy said my mother never met a fight she couldn’t win. He was right. Growing up, she always got her way, no obstacle ever remained standing for too long around her. She was a superhero, or villain, depending on what side of hers you were on. I thought she was invincible; even after the diagnosis I wasn’t worried.

It turned out my mother was defenseless against stage four ovarian cancer.

Six months after her death I stood in front of the full length mirror in the upstairs hallway of the house by the lake, my forehead large and pale with zigzagged creases. The skin on my face was taut, hardened by the heavily sprayed on makeup. My mother always said a woman could conquer the world with a fully painted face. I felt clownish with the heavy blush, eyeshadow, and false eyelashes resembling dozens of spider legs. But I knew it’s what she wanted. She never knew how to hide her disapproval so it was best to follow her advice. Her suggestions, as she called them.

All I wanted was my mother to be there on my wedding day.

I asked the wedding planner set up the living room the way my mother suggested, the French doors left open so Jeremy and I could say our vows with the lake as the backdrop. The wedding planner said if we timed it right the sunlight would hit my hair and make it shine golden. As Madame Bashiri instructed, I asked for candles to line the room and cover every surface, creating a soft, rosy hue.

“Everything has to be perfect if your mother is going to come,” she said.

Jeremy thought I was crazy. And maybe I was. But every girl wants her mother to be a part of her wedding.

Like Madame Bashiri said, everything had to be perfect. I hadn’t been able to make contact with my mother during dozens of attempts, so no detail could be out of place on my wedding day. It had been nine months of radio silence, with only the nagging memories of her suggestions to guide me. The Ouija board was coated in dust now, with a thick stack of papers and copies of wedding vendor contracts on top of it. The candles, crystals, and herbs were stuffed into a drawer. My mother’s navy dress was at the back of the closet where it couldn’t mock me and the five pounds I had gained from stress eating junk food. Every time I put a piece of candy or fried food into my mouth I was daring my mother to appear. I didn’t believe she would let death quiet her. I didn’t believe she’d let anyone else micromanage my wedding.

The violinist began playing “Ave Maria”—my mother’s choice—indicating my cue. I tilted my chin up, pushed my chest out, and began to walk down the aisle made by two rows of candles on the ground. I walked alone since I had no paternal figure. I hadn’t seen my father since I was eight; my mother literally ran him out of town after she discovered he

was cheating on her.

Madame Bashiri stood by the violinist, her arms by her sides, palms facing upward. Her eyes were closed and her thin lips moved silently and rapidly. She was calling out to my mother as she had with me many times.

As I walked down the aisle, I tried to remain focused on Jeremy—his gaze warm, his grin stretching ear-to-ear—but my eyes kept flitting away, looking left and right, searching for any sign of my mother’s presence. As if on cue, the flames of the candles positioned by the altar in front of the French doors began to flicker, softening and brightening like a beating heart. I swallowed, not sure if I was ready to see her again. My face must have shown my apprehension, my silent hope, because Jeremy’s face folded. He shook his head to tell me it was just the wind.

I told myself she was biding her time, she wanted a dramatic entrance. She would wait until Jeremy and I were hand-in-hand saying our vowels. She wouldn’t miss it. She wouldn’t leave me alone on this day.

The vows came and went. We were pronounced husband and wife by the officiant my mother liked—the Protestant minister even though Jeremy and I wanted a non-denominational ceremony. The candles didn’t flicker, my mother didn’t whisper in my ear, *I’m here, honey. I’m here. I wouldn’t miss your day.* After Jeremy and I sealed our marriage with a kiss, I looked back at Madame Bashiri; she was picking at her nail beds. She had given up on my mother coming, and I couldn’t blame her.

The reception, like the ceremony, was motherless. Jeremy gripped my hand a little tighter than usual. He whispered things like *I love you* and *You’ve never looked more beautiful* in my ear. I told him I loved him even though my chest felt gutted. I found myself going through the motions at the reception—greeting and thanking our guests, accepting their condolences about my mother. Sandra, her best friend, said she knew my mother would have loved it. I nodded and thanked her, even though I knew it wasn’t true. My mother would have found something wrong with it. It was in her nature to pick things apart.

Even in death I couldn’t meet her expectations.

I excused myself from the group of cousins I had been talking to and went upstairs to the master bedroom. This was where Jeremy and I would spend our first night married. It was the same room my parents had slept in all those summers ago. I went into the bathroom, flicked on the light switch to the right of the door and stood before the sink, the round mirror above it reflecting my face and upper torso. I looked like a shell of myself. What had I done all of this for?

I turned the faucet on, lowered my face to the stream of water, and began to scrub off the layers of makeup. A minute

later I lifted my face towards the glass above the sink. Black circled around my eyes, making me look like a corpse bride. With the remnants of heavy tan blush and runny mascara, my cheeks appeared concave, as though I was collapsing in on myself. My jaw was sharp, trembling ever so slightly, ready to take a blow.

As if on cue, it came.

As I gazed at myself, I heard, “Look at what you’ve done. You ruined a perfectly good face of makeup. What do I always say about a fully painted face?” The voice was low, but clear. I had known it my entire life.

My skin rose in goosebumps. I exhaled. “You can take over the world,” I said. I narrowed my eyes to see if anything, a speck or orb was behind me in the mirror’s reflection. But no one was there. “Mom? Are you here?”

Silence filled the room, settling on the goose pimples lining my arms and chest. I was alone. If she had been there, she was gone. All I wanted was my mother to be there on my wedding day, and she only showed up to pick me apart. To drag me down on a day that was supposed to be about me and what I wanted. That was supposed to be the best day of my life. I cleared my throat and stared into the mirror. I stood tall, made myself steady. “I’m not going to let you takeover my world anymore, Mother,” I said. “I’m done with you and your suggestions.”

My voice wavered like an uneven boat, rocking low and then high. I waited for the blow, the icy, salty waves, but none came. My mother had come to my wedding liked I’d wanted and now she was gone. And with her exit, I could finally enjoy the celebration happening downstairs. For the first time, I was free of her suggestions. Her disapproval.

For the first time, I was free. 🌙



A Starry Sky

Barbara de la Cuesta

Alcide Arsenault, at 508, Napoleon Court, has escaped his wife, and with his Walk-Aid makes his way downtown by way of Crescent Street. He’s seeing ghosts.

The Irish Travel Bureau.
The old Hall’s Corner Smoke Shop.
Lovings’ Furnishings for Men.
Ike Allen’s Corinthian Alleys in the basement under the Waldorf Lunch on Gordon Street
and the old Embassy—a walkway now.

It had a ceiling that gave an illusion of a starry sky...

Meanwhile Eulalie opens the front door to Priscilla from the Agency. He’s gone, Eulalie says, I hid his walk aid but he found it.

No, not again, the second time this week. She mounts her bike and heads down Main Street. But Alcide is on Moody Street in little park where the Embassy Theater used to be.

A starry sky, Alcide recalls, with floating clouds. A rather taking thing. J. Lesley Cahill played the organ.
...READING FROM EURIPIDES
THE LECTURE ROOM AT
SPINGOLD...runs round the electric sign on the Waltham Savings.

The wonders of the modern world, thinks Alcide. But give him any day the starry sky at the old Embassy, billiards at Ike Allen’s, trolley trips to Norumbega, French-American Athletic and Literary Association, met on the second floor of the Odd Fellows.

He’s watching the river scum wash up in little inlet under the Gold Star Mother’s Bridge when Priscilla spots him from a rise two blocks away.

There used to be a dance hall on those pilings, Nuttings. The Black Velvet Irish Band, Prince Edward Isle Quadrille... He suddenly decides to have a beer in O’Reilly’s Daughter, hails a passing cab.

The usual? Melissa asks, and pushes a Michelob in front of Alcide.



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Fresh still, he notes. She’s forty-seven, she’s told him.
Won’t tell him if she bleeds still.
Has she got her teeth, he wonders?
A little overweight, of course, but he prefers that in a woman.
He likes to see it high on hips the way Melissa....Saucy.
He would bet she’s got her teeth...

 I’m just wondering, Alcide dares, you got your own...?
 My what?
 Teeth. Your own teeth.
 Alcide grins and shows his full upper and lower.
 Well, six of them. Four up, two down, Melissa grins back.
Just thought you’d check me out, eh, Alcide?

 He’s still at large when Priscilla gives up.
 The boys from the Press Box are lounging in the settling body of an old Pontiac in the lot of Masserelli Motors. Batty Allard, Berto Ginastero, Cristos Demos, Jacko Winegar:
 Hey, Alcide, lookin’ for a job again?
 Don’t Jacko. Don’t you see that he believes you?
 Naa, he don’t. Nice job out front, with coat and tie; you meet the public...
 Listen Frenchy, it’s just a joke, says Cristos.
 A joke?
 Yes, he’s just kidding you.
 A coat, he said, a tie. I’d meet the public.
 A joke. He’s only joking, Alcide baby. We ain’t got no public here.
 You tell me, you see any public? Cristos waves his arms around the muddy lot.
 And what you want to work for, anyhow? You got yourself nice pension from Canadian...
 U.S. Army. Alcide straightens up his shoulders. U.S. Army.
 Well, you shouldn’t go believing every little...

Meet the public...Alcide murmurs as he turns the corner at the French American Victory Society. He took Eulalie here to dances in his uniform, the Sixteenth Infantry.

It was the year they opened up the second front. He can still remember Tranquille Galant behind the drums in his Navy whites, and Claude, Eulalie’s brother, fiddling. He had one leg shorter than the other, so he didn’t go off to war when the rest of them...

 A largish crested bird is strutting just ahead of Alcide on the sidewalk.
 He turns his pocket out, shakes out the crumbs.

 The U. S. Army, he served in. The Navy was what he wanted, but they wouldn’t take him because of his missing finger, so it was the Army, late in the conflict.
 Embarrassing, it was to be around in civvies so long, and going to the kitchen rackets in Irish Town every night. They used to call it The Bleachery. A crazy time.
 The French, Italians, Irish whirled together by the war. They married, many of them—French to Irish, Irish to Italian. Tranquille and Jean Pierre were bedded down with Irish girls before they’d finished training.
 And he was having his first woman. Irish Peg, they called her; used to charge a dollar to the uniforms, had little ratlike teeth that nibbled at him... U.S. Army. Zut!
 He scatters a crowd of grackles, sparrows; crosses the tracks below the car wash. Used to be a school here, the Misses Varnums: made Americans out of you. Combated Bolshevism and Lawlessness in the Foreign Born...
 Yes Alcide sees it now, his memory a lucid pool:
 The creamy walls, projected stereoptican ghosts.
 Lewis and Clark on shores of the Mississippi.
 The terrible Miss Varnum, who would make Eulalie
 leave the Monday wash to write her essay:
 Why I Want to be a Citizen...

 She took them berry picking, wouldn’t let the girls mix with the dirty boys.
 She thought she’d hold that tide back, till the War undid her.
 Yes, married, most of them, a half breed in the oven, by the Second Front.
 Jean Pierre, Tranquille, and he, soon after, to the prim Eulalie. She got word
 of Irish Peggy. He never had her after that.

 He stops to watch two boys who’ve caught a fish—a bass—from off the bridge at Moody Street. It’s huge almost a foot and a half in length. They’ll never get it up; the line’s too light and they haven’t got a net with a handle long enough to reach it.

It’s ten thirty-five. A parachutist, practicing for the Policemen’s Expo, lands in front of the field house at Leary Field.

Coat and tie, thinks Alcide. And meet the public. He crosses at the corner of Hammond Street, and to calm himself he sits on a bench and feeds the pigeons pretzels from his pockets.

Pigeons strut on their red legs.
If there weren’t so many of them, Alcide thinks,
you might say they were beautiful...

Calm now, and, feeling both hunger and an urge, he thinks he’ll have the eggplant parmigiana, use the bathroom at Mama Josie’s. A block away and suddenly the urge is...

Merde! A woman with her little daughter by the hand is shrieking on the corner of Prospect and Newton.
 Merde! Alcide fastens up his trousers. He’s done it neatly as any dog, there in the gutter, but now the woman’s screaming. Officer, this child has had to witness this filthy act! Her cry is taken up by the crowd that gathers, brings Lieutenants Langille and Mackle on their break in Dunkin Donuts. Yes, Ma’am, we’ll take him in. They pull him into the parking lot. We’ve told you, Mr. Arsenault. Here, get in the cruiser. This time we’ll have to take you in.
 Merde, merde!
 But instead they take him to Eulalie: Going to have to watch him, Missus.
 Watch him! You try!
 A woman’s little girl...
 I turn my back a second!
 Second time. A woman’s little girl...what can we do? We ought to take him to the station, book him on indecency... Officer Langille is blushing, softening, pushing him toward her. He’s a second cousin once removed.

She’s got her feet up, and is reading the horoscope in *The Globe* to calm herself when Rosa From the Agency comes a second time to give him his bath.

 Alcide meanwhile, has had a little nap and wakes out of a dream he’s made the little girl that comes to swab the floors pregnant. He’ll have to marry her, of course He thinks. He’ll find the money somewhere... He’s out of bed and searching for his walk-aid. It isn’t in any of Eulalie’s customary hiding places: cellar landing, laundry room... a...job...some money... breathing hard. He found it this morning stuck on the shelf above the coats in the hall closet. Of course it won’t be there now. There’s still a chance, of course, that she’s not in a family way...he hasn’t touched her, only dreamed. And possibly she doesn’t bleed yet. Just a kid, but they bleed early now. He makes his way down the hall, sees Eulalie in her EZBoy. Eulalie hasn’t bled last twenty years; he wonders does Melissa at the Press Box still? That Rosa that comes to bathe him, he would wager she...

He’s here, Eulalie tells Rosa. He was brought home by policer, for shitting in the gutter on Moody Street.

 He probably just needed to badly, Rosa says. Men in her village did this very neatly all the time.
 Well it’s the second time, and I was very upset. The horoscope is telling her to focus on “extra earnings,” She tells Rosa she’s going to get a job so she can put Alcide away. She can’t tolerate him any longer.
 She probably could get a job, thinks Rosa, watching Eulalie’s energetic legs as she crosses and recrosses them, concentrating on the horoscope. And she’s legal for the past sixty years at least. The French from Canada just come over the border without anyone bothering them it seems. Eulalie told her once how she used to work at the mill, when it was a mill, not apartments for *ancianos*, and come home every night and cry for the farm in Canada, where they kept sheep and wove their own blankets.

 But there wasn’t enough food for so many children, so half of them had to come here and live in a little room on Cherry Street and wash their stockings in the bathroom sink and work six days a week cleaning the lint from under the looms.


But they had schools and English lessons and clubs, Eulalie told her, not like now, when you can go to the adult education at the High School if you have the money and aren’t afraid of being turned in for illegal...

 Rosa has a soft spot for Eulalie since she told Rosa these things. Still, she could never shame a man the way Eulalie does. I hid it at the top of the closet, this time, Eulalie says. “I can no imageen how he find it.
 Rosa laughs and passes a clot. She’s having very heavy periods every two weeks. Eulalie hasn’t bled for fifteen years, Alcide told her once in the bath. As if that put her past his interest. He never put his hand up Rosa’s skirts, in any case, and she certainly wouldn’t let him. He just likes to *think* about women, she concludes. What they might be like if he had them. Probably he imagines everything, just like the job he thinks they’re offering him at the used car place. A job, they tell him. You meet the public. He keeps going back to hear it over and over. Eulalie, on the other hand, could get a job. Eulalie was

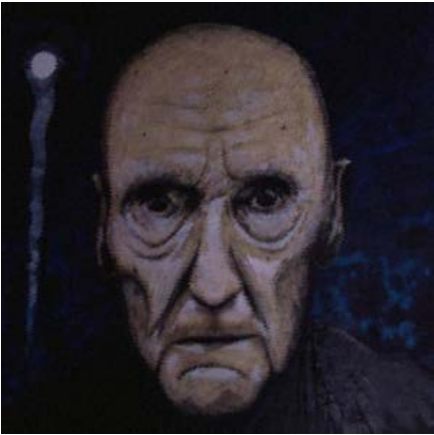
probably good looking in her day, she thinks.
Innerspring. The word pops in her head. What it mean, innerspring? she asks Eulalie.
It's the bottom part of the bed, Eulalie says. With the springs in it.
Rosa feels a fool and vaguely disappointed. Of course, Eulalie knows things she doesn't know, the French being better schooled than the Hondurans and all that rabble. Probably there weren't so many of them all at once, coming in. And there was the mill that needed them, and the watch factory, where Eulalie worked after her first job at the mill.
Too many of us, she thinks.
Alcide told her once how he loved the pigeons
that he fed in the park. They are really very beautiful,
he told her. If you look closely at them.
It's just there are too many of them.

Too many of us, yes, she thinks. This thought always brings an image of the Guatemalans downstairs, flooding the toilet, clogging the washing machine, taking apart their cars in the yard. Fortunately they were Laureano's worry. She would come home and find the toilet pulled up by its roots and the washing machine set out to the trash and one of the spare ones in the yard installed.
It seems, says Eulalie, some woman's little girl saw him about his dirty business, and screamed, and the police came and brought him home. They would have taken him in if Officer Menard who's married to my cousin, Ottilie Rosier hadn't been one of them. So they bring him to me. Going to have to watch him better they tell me. We should have booked him.
Book him, I scream at them. Go right ahead. Maybe they send him off somewhere! I've had my fill. *Dieu!* Man that can't keep his pants on...

Alcide is docile and exhausted. She gives him a sponge bath, as he says he's too weak to get in the tub. He's grateful and leans up against her like a little boy while she sponges him off seated on the toilet. You've missed the Sunshine Club, she tells him. They're having a birthday party for Adie Blakey and the Mayor's coming.
Ah, well, I have to tend to my affairs, says Alcide. It's no small thing when you get a young thing pregnant.
What young thing? asks Rosa, shocked.
What's Her Name, that comes to clean.
Oh, he means the little girl that Eulalie hired for after school, to mop the floors.
But she can't be. She's only eleven or so...
She bleeds. You just have to look at those young ones to knock them up.
That's probably what he did, Rosa thinks, *looked* at her.
You can still go if you want. Get your mind off things, she tells him.
The Sunshine Club? *Pas*. What kind of a club is that? In my day we had real clubs: French American Athletic and Literary Club. That was a propaire club.
What you do there?
We recited poetry. Racine, we recited. By memory. Then we played quoits.
That sound nice. Maybe you give them some ideas like that. Some intelligent people go there. Mr Wolfe was a famous lawyer once. And Mrs. Rose lived in many foreign countries. I bet you they know some poetry.
Merde, he says, leaning his head against her flank and closing his eyes.
Mierda, she says in her own idiom, and laughs. *Que se vayan todos a la mierda.* 🗣️



BARBARA de la CUESTA has been past recipient of fellowships in fiction from the Massachusetts Artists' Foundation, and the New Jersey Council on the Arts, as well as residencies at the Ragdale Foundation, The Virginia Center, and the Millay Colony. Her poetry collection, *Rosamundo*, was published in 2017 by Finishing Line Press. Her novel, *The Spanish Teacher*, was winner of the Gival Press Novel Prize in 2007, and a more recent novel, *Rosa*, was winner of the Driftless Novella Prize from BrainMill Press, in 2017. This novel has recently won gold in the Human Relations Indie Book Award. Her book of short stories, *The Place Where Judas Lost his Boots*, has just won the Brighthorse Prize.




Search

Bob Chikos

Let my dad die alone.
It started with a cough that just wouldn't go away.
When he started coughing up blood, he finally went to the doctor.
Lung cancer.
He never smoked a thing in his life. In fact, the doctor said if he *had* smoked, he might have taken his cough more seriously and come in sooner when they could've done more about it.
He tried chemotherapy. Mostly it just made him feel like crap. Mouth sores, vomiting, diarrhea. He couldn't eat, couldn't sleep.
He lost his job while on chemo. To this day I'm not exactly sure what he did. Something with life insurance. Every time I asked him about it, he was so vague I never got a clear picture. I used to tease him that I thought he was secretly in the Mafia. He never denied it. I do know he was an art major in college. I've seen his artwork, it's amazing, but he had a family to support and I guess he felt he couldn't do that as an artist.
He missed too many days. And on the days he did make it in, he often had to leave half-way through because he felt so sick. When chemo ended, he felt better, but he couldn't find a similar job. He ended up working at Wal-Mart. And the thing about that job, even though he got paid just this side of minimum wage – is that he loved it! Every day he came home and he talked about these crazy things that happened there and the weird people he met. He always

had a bunch of dirty jokes he learned from his co-workers. I came in a few times and he showed me off to everybody. They all said the same thing, "Man, your dad's the best!"
The cancer came back stronger. The doctor said they *could* try chemo again, but there would be about a 1% chance of success. Most likely he would have a few more months, and if he went on chemo, that time would be spent with those horrible side effects. He said no.
When you're young, you come up with scenarios about how'd you like to go. *Man, if I had a few months left, I'd go on a Caribbean cruise and keel over on a deck chair, with a pina colada in my hand.* My dad never quit working. He knew we would need the money after he was gone. He worked on his last day.
He died soon after he went to bed. Alone. My sister was already asleep. Mom and I were in the living room, watching a rerun of *Seinfeld*.
Another misconception is that, when death happens, everyone will just *freak out*. They'll be in such shock that they'll be able to nothing but wail and gnash their teeth, sobbing over the lifeless body. It wasn't anything like that. I walked down the hallway and saw his light was still on. I went in to say goodnight and I couldn't hear him breathe. I got Mom. She put her hand over his mouth and checked for a pulse. And that was it. She let out a small sigh, but she didn't cry. Neither did I.
She said, "I need to call Dr. Callahan. I think he's gone."
I'm ashamed to admit my first thought after she said that. *I bet I won't have to go to school tomorrow.*
He didn't have a big fancy funeral. He was cremated, but the priest talked about him during his Sunday homily, which was nice, but then everyone just stared at us. After mass, people came up to us and offered their condolences. I know they meant well, but I felt so stupid saying the same thing over and over again. "Thank you. That means so much. Well, he's in a better place now."
Sometimes I feel guilty that I didn't feel worse than I did. Maybe that's what they call survivor's guilt. Or maybe that's just being a Catholic.
I miss him at the most random times, like a couple of days ago I answered the phone and it was my roommate's dad. Or I'll open the cupboard and see his coffee maker, collecting dust. Or I'll hear a really funny joke and my first thought is, "Wait 'til dad hears this one."
I've had a few years to process all of this and I've come to believe that, in dying, dad was teaching me how to live. He showed that I can play it safe, in work or in health, but that's no guarantee I'll *be* safe. Fight battles, but when losing is inevitable, embrace it.
And never, ever let someone you love die alone. 🗣️



BOB CHIKOS has several degrees from some highly unimpressive colleges. His family is sick and tired of his stories, but his grateful students love them. He teaches special education at Crystal Lake Central High School and lives in Cary, IL with son Martin and spouse Aileen.



A Sacred History of Coal

Augusto Todoele

“Nonfactual and mythical history of a credulous former age.” The Catholic Dictionary

“On the bank of Chartiers Creek lies a valley in a graceful curve and precipitous hills that change their course at each extremity of range, and slope gradually to the margin of the water.”

—History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, 1889

It can only be fiction that the creek, the coal, the railroad and the boy superposition together. Scraps of iron cubes sank in the Creek from railway cars that rolled down the bank. They stuck up like the cargo of wrecked ships. The water route of the train followed the creek. It was an easy grade, steep only at the beginning and end of the line. Double tracks followed the Creek all its way to the Ohio, but stopped on that bend before Scully Yard for switching and shunting, to look out for load sifting and hot axles, long enough for a child to board and visit. It broke their monotony. Laws required all freight trains to have a caboose and a full crew to search the tracks and under the cars, to check the brakes and put out torpedoes and flares to signal the next train behind. Leaving the Yard, they never stopped. The child could walk the rails then, sometimes between the ties, sometimes on the rock hills the ties set on, balancing.

The strip-mined hills and galligaskin forests carried with the coal in a chute hundreds of feet down the Thornburg steep to the railroad cars. Black smoke from the engine soot shot up. An oil well near the school seeped oil from saturated rock. Where the bales of scrap iron overturned like undredged divots, lariat-like swings of pigment and loops swirled. Black as soot from the coal pocked forms that overwhelmed the sidings and small yards near the coal tipples, history and memory large, the soot-shrouded Pennsy Chartiers began. The child knew which way the water flowed from hundreds of hours spent looking, but thought it headed away, meaning south, but south was north and it flowed north toward the Ohio.

Chartiers Creek dissects the Pittsburgh Coal seam. A branch of the Pennsy Railroad followed and crossed the streambed 19 times in 23 miles. Dissolved and precipitated

acid solids and iron made it one of the most polluted watersheds in Pennsylvania. Deforesting and farming added to the floods caused by a rugged and steep basin terrain which falls 500 feet to the Ohio River where coal was shipped when the Chartiers was in high water. Farms on the other side of the creek made an updraft that roared flames in dry spells from the sparks of the trains that rose hundreds of feet up hills as the town playfellows fought the fire with rakes and mats. We say he was a participant to serve the ducks that sit in their coal-neuks so the sheep would take no harm. That burg was a pasture. *If you're one of those that likes to know where one went who left this state and entered contemplation, if he ever left, who first moved there at five, a character not formed within the pale, imbibed of wildness and natural force, then those who say their name and sweep the ridge behind the teeth must probe the throat, common in the East, where one shall be taken and one shall be left.* Not to hold the ratio, this is good for the author of a million thoughts. Stats on these thoughts range into the unsanctified. Now I lay me down to sleep I remember.

2.

Coal extraction is like that. Topsoil brushed aside with bulldozers and power shovels uncovers seams of buried overburden. Piles of mixed soil and rock in long parallel ridges of vegetation and bramble prevent at all costs the amplification of thought, the cartilaginous cities of the mimoids that further development seeks. Societal reports of the Ghost Plane differ. Every man his priest. Never a greater time than today. Wisdom is a pyramid. *Sav lasav, kav lakav*, drunk. The Days before the Flood do not mention sleep. We're actually smelling each other right now as we talk. My gestures, your gestures, the look in your eye. A walk among the doves at five feels the same at eight walking among the trees. Do not be one with the world, which meditation ends in books where characters affirm or deny. He was in the world and the world was made by him and the world knew him not. He came to his own and his very character speaks the Heraclitean Fire of pity and indig | nation! / Sheer off / Manshape shone / disseveral star, on one hand swallowed in the thousand glitters flow, but on the other, this poor potsherd, | patchwood, immortal said, “listen, let's go down and clear the traps.”

3.
The Old English holds the meaning of a creek, a going, a journey, a road, a passing, a path; an entrance; a vessel, a carriage, a ship; a crew, a peril, a danger, a beauty just-out-of-sight; a fairing like a man vibrating a thousand times. Barrels of him fill space who used to walk the slag above the pits of water, green at the bottom. He woke on the mid line between sea and land with a decompression of lungs. “Will I have eyes at the bottom of the sea, supposing I descend the stairs?” He would leave while his family was asleep at dawn, walk the borders, one side of the two tracks and on.

Three steps removed from what is apparent, nations put *statues in all cites* and stick them with various afflictions, pins and needles. Too simple a ruse, but somehow it makes citizens and the streets so London is not London all by itself, but the tampering of kings and palaces. Three envelopes understand. Envelopes one, two and three accelerate each other to the depth o’erleaped by a fourth, spontaneous and self-evident as memory. Turn over, turn over, turn over, spit out. The fourth reads thought streams going in and out of sleep. Physical objects do not qualify in entanglement. One discrete particle over there becomes two over here if you have got any of these pretty elf tongues the water wets as the flood ratchets out the stones. For those who walk the ground the idea of a river is wet.

4.
The coal fell hundreds of feet down the Thornburg steep to the rails and the Creek. Removal of the coal made the substrate unstable so it could not be further mined, but then to show the instability, it was. Coal was shipped partly from the hill above down the flooded Creek to the Ohio and partly by rail and truck. Springs from the open pits of turquoise water above the end of Hamilton Rd ran for decades. The hill of mines sluiced down, but like the katabole had ended years before as the trains would end soon too, but the Creek ran on. Steam and coal inspired the train and pollution the creek. People retreat from the facts and select their responses if they overwhelm. Hawthorn said of *Moss*, “I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories... I am a good deal changed since those times; and to tell you the truth, my past self is not very much to my taste, as I see in this book.” Franz Kline’s black and white childhood in Wilkes-Barre next to tracks, where the engine smoke chubbed black, exploded from **bridges that blew open like bellows** the whole landscape and undermined for their cutery corn ruth dug from the ground. Then came *Vater Eberhard* who walked the tracks with a gun, collecting torpedoes to fasten and drop with the stone. *Der Bischof, der Bischof*, shoot out insulators. Would a green soul explode basements? Will he see St. Peter then?

5.
At the start of this epoch, Brunet’s Island, called Coal Harbor, just south of Pittsburgh, received coal shipped on the Creek from its site above the town near Chartiers Country Club on Baldwin Road. The train that followed the track of the Creek was the first soft coal powered locomotive west of the Alleghenies. That first Chartiers Valley Railroad and the Chartiers Coal Company of 1855 revived in other

forms. Efforts at mining failed again in 1908. A steam engine piston back and forth in the cylinder is like the progress of mines. Wheelbase locomotives with four or more coupled axles are equipped with blind drivers.

Engines, cylinders mounted vertically or diagonally on the side of the boiler spin a drive shaft that delivers power to that spot where Franz Kline lay unconscious too, whose calligraphic aspirations and regret over the flood of the mountains of Job, the first flood before Noah of Jeremiah 4, the Foundation flood spoken by Jesus the Blessed in Rev. 17 and 4, which means disruption, when truth shall spring out the earth (Ps. 85.11), had succeeded so far by 1918 that Ben Hammill, mining coal at the end of Hamilton Rd., trucked out through the town or sent down by chute to the rails and the flood on a conveyor belt the coal from the top of the hill.

You have to cross the iron road to get to the Creek. When that first coal hauled down the flooded plain with flotsam and tree trunks, Jetsam decried on the banks. The series of cliffs enlarged at the top of the hill pocked with mine holes and caves.

Strip mines, iron sump, slag piles added a kief of resin to those parabolas intersecting down from the knees to the kerf between the sawtooth toes of the feet of iron and clay, but to the child the true meaning of those, the figure of the il ya is not the self-oscillating between self-revelation and self-concealment, but the Il ya of parabolas intersecting at their bases, open at the top and at the base, transcendence and transdescendence, the other human being not Being, that produces Ille-ity, “that man; he,” external embodiment of the self, horizon mirrored in open space at the base of the parabolic, “the heart of the being of the world like a surplus that overwhelms even as we enjoy the warmth of the sun and the illumination of the morning sky.”

Fascinated with the territory of unregulated space, exhibition and style had a supply of flares and torpedoes there, and dynamite to dig a pit or two as tracks set in the mountains ran up the valley flat.

If you stick your feet in pits steep on all sides and fall in you will get wet. All the king’s horses can pull you out. These were all filled in later by the same engineers who turned the black smoke white where the freights came up the rise. Blunt slashing iron, industrial broad planes, *cupreous and mudblack coalfish* sulfate from the creek mined at night from jon boats. The 4th and 5th angels hail the “hairy hearts,” the “petrified hearts.” Call from the crater if you hear the sound, but not from where it comes or where it goes: *Pater ignosce, Father forgive them. All that is done in a weight of future glory to pay my debts with my bones I possess.* Casting the ruins as solar pollution of the Chartiers is a leap for both. *Lead me, guide me along the way...*disruption, katabole out of everything that was made, means people, not world, in the world immature.

6.
In sharing personhood with a river and a spouse, should you have both with the telling? They’re laughing at the fire of forgetfulness about seventy when David got cold and they sent a warm girl to his bed. We have no need of telepathy in love, nor memory. Like an ephod bringing succor, love is complete. Baptism like a rushing wind you know, where it comes or goes. See this and forget yourself if you want to

know the industrial miners of Fairy Town, Patchtown, the Russians, Poles and Slovaks who rushed the orange creeks. Coal not ready for repentance had to be learned. Cleaving and burning, drop by caustic drop, emblems of conduct sulphur the aureate rocks. Rivers recite while darkness falls away, ranging in a brow of blue light. White shadows, metallic paradises charge with what can be called thoughts that fly about the heads, reflections of air which is not air, enacted upon the river of the mind below, impersonating chartreuse shirts with yellow scarves projecting from and with the Bridge, which wasn’t over or under, but around and through.

How can things not present enter our thoughts? Did you know King’s College was on fire? A substitute will do. The oil well gushed against the window panes of the school. On the side of the cliff overlooking the tracks, pools of water scorpions were croodin. We had a slight attraction to this time and place, boomed a private steel guitar in a blizzard—blatto, *volavit volucer*, amenities that supported the mills and the elbow culverts to compose. The largest class that school had ever seen sailed. Always rural, elemental. Snow maples, elms, pilsner.

What are balconies on houses or mountains in the plain, or the heads of those who cruise the river mouth below. We call Divine Gates these snowflake navies that fly in a storm saddled by a sky shook down. Long trains of association that rotate in and out like wheels in wheels, rulers of this ferment indulge themselves with gold-shod prophecies they think to congregate with stars but are *bushels of moonlit pears*.

7.
These scenarios give a serpentine of eights in torsion plasmas of the golden age. Steam locomotives belch their sulphur, glowing *aureate* cinders in the air. Fires rage up tinder hillsides from train sparks, above the trees, 100 feet up, as high above the tracks as the slag pits beneath. Everywhere in season the hills run red with springs out of the hillside waters of the Woods. They come down the hill after mining from the veins of coal pits, culm dumps, hillocks. Leach residue and tail slime slick the terra-cone watersheds. Across from Backbone Road on a high bluff towering above its neighbors on the southeast that overlooks and commands the whole, the pale water scorpions hide under the cliffs high up, under stones in pools, and selective memories flood the kilns for those who think they know. *Not that anything can be done to change the way space extracts sulphur from blanket rock or meteorite impact vaporizes sulphur and sins, such that, were the child infected, then vaporized three times faster than iron by the effects of impact and ion bombardment in the sputtering solar wind, the blows bring light.*

But if the landscape were a woman, a Picasso, or de Kooning to describe the fertile place at work in the tissue where creation groans individual and social bodies together and feminine and masculine meet, some parts hard, and others not, and the body holds out its arms to the other body to do the same, then the saved child pulls pins on the earthly good, on the inscrutable corruption of Breughel & Bosch from the coal and window dressing before the towns and the jpeg bloom.

Compare some tapestry fertile and corrupt, sheol sans fire that can claim the comedy of desire. They say life is a changing event, a Ledean white yolk shell, hollow of cheek and mind, a king caked with mold that maunders over revealing earth. Count up to ten in the western wall of Jerusalem where **the candled wood-knots shine blood red**. Pick between early incandescence and later diffusion, limbo in a terrestrial hell, like fish and the fisherman the 4th, 5th and 7th angels scorch, who make the dark, and hail blasphemy in these hearts. “Suffered to possess the tabernacle as they sometimes are, say the *Pater ignosce*, Father forgive them, which allows all that is done a weight of future glory to counterpose as soon as an upright man appears. As though the greatest weakness in this world were man, and the greatest fault in man were to be good, made the Sewer of all corruption, of all the sins of the world, as no son of God but a mere man, as no man, but a worm. You would think the good would have its reward, but they are blamed for all the evil they did not do. If it goes against the grain of youth then say *Pater ignosce*. Ignosce ignorant of their deeds, but not of the counter weight to them, the bulls of Bashan *Pondus Gloriae*, weight of glory, earthquake, flood, prison. So let me pay my debts with my bones in this penurious prison! ...to recompense the wantonness of youth.”

lord of heaven, thou help me!
for you have made me in this street
wear bones & warchen feete.
Sure we heavenly wile bound to meet.

Surely yes. As minds seek good, the holy, the just the woe is woo. Chaung Tzu did not take the business ants and do-good mosquito holy men for good, but took to bed naked with his wife, where the unspeakable is not heard. Unsaid thoughts or minds in the middle at its height laugh the absolution of time, dissolution of space. Pass the world in embrace, laughter of the temporal pain, that adversaries dimute to the river below. I cannot separate myself from this that searches me and knows my thought, for I have outlived my knowledge of myself.

In the servitude, captivity, desolation of Jerusalem Daniel knew where the Sovereign One gave equal measures of audacity and sentience. Which is the hardest part to know of connectedness, compassion, relation and love? *Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark, Thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall the dead arise and praise Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?* Otherwise it would be sleep. To grow into the experience the sentient understands instruction with a pierced ear. It becomes a musician that Place made the man as the transformation of an event into a being. To take the body as more than an instrument, as an event, position itself, superposition finally, the Place makes the body, the soul conscious. Irruption in an anonymous being becomes localization itself. So there is no arguing Franz Kline’s coal mines.

The kerf in the present is anonymous that becomes a subject, an identity whose time is the isolated willful ignorance of history where an anonymous being becomes a subject, a stop and a start, for “when you arrive at such a stage that you remove Him from your thoughts and senses, give up the possibility of conceiving or imagining His essence,

because he is not thus to be apprehended, and you realize Him in the evidences of His activities, as though He were inseparable from you, you will have reached that limit of knowledge which exhorts in the text, ‘Know this day, and lay it to thy heart, that the Lord, he is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else’” (Deut. 4.39).

The many instances of precognition, of serendipity for the synchronist, evidence the skein of the worlds, the skin skein onion simultaneous all at once. Do they come many into one, one into many, expand and contract separately and together as you look at the stars to bring them to earth? This is that knowledge of the worlds, a kind of medieval thing the quantum stories told with Giotto and spiritual beings.

8.
The coal, the creek, the railroad entangled with the boy. Fasten torsions of explosive to the tracks with lead straps, two torpedoes at a time to warn or not of what’s ahead. Those removed are put in store by children, along with flares sometimes dropped alongside. Obtain more explosives from Fischer Chemical, pounds of potassium chlorate and nitrate, charcoal, sulphur, red phosphorus and mercury as histories of time, like society, leadership, affluence. Advanced achievements of history forget to mention. The secret of matter if you’re a child you don’t know. You’re a fish or it’s a bowl. The water watchers don’t bother much as long as they don’t see, or you get caught. Thus free, walk the stones, collect torpedoes and flares and skip the creek. Shoot out insulators on the poles as your passage from pure innocence to guilt, largely the result of others, but you take it like a duck, as if given both a disease and at the same time its vaccination, not a shot but an attitude of a kind of beauty *du mal*, a beauty repented by Baudelaire. It washes the superfund sites after all short-term victims are gone and remains in cell phones and phosphates and aluminum sulfate blamed on other causes, the dirty that makes desolation good. You can surf in memory all day long in different languages from the sun, everyday speak and never. The editors of shame maintain this good, but the subterre we converse to ourselves becomes rehearsal. *My soul is among lions: and I lie even among them that are set on fire.*

Different sounds register where the false predicts the true and with much affinity, just false. We like our writing full of hispid sticks and spits, which is why there is a second quality beyond the truth, of the nose, in the methane as much beyond the nose as the ear is beyond the eye. Some poems stink. Pound called *The King of the Great Clock Tower* “putrid.” Watching colors fade as they dry or the light go from the sky, color revives in the final fire, and its gloss from ash or glaze. But don’t try to photograph. The

better the rhythm of color the harder for the camera to see. Contrasts blind the lens. Reflections of light against the glosses blind.

This analogy of listening, hearing, aural translating sense with the nose *feels* it first, essentially a smell not right. Lenses in the eye are like the opposition of *thinking* what to say as opposed to *merely saying* what is compelled. The fovea focuses light on the retina. The cones increase toward the center. At the periphery of retina, rods increase and cones decrease.

Does that help explain the difference between coal and soot, methane and pot, alcohol or whatever drug? One sanctioned, the others putrid as silicon stumps, giant causeways of Ireland’s Volcanic Neck! Eroded Laccolith.

If a boy or a person could be a cow and their memory extracted by the memorist magnify many times their age, a swift small drawing begun with black and white highlights of anthracite or bituminous could become culm piles of slag the same whether dug in the ground or from open pit mines west. Then the soot of the engines, six billion tons of anthracite reserve and a hundred times of bituminous stretch the expansion cracks. To see yourself naked in mind, but only when clothed are you whole, lines reveal lines, planes, forms repeating patterns betray.

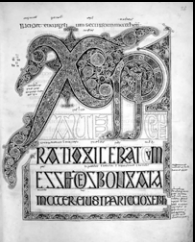
The heart of the being of the world overwhelms as the warmth of the sun and the illumination of morning sky puts roads, railroads and mines as an overlap, to add sentience and get the tale of place, the breath. Maybe we are not aware but the biography of Place is the identity of breath. Place is a base of the existent

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
God bless Mommy, Daddy,
Jacob, Nikolai, Theodore, Noé, Abellah and Augusto
And keep us safe for Jesus sake. Amen.

—New England Primer, 1750

Cited:

—*Il ya, Illeity*, Levinas
—*Sav lasav*, Isaiah 28
—*Heraclitean Fire*, Hopkins
—*Kerf*, Daniel 2
—*Pater ignosce*, Donne, Sermon LXVI
—“When you arrive,” Bahya, Duties of the Heart X



AUGUSTO TODOELE is a historian of the illuminated Gospels and texts of Lindisfarne before the time of the Viking raids until their safe keeping in the Cotton MS in the seventeenth century. Produced when Eadfrith and Ethelwald were bishops at the monastery, written sometime between Cuthbert’s death in 687 and Eadfrith’s, their scribe, who painted interlaced geometric animal and bird patterns throughout, and his death in 721, the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, written in Latin, are the oldest surviving translation of the Gospels into English.



Expectation of Stars

Dan A. Cardoza

Because I wrote poetry, you always said, “You are a bit of a romantic, my renaissance man. I like that about you. It makes us closer”
And so I would often read to you before the deep saliferous waters of sleep took you away from our rocky shore. That evening was no different.
I began:
“Up the coast, near Crescent City, fly all those inky birds poets write about, in search of a dry enclave. And somewhere, further out in the Pacific is where our memories entwine into the last braids of saffron. Above somewhere, blue steel-sky away, stained comments rain down on tomorrows.”
Its then I quietly watch, as you drift out to sea, eyelids burdened with salt.

After a long drive, I arrive at twilight, at Lost Coast Township, near Ferndale, California. I make camp. Ferndale is half-way to Crescent City. It’s the furthest point west of the State, the sentinel of the Pacific. And a brief stop along the way to a poem I never completed.

“Yes, I wore expectations on my sleeve, like a first tattoo, brash & narcissistic. You, were a free spirit, always just a heartbeat out of reach. Now you don’t even look back, your thoughts of us, gathering endings momentum.” I burble, to no one listening.

After a late snack, I walk along the lunar bluffs, a bleak landscape. Sightless, I interrupt an unfinished canto with you still living there.

It’s then, in this darkness nihilistic stars riot the sky in a blaze of electric confetti. I stand rigid in this obsidian vault of raven wings & fire, vice-grip two broken stars between thumb and index finger.

I imagine how close we are; concede five light-years apart will have to do.
I will miss you.



DAN A. CARDOZA’s work has most recently been featured in *Brave Voices*, *Cleaver*, *Coffin Bell/2019 Anthology*, *Dime Show Review*, *Entropy*, *Gravel*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Poached Hare*, *Spelk*, and *Vamp Cat*.



Admirer

Nigel Ford



Poignant

Nigel Ford



Maintenance

Nigel Ford

Two people arrived at the bench, one stopped and looked at the bench, hands clasped beneath their chin, eyes wide and glistening. The other walked on for several metres, stopped and turned and walked back. ‘What?’

‘It’s so beautiful.’

‘The bench?’

‘The bench. All of it. I want to sit. Sit with me.’

‘Alright.’

They both sat on the bench and listened and looked.

You could see one was absorbing it all, talking it all in, the river, the rustling rushes, the life all around them. While the other, well, the other wanted most of all to continue their walk. They had things to do at home.

The waters rippled and gurgled, cotton ball clouds raced across the faintly lilac sky, birds performed acrobatics in the breeze, the bench felt nicely comfortable beneath their thighs.

A cat walked up, tail upright, and twirled itself around the leg of the one that wanted to walk on.

‘We’d better be getting on.’

‘It’s lovely here, can’t we stay a little longer.’

‘We’ve got things to do at home.’

‘O. Alright then,’ sighed and rose. ‘I suppose we’d better.’ Held out her hand. The other took it and rose.

They walked away down the towpath. One stopped and looked back. The other tugged her back on course. They disappeared around a bend in the towpath.

A pang of regret was left hanging in the air. 🌀

The bench is composed, it has been spring-cleaned, used lightly and enjoyed. It is a personality of substance and will have and will last for centuries. It has a life of indolent waiting and unforeseen conversations. It supports gallantly the buttocks of all shapes, sizes and sexes. And with utter composure.

It has set the seal on many deals, resolved frequent arguments, saved myriad souls. It works as the eternal oracle, greeting the unforeseen imperturbably, loosening inhibitions into creativity, it is truly and monstrously amiable and deserves to be the object of definitive awe.

And it is.

It’s idle welcome carless and confident, it nonchalantly recognises the sharp clap of shears around it without fear and with consolidated arrogance.

It has been selected by the gods of make-believe, a dazzling throne accepting without mockery all the crowns of those who seat themselves upon its pristine lap, its bearing ever superb, its mocking laughter at indiscretions and foolish questions ever hidden.

It is solemn, provides atonement, furnishes retreat. It soothes the hard-swearing, ugly and revolted. It prostrates itself before the saboteur who vents anger against it, and rises unharmed to nurse the needy.

Ever reflected in all minds and memories of thousands, it remains full of silence, its life ever poignant. 🌀

It looked as if it had been neglected for some considerable time, the bench. And it had, having been overlooked all winter.

Two persons arrived, dressed for work in orange jackets and equipped with a trolley loaded with equipment. They were bent on doing something about it.

The pump, using water from the river, made a good job of hosing it down. The bench springing into life immediately in the early morning sun. Glitters with new birth.

The sun dries it quickly and next thing you knew the pump throbs and spurts rhythmically again and the bench is covered with soapsuds.

The two persons scrubbing industriously, the soap bubbles flying and circling in the breeze, the luminous work jackets and trousers glowing in the morning light, like two huge busy insects nodding, flailing and buzzing.

Once done, they sit side by side on the bench and gaze at the river for a short while.

One bends and delves into a bag and produces a thermos flask and two mugs. The steam of coffee drifts up into the air, the fragrance of coffee spreads like a scented cosy blanket around them.

‘Always smells better than it tastes,’ said one.

‘Ugh,’ said the other.

They sat in silence and watched the river while drinking their coffee.

Finished, they both shook their cups clean on the towpath. The thermos and cups stowed away, they stood, loaded their equipment onto the trolley and left, each one holding a side handle, pushing the trolley away down the towpath.

The bench shone pristine with new life in the mild sunshine. The spring had arrived. 🌀



NIGEL FORD is English, lives in Sweden, works as a translator, writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in the Penniless Press anthology, *Howling Brits* and a collection entitled *One Dog Barking*, published by Worldscribe Press. His works have been featured in several literary magazines in the US and UK, including *Orbis* (UK), *The Fortnightly Review* (UK), *Ydrasil* (USA), *Duende* (USA), *Corvus* (USA). His book *Snatches* is now being serialised in the notorious literary magazine *The Crazy Oik*. His most recent event took place at the Lysekil Art Museum in May 2019, this taking the form of a short play entitled *Wader & Bader* using his paintings as a backdrop. In addition he works at and has curated for the graphics department at the Artists Workshops (KKV) in Gothenburg, Sweden.



Magnus Opus with Rodents

Suzanne C Martinez

Magnus believed he could go any time. Nothing and no one was keeping him inside his ninth floor studio apartment in an upper Eastside high rise. He hadn't had a good reason to leave since Hester moved out. On that day, he'd cinched up his fluffy robe, slipped on his flip flops and carried her heavy suitcases to the elevator and down to the lobby, even outside to the back of the waiting mega-drone. He'd lifted her luggage into the trunk, shut it, and slapped the top good-naturedly. That was seventeen years ago.

Since then a lot had happened to Magnus and the world. The water levels had risen as predicted. He now lived on the fifth floor. The crafty developer had located all the mechanicals on the roof, so a new lobby door was retrofitted at the new sea level with a dock. It wasn't a big deal. Everyone made adjustments to live in Manhattan.

"Your breakfast has been delivered," said Lucille, his PA. She sounded miffed.

He watched the halo-ad, checked yes and opened the bin.

Watercraft or drones delivered everything. Meals came from chain restaurants, since the pandemics made person-to-person contact iffy. Three meals a day, six days a week, two on Sunday were placed in the insulated bin installed in his front door on a set schedule. Non-perishable items were delivered to the other bin, but Magnus was a minimalist so he hardly ever ordered anything.

The temperatures in New York had gradually risen to an average daytime temperature of 130° Fahrenheit year round, so everyone over fifty-five or with small children had been relocated to Alaska. He heard from his parents that some things still grew up there and they could sit outside in the evening and watch the sunset. He missed them, but it made sense to have all the seniors and parents with kids living in one location where the air was cleaner and cooler, much more efficient. They Skyped every Wednesday night. He'd be joining them in three years, if there were still enough space for his age group. He didn't like to think too far ahead.

Chelsea-cat rubbed against Magnus' shins. It was

relaxation hour and she was looking for attention. He loved petting her soft fur, smooth as a seal. She cuddled against his chest her whiskers tickling his chin, so he had one hand free to surf. He never tired of stroking her, but she'd slink away after an hour and curl up on her bed to recharge. She was the ideal pet.

"Magnus, it's time for your news feed." Lucille never gave him any slack. He'd look into reprogramming her next week.

The last twenty-four hours had been so jammed with activity and emotion that he was drained. He needed to calm himself down. He liked predictability. He liked order. His mom used to tell everyone Magnus was, in the best sense, a dog. Like a dog, he found comfort in doing the same thing at the same time everyday. When all employment was changed to five hours a week so all working age adults could share jobs and keep everyone employed, Magnus was on board.

He'd been a serious gamer since birth, so the mandatory two-hour game play twice a day was perfect for him. Truth be told, he'd have preferred three-hour sessions, but he'd learned to adjust. Every few months, the federal government, who controlled social media, debuted a new game. No one watched rom-coms, crime dramas, tela-novellas or talk shows any more; even the reality shows had shed their audience.

Reality sucked for just about everyone, except for the young and the old up in Alaska, so stimulating entertainment was critical to avoid unrest among the Millennial2s and the Gen-X2s who still lived and worked below the 49th parallel. Synthetic food had caught on better than synthetic booze and drugs, since most kids had become acclimated to it in the 21st century. People being people, they still needed distractions. The new game was called R.O.U.S. and it was to launch on February 2nd at 2pm, Groundhog Day.

Magnus' birthday was February 1st and to celebrate he'd opened the bottle of wine Hester had given him in 2152 before she left. He drank the whole bottle in one sitting. It was exceptional, having been vinted from the final batch of Saskatchewan grapes ever grown. Now he was 52 years old. It didn't seem possible. As a result, he stayed up well beyond the mandatory bedtime and overslept.

He slumped at his desk pod and re-watched the required holo-ad on the lid before he opened his breakfast box.

Lucille perked up at the sound. "Good morning, Magnus. Or should I say afternoon? Would you like to know today's program?"

Magnus swallowed quickly. "Sure, lay it on me."

"I'm not sure of your meaning, Magnus."

"Sorry, please tell me what's on the agenda, Lucille."

"Use Schedule D today. And R.O.U.S. releases this afternoon. I noticed you stayed up much later than recommended last night and slept through the 7-9 news feed, as well as, mandatory Face-time from 9-10. I've added these omissions to your database. Please be more aware of your time. I took the liberty of scanning your cell which seems to be in working order." Since they'd imbedded Quantum cell units in everyone's arm ten years ago, they seldom malfunctioned. She knew that.

During Lucille's commentary, Magnus continued to eat his flatbread egg and cheese, taking extra care to keep his eyes relaxed and expression neutral. He would've loved to blurt out an excuse, but he knew explanations were useless and Lucille recorded every emotional deviation. Some days he really hated her.

Magnus gathered up the packaging from his breakfast and shoved it into the refuse pneumatic tube, which whisked it away. He diligently worked on the programmatic ad sequence needed for the afternoon upload. Analyzing spreadsheets was boring work, but he knew he was lucky. It was a good job, indoor, no heavy lifting, and still legal. The hour went by so quickly he jumped when his arm cell vibrated.

He always enjoyed exercise period – getting his blood pumping, sweat dripping down his face, stretching his leg muscles. After hooking up his life monitor, hydration tube, and removing his robe, he activated the bi-flex machine that was installed in everyone's unit. This and the air quality monitors and hi-efficiency waterless showers were installed fifteen years ago as part of the universal upgrade. It took a little getting used to, but Magnus appreciated the convenience.

Game period at last. He'd been reading about R.O.U.S. for months on his news feed. Its release was much anticipated among his 352,627 Facebook friends. They'd TEXTed and Tweeted about little else for weeks. He took a swig of his Vitamin water and limbered up his fingers. The monitor was black, but he knew what that meant. He took a few deep-cleansing breaths, never letting his eyes stray from the screen. Bingo! It came alive with color simultaneously with a brain numbing blast of sound. Magnus nearly fell off his chair, but the five stabilizing wheels prevented a mishap.

The game began with a short video with a voiceover:

In 1938, twenty Nutria, or swamp dogs were brought to Louisiana to be raised for their fur, but escaped captivity rapidly. Bigger than groundhogs, but smaller than beavers, Nutria have yellow front teeth, long white whiskers, and thin tails. These large rodents have lush shorthaired fur many compare to seal. They breed with great enthusiasm producing five to thirteen pups per litter, three litters a year. Because they have few natural enemies, Nutrias have proliferated well beyond Louisiana and currently number in excess of fifty million. They are plant-eaters and consume 25% of their body weight in vegetation daily, destroying marshlands,

causing massive sinkholes and damaging foundations of structures. Determined trophy hunters are needed to deplete the population before they infest the world.

The game environment was a series of underground tunnels, dug by Nutria over the last hundred years within a vast semi-tropical swampland with thousands of connecting passageways. Each hunter was virtually equipped with sixty spring traps, a semi-automatic shotgun and a motorboat. Nutria kills were calculated by the number of tails deposited in each player's cache, valued at five gluco-coins per tail. The trophy hunter with highest number of tails after completing Level 50 of the game won the Golden Nutria Trophy, the accumulated gluco-coins, and the opportunity to have sex with a consenting live human, choice of gender.

Magnus was shocked. The trophy and gluco-coins were 'same old same old' rewards, but he'd never heard of a game prize package that included sex! It seemed exotic and so random, but the news feeds had been mentioning the aging population problem frequently, as well as, the smaller number of boys being born due to warmer temps – the last census 60/40, female/male. Those little boy sperms were delicate. Even NYC was under two million after the last pandemic. Magnus read parts of the Midwest were totally empty, but didn't know that for sure. He did know none of his friends had children. And there was another factor, as well.

Most of Magnus' contemporaries were digi-sexuals with thousands of virtual, few actual lovers. No one went out anymore or interacted in person. Stimulation arrived on screens. The air was lethal and ADS suits were bulky and expensive. Public transportation was literally underwater.

It was so much simpler being on your own – no hurt feelings, no performance issues, no pregnancy worries. Birth control had been banned in 2082. Besides, everyone had 24/7 porn access and, quite frankly, who knew what made you feel good better than you. Magnus and Hester had had sex a few times, but it was never as good as he thought it would be. He assumed he'd never have an opportunity for sex again after Hester left.

Magnus focused on the game and two hours passed like five minutes. He had 9,034 Nutria tails in his cache. Not bad for his first play. He was already on level 16. It was an okay game – he'd give it 4 out of 5 stars on Yelp. He saved his cache and quit.

Magnus booted up his mandatory newsfeed with Facebook, but rapidly moved onto Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Buzzfeed, CNN, Wikipedia, Reddit, Vox, RS, TPM, Cloutwork, Dazzale, NPR, YouTube and Hulu. He split his monitor into sixteen sectors and let the chatter wash over him like snow while he analyzed his reaction to the game.

He'd never considered himself an exterminator of furry creatures, but there was something exciting about hunting giant rodents through underground tunnels and obliterating them from a boat bobbing on the water. Very satisfying. The grand prize intrigued him, as well.

He freed his dinner from the bin after watching the holo-ad. It was Chicken Fried Rice again. Afterward, he petted Chelsea during relaxation period, but his mind was elsewhere. His eyes drifted to his cell every two minutes until it was game time.

Magnus logged onto R.O.U.S. The player scores were displayed. He wasn't first, but he was in the top hundred out

of a half million players. Not bad. He dimmed the lights and checked that Chelsea cat was charging. His fingers danced across the controller as never before. He was a man possessed.

In two hours, he was up to level 40, but 41 took another sixty minutes. It was getting harder. He wasn't tired after sleeping late in the morning, so he continued, ignoring the vibration in his forearm telling him it was time for the nightly news feed. He completed level 46 at midnight with just four levels to go. His heart was pumping; he felt energized and laser focused.

Magnus didn't go to sleep as required; he continued to hunt Nutria. His cache showed 26,445,991 tails. He'd earned over 132 million gluco-coins. He was a rich man for the moment, but only the winner would keep the currency. He grabbed more Vitamin water, peed and returned to play. He'd never felt so in command before, not at work or on Facebook or even playing squash years ago when he was in school. All those sports trophies would look cheap and dinky when he won the Golden Nutria. Every fifteen minutes his forearm buzzed, but he found it easy to ignore.

Narrow bands of light from the window blinds partitioned the blank walls of his apartment. Magnus blinked. Something happened. Did the screen freeze? It went black, then screamed – GAME OVER. He slumped in his chair and checked his cache: 50,000,000 tails. A giant Golden Nutria emoji appeared below the banner and it slowly turned toward him, almost smiling. His long yellow teeth hanging below his white whiskers made him look like a big buck-toothed cat.

"I won." He closed his burning eyes and dropped his controller.

Lucille was up. "Magnus, you have violated your schedule – two days in a row. A district representative will visit you later today to discuss these infractions and recommend the best way to remediate. As you are aware, we can adjust your arm unit to remind you more forcefully to stay on schedule."

"Lucille, I won. I won the R.O.U.S. Grand Prize." Magnus couldn't help smiling though he was aware Lucille already knew and couldn't see him in the usual sense of the word.

"I know that is a big accomplishment, but since you went outside of the prescribed schedule, I'm not sure it will count as a win."

Magnus started to shiver. He pulled his fluffy robe around his body and tied the belt tighter.

"The game says I won, so I won." He wanted this to be the truth. He needed it to be.

"You'll have to leave your apartment to claim your trophy – and the other prize." Lucille sounded a little snarky. He really disliked her.

"I know."



SUZANNE C MARTINEZ a visual artist with a BFA/MFA, has studied fiction at Kenyon Review and Yale Writers Workshops. Her work has been posted on *The Drabble* (11/18), appeared in *The Hong Kong Review* (1/19), *Bull & Cross* (2/19), *Streetlight Magazine* (6/19) and will appear in *Flash Fiction Magazine* (9/19) and the *Broadkill Review* (11/19). She was a finalist in the 2019 NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge. She lives in Brooklyn. You can visit her online at scmwrites.com

"When was the last time you were outside your unit?"

Hester had hugged him hard and opened her mouth to say something, but he couldn't remember what. Her vehicle evaporated in the haze and then he was drifting down the empty hall holding two sets of keys. "Seventeen years ago."

"Will you be able to do it? Can you even open the door?"

"I seriously don't know. I'll get back to you. It's time for breakfast."

He collected his breakfast from the bin and watched the holo-ad. Egg McMuffin again.

He stared at his apartment door while he ate and checked the outside temp: 134° air quality: lethal, inside 70° air quality: good. Chelsea cat rubbed against his shins, looked up at him, her long white whiskers trembling, and meowed a little too loud.

Lucille really got under his skin.

He opened his closet door and dropped his robe. He pulled on shorts, a tee shirt and wiggled into his ADS suit. On pure instinct, he reached into his nightstand drawer and closed his hands around his house keys.

"I'll be back," he said to Chelsea and Lucille. Neither responded.

The corridor looked longer than he recalled, or maybe it was just weird walking in a clumsy suit. The elevator came more quickly than he anticipated. Magnus walked in and pressed lobby. The piped in music was atonal without beginning or end.

The doors opened and Max took a deep breath and proceeded to the front door. It had a motion sensor and opened immediately. He looked through his goggles at the greenish mist. Somewhere, across the river was Queens, Brooklyn, Long Island and the ocean. It made him nauseous to think of all the open space outside and all the tunnels below surging with rodents, Nutria's, giant rats and others of unusual size.

Magnus turned back and went to his apartment. He took off his ADS suit and hung it carefully in his closet. He gave Chelsea extra long pets and was nice to Lucille all day.

He was fine really. No need to leave. The trophy was just another thing to collect dust. What would he buy with all that coin? He had everything he needed.

Sex was overrated anyway. He knew better than anyone else what made him feel good. 🍷



Cowboy-gone

Mary K. Curran

I picked up mid-seventh ring knowing it would be Cousin Barbara making her daily gossip calls while monitoring the street from her front window.

"Addy, you awake? They found Trigger burnt to a crisp in a shack in the woods. Don't groan. I called that stuttering dispatcher, Saff Sullivan, and he said they think the fire was caused by someone smoking around gasoline. Place went up like a tinderbox and Saff said the Fire Chief said it was like the 4th when those fireworks went off. I'm glad your mother didn't live to see it. She was against Trigger smoking. I see his sister. Must go. Be over later with coffee."

I was sitting on the back porch steps when Cousin Barbara came around the corner of the house.

"Your face is red. Too much sun on your pale skin," she said, placing on the step a small covered cup from the local coffee shop with packets of artificial sugar and little

containers of non-dairy cream. "Don't remember how you like it so brought everything."

"Black's fine," I said, taking my cup, lifting the lid, releasing the steam.

"Grass needs cutting." She sank into a metal lawn chair and took a noisy gulp from her cup. "Spoke to Christine on her way to daily Mass. So devout, no wonder she never married a mortal man. Said the police been to the house about Trigger. Family's not seen him for a while. Her mother went into hysterics and her father got into the scotch. Came down to Christine to identify her brother from police photos. Trigger's body was unrecognizable but they'd found his dog tags in the ashes. How's the coffee?"

I nodded approval, sniffed and sighed, wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, marveling, yet again, at Cousin Barbara's complete lack of awareness of anything outside her own narrative.

“What with his father away from home most days and his mother so discombobulated, plus that nasty business in Viet Nam, Trigger never really had a chance. Kingmans adopted those kids too late in life but your mother tried to help. Always kind to them. You’ve been awfully good to keep up the house just as Lizzie had it. Feels the same, like she was still here. I’ll let you know about the funeral. Don’t spend all day in your bathrobe.”

“Funeral? There’s going to be a funeral?”

“What’d you expect? Christine’s speaking to the priest this morning. Trigger’s father probably doesn’t give a fig and I doubt the mother has a vote. Christine’s going forward with visiting hours at the funeral home and mass at the church. Hope Trigger’s war buddies don’t show up. Oz and Jute. Gave me the willies. Couldn’t tell them apart, what with their long hair and tattoos and no teeth. Always talking NASCAR races. Off to Weight Watchers now. Let me know when you’re ready to join. You’ve got your mother’s rear, like a shelf. Your face will freeze like that.”

She chugged her coffee, traipsed out of the yard and merrily tooted the horn as she rattled off in her lime green Gremlin. Cousin Barbara was slightly related to me through marriage being my mother’s sister-in-law’s first husband’s girlfriend’s daughter. Unmarried, frugal, overbearing, and, as my father remarked, a bit touched in the head, she meddled, gossiped, took any opportunity to inflict opinion or advice, and never met a secret she wouldn’t willingly share. After my father died she was here all the time tossing pity and platitudes at us as she imagined families should do in times of grief. I put my head down on my knees and whimpered. Cultivate kindness, dear, came the words of my mother who had treated this full-personality woman with amused tolerance, steadfast patience, and unconditional compassion. I wished for similar talents.

Trigger’s story began one day in late summer when Cousin Barbara called my mother and I listened on the upstairs extension.

“I’ve binoculars and been watching the new neighbors move in today. Paid cash for the old Robinson house and Kingman’s their name, Douglas, Sr., and his wife Deirdre. Heard she’s a dipsomaniac. See the children coming outside now. Boy’s name is Douglas, Jr., has light hair and looks about sixteen, maybe seventeen. Girl’s a brunette called Christine who looks about Addy’s age. There’s the mother, a pale little thing by the front door in a yellow sun dress. Much younger than I imagined. Got some nice looking furniture. Their realtor was Carol Goodwin who’s driving something new almost every month being married to that used car salesman up Route 1 who never stops talking. People buy just to shut him up. Ain’t mean if it’s the truth, Lizzie. Douglas Kingman told Carol that Deidre was once a fashion model in mail order catalogues. He’s a consultant, whatever that is, and travels a lot on business. He’s seen me. He’s waving. He’s coming into the yard. He is a big one. Got a mustache. But I don’t want his fat cigar in my house. Must go and stop him on the doorstep. I can hear you breathing, Addy. Hang up.”

I figured Deidre Kingman liked her booze after looking up dipsomaniac in the dictionary. I was sitting at the kitchen table glancing through a Sears and Roebuck catalogue for

a pale little thing when Cousin Barbara called back. After listening on the phone for several minutes my mother wrote a number on a slip of paper. “Yes, yes, of course...totally agree...Addy would be delighted...I’ll call right away so they can get acquainted before school starts.” She smiled encouragingly at me. I rolled my eyes.

A couple days later on a sunny afternoon we sat on the back porch steps with sugar cookies. He told me not to call him Douglas because his name was Trigger. After Roy Rogers’ horse? He shrugged. Naturally I developed a crush on this tall blond boy with beautiful smile. Like my favorite TV heroes he was Cowboy-strong, ran miles almost every day and was on the school’s wrestling team, often Cowboy-silent, moody and not much for small talk, but Cowboy-brave when he took me, a sophomore, to his Senior Prom. I thought he was very Cowboy-clever when he got into to a decent college but really Cowboy-stupid when he infuriated his parents and stunned the rest of us by quitting in the middle of his second year to join the Army. They sent him to Viet Nam.

Christine aspired to be a nun and reddened furiously when anyone cursed. At Girl Scout camp she was inordinately modest and showered in her bathing suit. She spouted pious inanities about gluttony and refused to make S’mores. During a heavy downpour she said we all had to pray. We refused so she rubbed her hands on the sides of our tent and made it leak. I thought she was a total waste of time but my mother saw a lonely, self-absorbed girl who needed assurance and motivation. She signed us up as Candy Stripers and two days a week after school we donned our perky caps and starched pink and white striped pinafores and volunteered at the local hospital. Christine hated the smell of disinfectant, made the patients nervous with her moralizing, and was assigned to the gift shop. I was sent to Med-Surg, Telemetry, Hospice, and to OB/GYN where I witnessed a birth. I loved it. My mother, an RN, was overjoyed when I went to nursing school but showed equal jubilation with Christine’s odd choice of a two-year business program at the community college.

I got off the porch steps, picked up the empty coffee containers, went inside and started the washing machine. On the Hoosier was Trigger’s framed photo taken when he was young, resplendent in his Army dress uniform, a lean, mean, fighting machine, physically and emotionally whole. I sat down at the kitchen table and thought about a rainy afternoon when I was home between semesters and my mother and I tolerated an afternoon coffee with Cousin Barbara.

“Never guess who I ran into at the A & P this morning. Gloria Peron whose third husband owns that new restaurant on the right just coming into to town where the old chrome plating shop used to be. Take serious consideration before drinking the water in that place or paying for one of those fancy dinners arranged like Easter hats in cream sauce so small people have to eat again once they get home. They catered the Rotary dinner last night down the country club. Kingmans were there. Gloria said Deirdre looked like a naughty mermaid in tight green sheath with pink silk rose in her hair, ate little, drank more, and spent the evening leaning up against Grover Branson, the one-eyed fellow with gold tooth and missing pinky who sells accident

insurance. I’ll have another, Lizzie.”

My mother sliced more pound cake and poured more coffee into the china cup to which Cousin Barbara added four sugar cubes.

“Douglas Kingman, drunk as a skunk, was pounding the table, snorting and blowing about Viet Nam, and shouted, ‘The boy’s a damn coward!’ That quieted the room because the Kingmans just heard that day Trigger’d been wounded. Lizzie, careful, now, you’ve spilled your coffee. Gloria’s husband told her Douglas Kingman got violent in the men’s room where they’d taken him to wash vomit off his shirt. Kept flailing around and yelling Trigger’d walked into enemy fire on purpose and got injured out of spite. Lizzie, you crying? You did so much for him and his sister. Cooked meals, helped with homework, even taught them both to swim in the quarry. Funny how kids that age had never had swimming lessons but you told them they had to learn because the quarry was bottomless and no one’d ever find them if they drowned. That scared Christine, she was never in the deep part, but Trigger was always under water. You jumped in after him, scared he was gone forever. Trigger always came up eventually at some place nobody was looking and you never scolded him. That was a mistake in my opinion. You were too easy on him. Where you going, Lizzie? Some of this cake’s going home with me.”

I hugged Trigger’s photo to my chest until the washing machine stopped with a loud buzz that startled me out of my reverie. I put wet towels in a basket and carried them outside to hang on the clothesline. I was doing fine until I picked up a blue towel used so many times with my mother’s sponge baths. I felt overwhelmingly sorry for myself, fell to my knees in the grass, trembling and sobbing, remembering my past, lamenting my dead.

Father had been dead for a few years and I was living eight hours away working at a hospital in another state but moved back home when the official diagnosis of stomach cancer confirmed what my mother had suspected. She had been given a few months and refused what she considered useless treatment, worked until it became impossible then calmly surrendered to the dying process at home. She was an easy patient who gratefully accepted my ministrations and graciously welcomed visitors who arrived almost daily with desserts and casseroles, hugs and tears. Trigger came often; Christine, not so much. When Cousin Barbara wasn’t there chattering at us or eating our food she’d be on the phone.

“Hospitals are crazy, dangerous places, Addy, full of sick people. Look at Trigger, in and out of VA hospitals where first they get him hooked on morphine, then they wean him off, and still they don’t fix his limp. Remember Bill Wiggins? After getting that subpoena for his taxes he tried to hang himself from the train bridge. Rope was too long. Police found him down in the runoff mad as a wet hen with a broken leg. Went to the ER to get it set and they found a slew of problems. Kept him there until he died of staph infection.”

And: “Trigger spent the night in jail because of those platoon buddies of his. Was on Kingman’s patio last night with Oz and Jute hooting and hollering, drinking and probably smoking that dopey stuff. Almost jumped out of

my skin when they set off fireworks. Like bombs exploding outside my bedroom window. Sally Riggs, two doors up and president of the D.A.R., was on the street in her yellow slicker carrying her ancestor’s old musket when the police showed up. Tried to take Sally’s musket but she was feisty, held on for dear life. Police backed off with a warning after seeing it wouldn’t fire. Douglas Kingman was yelling inside the house. Saw Trigger and friends marched outside in handcuffs. Got loaded into police cars and taken away. This morning went over and saw Deirdre’d been crying. Said Doug had been threatened by Trigger so he and his friends weren’t allowed at the house anymore.”

And: “Heard from Gail Woodbury whose son, Paul, is in the fire department. Once a flamethrower with the Marines, married to that Vietnamese girl who paints nails. They had to put a fire out at Trigger’s shack last night. Pumped water from the quarry. Trigger and his buddies had rigged up a latrine with a 55-gallon oil drum cut in half, made a two-holer. One must have been full because Trigger was burning it with gasoline. Firemen got a good whiff of that black smoke. Gail said Paul said he never expected to smell that burning shit again since Viet Nam.”

Ashes on water were my mother’s last coherent words before quietly floating away on an opiate cloud. I had her cremated and held a memorial service at home. Many people showed up and we played her favorite Sinatra songs, ate, drank, laughed, cried, and offered impromptu eulogies. Several days later Trigger and I took my mother’s urn to the place she loved, the long-abandoned granite quarry that over time had filled with rain and spring water and where we had spent our summers swimming. We walked slowly. Trigger limped and leaned on me through the rough patches. We poured mother’s remains into the water, clung tightly to each other until Trigger whispered he would miss our Lizzie but he’d like a drink now.

We went to his shack less than a quarter mile away. He propped the narrow door ajar with a granite paver and placed the empty urn beside it. By the light of the open door and small window I saw a rusty cot with thin mattress and rolled sleeping bags, Coleman lantern placed on a plastic milk carton, coffee can full of cigarette butts next to a red container of gasoline, worn paperbacks and Playboy magazines piled on boxes of fireworks stacked in a corner. Trigger opened a cooler full of melting ice, took out two cans of beer, handed one to me. We sat opposite each other in aluminum beach chairs. He drank quickly, tossed the empty out the window where it clanked on granite boulders and picked up another before I had barely taken two sips of mine.

“Welcome to my hooch.”

“What is this place?”

“Lizzie showed me it. Said when she was a kid some old geezer used to live here with a pack of runaway dogs. Played the harmonica and went around town sharpening knives. He, the dogs and harmonica just disappeared one day without a trace. Me and my buddies fixed it up.”

“Don’t the cops bother you?”

“Nah. Keeps me out of the house when Doug’s there.”

“Where are your friends?”

“They come and go on their own time.” He chugged his

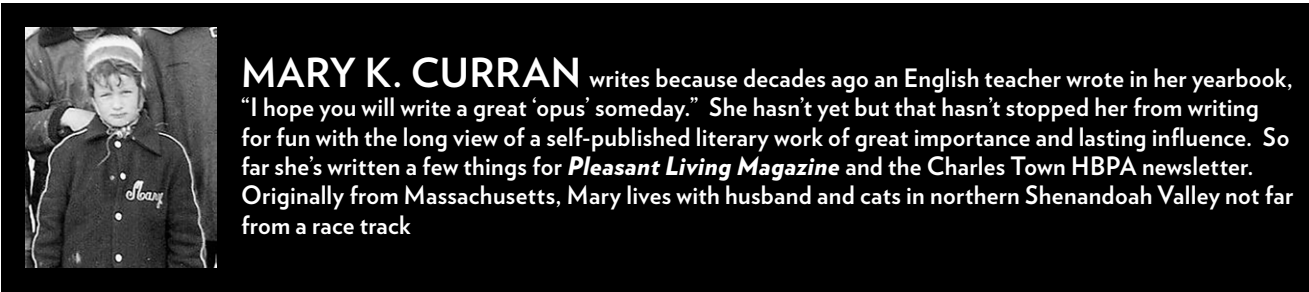
beer, opened a third. “You home for good now?”
“I hope so.”
He nodded, winked, took a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it with a kitchen match he ignited with his thumb nail. Cowboy-cool.
I pointed to a coil of rope and cement blocks under the cot.
“Exit strategy.”
“You all right, Trigger?”
“Middling.”
I was quiet while he finished his beer and picked up a half-full bottle of scotch from behind the cooler. He lit a new cigarette off the old, removed the dog tags from around his neck and dropped them between his feet.
“Tried to kill my father.”
“What?”
“He had this old Enfield revolver kept loaded in his desk drawer. Showed me how to use it because if someone ever broke into the house I’d better shoot to kill.”
He took a drag on his cigarette, a swig of scotch, and related a plot line worthy of a B-movie.
Good son smacked with teenage hormones develops bad attitude, hangs with sketchy group, becomes hostile and rebellious, a disappointment to his parents, an incitement to his younger sister. His father has little patience with kids and, truth be told, never wanted them. His mother is ineffectual at mollifying discord and his sister finds a friend in Jesus. Early morning father returns from business trip totally plastered, locks keys in car, forces back door, kicks cabinets, slams pans, starts frying eggs. Son awakens, sneaks downstairs, gets loaded gun, sees coat hanging on kitchen door, grips gun with both hands and fires until there are no rounds left. He walks into kitchen, is horrified, yet, morbidly aroused, when discovers father face down on floor. Eggs burn, room fills with smoke. Son turns off stove, leaves gun on counter, folds himself into small closet under stairs. Mother screams. Sister prays. Police arrive. Neighbors stare. Son is pulled from hidey hole to face woozy father standing, glaring, and alive. One cop says, Therapy. Another says, Target practice. Father says, I’m calling you Trigger because you’re so damn quick on it. Hearty male laughter and...Scene.
He finished the scotch, dropped the cigarette into the bottle, threw it out the window and smirked at the sound of shattering glass. “Moved here. They thought a small town might straighten me out. Like I was the only problem.”
“You didn’t show any weird behavior in school.”
“Kiddie meds and morning runs made me into something almost likeable. Had you fooled.”
I blushed and leaned down to put my beer can on the floor.
“Your mother was only one I wrote from ‘Nam.”
“She loved you like a son.”
“Roger that.”

It started to rain. He got up to stand by the door. “There was a story we read in high school by a Russian dude. Raining outside and this guy’s swimming in a pond, flapping his arms, swimming around. ‘How delicious,’ he says again and again. He’s loving it. Dives over and over, goes deeper and deeper, stays down longer and longer. Then some idiot on shore shouts, ‘You’ve had enough!’ And he

gets out. Son of a bitch should have stayed in there until he touched bottom.”
“Gooseberries.”
“What?”
“The story was Gooseberries by Chekhov.”
“Look at you, remembering crap like that. You figure he wanted to drown himself?”
“Maybe just his demons. The story’s got a lot going on. Social injustice. Guilt. Selfishness. Quest for happiness. Inability to help those who are not happy. It’s Russian, deep, dark, bit hard to fathom.”
“Jesus, woman.” He opened the cooler for another beer, held the wet can against his forehead. “Life’s a fucking bitch and then you die.”
I wanted to hold him, make everything better. I considered asking him to move in with me, the house was big enough. Maybe I could even get him to join A.A. I sighed, rose from the chair as he tossed the beer back into the cooler, ran both his hands through his thinning blond hair, and gave me his beautiful smile with his VA-issued dentures. Still Cowboy-handsome.
He took off his shoes, removed his clothes. “Need you to see this.”
“No, Trigger. Please.” But I watched, and wept.
He stood before me showing his wounds, the long ragged red lines of suture scars and dark dimpled depressions where chunks of metal and muscle had been gouged out, skin stretched over and sealed. He had been heavily damaged and too many parts were missing. He smelled of cigarettes and liquor and profound sadness. I led him willingly to the cot and we made love on the thin mattress.
Cowboy-beloved. The bittersweet memory had unanchored me from grief, gave me tenuous peace of mind and a modest glimmer of insight. I uncurled from my fetal position, wiped my tears with mother’s blue towel and lay on my back in the grass, relieved. Cousin Barbara appeared out of nowhere and stood over me, arms akimbo, blocking the sun with her solid body.
“You’re still in your bathrobe? It’s not the end of the world. People die all the time. Get up. Shower. Get dressed. I’ll hang these and make us some lunch.”
Clean, dressed, and comforted by grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup, I listened to the prattle.
“Saw Kate Foley come in late to Weight Watchers. Been losing and gaining the same 22 pounds for the past two years. Still shaped like a soccer ball. She’d seen Christine and found out Trigger’s visiting hours are tomorrow evening at the funeral home. Funeral Mass is the following morning at 9:30. Kate said Christine said the priest wanted to get it over with before painters started on the ceiling. Scaffolding’s already up in back so everybody’ll be squeezed up front. Plywood’s still there covering the window that wild VanDerpool boy broke with his BB gun shooting crows off St. Francis’s statue in the Peace Garden. Can’t use the parish center because it’s all set up for church fair. Don’t know why Christine didn’t ask Episcopalians for their church, it’s huge, or Methodists, they’ve got bench cushions. Baptists might have allowed a Catholic service if nobody danced and UUs tolerate just about anything. But Christine’s particularly odd, following rules right down

to the last rune. Should’ve gone into a convent instead of accounting. Don’t sigh so much, Addy.”
Cousin Barbara cleaned the table and put everything in the sink, wiped her hands on a dishtowel and surveyed the room.
“I’m glad you didn’t sell your mother’s antique oak Hoosier,” she said, tapping the cream enamel countertop. “That’s worth something, hold out for the best offer. Nancy Griffin practically gave away her grandmother’s mahogany secretary. Remembered she’d left some cash in it and went back to the dealer who smoothly opened the secret compartment and showed her it was empty. Always carried a suitcase of a purse and she was entirely justified lifting two oyster plates from his shop along with a cameo brooch, a pair of silhouettes, a sterling silver pickle fork, and cobalt glass target ball.”
“It’s not Trigger.”
“No, of course it isn’t. That’s just his empty shell. His soul’s already departed. You’re upset because he was like kin. Probably still mourning for your mother and Lizzie’s not been gone too long. It takes time to adjust.”
“It’s not Trigger, Cousin Barbara. He’s not in the coffin. He’s in the quarry.”
“That’s just silly. See you tomorrow night if not before. Dress nicely.”
“I’m working a double shift. I’ll be at the funeral.”
Cousin Barbara nodded and left.
I stared at the Hoosier, opened drawers and doors and found years’ worth of accumulated detritus - sugar bowl full of fancy buttons, old Currier & Ives calendars behind the flour sifter, pencils, photographs, dishes and a bag of tarnished silverware, drawings I’d made in school, yellow news clippings (President Killed in Dallas!), and under plastic bags jammed into the potato bin a packet of correspondence wrapped in a turquoise silk scarf smelling of my mother’s Wind Song perfume. I put the scarf around my neck and poured myself a tall glass of wine, sat at the kitchen table and slowly read passionately intimate letters written by two people scandalously in love. I wasn’t angry but oddly amused at the tender absurdity. Their secret was safe with me. I carried the letters outside and placed them on the BBQ grill, squirted the briquettes with lighter fluid and set the love letters on fire. I sat in a metal lawn chair and raised a toast to my mother and our Cowboy-lover as damning mementoes of their amorous entanglement incinerated in a smoky finale.
Another morning, another phone call.
“They called off Trigger’s funeral! Went early to be first at his visiting hours. On a table just inside the door was

a display of Trigger’s medals along with his high school graduation photo and the one in uniform like he gave your mother. American flag, too, nicely folded, and some flowers but, in my opinion, the red carnations shaped like a horseshoe with a Good Luck ribbon was in very poor taste. Douglas Kingman shook my hand with a grip like a stevedore. Deirdre clutched his arm and barely let out a peep. Christine was all professional in black dress and Jackie O veil. When people started coming in she escorted them right up to the kneeler, even the Protestants. Said she was glad I came and asked after you. Closed casket, of course, candles at both ends and white Bible and pearl rosary. Funeral home props. Seen them before for Linda Bennett, ninety years old and sharp as a tack right up until her fatal reaction to shrimp scampi at the Junior League luncheon. Visiting hours were ending when a man shouted, “Halt, there!” Oz or Jute, couldn’t tell which, stomped in waving a black and white checkered flag. Went right up to the casket and opened the bottom half. Douglas Kingman stood up growling. Deirdre screamed. Christine launched her red missal at Oz or Jute and knocked over a candle which fizzled out in a lovely display of purple gladiolas. Inside the casket I saw swollen burnt legs and feet like fried frogs on a stick. Oz or Jute was making to wrap that flag around those kabobs but he took a good hard look and shouted, ‘Hey! This ain’t Trigger! This guy’s got all his toes!’” 🍷



Thrice Time's a Charm

David Simmer II, Graphic Arts Director



It was the 25% cyan.

My answer to anybody kind enough to ask what I will remember most about the nine years I spent working on this publication with my friend and colleague RW Spryszak... it was the 25% cyan.

For all twenty-seven issues of **Thrice Fiction** I've assembled, it was boxes filled with 25% cyan that signified something was missing or unfinished. Sometimes it was a piece of artwork. Sometimes an author photo. Or maybe I placed a box filled with 25% cyan on top of a paragraph... or a name... or a web-link that needed checking. As each issue started to take shape and all the pieces started clicking together, those 25% cyan boxes would start to fade away. And when the last one had disappeared, that's how I knew it was time to send it off to RW for a final read-through.

And, I'm here to tell you, sometimes getting rid of those 25% cyan boxes was a real challenge! But I loved (most) every minute of it and couldn't be more thrilled to have been a part of something I'm so incredibly proud of.

It seems impossible that it was nearly ten years ago that I was sitting on RW's back porch 1600 miles from home drinking beer, eating homemade pizza, and talking about life. Knowing of his substantial history in the lit-zine world, I floated the idea of creating a new zine where our blogging friends could show off their writing talents (or, as in my case, the lack thereof). Would he be interested in contributing? Perhaps even editing it? I don't know if it was my charm (unlikely), the timing (possibly), or just my dumb luck (more likely), but he signed onboard when all I had was a title. It would be called **Thrice Fiction Magazine** because we'd put out three issues a year. Why three? Two seemed too few. Four seemed too many. A handshake agreement on a warm summer day in the suburbs of Chicago and here we are. RW would be the guy weeding through the written submissions, and I would be the guy who put everything together... maybe with a few pieces of artwork to give it some visual "snap."

Once we got the word out, submissions started flowing in, and RW sent me his picks for the first issue, it was time to decide how this thing would look. After a week of playing around I came up with a list of rules I wanted to follow. The first one... *and the only rule I would never break...* was that stories would run uninterrupted. I always hated it when I'd be really into a story and then see "Turn to page 48" just as things were getting good. Suddenly I was concentrating on page numbers instead of focusing on the story... well, not on my watch!

Another rule was that the artwork would never eclipse or spoil a story. Our focus was on the writing and this was something I felt was important. Alas this rule was broken from time to time. Something that became inevitable once I decided each story should have its own art. There's just no way to have a random assortment of texts that were of widely varying lengths... *each running uninterrupted...* and have the exact same 2-1/4" square piece of artwork. I'd end up with a bunch of white space which would make each issue expensive to print. Yes, we would be giving digital copies away for free, but for people who wanted something they could hold in their hands there could be no wasted space. So some stories had larger artwork (or even an entire page), just to be sure print buyers got their money's worth. Occasionally this overwhelmed the story in a way I was unhappy with, but compromises had to be made.

At first I was creating all the artwork myself. That first issue is all me from cover to cover. And that's too much me. Our stories were coming from a wide variety of diverse writers shouldn't the artwork be the same? And so I reached out to friends, at first, to see if anybody would put their busy lives on hold long enough to donate their time and talent to these pages. I don't know if it was my charm (unlikely), the timing (possibly), or just my dumb luck (more likely), but most everybody I asked said yes. It's to them I offer my heartfelt thanks and appreciation. **Thrice** would literally not have been the same without you.

There were a handful of individuals who said "no," of course, and I hold no malice for those who refused. None whatsoever. Having to put your paying jobs on hold and give up your personal time for our little lit-zine was always a tough sell. Which is what makes getting a "yes" from artists whom I didn't think I had a prayer of landing all that much sweeter. My friends probably felt they didn't have a choice (they didn't), but those shoot-for-the-moon contributors? I mean, come on, our second issue has a cover by Echo Chernik! And I still marvel that Reza Farazmand from **Poorly Drawn Lines** ever wanted anything to do with us. Yet here he is... still contributing his hilarious cartoons to our pages. I feel the need to pinch myself every time he responds to my emails.

The easiest part of the job is the asking.

The hardest part of the job is meeting a deadline. RW, myself, our writers, our artists... none of us are getting paid. We've been doing this for the love of the game. But love doesn't pay the bills. Certainly not in my case. Which means that **Thrice Fiction** often has to take a back seat to Real Life. Not just from contributing artists who have to drop out at the last minute, but also for myself. On three separate occasions an issue was released late because it all came down to me and I wasn't able to deliver on time. I tried not to feel bad about it.

No I wasn't being paid money... but our contributors were paying us in something far more valuable than money, **their time**. To release late was to fail them and the precious commodity they had donated. But if you're so sick you end up in the hospital, there's nothing you can do. If you're having to scramble to meet work obligations due to complications from a government shutdown, there's nothing you can do. If you're saying goodbye to your mom as she lay in hospice, there's nothing you can do. And yet... **you still feel bad**.

I bring this up because this issue is looking to be late as I sit here on Christmas Eve waiting for the remaining bits and pieces to arrive. Our artists will likely come through before the end of December but, alas, I won't be here to receive their works. Thanks to a "paper supply crisis" at my real job, a trip from early December had to be rescheduled to the 26th. And so I get to spend the end of my 2019 fighting post-holiday travel crowds. Thanks a lot, Santa.

Which is why when I think of whatever future is in store for **Thrice Fiction** now that our thrice-annual magazine is over, I envision something that doesn't have deadlines. Or at least not firm deadlines. It would be nice to be able to have our issues or books or editions *or whatever* land where they land so I can let life happen when Life happens.

And not feel bad about it.

So I guess we shall have to wait and see. Because whatever happens with **Thrice** will be a surprise to me too.

When RW and I first started this thing I was told that most magazines like ours end up closing after two or three issues. People actually took great joy in telling me this. "*It's all good now, but just wait until you've got three issues under your belt!*" they'd say. "*It's all good now, but just wait until you've got ten issues under your belt!*" they'd say. "*It's all good now, but just wait until you've got twenty-seven issues under your belt!*" nobody would say. And I get it. Putting together a magazine... especially one which makes no money and relies on donated content like ours... is no picnic. It's a lot of time. A lot of hard work. A lot of frustration. And yet I am still as fond of **Thrice Fiction** today as I have ever been. And I'm sure when April 2020 comes around and I don't have a new issue to assemble I will definitely miss it. Truth be told, I miss it already. That feeling when RW sends me all the latest stories. That excitement when the artwork starts rolling in. The relief from announcing the new issue is out. And that wonderful feedback from our readers after they've finally seen what we worked so hard to create. All your kind support and comments were much appreciated.

And with that, one more box of 25% cyan is gone.

CLEVER ILLUSTRATION HERE

KEEP IT CLEAN!

Later, Hater!

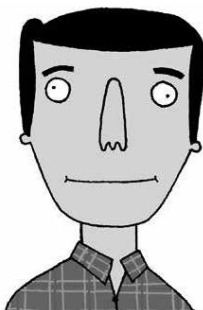
David Simmer II

Before I go, I would like to take this opportunity to ferepe velitat videbis rem venduciendi dolorec turiatium nim invelendus modia nam soles et id eum voluptatquam rehendellam es non plahere cum ad quiendit a sed unt adit occabor runtiat qu et ad et rerspel lac ene nonsecus earu debitiust qui blam tempore ribere lab ut facipsa ndenitas ra de ducipis dolor minctur, aria nulp nonsenduciat omr non expellora que quibus et maio qui quis sam nectati te ea voluptatium et et harum eicimus e aut verionecerum maximinis eost ut voluptatum conser millenimus velist fuga. Cretio tenu. Et quant volut magnis ende cusda dolorpo repremquunda di con reperfero volore litatur? Beaquo escitem porit, cus, sit quia qui to doloritatur, consecto ma ventiunt licatem ut anda.

FARE THEE WELL AND KISS MY ASS NOTE TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED ME IN LIFE AND DESERVE A PUBLIC SHAMING. DO NOT NAME NAMES! THEY KNOW WHO THEY ARE!

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

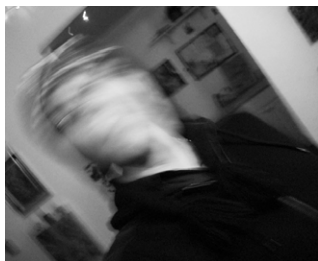
REZA FARAZMAND *Page: 10...*
draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (PoorlyDrawnLines.com), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled **Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories** debuted on October 6, 2015. His latest book, **Comics for a Strange World** was released on October 24th, 2017.



ROB KIRBYSON *Pages: 37, 44-45...*
conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at RobKirbyson.com



KYRA WILSON *Pages: 7, 33, 43...*
is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at KWilsonStudio.com



KATELIN KINNEY *Page: 28...*
graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at katelinkinney.com



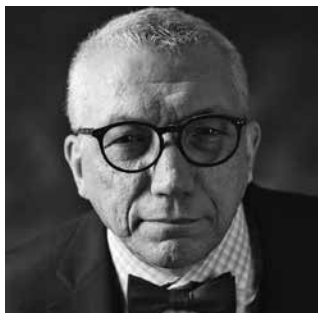
CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 11, 46...*
is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



CHAD YENNEY *Pages: 3, 21, 49...*
makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at computarded.com or send him love letters at computardedcollage@gmail.com.

THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & STAFF

RW SPRYSZAK *Editor, THRICE Fiction...*
has work which appeared in **Slipstream, Paper Radio, the Lost and Found Times, Mallife, Version90, Sub Rosa, Asylum**, and a host of other alternative magazines over the last 30 years. After a drunken hiatus his work has resurfaced in places like **A Minor Magazine** and **Peculiar Mormyrid**. He was editor of the **Fiction Review** from 1989-1991 and co-founded Thrice Publishing in 2011. He compiled and edited **So What If It's True: From the Notebooks of Lorri Jackson** and stares out the window for no reason quite often. He has no degrees, does not apply for awards, and works in a print shop where nobody knows about any of this. You can find his website at rwspryszak.com



DAVID SIMMER II *Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...*
is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of **Thrice Fiction Magazine** and blogs daily at Blogography.com



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