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Calliope

1998

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Volume XV



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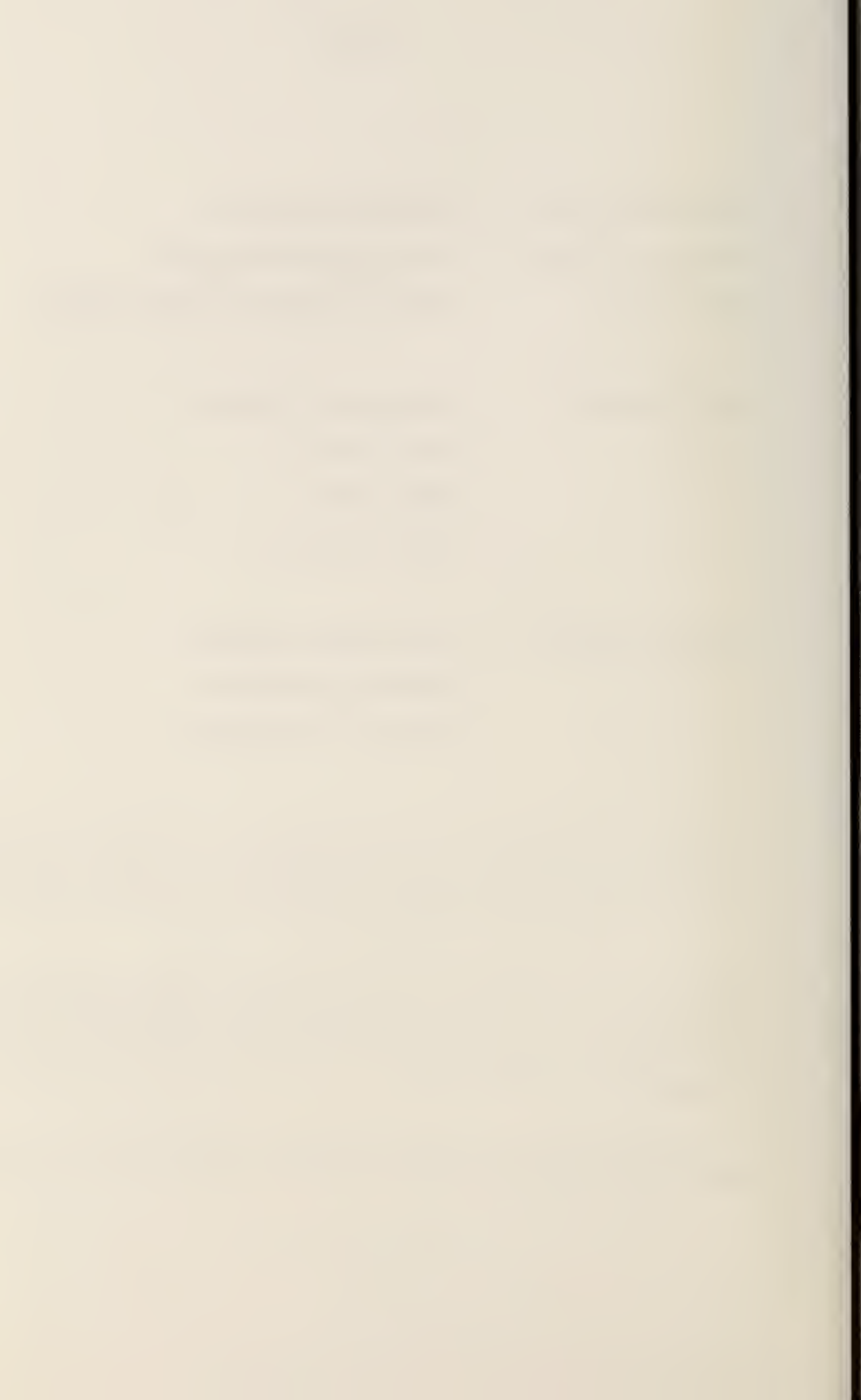
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The Lillian Spenser Award winners and the Art Award winner were chosen this year by the *Calliope* staff.



A Note From the Editors

Many of you know that *Calliope* has fought hard this year to maintain its existence. Both the staff and the editors of this year's edition have worked to produce a quality journal that truly reflects the student body's diversity and creativity. Since *Calliope* is a student publication, the selection of work was done by the *Calliope* staff, which is composed only of students. In addition, the Lillian Spencer Awards for poetry and prose and the Art Award were chosen by the staff this year. As with any professional publication, some editing was necessary; however, the *Calliope* staff strove to maintain the overall integrity of each individual work. The staff would like to extend a special thanks to the Writing Center staff (who will probably never want to hear the name *Calliope* again), the magnificent Dr. Marinara who held our hands and kissed our boo boos, and to our friends and families who, although they are still puzzled as to why we volunteered for this to begin with, are still our friends and family. Above all, we would like to thank you, the students, for providing us with the opportunity to publish the exceptionally creative work that made this edition possible. It is our sincere hope that this edition represents a rebirth of *Calliope* that will continue on for many years to come.



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** Denotes Award

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silver revolution: southern gothic

Melissa S. Hill

beautiful
i think
to stare at crimson
and imagine black
as the absence of
color and the scream
of velvet to be
the king's ransom
and lost i think
to stare at mirrors
and take the silver
and crack my revolution
to time-spinning
details of half
remembered nights
in the full moon's
blood.
is found a color?
is lost a taste?
is beautiful alive?
these things
these questions
grow inside and i give
birth to the beast
in the light
and the angel in the
dark.



Insomnia

Rekha Prakash

the moon continues
to rise while I prepare
my bed of blooms
uncovering protective sheets
tossing and turning
the soil in my hands
dropping seeds tainted
scarlet, like my eyes
that water
from the cool night air
while the poppies
slouch and the breeze
allows their
heads
only to nod
but never rest.



Ashton

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A Whisper on an Owl's Wings

Anita Maurer

A whisper as soft as wind could be heard: "Where are you David?" It was getting late and boredom was setting in. Gina sat alone in her upstairs bedroom, just down the hall from her parents' room. "I wonder if he's coming," she thought. It was raining rather hard, and she figured it was the weather keeping him. She glanced at the diamond engagement ring on her finger, a symbol of David's love for her. Tiny flecks of blue, red, green, and yellow glistened from the gem; it mesmerized her. The roars from the thunder were lulling her to sleep although she tried desperately to stay awake and wait for David.

At last she heard a faint voice from below. "Hey, Gina, are you up there? Hey, Gina, open your window."

Undoing the window latch as silently as she could, she gently opened the window, placing a segment of a broomstick beneath it to keep it open. She always feared it would snap in half at the weight of the window, locking her out of the house. Gina climbed to the ground using the trellis. The rain chilled her to the bone, and she could smell the wet mud in the air. "Where have you been?" she asked.

David smiled and held out a rose. "Getting you this," he said. His hair was wet and drops of water accumulated at the ends of his eyelashes. David's sharp features, dark hair and high cheekbones were from his Indian heritage, but his eyes were of the deepest, darkest blue. It was his eyes that captured Gina the most.

Gina took the rose and David kissed her on the cheek. "David, when should we tell my parents we're getting married?"

"Well, maybe we should get married and then tell your parents," he said.

"But David I..."

"Then you and I can live on the land I have in Nebraska and I can take care of you."

"David I think we should..."

"You don't even have to work; you could just stay home and take care of things."

"But I don't want to move to Nebraska."

Suddenly a light appeared in the kitchen window. "My dad is up," she said. "I have to get back in." She kissed him goodnight, and David helped her back up the trellis into her room.

With the smell of his cologne still fresh on her skin, Gina tried to fall

asleep that night, but her whirling imagination kept her awake. Could she honestly bring herself to quit school to move away with David? What about her parents? What if she wasn't happy living in Nebraska? A month into her eighteenth year and she felt like the world was on her shoulders, and her stomach twisted because of it.

Gina propped her head on the pillow while the moon cast dozens of small shadows onto the ceiling. She glared at them, remembering Larea's Christmas party where she met her one true love. "That's David," Larea said, trying not to make it obvious she was pointing him out. Gina was stunned at the brightness of his eyes. She thought him to be arrogant at first and didn't want to speak with him. It wasn't until he insisted on walking her home that she became enchanted with him. That night she promised herself she would always have David by her side...always, no matter what.

"We'll find a way to work this out," she thought. She felt the tingling of her body relaxing. Slowly she drifted further and further into sleep.

The air was thick and moist when Gina got up for school the next morning. With an emptiness in her stomach, she stared out the window wondering what the day had in store for her. She glanced at the clock. Seven thirty. "Damn, I'm going to be late." She grabbed her coat and purse and jumped into the car. The roads were slick and wet, and it would take her even longer to get to school today. "This is strange," she thought. "Only a few cars on the road." She turned on the radio and learned the storm from the night before caused several leaks in the roof of her high school, and classes were canceled for the day. The conversation she had with David the previous night loomed in her mind, and she took the long way home so she could think about her problems.

Suddenly an object appeared in the road and Gina came within inches of hitting the creature. Looking into her rearview mirror she couldn't make out what it was, so she put the car in reverse and got out to take a closer look. "Oh my God!" Gina found herself staring into the biggest blackest eyes she had ever seen. "A Grey horned owl!" Someone had hit the animal with a vehicle the night before and left it to wallow in agony. It was still alive and obviously in pain. Her heart sank when its sad eyes pleaded for help. She scooped him up in her jacket and raced to the animal hospital.

Once at the hospital, the owl let her pet its beak, which moved Gina's spirit; she knew she was doing something special. "Well, Gina, it looks as though his wing has been dislocated," said Dr. Allen. She could tell that much on her own because his wing was protruding outward from the side.

"Can you do anything doctor?" she asked.

"I don't know. His wing is so badly damaged that to put it in a sling, I have to temporarily put him to sleep. It is possible that the anesthesia may kill him." She knew putting the owl to sleep would probably be best, but she had formed a relationship with it.

"Do whatever you can doctor, and I'll hope for the best," she said.

For several days Gina fed and cared for the owl. She was the only human he would take food from and the only human he would come to. Her only sadness was she knew sooner or later his wing would heal, and he would leave her to fly back to the wild. Suddenly she thought of something, "Maybe I can train him. Then I can keep him for a pet." This idea excited her and she called Dr. Allen to see what he thought.

"That's a nice idea," said Dr. Allen. "The only problem, Gina, is that he's a wild owl, and it's going to be very difficult to tame him, much less train him. The only advice I can give you is that it never hurts to try. If it doesn't work, you will have to return him to the wild." Gina thought about the happiness the owl had brought her, and she rushed to the library to check out several books on wild birds. She read diligently, not omitting any pages. One night David stopped by while she was sitting on the porch doing research on her owl.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"Well," she said. "I'm going to try to train Mr. Owl, so I'm reading up on wild birds."

"Mr. Owl," said David sarcastically. "You named that dirty old bird Mr. Owl. Gina, that's a bit immature, don't you think? Besides, you'll never train a wild bird; you're wasting your time trying."

"If I train him," she said, "I can keep him and just clip his wings; then he can't fly away."

It was evident by her face that what he said hurt her feelings. "It's not a stupid idea David," she said. "In fact Dr. Allen even said it was a good idea. I'm not going to clip his wings and I'm still going to try no matter what you think." Gina got up and went into the house. "Call tomorrow when you don't feel like insulting me," she said and slammed the door.

David yelled at the front door, "Why are you being so sensitive, Gina?" He stood there for a minute waiting for a reply, but none came. Finally he turned and left, feeling sorry for what he had said.

For several weeks, Gina continued her mission to train Mr. Owl. The first week she taught him to waddle over to her when she called him. His wing had not quite healed all the way, and flying was out of the question. Gina's dad built a cage for the owl, which is where he slept until the day came when his wing was finally healed. Gina was reluctant to bring him outside with her without the use of a harness, but she knew it had to be done. David was with her when she took one more look into Mr. Owl's big

black eyes before she set him free in the yard. At first the owl just looked at her, confused as to why he was no longer trapped by the harness. Then he spread his wings and took flight. David heard Gina gasp at the length of Mr. Owl's beautiful wing span. Then he saw the sadness cross Gina's face.

"Call him to see if he'll come back," he said. Gina yelled for the owl once, twice, then three times, but there was nothing. Finally, a black speck could be seen against the clouds and Gina knew it was her owl.

"There it is!" she exclaimed. "He's coming back! He understands me!"

"Wow, you really did train him Gina. That's amazing!" Mr. Owl nestled softly onto her arm, and Gina shrieked with excitement.

"I'm happy for you," David said.

Later Gina went to bed happier than she had been in a long time. Not too long afterward, her school held career day, and Gina chose the science category. The guest speaker was a marine biologist whom Gina was excited to meet. He explained the thrills and rewards of studying animals. Gina thought of her owl and how fun it was to train him and take care of him. That day she went home from school with a plan for her own future.

That night David came to see her. "I need to tell you something," he said. "I spoke to my uncle in Nebraska and he's going to lend us the money to get married. Once we've moved up there, he's going to set me up with a job. Before you know it, we will have saved enough for a house. I think we should get married right away."

The image of her owl flashed through her mind as she heard someone speaking in the distance. She then realized it was her own voice. "I want to stay here," she said.

"What? What about our life together Gina? What about our future?"

"Well, I think I want to move on to college."

"But I told you, I don't want you working. I want you to take care of things at home. Don't you understand?"

David's words cut her. "Stay and take care of things at home," she thought. Other thoughts appeared in her mind. "But I don't want to stay at home. I want to go to school and have my own career." Suddenly she remembered something. "If you want to keep him, just clip his wing; then he can't fly away."

With that last thought Gina blurted out, "I want to live here David."

"No Gina. If we're getting married, we're doing it now. You will live with me, and there will be no more talk of you starting your own career!"

She paused for a moment and stared into his cold blue eyes. "I'll meet you at your house in twenty minutes and then we'll go." She went inside and pulled the suitcase out from under her bed. While arranging her clothes inside it, she suddenly stopped and looked at the owl sleeping in his cage. Then she looked at the clock. "Ten minutes," she said. She took her night

gown out of her dresser, gently unfolded it, and put it on. She looked at the clock. "Five minutes," she said. Slowly she climbed into bed and turned off the lamp. She looked at the owl sleeping in his cage.

"Goodnight, Mr. Owl," she said. A whisper as soft as wind could be heard:

"Goodbye, David."

In the Lion's Den

Katy Pace Byrd

Writing a check, "Today's my anniversary," I said.

"Congratulations, girl, how many years?"

Thought and answered, "Nineteen."

"Well, nineteen years in the lion's den
that's something."

But this nineteen can be factored

Into honeyed moons, aromatic confluences,

Passionate cross-purposes, gritty endeavors,

Grim defeats, tender victories.

This nineteen makes a secret history for two,

A gripping and warring pushme-pullyou,

Going our separate ways together.

And here we are, still making history in the lion's den,

Still roaring, still wrestling, still prideful.

Still trying to figure out who's in charge, who's

The leader of the pack. Still needing to learn

That we're all in this together,

But knowing it all the same.

Nineteen years in the lion's den

O for a hundred more.

Cat's Reply to Schrodinger

Tiffanie L. C. Rogers

They are Outside of my box
and i wonder,
oppressing dark
upon me,
What can i know of them?
Can i know
of their state
of being
From my strong dark box?
They've left me
with, but they
are in, a thing
decaying at no
certain rate.
And the question is, while
i cannot
see them,
are they?
No, as i have often thought,
they are in
an obscure state of neither;
What can i know of them
but that they
put me in
this box,
just after
scratching
my ear,
And that maybe i am better off
in here.



Candle Kaleidoscope

Armstrong Athletic Ball

Armstrong Athletic Ball

a communion

Melissa S. Hill

Softly falling into the aftermath
of a communion I anointed the
kaleidoscope of my sins.
How through the dark looking
glass I crawled through promised
lands and crystal shards pierced my
wrists though I felt a saviour
in my hands.

I bore a cross of blue-eyed
roses and a crown of gilded thorns
my temptation lingered in the
hurricane and my pain within
the storm.

I screamed in silence
took my way through empty
streets lashes fell like
burning kisses I raised my
lips for more and trembling
licked the heat.

But through the bowl
of sorrow and light and the silken
murderer's retreat, I washed my
hands of all shame denied myself
denied my maker and danced into
the naked flame.

And a stumbling hymn through
stilted lips so afraid to speak,
I gave them over to my revelation
my sermon by the tangled
tree,
and God's nails tore me bare

and laid open for all to see
the mourning existence and skillful
rage and weeping parody,
and my passion play has ended
as I give up the ghost
open my mouth for wasps and
vipers and close my tongue around
the host.





With Apologies to Walt Whitman

Elaine A. Hakala

(The following is an excerpt from the poem "A Tune About Me" by world-renowned poet Whitley Yawp, wherein she describes the resources she has drawn upon while creating her many respected works)

The screeching sound of passing cars filled with teenagers, deep bass
 booming out the lyrics to a song about some woman's derriere
 and the dynamics of its movement,
The sticky quality of a glass bottle after the label is torn off,
The constant awareness that some mustards are yellow, while others are
 golden,
The dichotomy of Ted Koppel and his hairpiece, sweating in front of
 studio lights,
The cantankerous mood developing at the Dames of the American
 Revolution nursing home over the way cribbage scores are
 being altered for profit,
The little pet monkey in the clever red suit and pill box hat who had
 shared my bunk in my childhood and taught me so much about the
 meaning of life,
The tragic beauty of a lonely beer bottle lying in a corner after a party,
The still constant memory of sitting in church as a child listening to the
 minister say "Verily I say to you," and wondering what "Verily"
 meant,
The taste of pennies in my mouth,
The moment in my life I realized there was no such thing as "free space"
 or "free time,"
The difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist as it relates to the
 normal fee charged for an hour,
The lunatic hitchhiking on the side of the highway wearing red, white and
 blue harem pants a big "Please pick me up...I'm harmless"
 smile on his face,
The middle class mom in pink polyester double knit pants and matching
 pink curlers at Wal-Mart at 8am to buy bonbons and a magazine to
 prepare for a hard day's work,

The man in a thousand dollar business suit walking into a board meeting
with toilet paper trailing from his shoe,
The tele-evangelist with the wind-proof hair, his accompanist with the
troweled on make-up,
The bigot who arose from the murky bottom in the shallow end of the
gene pool,
The heart wrenching realization that "one size" does not fit all,
The bullfighter with the high, squeaky voice,
The mental image of Albert Einstein wearing a smirk and a tee-shirt that
reads "Moustache Rides,"
The dreams of white rabbits wearing orthodontic retainers on their teeth,
The realization that by definition, the term "average intelligence" means
that roughly half of the people I meet fall below that,
This space for rent or lease--call 555-1545 for information,
The dreaded STD known as "mossy crack,"
The bald man with the webbed toes who hung out around the elementary
school offering kippers to the children,
The nice man in Sears who showed me the proper Craftsman tool to
determine if I was metric or standard,
The nightmare of waking up to discover that everyone is exactly the same,
and being rapidly bored to death,
The love of mental gymnastics, and doing fifty pound benchpresses with
my brain,
The meter maid in orthopedic shoes whose grin grows as she waits for the
meter on my car to run out,
The number of holes in a standard sheet of institutional ceiling tile,
The cats yeowling out their lust in spring, the sound of country music
singers doing the same thing year round,
The segment of the population born with a malformed duty gland,
The embodiment of masculinity on bodice-ripper novel covers, the
embodiment of femininity in stick figures,
The ramifications of global warming and what that might mean to the life

expectancy of the polar bear club,
The continuing euthanasia of the art of conversation,
And these swell inside my head, till the pressure grows immense,
And the vivid streams of consciousness flow across a field of CTR green,
twisting and turning amid big glasses of sweet tea and the
occasional ice cream sandwich,
And become one with me, in a tune about me.



Hindsight

ARMSTRONG ACADEMIC STATE
UNIVERSITY 1980-81

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UNIVERSITY 1980-81

Indian Summer

John D. Trainor

With Father Winter blowing
sarcasm in dangling icicles
on the cracking Georgia pine,
I sit with my childhood friend
reminiscing in giggles and short stares
in front of the burning ember,
an easing warmth,
rising from the cold earth

With our smiles' agreement,
my eyes meet hers,
a pair of auburn moons
that bleed into blowing autumn leaves,
returning to yesterday
at Mr. Luther's farm

When we would play hide and seek
in the woods and jump the battered fences
that once claimed ownership,
but have fallen to Mother Nature's
settling balance,
running down through the Cedar Creek cemetery,
littered with three-nailed decaying crosses,
towards the forgotten pier,
left for hidden secrets and promises
to bloom the following year
after a season of icy beating
to lose our innocent seedlings
and mature
into wildflowers

Whereas, the town folk would frown
on the two experience-blind butterflies
leaping and bumbling across tombstones
of sacred lives buried beneath
rotting symbols of exalted saviors
and martyrs,

who once watered the earth
with their bloody tears,
passing through life, claiming sanctity

While Mr. Luther always knew
that we kept shelter
behind the forbidden drapery,
he never bothered interfering
with the bubbling life that would seek refuge
in his stretching fields of poppies and pines,
but occasionally spying on its nature,
lingering where the sea and wood
would kiss by the pier
and share secrets

And on those Fall afternoons,
we would sit with our legs
dangling off the pier
tapping the water to the rhythm of the wind
blowing through her hair
and touching my face,
drawing closer to kisses
until rolling about the water
in little splashes and ripples
that drift
to infinity,
whispering, "I love you's"
in the short days
of an Indian Summer.

Eternal Winds

Don Newman

When my body has returned to that which earth and stars are made of,
And Spirit whisks me to another plane.
When this existence here is finally over,
And onward there I'm free of all this pain.
When no more shall I breathe this breath of sorrow,
Even then, I shall remember thee.

And when Eternal winds blow round about me
And all there is, is ready to start over.
These times we live will be such joyous memories,
For they were spent with you, in Heaven's love,
Which made the sadness of each day naught but a pin-prick,
As our healing came in moments fully lived.

So when our time is just a part of history,
And love well lived replaces oft felt pangs,
I'll embrace you in the Great Adventure's mystery
While our Journey brings us together once again.



Weather or not

Rekha Prakash

I send
 down
cool
 drops
that
 fall
like fireballs,
hissing and spatting
with the rising steam,
each a pear-shaped bomb
plopping on men's hats
and percolating on
ladies patted powdered
noses.
The sun evaporates at my command
as I control the shapes
 that shift
from
 plops
 to
drops,
 dribbles
to
 drizzles,
changing
glazed icicles
into tumbling
trickles
causing shrieks
of crash! boom!
As pedestrians
 zoom
across the splashing street



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Encomium On Pride

Tiffanie L.C. Rogers

Pride, oh highest of all Transgressions,
Most frequently noted in poet's lessons,
For the love of You have angels fallen,
And little men with breasts too swollen,
To the lightless levels of emptiness
Or the choiceless pit of Tartarus.
For You, men sacrifice salvation
And lament in metrical syllabication
Their Life lost to temporal joy
Like Aeneas moaning the ashes of Troy.
How great Thou are! Swift-footed Pride,
To rough a task to Thee belie;
Indiscriminate Pride, You seed throughout
Every trace of humanity's Gift of Doubt
A seed which sprouts a fruited Tree
By which we grow still closer to Thee.
Your amorphic Face superimposes
On all whose slothful conscience dozes
A will to justify Your presence,
And thence You gain their acquiescence.
Your laughter, sounding a mighty quake,
Rolls in thunder and waves' soft break
As You slaughter a lamb for sheer delight—
Never for hunger; you kill for spite.
Yet death through You is something gained
For the watchful eye of humanity, pained
To see that suffering lamb at Your side
Gives them power to resist You, oh, Pride!
Through ages and evidence, none can doubt
Your power, for it is strewn throughout
Each page of glory bled in ink,
For there 'tis seen Thine pow'r distinct.

Beloved Beowulf, son of Ectheow,
would ne'er be quite so masterful
Without You harboured in his breast
And urging him throughout his quests.

Cain's Grendle rues his triumph-day
 When forced to cower to that cave
 And die beneath in mother's arms
 Who joined him soon within that cairn.
 Mortality, though, conquers Thee
 In dragon's flame whence companions flee;
 Wiglaf, loyal kinsman with courage true,
 Could not that fated scene undo.
 Hence, the high-barrow at the shore
 Where lies a legacy of Yours.
 In ballads, too, Your praise is sung
 As you destroy the purest Love;
 Fair Barbara Allan You employed,
 And with her beauty Sir John cloyed.
 Though meaning well, her Pride he hurt
 And she his death did fail to thwart.
 A narrow road home she takes, and weary
 From the wight of the knelling, eyes a'bleary,
 Knowing Sir John she soon will follow
 And Sleep in her own Pride-made barrow.
 And shall we forget Marlowe's own Dr. Faustus,
 Wherein dear Christopher tells much about us?
 Gods, men, and devils; all favours are priced.
 It is good that we have Your friendly advice!
 You help us to focus on opportunities at hand
 And forget tomorrow's violent reprimand.
 Heaven awaits those who elude Your grasp;
 A strength the good Doctor did not have.
 See him writhe through his final hour;
 His soul seeks flight, but he won't allow her
 For she is betrothed unto Satan yet;
 Faustus holds fast to his cowardly debt.
 All that men see they think 'tis their right
 To possess and destroy how'ere they might
 To exaggerate temporal, mortal pleasure,
 Reflecting Protagoras, that man is the measure,
 And ignoring the warning that there might be
 Life beyond this comparatively trite facsimile.
 We see Your reflection in Francis Bacon
 As he relates his essay, "On Plantations."
 In him, You are manifest as Pragmatism—
 Aesthetically devoid homocentrism.

Though not as harsh, Ben Johnson, too
In Penshurst sees Nature as a servant true.
Among humanity you cause great strife
By focusing man's will on his own petty life.
Alexander Pope illustrates this
In his story of a Lock and a proud young miss.
Belinda's guardian spirits well knew the price
Should the Baron succeed in his avarice.
Pope warns us at the very start
Of the throbbing Pride in Belinda's heart
As she diligently prepares-with assistance-
Her beauty, which she cultivates with persistence.
When finished applying her battle gear
And perfecting Your face without a smear,
What wonder the Baron would not be drawn
To see a victory in one lock gone!
For You guide him as well, and puff his heart;
Ah, Pride! Your grandeur is such Art!
Pope reduces Your antics to gentle folly
In this mock heroic where the victory solely
Conjures a tantrum unwarranted here
For 'twas only a hair! 'Twas not like her ear
Was severed or some mortal wound inflicted!
But unto You she is truly addicted.
Her shrieks and cries make us cringe from the page,
For we see ourselves in her clamor of rage.
Pope hopes that through his insight we
Might realize our masks are fashioned by Thee,
And not remove them, does he suggest,
But just understand their temporalness
And not think the world has suddenly ended
By some stroke of evil ne'er to be mended
When we are deprived of a lock of hair
Or some other trivial matter of care—
Unless, of course, we allow our Pride
To force us a trivial life to abide.
Pope, with playful wit and grand fantasy,
Exposes the folly of our trite vanity.
Milton would rather be far more grave
In his honorable mission to from You save
Our souls through granting us recognition,
Which we can then use as ammunition.

(Milton look down and lend me you reason,
So i'll well represent your account of High Treason);
You whispered rebellion in Satan's ear
And caused him Heaven's peace to smear
With jealous rage and false righteousness.
But Who told You to whisper thus?
The Manichean would not understand
Your place as a Gift of God's great Hand!
But Milton knows that Goodness is earned;
Not granted or imposed— 'tis yearned
For by humanity, who wishes to be in God's favour,
But achievement should require toil and labour.
Without failure, how would success be measured?
If not for pain, how exists pleasure?
To this end Satan (though unaware of the Purpose)
Sparks a war that is yet Good's impetus
Or at least provides an ample force opposing
The Good, affording us the power of choosing.
Pope gives examples of Your lofty deeds;
Milton explains how Your tension we need.

You acquaint us with all of Your little brothers
That we might be misguided through these Others.
Your sibling six i here shall praise,
For they are, by You, well trained and raised
To ruin all fools who permit them entrance
By subverting their will and negating temperance.
Dear Sloth, awake to hear my decree—
Or would someone come to listen for Thee?
No wonder God looks with disfavour on You;
A bureaucracy needs get the message through!
You lay on Your couches and feign contentment
As You try to sleep off you self-resentment.
There are starving children and people in the streets
Who enjoy their lives much more than Thee!
And who is this by the table here
With meat a-plenty and gallons of beer?
Ah, Gluttony, You focus Greed's eternal void
And in You our hungers are thus employed
To seed our Ruin and fall from Holy Grace.
But we know to repent when we see Thine Face!
Your pangs of need are ne're satiated

And You remain spiritually emaciated.
Behind you i see yet another Hunger
In a red dress fit for such a monger.
Lust! Most tempting of the deadly Six;
Men wallow in Your false Pleasure Pits.
At your beckoning Love is perverted
And Salvation, thence, is duly subverted.
Like Gluttony Your need is never filled
And Your restless soul is never stilled.
Near You is One who inspires malignity
For all who insult his fragile dignity
By daring to acquire what he has not
And against them he's forever forced to plot,
But never will he fill the darkness inside
With material things. His wants belie
His desire for inner Love and Light
And he spends his life in constant flight.
Envy, come forth from Your mirror and hear
How someone greater than Thee may be near—
Oh! Wait! Throw that not! 'Twas only in jest!
Your rage, dear Envy, would do well to Rest.
Wrath, i detect and alliance between
You and fair Envy, as we have just seen.
Your intent on vengeance is quite often admired;
By men in whom Greed has been inspired.
Greed, paternal twin of doting Pride,
With Whom You are eternally allied,
Your illusion is like a flower blooming
Which entices weak men into assuming
That they might own Your beauty rare.
Then you catch their souls in thorny snares.
They often never suspect their privation
Until it's too late to regain their salvation.

Pride, oh highest of all transgressions,
We see You in the poet's confessions
And see also that the freedom of humanity
Depends upon the existence of Thee.
For if we were not to Choose our Path,
What semblance of Goodness would we have?
And to be completely free from Thee
We would be more like Gods than Humanity.



Renee

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UNIVERSITY 1988

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Water Music

Tiffanie L.C. Rogers

Leaves, floating on erratic rivers
we are alike in fall from summer trees
borne by the wind to our death
to the water
separated by undercurrents
of Nature's breath
gliding softly over placid
glassy stillness, life below,
until it shatters into
 rapids
 where
 we
scream
 inside
like
 children
 on
 amusement
 rides
 one
 final
 crash
deposits us once again onto
muck-smothered stagnant water
where we listen for the
pregnant sound of
rapids.







Artists' Books
A Series of Artistic Books
A Series of Artistic Books

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Monet in the Center

Susan C. Burch

When by some chance I happened upon the bank of a distant shore
and the soft smooth pebbles caressed my feet upon its floor
And the brisk, briny breeze whipped past my face
with a cool refreshing countenance
And the waters reflected the sun's robust rays
as an explosion of light engulfs a mirror in shining display
a deep devotion consumes my soul
with peaceful,
 tranquil,
 serenity.

And when days of turmoil and trouble together knock upon my door
to steal my joy, my hope, and stress my very core
Ancient past struggles which try to debase
Anguish poisons, anxieties pace
There beacons this shore painted of a distant May
a picture, transforms restores my day
with peaceful,
 tranquil,
 serenity.



Zebra

Amstrong Atlantic State
University, NJ

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University, NJ



The Sound—and the Silence

Virginia Gray McCoy

What price freedom? How far must an individual compromise his/her values in order to survive? Is it necessary to die in order to be free? In the Amish community one may have to die to be free. Death can be the greatest form of living you will ever know because if you have committed a crime in the Amish community, the punishment is shunning, and this ritual is more than just ignoring an individual's deviations from the established/enforced norm. Shunning in my former closed community was the punishment for such unpardonable sins as failing to be obedient, non-compliance with community rules, and lack of adherence to religious dogma. This ritual is the death knell of the person who dares to be an individual.

I remember my funeral quite well. I was 18 years old, and I had dared to ask to go to school outside the community and to become a teacher in the public education system. Furthermore, I had refused to marry the 40+ year old man who had been selected for me by the elders. I was a dissident and you know what happens to dissidents—exile and death. Yes, I died over 30 years ago, and I am alive to tell the tale.

My day of reckoning began on June 10, 1963 when I graduated from the local high school. I was scheduled to be married the next day to my father's neighbor two miles down the road. I had never met the man except in church, and that is hardly enough to build a marriage on. However, my father was delighted that his rebellious, embarrassing, non-conformist daughter would be married to a man who vowed that he would make a proper wife out of me, and that I would learn respect for our ways whether I liked it or not. My father was looking forward to Saturday with baited breath. I was staring certain death in the face and knew it. I was dragged to the church the next day and the ceremony began. I was expected to take my vows, be silent, and thank God that someone had decided to marry me. I was no prize, and I had been told why all too many times. I could not sew, can food, cook, or raise chickens like most of my peers. I also had the embarrassing habit of reading literature and had the audacity to taint my father's house with the abomination.

Even before the ceremony began, I had decided that, regardless of the cost, I would have to embarrass my father once more. I was not marrying that man and that was that. When the time came to sign the marriage certificate (the bride does not say "I do"; that is reserved for her father because he makes the "deal"), I boldly said "No!" Utter silence filled the room; it was deafening in its loudness. Everyone was stunned! How could

I possibly hurt my family so; I was marrying one of the richest men in the community and also one of my father's closest friends. No! How dare I? I knew that I would have to pay for my crime, but I must admit I was not prepared for the outcome.

My father had suffered the last bit of abuse he was willing to take on my account, and he acted swiftly. Without a word, he immediately took off his blue collar, symbol of being my father on my wedding day, and threw it into the furnace/stove that heated the meeting house. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was being disowned by him and the community sanctions were soon to follow.

Because I had such a long history of miscreancy, the elders decided that I could not remain in the community, so I was asked to leave. This I refused to do; after all, I had a right to live where I liked. How dare they say I could not build a small house on the property my grandfather had left me? They could shun me if they liked, but I would not lose my property to boot. My mistake. I should have left quietly. My father's outrage at this last act of defiance led him to ask for the ultimate punishment—death. The counsel agreed, and my father began to select my burial plot.

I watched with horror from my bedroom window as my father began digging my grave. He selected my favorite spot as a child, the big oak tree in the lower forty. I'd had a tree house there as a child. I can still remember my grandfather and me building it the year before he died; I was eight. Now, ten years later, the very boards of that tree house would form my coffin. You see, no useful wood can be used to bury a criminal. New wood still possesses life to the Amish because it still smells of cedar or pine, the heart blood of the wood. Only the pure, the clean, the deserving may have a coffin made of new wood; the life of one given to house the soul of the other until both are in God's presence.

I remember the deafening sound of my father's silent digging. The rasping sound as the shovel and pick pried away at the resistant ground beneath that majestic oak. The sound of the crowbar as it scraped and scratched against the stones; the sound of the resistant stone hitting the wet dirt with a mushy thud. The silent thud, thud, thudding as the newly raped earth was piled to one side in a neat mound next to the rolled back sod. My father worked for about two hours as he prepared the ground for my body. (He needn't have bothered; I was already dead. Listening to him before the counsel had killed me already; I had been buried more than a week ago.) His task completed, he went to the barn to help the carpenters prepare my box.

To be assured that my brother would not be so foolish, he had made him take down the old tree house three days earlier so that there would be no trace remaining that I had ever lived. So, I spent my last night at home

listening to the men sawing, the quiet rasping of the old tarnished saws against the well-weathered old pine boards. The gentle, purposeful hammering of the squeaking peg nails as they were forced into the old wood. I listened to the gentle falling rains against the window panes, and wondered if anyone was crying—I was assured that God was not. I watched and listened until early dawn and the rosy fingers of nature painted the gloomy sky—or was it really a bright sunny day? I don't remember; I'm sure the community does.

At dawn the community women gathered to help dress the body. You see, in our community, a body is actually buried. Everyone brings anything that the deceased made that they have received as a gift and puts these items into the coffin along with our clothes and personal belongings. This act purges the community of our essence, cleansing them of any iniquity they may have received along with our gifts. Once all things have been placed in the coffin, the burial is official except for the closing of the earth.

The community joined hands and encircled the now living corpse who had been dragged out to watch!! There must be no mistake that you are dead, and all the community must acknowledge the judgement in the presence of everyone else. From this point forward, anyone giving you refuge is subject to the same discipline for they too are possessed of the devil and must be purged from the body politic. Why a circle? Because it represents the circle of life, the binding chain that connects everyone to everyone else.

Once the circle is complete, the sentence is formally spoken and the coffin is lowered into the ground. I watched my father's emotionless face as he and my overwrought brother lowered me into the earth. Coffin in place, the community gathered to finish the job. Each member turned their back to me, picked up a handful of dirt, and threw it into the hole. I listened to the scouring sound of the small rocks against the old wood, a hollow sound as one by one the gravel fell. The rocks made a pitter-pattering sound as they fell, counting off my sins for all to hear. With each person's throw, however, the sound began to change, first scraping then grating, next scratching, as the dirt descended to fill the gaping hole. The ritual took over 45 minutes as each person pronounced judgement and walked, back turned, away. The empty glass which was my grave was filling and the hollow sound lessened with each passing eon, as I stood transfixed. The scarred earth was then leveled, the sod replaced, the ground tamped down with their shovels, as the men returned to their mid-day work/routine without so much as a flutter of their consciences.

I was left standing alone, looking at my grave, with only the sound of the old oak in my ears. The oak and I said goodbye, and I turned down the

road, dead, but still breathing. I walked to the nearest town, over 20 miles away, and signed my name on the Army recruitment form. I boarded a bus days later and paid the local Catholic church the \$80.00 I owed them (out of my first military pay) for my two day hotel/dinning bill as I awaited the final bus to my new life.

I have visited my grave only once since my death. When I left the military, I was returned to my home town in accordance with their discharge policy. I noted that things had not changed. My grave was maintained; grass cut, weeds pulled, but no flowers, for those are reserved for the deserving, not the dissident. Why bother maintaining the grave at all? Well, you see, the circle of "friends" does not end; one is also buried in a circular fashion as well. The body is placed in the middle of the family burial plot (always reserved) and it is surrounded by the dead family members, whose grave markers have been turned to face outward, thus shunning us throughout eternity!!

What is the cost of preserving one's identity? What is the cost of being an individual? Of having pride (the ultimate sin)? DEATH. Funny things sometimes happen though Death can bring a great deal of LIFE as well. Yes, I am still alive and my brother has taken the risk of acknowledging my letters now and again. He even sends me fall leaves from my favorite old oak tree. It may sound funny, but those leaves have given me more strength than you can imagine. I do hope to return home one day. Why? To walk among the beautiful fall leaves, to hear the gentle rustling of those dead leaves upon the dried branches, and to hear the birds twitter for a final time before flying south. Yes, I have a new life, but I am still tied to the community; my best and dearest friend, my brother, is still imprisoned there.

Passage

L. V. Charlotte

D[Blue eyes against
backdrop of antiseptic
sheets reveal final
existence. We both
anticipate a journey.
Passage. Irony.]AD





Pond House

THE HOUSE WAS BUILT BY THE
FAMILY OF THE PRESENT
OWNERS IN 1880.

THE HOUSE WAS BUILT BY THE
FAMILY OF THE PRESENT
OWNERS IN 1880.

Short Memories

Response to James Schuyler's "A Few Days"

Dana Sheppard

are for the loved ones. They die
so young sometimes.
It's beautiful. They gave me one
of her table clothes
her mother made. So beautiful
white and delicate.
What day is it? It's Halloween,
October 31st
and all the ghost and goblins
are out
knocking on doors. My granddaughter
dressed as a shepherd.
She bit her cousin on the hand
and got spanked.
She asked me if I would bite her?
I said no.
My brother asked me to write
a story
about him. He said to call it
"Legend in His Own Mind."
What a title for a biography of
my brother!
I think I would call it "Haney."
"Handy Haney."
That's his nickname. I think I would
call it "Cow Poke."
That's what he is. He works on
a farm. He drives a tractor and bales hay. Our
father used to help
until he passed away. I do
miss him so.
I have a professor who is
my friend. She is
kind and has two dogs. Why
do lovely people like
her retire and go away? She is my
mentor. She loves

to read books, and she writes well.

One day, she
will publish her stories, "Dogs
and Other Men."

I want to be there when her books
are signed.

To Dana, With Love. That's
what it will say.

Those books she'll sign for
me and I'll
cherish them. My children will
ask one day

Whose autograph is this? And
I'll say

Helon's, my friend. I had another
friend-Janice

She's gone now. You know the one.

Her daughters gave
me the crocheted tablecloth. It's a
keepsake and I
will always treasure it because
she was hers.

My husband is talking over the
back fence
with the neighbor, Tom. They talk
about nonsense and
work and stuff. I get to keep
my grandson tomorrow
night. He's four months old and
at a cute age.

Will we rock? Yes, we will rock
and coo.

He is here and I'm enjoying his
sweet smile
and his cries. He loves to cuddle up
near my neck.

I love to feel his warmth. Tomorrow is
Sunday. I made

potato salad tonight. I think we'll have
ham tomorrow,

Tonight, my cousin from Washington
DC came by.

She's 60 years old-still so beautiful.
Her husband came
along too. He loved my black-eyed
peas. Where are
they going? Down into Florida to
see their son and wife.
They have a new baby girl. Do you like
plants? Me too!
I bought a new one today. Another
purple violet.
How will they survive a winter
without light?
I asked myself, then went and
bought a light-
A growth light for plants. Now I
will have blooming
violets all year round. And my young
plants will live.
And donate life and beauty to my
Short Memories.

Going Home

Denise R. Shaw

Once again, Emily Metts needed to summon her energies and prepare for her visit back home. As she sat at the edge of her bed, suitcase in hand, her long, thin limbs felt heavy and unwilling to cooperate with the task at hand. Going home to New Orleans was always an emotionally exhausting exercise and Emily welcomed the preparation by acknowledging the customary tinge of nausea which usually went hand in hand with the anticipation. Facing her father had not gotten easier over the years as Emily had hoped it would, but not going home would break her mother's heart, and the good Lord knows she didn't need any more of that.

"Hey, Em," shouted her husband, Rob, from up in the attic, "Do you want me to bring down the hanging bag, too?"

"No, I don't think so, the casual look is all I'm up for. Is that OK with you?"

Emily knew her question would surprise Rob, as she usually failed to include him in any aspect of the plans for going to New Orleans. She knew Rob usually tolerated being relegated as an observer, but this trip she really needed to have his support, and she felt the best way to enlist him was to include him from the start.

"Yeah... casual is fine with me," said Rob as he entered the bedroom.

Emily had not moved from the edge of the bed. She sat motionless, with her head hung, fidgeting with an old airline name tag. Her dark, brown eyes had that distant gaze in them that she knew Rob hated, but she couldn't help it. Rob sat down next to her and held her restless hands still with his large, rough hands.

"You know, we don't have to go," said Rob compassionately.

"Yeah, right!" snapped Emily.

Rob withdrew his caress and walked toward the door with hasty and rigid steps. "I'm going to make a pot of coffee; it's going to be a long evening," he said in a resigned tone.

"Wait," said Emily. She reached out and grasped his hand. "I'm sorry. You know it's not you." she raised his hand to her lips and kissed it softly. "Coffee would be nice."

Rob just shook his head. "God, Emily. This is pathetic!" he said with disgust as he turned to leave the bedroom. "I just don't get it!"

"What, Rob! What exactly don't you get?"

"Don't insult me, Em. You know exactly what I mean. You know what really pisses me off about all this? It's the way we end up at each other's

throats. I'm sick of this. If you want to put yourself through this... well, just do it without me. I'm done."

"Oh, Rob. Don't do this to me. You know I don't have a choice."

"Yes, Em. Yes, you do. Grow up! And, don't even think about putting this on me. I haven't done a thing to you. I am so tired of this shit. I'm out of here."

Rob picked up his keys and charged his six-foot frame angrily out the door. Emily did not move from her spot on the end of the bed. Her eyes welled up with tears, but she would not allow herself to cry. Not again. Crying had never solved anything for Emily. Hell... it didn't even make her feel better; so she learned some time ago to stop the tears. And, she did. Besides, she needed some space to deal with this ritual. Yes, let Rob go and spare him her zombie-like state. She could handle this.

Emily stood slowly and stretched her long limbs. She placed the suitcase on the bed and flipped open the locks. Inside she noticed a doubloon from last year's Mardi Gras trip. She picked up the shiny, purple coin and rubbed it between her finger tips.

"Hey, Em," her brother Nick had shouted, "You want another beer?"

"She doesn't need another beer," Em's father, Ryan, had bellowed.

"She's had three already."

"Oh, Ryan, let her be. It's her vacation," pleaded Patty, Emily's mom.

"Shut up, Patty. No one asked you for your opinion," scolded Ryan.

"Yeah, I'll take another beer," said Emily. She glared in her father's general direction, then put her arm around Patty's frail shoulders and led her down the block toward an upcoming float. "I can't believe you let him talk to you like that," said Em. The two rolled their eyes at each other, like a secret handshake, and walked on.

Looking back now, Em realized that she had no business criticizing her mother. She was no better. Ignoring her father did not empower her, as she convinced herself. It only removed her one step further from confronting him... just like everyone else.

"That bastard," mumbled Emily to herself as she tossed the doubloon in the garbage can. She moved toward her closet and began to pull some sweaters off the top shelf. Emily breathed a heavy, deep sigh and thought about Rob. She didn't blame him for leaving. She knew he despised these trips because he always became the object of her displaced misery. For the first time she wondered how much longer he would tolerate any of this.

She smiled to herself as she remembered the first time Rob confronted her father during a trip home. It was over a black velvet evening dress Emily had put on to wear to her fifteenth high school class reunion.

"Just who do you think you're going to impress in that get-up?" Ryan had said snidely.

"You look beautiful, honey," Rob had said, knowing how painstakingly Emily had searched for the right dress.

"She looks like a street-walker," said Ryan. "That peroxide look doesn't help! You should be embarrassed to be seen with her... unless you like that kind of woman."

"You know, Ryan," said Rob between clenched teeth, "You are a real son of a bitch."

Ryan chuckled aloud and said, "What do you mean 'are'? Don't tell me you believe all that hysterical crap she's told you. I thought you were more of a man than that."

"Come on guys," said Patty in her most soothing tone, "Let's not do this."

"Shut up!" snapped Ryan. "No one wants to listen to you."

"Man, what a dick!" Rob had mumbled to no one in particular. "Come on Em, get your stuff. We're staying in a hotel." He walked over to Patty, who was sobbing, put his arm around her shoulder and whispered, "Sorry."

At the time, Em was so proud of Rob. No one ever stood up to her father. It definitely was the highlight of that trip. But, now Emily realized that it wasn't Rob's responsibility to confront her dad...it was hers. And once again, she had chickened out. That was the story of her relationship with her father. He reprimanded, he demoralized, he demanded, and she chickened out. Ever since she realized that she could confront him, but had not, the anger she internalized had caused her an ulcer. "Yep," she thought every time she guzzled Maalox straight out of the bottle, "This burning feeling is compliments of Ryan."

She suddenly realized that she had just folded and unfolded the same sweater three times. She sat back down on the edge of the bed and sighed. "Get a grip," she thought to herself, "You've got to get on with this. Maybe a glass of wine would help. Yeah...a glass of wine." She shuffled into the kitchen and reached into the cabinet for a wine glass.

Her mind shifted back to Rob. "I wonder where he is?" she thought. "I hope he comes home soon." She poured half a glass of Cabernet and took a swig straight out of the bottle. The burn down her throat felt good. She leaned against the counter top and held the wine glass up toward the light. The scarlet prism within the glass mesmerized her and she savored the momentary sense of calm.

The taste of Cabernet Sauvignon on her lips reminded her of the night her parents took her to dinner at Brennan's to celebrate her academic scholarship to Loyola. She knew her father had expected nothing less, and was pleased that she had done something to make him proud of her. She always worked hard to receive his recognition and knew that the scholar-

ship was something good. He had ordered a bottle of wine with dinner, along with an extra glass for her. The evening had gone well. He was even being civil toward Patty. When the waiter brought the wine to the table, Ryan had poured them each a glass, lifted his into the air and said, "A toast...here's to Emily on her scholarship to college. Let's hope she doesn't screw it up by getting pregnant." Silence descended upon the dinner party like a plague.

Emily took another swig of wine and tried to recall any moment of tenderness showered upon her by her father. She remembered that once, when she was eight years old, he gently applied a Band-Aid to her knee after she had fallen off her bicycle. She also remembered him saying something about her being too old to fall. She shook her head in sorrow.

She decided that she needed to return to the task of packing and proceeded back into the bedroom. She turned and grabbed the bottle of wine as an afterthought. She held the bottle of Cabernet to her mouth to take another big swig of wine and froze as the bottle was almost up to her lips. She could not control the tears then, and as her sobs shook her limbs violently, she slid down the cabinets onto the cold Italian tile. When Rob came home, he found her curled up in the fetal position, sound asleep. He brushed the blonde, tear-soaked hair from her face and softly whispered, "Hey, Em. I'm home."

"Oh, God! What time is it? Look at me! Oh Rob...I'm so sorry!" she said softly as she wrapped her arms around his neck. The smell of nicotine, beer, and Geoffrey Beene cologne made her nauseous, and as she bolted upright to run into the bathroom, she began sobbing all over again.

Rob sat on the edge of the bed, with his long body hunched over, and waited patiently for Emily to come out of the bathroom. "Em, this has got to stop," said Rob disgustedly. "I am sick of watching you do this to yourself."

Emily emerged from the bathroom looking pale and disheveled. She plopped her body down on the bed next to Rob. "Let's not do this, Rob. I'm not up for it."

"You never are, Em. Not with me, and certainly not with your father. You just withdraw and self-destruct."

Emily let out a deep, slow sigh. "I know, Rob. I know," said Emily in a resigning tone.

"Well, damn it, Em. Do something about it. Please!" said Rob as he stood up from the bed in a rapid, stiff motion.

"Rob!" said Emily as she jerked her head up quickly. "Please don't go. Not again." Emily paused and exhaled a long, deep sigh. "I know what I have to do, and I know it will break my mother's heart. I can't bear the thought of hurting her, Rob; she has been through enough."

“Stop using her as the reason you continue to go home...that’s not fair to her. This is about you, Em. You and your father.”

A dead silence penetrated the room. The low hum of the air conditioning unit kicking in stirred the chill in the air. Emily could not look at Rob. Now the cards were on the table. Now she would have to act...one way or another.

“Em, aren’t you going to say anything?”

“No, Rob. Not this minute. Because, I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry.” Emily turned and hastily proceeded to the bathroom to battle a second round of nausea and her conscience.

Rob retreated downstairs to the den to lose himself in a remote control daze.

As Emily lay prostrate on the cold bathroom floor, visions of her childhood came flooding back. She couldn’t remember her father showering affection upon her, but she could remember times when he had shown her mother some tenderness. Maybe her mother was where she wanted to be. Why hadn’t she seen it before? Emily guessed that she wanted to believe that she wasn’t the only one who suffered her father’s contempt. As the cold floor sent a chill through her limbs, Emily knew that the time had come to do something. Anything! She could not go on like this. The thought of confronting her father was frightening, but she couldn’t bear the thought of losing Rob. Rob was her life now, not her parents. The thought of allowing the looming presence of her father to take another precious thing away from her made her angry.

Yes, angry! Emily bolted upright. She closed her eyes and filled her lungs with cool air. She welcomed the sense of peacefulness that had overtaken her. She was unsure if she should credit the wine or the epiphany, but regardless, she knew it was time to use the moment constructively.

Emily got up off the floor, went over to the basin, splashed cold water on her face, brushed her teeth, and ran the comb through her hair. She took a deep breath and walked across the room over to the telephone. She picked up the receiver and dialed her parents' number. Ryan answered the call.

“Hi, Dad. It’s Emily.”

“Well, Miss Emily. And to what do we owe the honor of this call? Hold on, I’ll get your mother.”

“No, Dad. Wait. It is you I need to speak to.”

“Oh! Well, what is it? Do you need money?”

“No, Dad. It’s not that. I just wanted to tell you that I’m not coming home. My home is here, in Atlanta, with Rob. And Dad, this is really hard for me to say, but I just don’t need to keep banging my head against walls trying to please you. I’ve never been able to, and I have to stop trying. It

hurts me too much. I'm sorry, Daddy."

"But, what about your mother? You'll break her heart."

"No, Daddy. I won't. I think that Mom will understand." Emily paused to wipe a tear from her cheek. "And if she doesn't, well...I hope in time she will. Please tell mom that I'll call tomorrow. Bye, Dad."

"Wait...Emily."

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

Emily gently laid the receiver down and reached for a tissue to stop the stream of tears that had begun flowing down her raw cheeks. Then she felt Rob's weight distribute on the bed next to her. He kissed her cheek softly and said, "I love you, Em."

"I love you, too, Rob."

"Hey, Em. I've been thinking. Why don't we send your mom an airline ticket?"

Emily flung her arms around Rob's neck. She relished the warmth of his strong arms around her waist, and the stale smell of nicotine and beer that reeked from his flannel shirt. She felt safe in his arms, and loved. Really loved. Emily knew that she had finally made it home.



georgia
for jacob's fury

Melissa S. Hill

Storm clouds have gathered.
I think it's going to rain.
Georgia can be a mass
Of wet red clay at this
Time of year. You've never
Seen mud this deep,
In our yard in our dreams.

Still clinging to chains
Broken long ago, the time-
Table of the South is a bit
Askew, we still ride forth
On our make-believe horses,
Tilting at windmills, a
State of Don Quixotes.

Sitting with my grandfather
On his front porch,
It's not the heat but the humidity
And it just gets worse
From here on out.
How do I call back
Through our murky history,
Cloudier than the pond
In his backyard?

Sometimes I can't believe
We closed our eyes so tightly,
It's almost unreal,
What we refused to see.
And I ask myself if I am
Guilty by association for walking
The same dogwooded roads.

A strange place indeed
To be born into
Cotton as high as self-
Righteousness and attitude
Screaming through the entirety
Of our being
But I suppose pain is fleeting.

The same pines still confess our
Sins, bending backwards in an
Electrical wind. The things they've
Seen could bring us crashing down.
Have we been forgiven,
Have we forgiven ourselves?

Small comfort that some of us
Have kept our eyes open all along,
But I hear a secret whistling through
The Spanish Moss:
Until we bring down the walls
That divided and conquer us,
We cannot rise again.

Six Bittersweet Minutes

Denise R. Shaw

"I need a price check on line six," shouted the check-out clerk.

"Oh great!" I thought, "This is all I need!" The clock was already ticking away at the twenty-two minutes and thirty seconds I had remaining until the post office closed.

As I looked up to glare at the idiot in front of me who was stealing time from my already tight schedule, I was jolted at the sight of his dark hair curling up behind his ears. Suddenly, my watch no longer mattered as I remembered my arms around Mike's waist as we stood in line waiting to buy a ticket to "The Way We Were." It was a cool evening and he had wrapped his long flannel-covered arms around mine to keep them warm. I turned my face sideways and pressed my left cheek into the warmth of his back. The smell of British Sterling mixed with Irish Spring soap drifted through my nostrils. I loved the way he smelled. We were enveloped in a warm silence as we swayed back and forth in unison in an attempt to ward off the chilling breeze. I lifted my head from the warmth of his back to whisper, "I love you" in his ear. Then I noticed those curls. I wondered why he just didn't cut them. Those silly curls made his meticulous appearance look unkempt. I untangled my arm from his and ran my fingers through those curls and said, "Why don't you cut these things?" instead of "I love you."

"Ma'am, ma'am, you can move your cart up now," said the check-out clerk. I looked up as if I was moving in slow motion. "Excuse me?" I said.

"Your cart, move it up," he said impatiently.

"Oh sure. I'm sorry," I said.

I glanced at my watch. I had eighteen minutes until the post office closed. And he was gone; the man with the curls behind his ears was gone. I took a long deep breath and tried to savor the feel of flannel and the smell of British Sterling, but the memory was fading. What a shame the line had moved so quickly.

Salad

Don Newman

As you gently, but firmly prepared the lettuce
I was thinking, "Let us begin"
And as I watched you slice the tomatoes
I thought maybe this wasn't such a bad idea
You and me.
The way you handled the cucumber was simply divine.
By the time the peppers, onions and radishes went in
I had to have you
And wished we could do this all the time....

For the Lady Behind Me in the Grocery Store

Marti Baker

I know what you see
I know what you think
You're just an outsider looking in
Or over my shoulder, to see how I will pay for this food
You don't know my situation
You don't know what I'm like
You only see another
BLACK GIRL
with those WIC VOUCHERS.

I know what you see
I know what you think
You're figuring that because I have those
WIC VOUCHERS, I collect
FOOD STAMPS and get
WELFARE CHECKS for my
THREE kids, whose father is not around.
You see my clothes, and think I use the
MONEY for MYSELF.

What you don't see, and
What you don't think is
YES, I get WIC VOUCHERS
but I DON'T receive
FOOD STAMPS.
I DON'T get a WELFARE CHECK, but I used to.
You see I began working. I got myself
TWO JOBS and they
CUT ME OFF.
I'm probably one of those accomplished
persons you'll never meet.

What you don't know is that I'm not a
SORRY STATISTIC.
I'm another
SUCCESSFUL BLACK FEMALE
who had an unfortunate beginning
but will have a miraculous ending.
Someday, I'll probably teach your children or even your grandchildren
But you'll never know,
because you let the outside fool you.





THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LIBRARY



Your Smile Is Sweet Deceit

John Trainor

Your smile is sweet deceit.

“Do you want to follow?”
over the flowering pattern
flowing in silk
swaying across the cleft of your...
creaking stairs.

- Teasing electricity
with gleaming stares
that twinkle,
“Come closer.”
- Igniting secrets
upon our canvases slide
with wetness matching our tongues collide.
Painting a picture
with mischievous laughter
that no one will ever see
when inside the shadows, we hide

...And in our minds
We can follow the traces
Of whispers left behind.

Getting Down

Mike Rios

Ruben's cigarettes lay on the floor underneath his boxers. He was breathing hard as he reached for them, his shoulders heaving, his heart visibly pounding against his slim bare chest. But Courtney picked up the cigarettes before he could. She was breathing, as well as sweating, he now noticed, just as hard as he was. With a smile, Ruben watched her flick two cigarettes, and thought how glad he was that he had not reached the pack first.

Ruben stood, walked across the bedroom, and picked his jeans up from where Courtney had thrown them. He was surprised how easily he found them, and that he found them at all, among the strewn dirty laundry, used romance books, and drained liquor bottles which, night after night, competed with the furniture for dominance over the room. It seemed the only things in order were the two framed black and white photographs, each of the same crucifix (one sun-draped, the other enveloped in shadow), that hung above the head of the bed.

The photographs, gifts from him to Courtney, were the results of an entire day spent patiently waiting on a scar-freckled pew in St. Francis. He had wanted to capture the wonderful and frightening details of the crucifix he had stared at so often during masses as a child. But after developing them, he felt he had failed. He had never allowed anyone to view them until he met Courtney, who instantly demolished Ruben's insecurity, which had caused the photographs to remain buried in his portfolio for so long. Her comments were insightful, refreshing, and above all, honest. The two had spent the rest of the evening ecstatically trading thoughts.

Now, as he looked at the photographs, it dawned on him that the moment he had shared his art with Courtney was indeed a turning point. Up until that moment his photography had been the last thing on his mind. An unfulfilling tour of duty in the Army, compounded by returning to find his family comfortably adjusted to his absence, had made sure of that. Courtney's overwhelming interest in his art, had revived his own interest. So it was with a wrenching mixture of regret and guilt that he questioned the uneasiness he felt tonight.

He took his lighter out of the jeans he had picked up, tossed them, and walked back over to Courtney. She was still in the same position: laying on her stomach, propped on her elbows, between the window and the bed that faced it. Her milky-white legs were crossed at the calves, creating a delicate dimple in the back of each knee. He knelt and lit the two ciga-

rettes, watching her small breasts rise slightly as she took a drag off both and gave one to him. After taking a drag, he blew smoke out slowly as she rose. The harsh smell of tobacco punched through the smells of sweat, sin, and sex congregating in the room. He welcomed it.

"Something's gonna go wrong," he said in a deep whisper.

She stared at his feet and blew a cloud of smoke that embraced his shin. He could not see her face, only her tangled red hair. He remembered how its striking color was the first thing he had noticed about her.

"I don't think I thought this all out," he added.

"Don't start," she said. "Please don't start."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked up at him, her raised eyebrows answering his question.

"I'm just wondering if it's worth it. If ..."

"If it's worth it?" Courtney interrupted, standing. "Take a look around you. Of course it's worth it. You think I'd be going along if it wasn't?"

"And as far as thinking it all out, you haven't left anything to chance," she continued as she walked to the bathroom. "I've got the photos and the negatives next to my purse, Tommy and Junior've been at Miller's since eight, and I called Garduno's guy right before you got here, just to make sure we were still on. Everything's set up for tonight, Ruben. Nothing's gonna go wrong."

She left him there alone, listening to the toilet flush followed by a faucet being opened. The running water was loud, making him aware of how unusually silent the room, the apartment, and the city were tonight. There was usually too much noise. The 4, 5, and 6 trains passed above ground only three blocks away, their constant rattling more like a natural or background rhythm to him by now. He could not recall whether he had heard one since arriving at Courtney's. Normally he could since the apartment was located only four stories up. The weather was probably the reason. The pushers and the hookers should have been out at this hour, but Ruben guessed even they got cold once in a while. Whatever the reason, he was thankful. It meant he would not get hounded to buy rock or weed or whatever else was the special of the day.

Ruben remembered how it was when he used to walk to St. Francis with his little brother for ten o'clock mass, or "teen mass" as it was cleverly called. It was a strategy employed by the church in order to get kids to receive the word of God, while instilling a sense of independence. On the way, Ruben and his brother, along with other kids, had to pass the local pushers, who were as pervasive as roaches. For the most part, he and his brother ignored them, occasionally shaking their heads, sometimes actually saying 'no.' To Ruben, though, it was not the fact that he was being tempted that bothered him. He had never succumbed to peer pressure.

There were too many friends and family members allowing drugs to rot their bodies and minds for him to join the crowd. What bothered him was that he had to see this on the way to church. It was all right if they wanted to push at midnight on a corner somewhere but, on a Sunday morning, right across from...?

A white flash.

He was back in Courtney's apartment. She was shaking him, yelling, "What's the hell's the matter with you?"

"What?"

"You've been sitting there saying 'no' over and over again. And you're about to start a fire."

He looked at his cigarette. There was a tiny bit of tobacco, glowing red, in between an inch of ashes and browned filter, each precariously dangling. As he put the cigarette out, he said, "Shut that water off. You think you're the only one who uses water in this city?"

She shook her head and playfully stormed back into the bathroom, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind. Ruben heard the sound of running water cease and the sound of a siren begin. He smiled to himself and began getting dressed, still listening to the siren as its whooping heightened, came to a blaring climax, and then faded. He wondered what kind of scene the police officer was headed to. Was it a robbery? Had some 7-11 been held up? Was it a domestic call? Was some two hundred pound drunk using his ninety pound wife's face as a stress reliever? Or maybe it was a murder scene? Did some kid disrespect another by laughing at that kid's braces and wind up with something funnier in his own mouth, like the barrel of a pistol? Or was there another serial killer on the loose, poised for bigger headlines than the last guy, who wanted only to avenge his tiny penis' damaged reputation by relieving a number of homosexuals of theirs, quite literally? In about a half hour, that siren could be for me, Ruben pondered. He was finished getting dressed when Courtney came out of the bathroom.

"I've gotta get going," he said. "Where's the gun?"

"It's right here," Courtney replied, brushing aside a pair of purple panties and picking up his pistol. She walked over to him and put her arms around his waist. Then she kissed him. Her tongue delicately met his as she gently lifted his jacket and softly slid his pistol into the holster in the small of his back. She pulled her mouth away slowly.

"We'll celebrate afterwards," Ruben promised.

"All night," she responded, clearly happy his confidence had been restored.

"Just the night?" Ruben asked with a look of fake pain.

Courtney laughed. "We'll see how long you last. Now get going."

Ruben watched her go into the bathroom. He heard the water run again

as he let himself out. Neither had offered their apartment keys to the other, so all he could do was shut the door.

He stood in front of the apartment for a few seconds, pushers and church on his mind. He wondered how he had gone from detesting people like those pushers from his childhood to doing business with them. He told himself that it was nothing more than a financial opportunity for Courtney and him. And it was hardly as if he were dealing with them on a daily basis; it was only tonight. And it wasn't like I went looking for them, he told himself, they came to me. And in that respect he was correct.

He recalled the night last month when, while developing photos of a cop tucking in a bag lady in Central Park, he had received a phone call on behalf of a Leonardo Garduno asking if Ruben would like to earn money with his camera.

Ruben had heard of Garduno; everyone had. He also knew how Garduno made his money, another piece of common and unspoken knowledge. That, and the fact that Garduno even had Ruben's number, had made him think twice about refusing to at least hear the offer.

It turned out all Ruben had to do was use that pretty little camera of his to shoot some pictures of a certain district attorney meeting with a certain borough president. Ruben recognized their names: Marvin Costello, a tough by-the-book D.A., and Orlando A. Garcia, a no-nonsense borough president with obvious mayoral aspirations. Ruben knew enough about politics to suppose these men's positions led their paths to cross once in a while and figured he would be capturing a pay-off of some kind. "Sure, I guess I can take some pics of their meeting," he had said. No, he didn't get it, the caller had told him, Garduno wanted him to take pictures of the D.A. *with* the borough president. A noiseless "Oh" was all Ruben could form in response. He gathered himself, and after asking why him (because he wasn't part of the family, it wouldn't get back to Garduno if there was a stink), how much (a rather substantial amount), and when (all up to him, the sooner the photos were delivered, the more substantial the amount), Ruben had said he would think about it. Sure, the caller had said, think it over.

This was his chance, he had thought. This was the opportunity which would grant him enough financial stability to enable him to concentrate more on his photography and a future in it. But this opportunity came with a moral price Ruben was forced to contemplate. Two men's careers would perish, their families devastated in the wake of the scandal these photos would unleash. Unless Garduno intended to use them as blackmail, which seemed unlikely to Ruben when he considered the outrageous amount of money he was supposed to be paid. But there was another kind of blackmail, Ruben knew, the kind that got the blackmailer something far more

precious than money. Garduno apparently had aspirations of his own. All night Ruben had tried to piece together the greater goal and the repercussions if he agreed to take the pictures.

The next morning, still awake, Ruben had received another call.

He shook his head, bringing himself back to the present, and looked around the empty hallway. The incinerator a few feet in front of him caught his eye. It was half-opened, part of a stained paper trashbag, seemingly full, sticking out. How lazy can someone be? Ruben pushed the trashbag in and watched it fall. He closed the lid before the heat and smell could hit him. If only it was this easy to throw away other trash, he thought.

Ruben turned and walked to the stairs. He began descending them, as he always did after leaving Courtney's. He remembered how she had laughed when he had confessed how nervous the elevator here made him especially with its menacing sliding gate, paint peeling off the bars like flakes of sun-burnt skin, reminding him of a prison he had never been confined in. He had not called her for a week after that. She never laughed about, or even mentioned, the elevator ever again.

He descended one flight and was halfway down the next when he heard a couple of voices. Loud voices. He stopped to listen.

"It's a four," said one voice. It was somewhat high, yet it undoubtedly belonged to a man.

"It's a two, man." This voice was deep, authoritative, and definitely masculine.

"I'm telling you, it's a four. It says four A."

"How can it be a four? Huh? Tell me. How can this be a four? I can understand a seven, maybe a three, in a way. But a four? Uh uh."

"It's a four."

"Look, it's a fucking two. All right? Two. Two! Now take out your piece and let's get this over with."

A sweet old widow lived in 2A. Ruben did not know her name, but she always said hello whenever she saw him. His hand went to his back and gripped the pistol there. The stairs were built so that each flight was divided into two sets of steps. In between, the person climbing or descending would face a window before turning to continue. Thanks to this simple economical design, the men could not see him as he edged slowly around the stairs.

"What the hell are you doing? Mind your own business!" Ruben thought to himself.

His doubt was answered by a gunshot and a flash. His ears started ringing as he saw one of the men kick open the door. A dog started barking from within one of the apartments down the hall.

Do something!

Ruben drew his pistol and aimed towards the men. "Police! Freeze!" he automatically shouted.

The two men turned, blinked and fired at him.

He heard the window shatter behind him and felt the night's cold air rush in and slap the back of his exposed neck. One of the men was in his sight. He squeezed the trigger and heard it fire, but the man just stood there and fired again. He heard more glass shatter and felt more cold air, another slap, and realized it was not his gun he had heard. It had been the man's gun. He had misfired.

He turned and ran up the few steps he had descended, and dove to his right. I should've taken the elevator.

"Let's get outta here, Nick," he heard the somewhat high voice say.

Ruben cocked his pistol.

"You crazy? That's him," the deep voice said.

Ruben froze. He didn't hear the click his pistol should have made as the next bullet made its way into the chamber. He pulled the slide back. Nothing. He let go, then pulled again. Nothing. His hands shook. He heard footsteps. He quickly pressed the release button on the pistol's handle and removed the cartridge. Empty.

This was not good.

He ran up the stairs as fast as he could, taking three steps at a time, reached the third floor, and rounded the stairs. He could still hear footsteps. Of course you can hear footsteps, he thought. They're after you!

He reached the fourth floor and ran towards Courtney's apartment. Once there, he grabbed the knob and looked at the number and letter stenciled above the peephole for an instant. Then he turned the knob and opened the door. He slammed it shut behind him and slid the lock when he heard another gunshot. A hole the size of a penny appeared in the door.

Ruben ran to the bedroom, where he found Courtney crouched in a corner clutching her legs. She stared at him, her mouth hanging open, her eyes threatening to leap from their sockets. He looked around the room in desperation, trying to think of something. Then his eyes fixed on something shimmering. Laying atop the dresser were eight bullets, laughing at him.

A gunshot.

Another.

There was no time to load his pistol. Besides the apartment was small; a firefight here would be too chancy. Instead, Ruben ran to the window and lifted it open, so quick and hard that it shattered, sending glass everywhere. The room turned cold instantly. He breathed a much needed gulp of air that chilled his lungs on contact.

A thunk.

The door had been opened.

Footsteps.

Ruben took hold of Courtney's elbow and shoved her under the bed. He was about to grab the bullets anyway, just in case, but thought better of it. He slid under the bed just as the two men entered the room.

"Where the fuck is he?"

"Dumbshit. He climbed out the window and down the fire-escape."

"If you had two guys lighting your ass up you'd be moving pretty fast, too."

Thankfully, Courtney was still and silent. It would have been difficult for Ruben to cover her mouth with his hand to keep her from making any sound. He had ended up laying on his back while she lay half on her side, half on her stomach, her head on his thigh, her legs next to his arm. He was also thankful for the bed, or rather, how high its box spring was from the floor. It gave him enough room to risk lifting his head a couple of inches. He did so, seeing Courtney's eyes still in their sockets and fixed upon the two pairs of legs shifting about the room.

The bed's height was also a disadvantage. It meant that Ruben and Courtney could be seen from certain angles and distances like either the bathroom or the bedroom doorway. The former seemed to be where one of the pairs of legs was walking. The legs stopped, turned, sprung, and landed in front of the bathroom. Then they walked in. After a couple of seconds they walked back out, stopping in the doorway.

"He's not here."

"What the fuck are you looking in there for?"

"He might have been hiding."

"The fuck's long gone."

"Maybe we should wait for him. Stake out the place til he shows up again."

Ruben wondered how long he could keep still, and more importantly, how long Courtney could.

"He ain't coming back. Not without backup."

"Thought you said he's a loner."

"A loner with friends."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Neither does this."

Ruben held his breath. Until now, he had been concentrating on the legs in the bathroom doorway, hoping his elbow was not protruding as far as he thought it was. But the last words had come from the other side of the bed, where the second pair of legs was bending. There was nothing he could do. He and Courtney had been discovered. He had failed to protect

her. He was about to tell her how sorry he was when he was cut off.

"Bushmills."

"Huh?" asked the voice from the doorway.

"What's a spic doing drinking Bushmills? I thought they drank that Bacardi shit."

Laughing.

Ruben began breathing again. He had seen a hand come down and pick up the bottle of whiskey he and Courtney had shared and discarded earlier, wanting to save some for later, to celebrate with.

He heard what sounded like a cap being unscrewed and someone taking a swig. Good. You can have it. Now go.

"Let me get some."

The legs in the bathroom doorway came forward a few steps closer to the bed and stopped. There was a swish and a low thunk, prompting Ruben to guess the bottle had been tossed and caught. The sound of a swig being taken followed.

With the lack of any obvious means of doing anything about the situation, Ruben's mind was overloaded with questions. Who were these guys? He had never seen them before, but their behavior and comments marked them as hitmen. Hitmen with confidence or stupidity. Why were they even hanging around? Someone had to have heard the shots and called 911. Even in this neighborhood, it wouldn't be long before the cops showed up. So who hired them? And why? Did tonight's deal have anything to do with this? When Garduno insisted he not be present, Ruben had agreed. He had figured Garduno simply didn't trust him. Who could blame him? Stories of Ruben's youth as a hothead still followed him in some circles. But Ruben didn't trust Garduno either. That's why Tommy and Junior were sitting at Miller's, keeping an eye on Garduno's men while protecting Courtney from a distance. But Courtney wasn't at Miller's yet. So why take me out before you get the pictures? Maybe his boys had jumped the gun, reasoned Ruben.

It was too much. Confusion was setting in, along with the anxiety he already felt. His head was beginning to hurt. He decided to focus on the objects around him in order to keep his adrenaline from getting the best of him. He studied the empty beer can to his right. He studied the bulge in the bottom of the box spring. He studied the run in Courtney's pantyhose. Then he heard his pants unzip.

"What was that?" asked the somewhat high voice.

Ruben felt fingers parting the slit in his boxers.

"What was that?"

Bewildered, Ruben put a hand over his mouth, trying to keep from shouting at Courtney. He guessed what she was up to. Her motivation

was another matter.

“Never mind. Let’s just get outta here.”

Ruben had now officially seen and done it all. Courtney’s probing lips and tongue, despite the presence of two hitmen intent on killing him, were successfully coaxing Ruben’s penis. Whether it was the intensity of the predicament or the plain fact that he was a man did not matter to him. This felt good. And if this was the last thing he experienced before dying, well, he couldn’t think of a better way to go.

“We gotta stick around for a little while longer.”

“What for?”

Ruben had forgotten about the hitmen and the photos and Garduno and everything else. He was in the realm of pure feeling now, intense, painful, hard, mesmerizing. And unquestioningly, he accepted it.

“For this.”

Ruben was again looking at the bulge in the box spring when he felt the explosion.

And then a thunk.

Courtney screamed.

Ruben turned his head and saw one of the hitmen on the floor. The hitman was staring at him, aiming his pistol.

Ruben pushed himself away from Courtney and towards the hitman in hopes of making up for this entire mess by shielding her from the impending bullets. But he noticed the hitman was not aiming at all. A red stain was growing rapidly on his shirt. The explosion Ruben had heard was real. Now one hitman lay dead, apparently double crossed, while the other...?

Ruben heard a noise from behind. He turned and saw the other hitman very much alive and very much aiming at him. Ruben’s instincts kicked in. He quickly stood, picking his side of the bed up. The he pushed it towards the hitman, who fired his pistol. The mattress didn’t stop the bullet like Ruben had hoped, but it did throw off the hitman’s aim. The bullet whizzed past Ruben’s leg.

He grabbed Courtney and threw her against the window sill. Prying the pistol from the dead hitman’s hand, he aimed at the upended bed and fired. He fired again. And again. And again, until he heard a click whimper from the pistol. He nervously moved the box spring and mattress aside to find the hitman huddled against the dresser, his hands on his stomach, preventing his insides from spilling out, his pistol at his feet.

Ruben traded pistols, breathing hard. He looked the hitman over, praying he would live, hoping he would die. Then he turned and aimed the pistol at Courtney. She screamed, “No!”

“Shut up.”

She did so, a look of bewilderment on her face.

Ruben shook his head. "You're one cold bitch."

"What?" she asked, standing and walking towards him.

"Sit down."

She kept walking.

"Sit down!"

She stopped, shaking now, and sat on the floor.

"You're scaring me, Ruben."

Ruben went to the box spring and ripped some of the fabric apart. He reached inside and pulled out a large leather bag. Courtney's eyes widened at its sight. He opened the bag, turned it upside down, and let its contents fall on the floor in front of her. She looked at the pile of money, her face struggling with a number of expressions.

"You...you knew?"

"Not until I came."

Courtney wiped her mouth with a trembling hand and uttered, "I called Garduno's guys last week and switched the deal to yesterday."

Ruben looked at the manila folder next to her purse.

"Full of blank paper," Courtney admitted.

He looked at the bullets on the dresser.

"When you went to the bathroom." Another admittance.

"Who else?"

"No one. Are you kidding? I couldn't get any of the guys to turn on you. I knew better. I told them you were gonna sit this one out. Those guys love you. That's why I had to...that's why these two bums."

Ruben listened to her words and tried to understand what had happened, but the barrage of questions hammering away inside of him were too staggering to face. Not while he had to concentrate on breathing, on trying to keep from falling, on trying to keep from tearing apart this woman who had sustained him. There was only one thing he could do.

Ruben managed to walk over to her. He bent down and whispered, "You should've written that note a little neater." He kissed her head tasting the redness of her hair.

"Ruben, I ..."

He held up an arm, dismissing her pathetic attempt at...at what? Explanation? Apology? What could she possibly say?

On the way down the stairs he stumbled twice, but only once did he falter on his intent to ignore the questions looming on the borders of his mind. He only wondered how much it would have hurt if he had been shot. He was certain, however, there were things that hurt worse.

When he exited the building, he was not surprised to find no crowd, no cops. And he was definitely not surprised when, three blocks later, on his way to the subway, he was asked by a teenager if he wanted anything. He answered, "Yes." But he did not know what.



Lady in Waiting

Michelle Woodson

they never told me I'd go blind
that sort of thing isn't mentioned
to baby women
I should learn Braille
just in case/you hadn't noticed
and you hadn't
you've divided me by zero
unde/find me
waiting on this rock
starving myself in cycles
listening for wind
and other myths

I refuse your English
and veggie burgers
you can no longer amaze me
with music
or gravity shoes
save the stale bread
for the ducks
give me digit eyes
and light years
calculate
the shortest distance
between your last breath
and my surface
in/tension

what I'm saying/is exactly
what I'm saying
it's my hair that's changing everything
don't listen to its
logarithmic twists
reaching for you like
spring in February
or some pink tree afro
budding snakes
begging apples





Renee 2
Charlie Parker

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Reality

Elaine A. Hakala

Sometimes it's just hard to get that first word out, even when you know you have to say it.

But he knew without me telling him. He knew the moment he got here, the moment he looked at me when he sauntered through the gate at the airport with that boyish grin on his face. I saw the awareness of it in his eyes when he hugged me tightly and kissed me in greeting. I felt it in his touch when we crawled into my bed a while later, despite the passion we always share.

Or maybe I was just feeling my own guilt.

I watched his face across the breakfast table the next morning, his hair still kind of rumpled from sleeping as he sat drinking coffee from my old tabby cat mug and skimming through the paper. I wanted to reach out and straighten those unruly locks for him—they made him look so young—but I busied myself with my own coffee instead, trying to get up the nerve to unburden my soul. Unfortunately it proved harder than I imagined it would over the two weeks since I'd made the decision to tell him. It's just one of those tragic paradoxes of life—when you know someone deserves to hear the truth, but you're also very aware that the truth will hurt him. And I never wanted to hurt Cody. He'd been wonderful to me in the year since we met on vacation.

Unable to face it quite yet, my eyes drifted down to my hands around my own warm cup, to that whitish scar upon my left ring finger that always catches my eye. Three years later that faint groove was still there, marking the spot where my second set of wedding rings rested for the stereotypical seven years. I never realized how tightly they bound my flesh until I took them off, just like the first set I wore before them. The act of removing the last set had been a painful and wonderful experience, in itself hell, as they both were, but I lived through them because I knew with certainty that the relationships were over both times, and that I had tried everything I could to make them work. I knew what I really wanted in each instance... and it wasn't them. This situation wasn't nearly that cut and dried.

His voice tickled across my awareness, almost making me flinch guiltily for the thoughts that raced through my mind. "So did you have some plans for us today?" he asked, just a hint of mischeviousness in his eyes as he folded the newspaper and dropped it beside his plate to capture my gaze with his own, "or can I just take you back to bed and have my way with you all day?"

I giggled, an automatic response to his words, to his voice that always

drops an octave deeper when he says sexy things like that to me. He just grinned lazily and reached across the table, bunching one hand in front of my tee-shirt to drag me to him like he always did, a gesture that usually made me melt.

But not that day.

Suddenly I knew that I couldn't let him distract me anymore from what I had to tell him, despite how pleasant the distraction would be. I was already suffering with sharp pangs of remorse for letting him travel a thousand miles to see me without telling him the truth before he came all this way...heaped with additional guilt for not telling him the moment he got off the plane. But it wouldn't have been right to tell him over a cold and impersonal phone line. And telling him as soon as he arrived? That wasn't even a thought that crossed my mind as I met him halfway up the ramp the night before to throw myself into his arms. I guess I'm selfish. I enjoy the feel of being wrapped securely in that nice warm hug of his. Maybe I just wanted to relish that sensation one more time before I had to throw it away for good.

He looked at me funny when I didn't move from my seat at the table, when I wrapped my fingers around his and took his hand to my lap to prop it against my bare thighs instead. Swallowing hard and trying to stop the nervous fluttering of my stomach, I scrambled for that all important first sentence. I'd rehearsed a few dozen of them in my head already, but now faced with that final critical moment—with him so close to me—I couldn't remember a one of them. But sitting there together in that stream of morning light in my kitchen, the difference in our ages hit home with me one more time, making me sigh softly and squirm in my seat under his inquisitive gaze. There have been times since I met him that those twelve years between us felt like only twelve days, but today I felt the weight of every one of them on my shoulders. The difference in our experiences made them so palpable. I've been through this before. I've dealt with relationships ending. But I know his past. He's still hurt from his last girlfriend...the one who was also his first real one...the one who broke his heart. And here I was going to hurt him again. All I could feel was miserable, because he really didn't deserve what I had to tell him.

I tried from the beginning to make sure this didn't happen...tried to tell him honestly and openly that I was not someone he should get attached to because there were miles between us in more than just the chronological sense. I tried to make him know that ours was a wonderful friendship, but that THAT was all it was. But it evolved into more than that over the year we'd spent visiting each other, talking on the phone for hours between the long trips we both made. I was partially to blame for that...I know. I should have broken it off when he first started telling me that he loved me.

But I didn't. I told him that I loved him, too. It's probably the worst mistake I made with him.

But in many ways, I do love him, adore him in fact. He's so wild and free. I'm just not 'in love' with him. One of those subtle differences that makes life so complicated...a subtlety that, despite my attempts to explain it to him, never sunk in. The look on his face as he sat across the table from me at that moment told me that. Perhaps he thought if he gave me enough time I would change my mind. But time was not on his side in this one. Time and distance were his own worst enemies.

"You look like you have something you want to say, Annie," he told me, his strong fingers wrapping themselves around mine, his voice bringing my dark eyes up to meet his lighter ones.

I didn't even try to hide the feelings on my face. It would have been a futile waste of strength anyway. I emote as much emotion as I absorb from those around me. He knows that. "I do, Cody," I began, then faltered, not knowing where to go from there. I tried to calm myself, but my next words sounded like a sigh. "I'm just not sure how to start, Babe."

I realized vaguely that a spring cloud must have drifted across the morning sun outside, graying the shaft of light flowing in through the open curtains, for when he sat back, removing his hand from mine and looking at me intently, the planes of his face drifted into soft shadows that didn't hide the look of nervousness he was wearing. My heart went out to him as he replied, the tension more than obvious in his tone. "Start at the beginning, Annie."

Start at the beginning. A simple enough request that forced me to grab hold of my emotions with both hands. It was either that or start crying right then. "Cody," I began, taking a deep breath that shuddered right back out of me before I could manage to get any further. Drawing another ragged breath, I tried again. "Cody, you know when we first met I told you that we were destined to be great friends."

The expression that came to his face at that moment made my own emotions threaten to strangle me. He looked for all the world like I had just kicked him. He knew what was coming. Tears started pooling in the corners of my eyes as I fought to go on, but I just didn't know what I could say to soften the blow. "Cody, I never wanted to hurt you," is all I could manage to choke out.

"Who is he, Annie?" he asked me softly, leaning forward in the chair and taking my hand again.

The dampness I saw growing in his blue eyes made me lose it, one lone tear trickling down each of my cheeks, making dual tracks on my anguished face. I closed my eyes and swallowed miserably for a moment to steel myself before reopening them and meeting his gaze directly. I'd never

lied to him, and I didn't plan to start then. "His name is Rick. I met him a few months ago...right after your last visit. He lives here in town."

He just looked down at our clasped hands for the longest time after that, while I fought to keep from breaking into sobs. It felt like I was ripping my own heart out right along with his. When he finally looked back up at me, his face was so rigid with forced control that I just wanted to hide. "What can I do, Annie?" he asked solemnly. "I don't want to lose you."

"Oh, Cody," I sighed dismally, reaching out to straighten those wayward curls on his head, fingertips sliding against his face as well as if trying to stroke the hurt away. "There's nothing you can do, Babe. I love you. You know that, don't you? But you never had me, Cody. Not really. And I think you know that, too...deep inside. I always hoped you'd understand that. We're the best of friends, but we were just never meant to be forever. We're just too different, you and I."

"Stop letting the age thing RULE you, Annie!" he all but growled, surprising me with the anger in his tone. He'd never been anything but calm with me in all the time we'd been together, despite the stories he told of his quick temper. I suppose he needed the anger at that moment to keep himself strong. "So what if you're a young thirty-eight and I'm an old twenty-six?" he continued pointedly. "What difference does it make? I love you."

"Oh, Babe...I know," I returned, my trembling fingers going to his lips to silence him for a moment, finding them trembling as well. "But we want such different things. You want that American Dream...a house with a white picket fence and a couple of kids. And you deserve to have what you want, Cody. You'll be wonderful at it, too," I added, trying to smile at him despite the tears running down my cheeks. "Me, on the other hand?? I've been there...done that and I'm ready for a change."

"I want YOU, Annie...period...whatever that means," he snapped right back, trapping my hand and putting my palm against his cheek as he leaned forward ever more, his eyes blazing and making me want to cry even harder. "I don't care how our lives work out as long as we're together."

"But we're NOT together, Cody." I knew that I should stop there, but he'd opened the issue. I had to tell him how I felt. "I see you every few months for a couple of days. And we have great fun when we do, but I'm afraid that if we were together all the time, we'd just get on each other's nerves."

"We could change that. We could move in together," he countered, his expression growing more stubborn by the second. "And you don't get on my nerves at all, Annie."

This was going badly. How do you tell someone that, as much as you

care for him, you know you'd end up ruling him in the long run, controlling him completely? How do you tell someone you care about that you could never really respect him for that simple reason? And how do you tell someone nicely that he just doesn't have the drive and maturity that you need in a lifemate? Or that, while he was loving you from a distance, you found someone else close by who had those qualities that you needed so desperately? How do you express that in words without sounding like a total bitch? At that moment, I didn't have a clue. But I had to say something. "I would in the long run, Cody. I'm not easy to live with. And there are so many factors at play here, Babe. The fact that you're only eight years older than my daughter is just one of them. What about your family? You're an only child. What is your nice Catholic mother...the one who's only ten years older than ME...going to say about you settling down with a twice divorced woman...one who has no interest in producing the only grandchildren she'll ever see? You already tell me how she pressures you all the time to find a 'nice' girl and settle down to making her some grandbabies. I think she's talking about someone your own age."

"She'll get over it," he grumbled in return, rising to grab the coffee pot and refill both our cups. I watched the slump of his shoulders dismally, knowing that it was going to get worse with him before it got better. When he returned to his chair, he stared at me for what seemed like forever before he spoke again, his tone so sad it nearly broke my heart.

"Is he good to you, Annie?"

I closed my eyes and took a calming breath before answering him, knowing that I was not going to say what he wanted to hear. "Yes, Cody. He is."

"Tell me about him," he said. I know it was the hardest thing he ever did in my presence from the pain in his eyes when he spoke. But I also knew what he was doing. He was hoping beyond hope to find a flaw in my description of the man I had met, something he could capitalize on.

But I was unable to give it to him. "He's forty-three, Babe...owns his own business, makes me laugh...and he doesn't let me control him." There. I'd said it. I'd voiced the true underlying problem in my relationship with Cody. It wasn't so much about age or distance...it was about who shouldered the power and responsibility in the relationship. It was about how I had been the one who had to take charge of all those boring and stressful life decisions in my previous relationships, because both times I married men who were dreamers, artists, creative souls...just like him. Someone had to make sure that we had money, that bills were paid, that the nuts and bolts of life were tightened properly. Despite the dream of a 50/50 relationship, that power always seemed to become very unequal after a while, because, after all, there is the Golden Rule to consider. She who

has the gold...makes the rules. And I'd always had the gold in all my relationships. I was always the driven one. My two husbands were never capable of keeping their own lives together, forcing me to do it for both of us. Cody wasn't capable of it either.

"I don't let you control me, Annie," he chuckled, kissing my hand and relaxing in his chair, a relieved look on his face. "So I don't see that as a problem."

I had to smile. He was such a sweet and wonderful man-so talented, and yet so damned naive to the ways of the world. "Cody? How many payments did you tell me that you're behind on your motorcycle?"

His face clouded instantly, tension returning to his countenance with that single question. "Only one...well, actually more like one and a half. I'll catch it up," he added defensively.

"But you spent how much for a plane ticket to come here?" I returned, standing and striding back and forth in front of him. He didn't answer my question, just squirmed a bit in his chair, looking sheepish. "How's the new guitar working out, by the way?" I went on.

"It's sooo sweet," he responded enthusiastically, that light bouncing back into his eyes instantly when I mentioned the new Les Paul he'd just bought. He'd talked about it for weeks before he bought it. "I haven't gotten it yet," he continued in an animated tone, "because they're still adjusting the..." His voice trailed off when I stopped pacing and looked at him with one eyebrow cocked, as he realized that was something else he had spent money on that he didn't have instead of taking care of his responsibilities first. "Money isn't the only thing a relationship is based on, Annie," he added defensively, trying to meet my gaze resolutely, but losing the battle and lowering his eyes again.

"No, Cody. It isn't," I agreed. "Tell me about Patricia."

His eyes shot instantly to mine, his mouth dropping open in shock. "Annie...I...umm...I...she doesn't mean..." he began.

But I silenced him with a grin and a sweep of my hand. "Don't look so surprised, Cody. Just because you live a thousand miles away doesn't mean I don't hear things." I strolled behind him, wrapping my arms around his neck and planting a soft kiss on his ear, my breath stirring the curls there as I went on. "It's just another reason, Babe. One of many. You say you want a commitment, but you don't live like you do."

"Annie, damnit..."

"No, Cody," I chuckled, hugging him and feeling him wiggle uncomfortably. "Don't even try to make an excuse. You've had another woman in your bed for the last month, yet you suddenly don't want to lose ME? I'm not interested in games, Babe. I told you that the first day we met."

"You're one to talk," he grumbled, sliding his hands up my arms that

encircled him, a soft sigh escaping his lips. "You've got me here sleeping in your bed while this Rick person is pining after you."

"He knows you're here, Babe," I returned casually, kissing his cheek and then smiling at him when he turned his head to look at me strangely. "He told me that he wanted me to have this last weekend with you before he and I moved forward. He understands that I care for you. It's not a source of jealousy with him. He knows my relationship with him is very different from my relationship with you."

I could see him fighting with that concept as I released him and moved to stand in front of him, my fingers trailing across his back, his shoulders, his cheek as I went. Those deep blue eyes of his, that hint of a beard shadow on his chin, that boyish shock of hair draping his forehead all made me smile. Oh, to be that young again—to have the freedom to just be who you were and to not care what tomorrow brings. I'd tried to recapture that in myself through being with Cody, that chance to feel free again. But it didn't work. Reality had a way of creeping into it every time.

Funny how I found that freedom in a place I'd never thought to look. For the first time in my life I found it in a man who didn't dash about all the time expressing his own freedom, but rather strove to lift the burden of the world from my shoulders, to allow me the space to be free for a change, taking joy in my art, my words, my expression as if they were of his own creation. And maybe in a sense they were.

And Cody? Sweet Cody. I took him back to bed as the morning light played across my kitchen floor, held out a hand, tangled my fingers in his, gave him a sultry look, and made him dance the dance I wanted him to dance. I controlled him for one last time. We spent the day and then the night with our limbs intertwined under the thick comforter on my bed, making sad but sweet love, few words, just touch, just closeness. There were tears in both our eyes as we parted the next day at the airport, but we both knew it must be, no matter how painful it was.

The phone was ringing as I walked back in my door, feeling as blue as I had ever felt in my life. Dropping the keys, I reached for the handset, and a deep voice flowed across my ear before I could say a word. "Don't speak, Sugar. Hear me out for a moment. I don't know how your weekend went. You don't even have to tell me what happened, if you don't want to. I know it was sad for you, but I'm glad you two had the chance to talk face-to-face. He's a better person for having known you, Annie. You know that. You give so much to the people around you," he murmured, the sound of his voice bringing his face before my vision—dark eyes with little sun crinkles around them when he smiled, dark hair streaked with the beginnings of a touch of grey. Not so young, but with a twinkle in his eye that spoke of intelligence seasoned with a spark of mischievousness, and a

double dose of humor I'd grown to love already. "It's why he loves you," he went on. "You've made him see life as he never had before. But you deserve so much more for YOU, Annie. You deserve your chance to find out what you can be for a change. That's what I want for you, Sugar. But for right now...I'll bet you could really use a hug."

It made me smile through the last traces of tears on my face. I only had one reply. "So how long will it take you to get over here, handsome?"

It made him chuckle, and I heard the scrape of his keys on the table beside him through the crackle of static on the phone line. "On my way right now," he said. I grinned and returned the phone to its cradle when I heard the hurried click on the other line, turning and taking a seat at my table to await his arrival in the shaft of sunlight that illuminated my kitchen.

A Statue Among Men

Clinton Carey

He stands alone in a crowded park.

Passersby talking around him—never to him.

The occasional old friend stops by to rest—worn from traveling so far, so fast, staying only a moment then flying away with the first strong wind.

He has stories to tell but no one to listen.

Captivated by his strength, I stop for a moment to rest.

He begins to speak to me but I can not hear him.

Then with a tired nod of my head his voice is clear; I am filled with his tales: the horrible winters where unprotected lives were lost to the elements wars for a freedom that was his from birth

the illnesses unaffected by modern medicine

Not all of his tales are sad; he speaks of bright spring days filled with the laughter of happy children running and playing in the beautiful parks, the distinguished sound of horses pounding the soft dirt roads, the leaves on the plentiful trees whispering and crackling in the cool autumn breeze.

Then with a jostle I am back in the park.

People still walking right by, never taking the time to stop and listen to the tales of my new friend's life.

Maybe tomorrow I will come back to sit here again, to listen, to visit.

Until I return—here he will stand, no one to talk to, no one to listen—

A statue among men.

Quatervois

Shawna Silverman

I.

You and I are veterans of the same dim campaign
with five years of wasted breath
coalescing between us like swampgas
and all my useless useless tears
won't water your bones
you beautiful fool dulled by despair
and the slow winding death of five years

II.

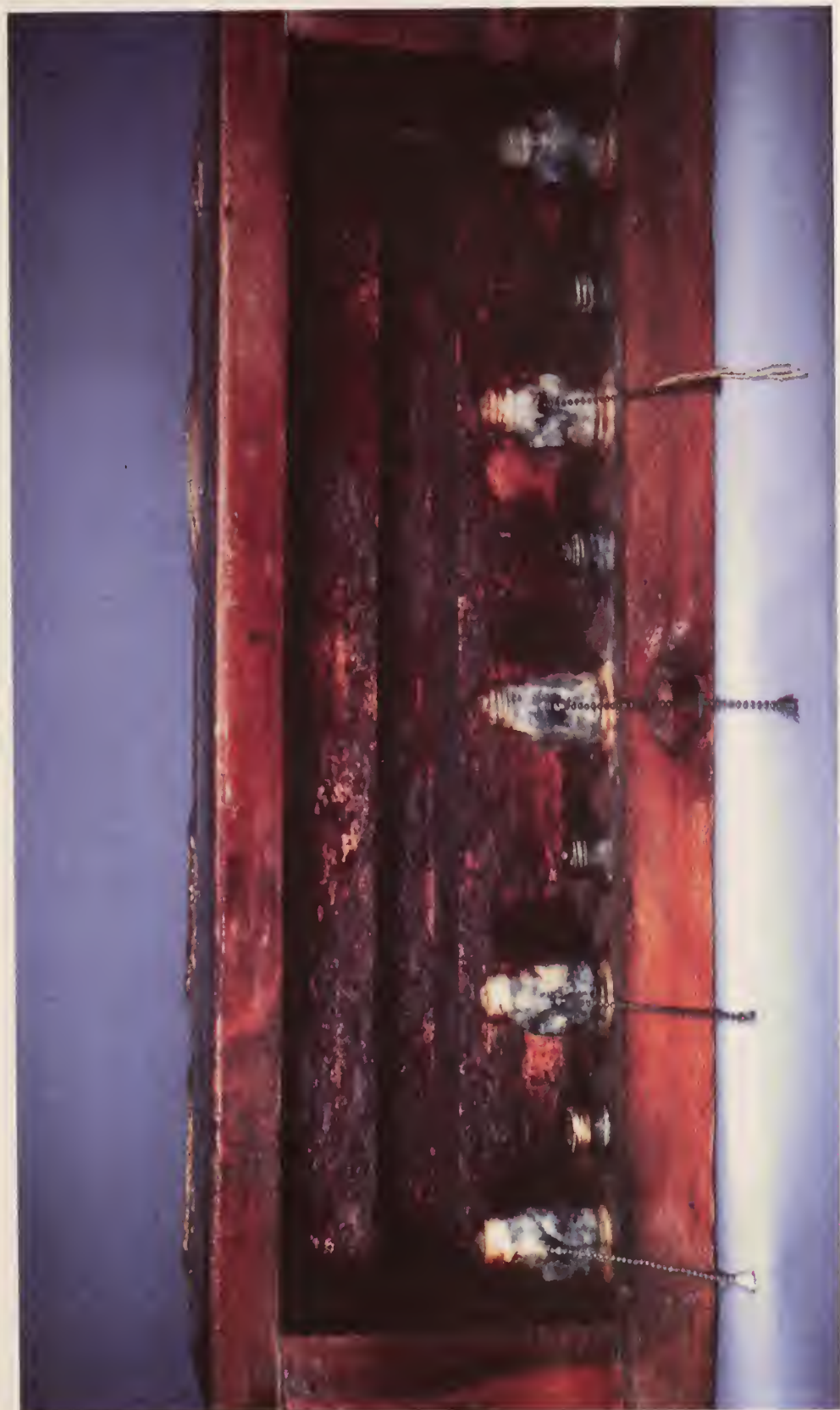
Who's to say which one of us is more wrong?
A bundle of twigs
in a moment's breath
is alive with flame
while the somber trunk may rot silently
from within

III.

Yeah, I'm takin' what I can get.
The angel spark in your brute chest sustains me.
The ashes of a thousand suns grace my boot-tops;
the fruit of last night's dreams
runs down my dusty chin.

IV.

In the shapes between the heavens and the sea
your hand in mine reflects
the straining skeleton of a china moth,
wings wrapped mercifully around my thumb.
All the little lives and deaths
emerge beneath the waves;
we jerk and toss
and then grow young.



el tiempo

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John D. Trainor

This isn't living,
fighting for my four corners,
walls that separate me from my neighbor,
my privacy through tracing paper...
Everyone listening to where I'm walking,
what I'm cooking,
my music that's wailing,
the secrets I'm saying,
the trust I'm sharing
for anyone that wants to get a leg up on me,
but maybe if I save my money,
begging for bills in front of a grill
that Don Sam wants to keep for protection,
wants me to call him my Uncle
so we can keep the connection,
(I call it taxes, but he says it's freedom)
pointing his finger, while his attitude lingers
on my shoulders like boulders,
as I hear Don Sam call for another soldier
and he hides beneath a three-colored flag,
standing in my backyard decked out in drag,
shouting, "Protect the women and children!
Prepare so that no harm will come to them!"
and out of sight is the silver spoon
shoved in the mouth of some Kennedy loon
who dances with Pope John and the Harlequin Nun
on my back so that their will may be done.



Jack of Hearts

Patrick Godley

The sun had long since set itself down for a cool dip in the Pacific when the stranger walked in. A seemingly impenetrable silence had filled the bar when the whispers of this night's wager crept into everyone's ears. Jim felt as if he had called out the devil. He had thought to himself, "I'd give anything to win this hand," just as he had done so many times before. But tonight he felt strange. He had only felt this way once before. As he dropped his fifth card to the table, the silence was broken as a spur jingled. At the time, his concentration was so heavy on the game that he did not ponder why a man would be wearing spurs. A few men still rode on horseback in the city, but spurs were not necessary when riding in a city of San Francisco's size. Jim's mind was on the game. Reaching for the top card off the deck, another spur jangled. Jim closed his eyes and, as he slid the card across the table to meet with the rest, he heard the hinges cry as the stranger entered unseen. Everyone heard him come into the bar, but the sound he made did not evoke interest, merely annoyance. It detracted from the final poker hand of the night.

Every night for as long as anyone in the bar could remember, Jim, the wealthiest man in the state, would get drunk and gamble, but never past midnight. Many years earlier, so long ago that many began to wonder if the tale was even true, Jim was said to have gambled his wife away. In truth, she was not yet his wife. They had been courting for some time when Jim ran into some money. They took a train ride across the bay to a casino outside the county. Jim gambled long into the night, so long that they nearly missed the train ride home. When they got to the station, the train was so full and the conductor would not let the two on board. Jim knew that if he did not get his fiancé home, her reputation would be ruined. Women in polite society did not spend the night out with a man unescorted. Jim's worries were not entirely unselfish, though. Even though his intent was marriage, he could not even imagine what her father would do to him. So Jim paid the conductor fifty dollars to turn the train around to come back to get them.

They went back to the casino and Jim kept on gambling. Some time after midnight, the conductor came into the casino to get the two and take them home. The train backed out of the station. They could have turned it around, but Jim was in a hurry since he was already late in getting his fiancé home. The train was on a set track so no one figured it would matter if it ran backwards. The conductor had not informed the bridge operator

that he was running the train after midnight in fear that he might lose his job.

A light fog had set in on the bay. Jim sat back with his fiancé in the only car the train was pushing. The conductor figured that with just one car attached to the engine, he would not burn enough fuel to be noticed. The cool fog dampened the air as the train picked up speed. A small ship entered the bay and approached the bridge. The bridge operator pulled the gear and spun the bridge to let the boat through. He was not expecting a train to be on the tracks and since the train was running in reverse, he could not see the light on the front of the locomotive. Slightly nervous of the time, Jim was watching the track and noticed the bridge spinning to let the boat through. He called the conductor to stop the train. Without panic, yet full of fear, the conductor pulled the brake. Sparks flew as the wheels stopped and the train's momentum sent it sliding along the track. They had reached too great a speed to stop the train in such a short distance. The conductor braced himself. He watched the passenger car drop out of sight and then pop back into view as he too went over the edge. It was like a roller coaster to Hell. The passenger car hit the water and before it had time to sink, the engine came crashing down on top of it. The conductor was crushed between the two cars. Jim and his fiancé were tossed to one end of the car and then back again. Water soon filled all of the space around them. When the locomotive's engine smashed into the passenger car, it shot a piece of the window framing, spearing Jim's right bicep and severing the nerve. His arm hung dead in the water. He managed to pull his fiancé to the surface, but with only one arm working, he could not drag her to the shore. She drowned that night in the bay.

The doctors amputated Jim's right arm in fear of gangrene. Though the two never married, tormented by guilt, Jim wore his wedding ring. And vowed he would lose his other arm before he lost that ring. And he never did lose that ring. He never lost another thing. He could gamble away all the money he had and if the sap he was playing would give him one more hand, Jim would win it all back.

The poker games never really got interesting until Jim lost all of his money. But some nights he would never get that deep in the hole. And Jim always gave odds; usually, it was Jim's hundred to the other man's dollar. Jim would drink and gamble all night but no matter how much or how little he won or how drunk he got, Jim would never play past midnight. Most nights the final bet would be double-or-nothing or for a few of Jim's stallions. One night he bet his house. Some of the time men would play Jim the final hand for that contraption called an automobile. The damned thing hardly ever worked and when it did, it left such a cloud of smoke behind that it could easily be confused with a burning barn. They

had no use for the car, they just wanted the bragging rights. But this night the wager was of particular interest.

A cocky Irishman by the name of Begby had won all of Jim's money. He had heard of the one-armed man who would lose all of his money, only to win it right back. Begby had plenty of money and a house of his own. He cared not for the breeding horses or for the automobile. He came that night to show Jim up. Begby was set on putting an end to the legend. In a drunken stupor, Jim had lost all of the money he had locked up in the bank next door to the Hyacinth House Saloon. Begby bet all of the money he brought to the table and all of the money he had won from Jim against Jim's wedding ring. Jim accepted and, being a man true to his word, knew that losing the hand meant losing his arm.

Jim lifted the cards to his face and opened his eyes to see the unthinkable. He had been dealt the Ace, King, Queen, and Ten of Hearts, and the Jack of Spades. Barely conscious from the bottle and the hour, Jim had tossed away a Royal Straight in hopes of drawing together the toughest hand in poker: a Royal Flush. And he drew the Jack of Hearts. He dropped the cards on the table and a rally cheer filled the bar. But as Jim swung his arm around like a hook to drag in all of his reclaimed chips, a gunshot rang out.

Begby called Jim a cheat and struck him across the face with the back of his hand. Jim hit the floor. The blow wasn't that strong, but gravity was enough of a reason for the drunken Jim to go down. Angered by the Irishman's accusation (and this being a western), a bar fight broke out. The Irishman was grossly outnumbered, but he did have sobriety to his advantage. The stranger who had just walked in helped him to fight off the mob. The two kept firing their guns into the ceiling. It had no effect in scaring the attackers, but, as everyone later found out, that was not the purpose. The two men fought their way to the door. As they stepped over him, Jim now noticed that both men were wearing spurs. Jim heard one more loud shot. He then passed out.

Jim awoke soon after dawn. As he tried to stand, he found the effects of the alcohol were all too present. The bar was in a shambles. The ceiling and back wall were riddled with bullet holes. Two men were dead. The bartender was not to be seen. Most of the men from the night before had gone home. Some, like Jim, had passed out on the floor and were still lying there. Jim wandered into the street. There were shards of wood in the road. One of the deputies was shot and lay dead in the street. Jim's horse had been stolen. All of the horses were gone. Jim stared at the sign above the saloon: Hyacinth House. The sun was now at Jim's side. His shadow ran down the street and seemed to reach all the way to the ocean. The town was still and silent. A breeze blew by Jim's face. He thought

that he smelled wheat. "Could this breeze have come from as far as the wheat fields? Why not further? Could this breeze have come from the Atlantic? Could it have crossed the entire continent? Was there a hint of the Deep South? Could this wind have crossed the Mississippi? And the plains of the Midwest? Could it have climbed the Rockies and jumped the Grand Canyon? And all for me?"

Jim heard a whisper that snapped him out of his trance. He looked for the origin of the sound. The wind had kicked a dollar bill to Jim's feet. He did not pick it up. His mind raced. This was bad. To anyone else, finding money in the street would be lucky. But it was out of the ordinary. And it was too much, a penny, a nickel, a dime at the most, but a whole dollar? Jim recalled the night before. He had drunk heavily. He had gambled and lost all of his money. He had won it all back. They had played with chips and not cash. All of his money was safe and locked up in the bank next door to the saloon. But Jim had that odd feeling. He had felt it only once before, the night his fiancé drowned.

Jim tried to recall the rest of the night. He had been called a cheat and then a fight broke out. He was either knocked out or had passed out. There had been gunshots. One, the last one he heard, had been exceptionally loud. The bank. Jim turned to see the bank's front window was blown out and the door was hanging on one hinge. He ran inside. The bank manager, Mr. Minor, was dead. He had been shot in the stomach and bled to death during the night. The door to the safe was open and the safe was empty. A hole had been drilled next to the lock and a stick of dynamite was inserted to blow the lock open. The Irish gambler was a setup. Everybody got so wrapped up in the game that no one noticed what was happening next door. The stranger must have walked in to signal the Irishman that the safe was ready to be blown. So they started a bar fight to mask the noise in the bank. That last loud gunshot Jim had heard wasn't a gunshot. That was the dynamite that blew the safe. All of the horses had been set loose to slow down anyone who might try to chase the thieves.

How long had they been gone? Jim reached for his pocket watch. It was not there. His billfold was gone too! He had been robbed of all he had. They had stolen all of his money out of the bank and picked him clean. His heart stopped. His wedding ring, the only possession he truly valued. It was still there. That they had not taken from him. He stepped outside, into the street once again. He now noticed the shards of wood on the ground. They had made up the paneling in the front window of the bank. The blast from the safe door must have knocked out the window. Jim stood in the street, this time facing the sun. He did not need to squint. It was a gentle light. The town was still quiet. Jim bent down and picked up the dollar off the ground. The wind blew again and Jim's breeze was carried to the ocean.



Silent Mantra

Elaine A. Hakala

All she could do was stare when the question was finally asked.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to steel herself against the eventuality of it. She spent hours and hours over the preceding two weeks preparing to be able to utter the word "Yes" when asked. But when that question finally came, uttered by the nurse in the impossibly white uniform standing beside her in the brightly lit corridor, it was as if the entire world suddenly pressed down upon her chest, making it impossible to draw a breath to answer.

And the nurse was no comfort to her in her moment of panic, staring back at her with cold, doll black eyes, her long lacquered nails tapping impatiently against the clipboard held against her lithe form. "Did you hear me, Miss Evans?" The woman asked in a patronizing tone, tipping her arm up to glance at her watch as if she had a hundred other responsibilities more important than asking a dying woman to take a chance with her few weeks left. "I can repeat the question, if you didn't understand," she added, the forced quality of her feigned concern evident in her tone. But when she got no response, her demeanor softened a bit as she slipped one cool hand over the curve of the emaciated arm that lay on the gurney beside the curve of her own white clad hip. "Beth?" she murmured.

Beth closed her eyes and swallowed hard, despite the fact that she had nothing to swallow. Her mouth and throat were sandpaper dry...had been for seemingly endless days since she had made the decision. When she opened her eyes again, the fluorescent light behind the nurse's perfectly coifed blonde head gave her an angelic aura, bringing up a chuckle from the depths of Beth's despair as she lay upon the rolling cart that would probably take her to her doom. Her frail frame began to shake with mirth, though no sound came out from between her cracked lips, her mind reeling with amusement at the thought that there might actually be angels after all, despite her years of arguing with her friends at grad school about their improbability. "I might actually find out soon," she thought, the hilarious irony of it blocking out the infinite sadness for a precious moment.

The nurse took the silent, shaking emotion for grief, her carefully made up face shifting into what must have been a well-practiced expression of sympathy as she patted Beth's arm consolingly. But the counterfeit concern only made the woman on the bed laugh harder, until her voice finally sounded out in the shiny white corridor like a maniacal croak.

Realizing that her patient was laughing and not in tears, the carefully

starched angel of mercy frosted over once more, a hard edge returning to her eyes as she stuck out the clipboard to Beth, chained pen skidding off into her patient's lap from the abrupt motion. She stood silently as Beth took the pen from the sheet that covered her, one tiny shaking hand rising to scrawl her name on the form clipped to the board presented to her, signing her own death warrant perhaps...only time would tell. The second Beth's hand dropped from completing her signature, the nurse all but snatched the pen from her, turning on her heel and walking away smartly, leaving the dying woman lying alone in the corridor.

Beth watched the woman's retreat, still chuckling as she laid back against the thin pillow and pulled the starched sheet up once more. It felt good to laugh. Laughter had been missing from her life for far too long.

As her fleeting humor drifted away, she fingered the tiny spot of blue ink left behind on the pristine sheet by the pen, thinking back to the day all this had started. That was the day Dr. Jamerson had told her about the cancer. "I won't lie to you," he had said. The hollow feeling that began in her at that moment still remained, echos of the words "bone marrow cancer" still reverberating around inside what had once been her life. They had tried everything they could, months of agonizing treatments that made her so sick she wished she was dead, but conventional medicine had failed her. As the soft sounds of distant conversation and the soft whir of machinery tickled against her ears in the stark white corridor, she ran her hands down her painfully thin body, feeling hard bone and papery skin where once soft, rounded flesh had been, and closed her eyes in misery once more.

That was why Chad had left. He changed almost instantly when she told him the news that day, and as she sobbed against his chest she felt him harden next to her like a stone, distancing himself from her pain. Oh, he stayed for a few months, just for appearances. It wouldn't have done his social standing any good to have left too soon, would have hurt his chances of finding another rich woman to take care of him if the word got out about that. But as the chemicals ravaged her body in an attempt to fight the growth of darkness in her, he grew more and more distant, until one day he was just no longer there. Sometimes at night she still hugged the pillow that held a faint hint of his smell, trying to lose herself in it as the pain kept her awake, to use that wisp of cologne to focus on as she chanted softly to herself, trying to let the mantra wash over her, to take her to the place in her own being that was calm, cool, the escape that she needed. Intellectually, she knew he was no good to start with, that Chad never had the depth of soul she had, that he wanted her physically, that he wanted her money, but could have cared less about the rest of her. But even admitting that, she missed his company, and the feel of his hands. But he no longer

wanted this body...this thirty-two-year-old flesh that looked ninety...no longer young, or lush, or supple to the touch. In the end, even her wealth had not kept him around to suffer through that.

She heard the squeak of rubber soles on the white linoleum, and looked up to see a young male orderly standing at the head of her gurney. His broad, pimpled face was homely, but his sunny smile was genuine as he looked down at her. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she said softly, her fingers trembling more as he pushed against the rolling table, and he started her on her trip down the hallway. She knotted her hands in the sheet to stop them from shaking, wondering for the thousandth time if she was making the right decision. But for her, there was no choice. It was commit to this, with the horrible risks, or simply wait passively to die.

"Are you afraid?" the orderly asked, and the audacity of that question caused Beth to turn her head and look back at him, preparing to blast him verbally for inquiring about what should be an obvious state. But his soft brown eyes stopped her. He wasn't just being flip. He really was concerned.

"Of course I am," she sighed, relaxing back on the thin mattress as best she could with the grinding ache in her bones. "Wouldn't you be?"

"If I were facing equal chances to be cured but go insane, or to simply die...yes...I would be," he replied, his compassion for her plight evident in his tone. Tears she thought had long since dried up welled in her eyes, and she brought her withered hands up to cover her face, fighting the sob that threatened to escape.

He stopped their movement instantly, coming around to the side of the rolling bed to place one warm hand on her stomach. She tried to ignore him for a moment, but then finally pulled her hands down, her damp eyes meeting his as he stood there beside her, his fear that he had upset her obvious. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"That's okay," she whispered as she sniffed back the emotion that had taken hold of her once more. "It's not your fault."

"You don't have to do this, you know," he added, shifting on his feet uncomfortably.

"Yes, I do," she returned, drawing the sheet up to her chin once more with both hands, trying to hide her soul from his questions with the thin cotton. "I'll be dead in less than a month anyway. No guts, no glory...right?" she added ruefully.

He stepped closer to her, taking one of her hands in his larger one and looking quickly down both ends of the corridor before leaning down to her, pitching his voice low enough so it did not carry down the echoing white hallway to anyone else's ears. "Beth," he whispered, his warm breath

brushing against her cheek as he put his lips almost to her ear, "whatever happens, don't tell them."

As he straightened beside her, she looked up at his face curiously, not understanding his words. "What do you mean?" she asked, but he shushed her quickly and returned to the head of the gurney, starting her on her way once again. Beth craned her head up to look at him strangely, and he winked and grinned at her as the foot of the bed struck the swinging doors at the end of the corridor, taking them into the treatment room.

Dr. Jamerson stood there waiting for her, and beside him the tall form of the Alandrain doctor Meyesus. Beth had not met him before. He was very much in demand, and Dr. Jamerson had thought it best not to tie up his time. She had seen the Alandrains on the telescreen when they had first arrived on Earth, seen the worldwide fervor and near global war that ensued because of it, until the alien creatures had proved themselves benign and united public opinion about themselves by showing the world their potentially precious gifts of better life. But meeting one face to face was much more shocking than she had anticipated. The pre-op shot had relaxed her, and it was probably just as well, for the sight almost made her gasp.

The kids had taken to calling them "Blue Kens" and "Blue Barbies" because of the way they looked...the less flattering versions "Blukees" and "Bluebees" they whispered of course, since almost all of the adult world stood ready to sing praises to them. Only a few people still held out against their acceptance, still cried that they were an evil alien presence on the earth, but most had stars and hope in their eyes after the rapid advancements in science, after the first AIDS victim had been cured, after the first cancer victim had been cured, a euphoria that had continued even after the success rate had proven poor at best with some procedures.

Despite their dusky midnight blue skin and crystal eyes, every one of the 28 Alandrains from the scout ship was beautiful. That was the only way to describe them. Their facial features had been compared to classic Greek sculpture, chiseled into handsome perfection. And they had two arms and two legs, and two eyes with a mouth, all in the right places, making the doomsayers who wrote science fiction stories of horrible looking aliens invading the Earth look rather sheepish. As a matter of fact, all of their features were very similar to the Earthling friends they had found on the blue-green planet their scout ship discovered the year before.

Was it only a year, Beth found herself wondering as her gurney was maneuvered beside a stationary table in the treatment room. So much had changed in that year. The skies were already noticeably cleaner; the air filtration stations that the Alandrains had designed and that whole world had sent labor and money to build at the polar caps were making a major

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difference already. Likewise with the water across the planet, genetically engineered bacteria clearing years of pollution away from nearly every body of water in a scant few months. Their altered versions of earth vegetation promised to end world hunger, and so many other things that they were willing to share, so much promise. They brought such knowledge with them.

Her body sang out in pain as the orderly and the nurse who had joined the doctors helped her from the rolling bed to the stationary one. The young man's face pinched just a bit as he saw hers wince, sympathetic pain perhaps, and he patted her hand and half smiled at her for a moment before putting a hip to the gurney once more and taking it back to the corridor. Beth turned her head to watch him as he went past and caught the briefest hint of what might have been a wink before he moved away. He was strange, but rather sweet she decided, wondering what his words to her in the hall had meant.

"Miss Evans?"

She turned back to face Dr. Meyesus, knowing the alien voice to be his. His warm smile as her eyes met his would have melted any iceberg heart, despite the deep indigo tone of the face it radiated from. She knew now why so many people from her world found the visitors so intriguing. "And why not?" her friend Cassandra had said that night that felt so long ago, the last time they had way too many margaritas and talked like magpies far into the night. "They're just like humans...only blue...just another color...like that Sudanese business man that Donna Ross had that affair with last spring...you remember the one??" Cassie had dissolved into giggles at that point in the conversation, like she always did...at least like she did before Beth's illness had cruelly stolen Cass' sense of fun. Now she was too serious in her best friend's presence, too sad, too quick to tears instead of the laughter that always helped Beth escape the fear of her tragic situation. Cass had offered to come with her today, but Beth had gently refused. Lying there awaiting what might be her last breaths, she knew that her tender friend would not have held up under the strain, despite the lure of having the chance to meet one of the charismatic creatures at last, the one who now stood beside the table and slipped one warm hand over her suddenly ice cold one.

Being this close to the Alandrain doctor, Beth could sense the charm of the man despite the one true alien aspect of his appearance...his crystalline eyes. With no pupil, no hint of the direction of the gaze, the Alandrians eyes were cold to look at, not the warm and open windows to the soul that their human counterparts possessed. But the rest of the face was so expressive, so alive, that Beth could not help being drawn into the circle of energy that he radiated. "Yes, Dr. Meyesus," she replied, returning his

smile. "It's wonderful to meet you at last."

"I wish it could be under better circumstances, Beth. May I call you Beth?" he asked, his warm fingers finding the pulse at her wrist almost casually as he smiled down on her. She nodded for him to continue, and his smile almost went up a notch in brilliance, making her marvel that there was once any opposition to the arrival of these dynamic creatures. That smile could light any room.

"Beth, Dr. Jamerson tells me that he's explained the risks in what we're about to do to you, but I want to be sure that you completely understand before we begin," he continued, the barest tips of his fingers stroking across her face to turn it slightly from side to side, his unfixed gaze seeming to scan her eyes as she lay there.

"What is there to understand, Dr. Meyesus?" she returned, a hint of wistful sigh escaping her lips before her weak voice grew stronger with false resolve. Oh, to be able to be anywhere else. "I have a one-third chance of complete recovery, a one-third chance of being cured, but losing my mind, and last but not least, I have a one-third chance of never getting up off this table on my own ever again. Considering the situation I'm in, it's worth the risk to me." She swallowed hard to fight back the tears that rose at the corners of her eyes again, caused by the stark emotion of saying those words and realizing their hard reality for what might be the last time.

The alien man cupped her face in both his hands and looked down upon her for a long span of heartbeats, and Beth suddenly found herself being enveloped in a feeling of such faith in this benevolent creature that she almost dared to hope. They had already worked so many miracles for the planet. Was there one for her? If no one else could, maybe he could save her. It was worth any cost. She'd proven that when she liquidated half her assets to pay for the procedure. It was only money, after all. So far only a scant double handful of wealthy and high ranking individuals in need had been able to afford the cost of the treatment, a cost that the Alandrains had assured the world would become substantially less expensive when the strange looking plants they had sown by the thousands upon the acres and acres of public land were finally grown to maturity. But Beth didn't have the time to wait for the cost to go down. No bargain basement for her. Days and even hours were precious to her now.

"Beth, I'm not going to put you to sleep for this procedure," Dr. Meyesus told her, bringing her back from her own thoughts for a moment to focus on his face and his words as he stroked one thumb casually across her jawline, holding her face in his hands. His soft touch made her shiver just a bit, and marvel at the reaction in herself. It had been so long since a man had touched her, and alien as he may be, he was still a man. She almost pinched herself for the direction her mind was taking as she looked

up at him...silly, girlish thoughts when so much was at stake, when her life hung in the balance. "I need you awake so I can talk to you," he added, his smile bringing one to her face as well, despite the pain, despite the dread. "But I must tell you that it may not be comfortable for you. There will be some pain involved."

"Nothing could be worse than what I've already gone through, Dr. Meyesus," she returned, closing her eyes for a moment to steel herself against the inevitable, starting the chant in her mind that had proven so useful over the long months of chemo. It was a simple trick of self-hypnosis, one she learned as a child from a New Age healer her mother had taken her to for the migraines she still suffered on occasion, a soft mantra chant inside that helped her to let the pain roll off like sheets of rain water, bringing blessed relief.

"Then we shall begin," the Doctor said softly, stroking her hair and then turning from the table. The nurse stepped up to take his place, the faint prick of an IV needle in the back of her hand that followed the woman's arrival nothing compared to the pain that Beth had endured in near silence for the past few months. She watched as the two doctors prepared solutions in a set of hypodermic needles, the long line of syringes gleaming under the florescent lights, and the panic she knew would come started to rise in her soul. She wanted to believe in the Alandrain miracle so badly. Meeting Dr. Meyesus had helped tremendously. His presence was reassuring in some extraordinary way, despite its strangeness. But the finality of it all as the alien doctor turned to her, pale blue essence of the Alandrain plant that had traveled with them over millions of miles of space carefully encased inside the first hypodermic, made her grasp the edges of the table to prevent certain flight.

As he pressed the needle into the hypodermic port on her IV, Beth closed her eyes and turned up the chanting in her head a notch, trying to fight the panic. "This is it, Beth old girl," she thought to herself, "no turning back now." The cool tranquil stream brought forth by the mantra soothed her some, but nothing could hide her from the terror as she opened her eyes again to see his hand poised on the plunger of the syringe.

"Beth," Dr. Meyesus said, pausing for a second to capture her gaze, "this will feel very cold as it goes into your veins. It's important that you keep talking to me during this first step. No matter how hard it gets. Do you understand, Beth?"

She couldn't find a voice to answer him, but nodded her head gravely. Time felt suspended as his thumb depressed the plunger, sending the pale blue fluid into the reservoir to mix with a bit of glucose before descending down the long plastic tubing on its way to roll the dice in her veins. Shifting the mantra in her head higher, she tensed as the first chill fingers of it

hit the back of her hand.

"Relax, Beth," Dr. Meyesus cautioned, one deep blue hand coming to rest upon her shoulder as his sympathetic countenance hovered above her. "Fighting it makes it worse." His other hand slipped warm fingers around her wrist as she felt the first icy shock hit her veins, making her tremble as much from fear as temperature. No turning back now.

Dr. Jamerson had told her that the effects of the drug would be rapid. She had no idea what that meant until that moment. The ice in her veins went white hot in a flash, the surge running straight up her arm to her head like a gunshot. Caught by surprise, she cried out, the cooling mantra lost in the scream that tried to tear itself from her throat.

And then they were all with her, the nurse, Dr. Jamerson, and the Alandrain all laying hands on her, murmuring soothing words. It was as if her head were filled with a hive full of buzzing bees for what felt like an eternity and then just nothingness. But vast nothingness. It was almost as if her head had opened up into cathedral size, a sensation that both stunned and elated her. Her mantra came back instantly, almost reverberating with power inside her skull, drawing her mind away from the pain that looked so small in that vast space. A smile came to Beth's lips as her eyes opened to find the faces over hers.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Meyesus asked, withdrawing the hypo from the IV port and replacing it with another one filled and at the ready.

"Amazing," Beth replied, "simply amazing. You should use that stuff instead of morphine, Dr. Jamerson," she added with a giggle.

"That was what we call Trora," the Alandrain physiciaian returned, "to ready the mind and body for acceptance of the Renaque that we will use next. It's important to heal the mind as well as the body, you know," he added with a smile. "We tried to take that into consideration as we began using our chemicals on our human friends."

Almost free of pain for the first time in months, Beth felt like dancing. Hell...if they'd let her, she knew she could turn a fancy heel around the treatment room a time or three. She felt strong and free for the first time in what seemed like forever. Her mind soared with the sensation, and the realization hit her that if the treatment was not successful, she at least had this moment of peace again before it was all over. "I feel great, Dr. Meyesus," she chuckled, grinning up at him with what must have been a silly look, but she didn't care. It felt too good to care. "Let's do it."

"Then we shall proceed," the Alandrain returned, pressing the plunger on the second hypodermic.

Beth went rigid as what felt like molten lava poured into her veins. She suddenly couldn't feel the table under her, or even sense the room around her. Every nerve on fire, every fiber of her being battling against the

onslaught on her senses, she screamed the chant in her mind, that inner voice panting harshly and echoing faintly inside the vast expanse of her augmented senses.

And then the images began, bringing with them an onslaught on her other senses. As her heart pounded in her ears, she saw, smelt, heard, tasted, and felt everything she had ever experienced in her entire life, scenes like motion pictures crashing into her at lightening speed, threatening to overwhelm her. They went so fast, like the fleeting memories that fired them into existence, but each event remained singular, the time encapsulated from hours into a heartbeat, each sensation as true to life as it was when originally experienced. But different somehow.

She saw her father standing over her, tasted the salty tears that flowed freely down her eight-year-old face the day that he told her that her cherished old dog had gone to live on a farm upstate where he could run free in his last years. But in that flash of perception, she knew that her father had the dog put to sleep, and that he had cried all the way to the vet's office that day and all the way home. She wasn't sure how she knew, she just did. But that was just the beginning. All the childhood memories, all the deceptions and white lies, big and small, paraded across her senses in blinding intensity, drawing an infinite sadness to her heart, a dull ache that she felt below her breastbone despite the chant that echoed in her head, despite the calming effect of the Trora.

Then came visions of adult life, and of Chad. She watched almost dispassionately as event after event in their seven years together rolled across her consciousness, all the untruths coming to the foreground, every deceit. But with the image of him came the visions of so many of her friends, their smiling faces hiding horrible truth as she confided her fears about him to them, their faces concerned, but all the while knowing that they themselves shared the blame with Beth's philandering husband, for many of them had been partners in the deceptions. All the affairs, all the lies. The chant sang out loud in her head as they flowed across her field of vision, instinct trying to protect her from the pain that truth brought with it.

And in a flash, she saw the TV news story that ran the day the Alandrains arrived on Earth. But with it came the truth as well. She lost the stabilizing mantra when the realization hit her like a thunderclap and her mind began to scream, the sound pounding at her body and beating her soul. Compared to the revelations she had experienced in the past few minutes, or was it hours, the horrible global truth made her lose her grasp on herself completely. Lost in the vortex of fact, Beth reached out blindly, catching her lifeline, and spinning away on the murmurings of the soft chant reverberating through her head, clinging to it rather than the reality

she had just become a party to.

She heard her name being called from what sounded like a million miles away, and she tried so hard to ignore it, but hands grabbed her, and would not let her slip away from them. The mantra in her head increased in volume as the intruders into her consciousness tried to pull her back to the treatment room, tried to stop her from escaping forever. Beth fought them with every scrap of strength she could muster, but she was lost, hopeless as she spun out of control. Inside the echoes of her mind, she screamed as they found a hold on her, as ghostly fingers encircled her arms and legs and dragged her down, until the hard examining table was suddenly under her body once more.

Something rigid was shoved between her teeth, and she realized faintly that she was shaking violently despite the hands that held her, seizures wracking her thin frame. As they fought to restrain her, she fought inside the strange alien distillation that raced through her veins. But the only thing she could hold fast to was the chant in her head, the soothing water that brought peace, and she finally sighed deeply, her body relaxing on the treatment table as she released her grasp on the edges of her torn world and let herself slip beneath the cool surface of freedom.

When the alien voice invaded her consciousness once more, Beth had no awareness of how long she had remained submerged there, only that she was reluctant to leave the peace that she had found. But the voice was insistent, as were the hands that moved her arms, her legs. They would not allow her the peace she craved so badly. The mantra in her head was still with her, soothing the raw extremities of her soul and mind, but it had changed somehow, taken on a lyric tone that seemed light and airy compared to before. It wasn't until her eyes began to flutter open that she realized why. The pain was gone. Not just pushed back behind gritted teeth. Gone.

A circle of faces surrounded her when her eyes finally focused, human and Alandrain, sharing concern. She had almost forgotten about them. Dr. Meyesus ran one indigo finger up in front of her face, and her pupils tracked it as it moved, bringing soft sighs of relief from the assemblage. Dr. Jamerson hurried forward, the human physician's face relieved as he checked her vitals, as he fretted over her as he always did. Smiling up at him, Beth felt tears bite at her eyes when she realized that she felt almost strong enough to rise, felt almost strong enough to survive. It was a feeling she had thought she would never feel again. The mantra within her sang of freedom, of life. She reached out with her mind to stroke the strings of it, and the chords rang clear and strong, filling her soul with hope.

From the edge of the group of people surrounding her, that whispery

voice caught Beth's attention, and she turned her radiant smile on the Alandrain doctor who stood at the side of her bed adjusting the IV drip. The clear glucose that trickled steadily into the drip chamber looked so shiny and clean that it caught her attention for a moment, so pure compared to the two hypodermic needles that studded the IV port, the darker colors of the two Alandrian drugs in their syringes vibrant as they stood poised for use. It seem as if her senses were fine tuned-sight, sound taste, smell-even the texture of the sheets under her felt so much more real. Dr. Meyesus caressed the colorful pair of hypos almost lovingly as he smiled back at her, his dark blue fingers trailing across amethyst and topaz blue essences from his home world. "They say that Renaque causes visions," he said softly, his voice comforting and softly caressing her as his crystal-line eyes captured her attention once more. "Did you have visions, Beth?"

"I had dreams, Dr. Meyesus," she replied, the soft mantra in her head soothing and caressing her as his face twitched with interest.

"What kind of dreams, Beth?" he inquired in an almost whispered tone, raising the syringes between his long fingers like the most precious flowers, his smile on her face so radiant that the others in the room stopped their motions to absorb the warmth themselves. "Tell me about them," he continued, one thumb stroking across the pair of plungers like fine rose petals, his tone consoling, calming.

"Just fleeting images and vague thoughts, Dr. Meyesus," Beth replied, holding out one trembling hand to him. "Some bad, some good, but only dreams. I prefer reality. And the reality is...I'm cured, aren't I?" she asked as he stepped beside her and took her offered hand in his. She closed her eyes as their flesh touched, a look of fear crossing her features before she swallowed hard and opened her eyes once more, her expression a silent plea. "Please tell me I'm cured."

"Yes, Beth. You are," he replied, bringing her trembling hand up to his lips for the briefest of moments before putting it back beside her on the bed. "But you still need your rest. I'm going to have them take you to your room now, and I'll come see you later."

They helped her to the gurney that the orderly had waiting, and as the young man was rolling her from the treatment room, Beth caught the Alandrain doctor's sleeve for a second, smiling at him once more. "Thank you, Dr. Meyesus. You have no idea how much this means to me."

He simply smiled at her, and returned to putting away his needles and drugs as the orderly pushed her rolling bed out of the room once more, a trip she had only dared to hope she would be making. Beth laid back against the thin pillow, her eyes closed and her mind floating in the cooling chant, free once more now that the pain was gone. She barely noticed their movement along the corridor, floating on such euphoria she could have

danced the length of the hospital. The orderly maneuvered the gurney into the elevator with practiced ease before she finally allowed herself to open her eyes, and she found him smiling down at her as he stood beside.

"What did you see, Beth?" he asked almost conversationally, one hand coming to rest over hers soothingly as he hit the elevator button, stopping them between floors.

"See?" she asked him, aware that the tone of the chant in her mind swelled with his words and strange actions. She kept her face passive as she looked up at him for a long moment, her eyes searching his young face as if scouring it for something tangible before she lay back wearily and closed her eyes once more.

"The Alandrains plan to take this world," she told him in a flat tone. "To use us to make it to their liking, and then destroy us. They are not as they appear. But you know that, don't you, Gabriel?" she asked, opening her eyes once more and capturing his gaze. "That's why you warned me."

"Yes, Beth, I do," he replied softly. "What else do you know?"

Her sigh was weary once more as she continued. "That the Alandrian drugs I was given have a 100% cure rate for cancer. The people who died were the ones who woke up screaming the truth of what they learned at the top of their lungs," she sighed, the mantra in her head swirling up to help her combat the emotion of the words, its cool fingers soothing the ache in her heart. "They are the ones Dr. Meyesus used the amethyst colored drug on, the one they call Fuetran. Those people were the failures in the Alandrains' eyes, and the drug was coma inducing for a delayed death. The ones who awoke and simply curled into a fetal position went insane because they just couldn't handle what they learned. Dr. Meyesus gave those the topaz colored mixture, the one called Mawrun," she continued, knotting the sheet in her fists against her as her eyes pleaded with the young man beside her bed. "It keeps them insane, and therefore manageable until the time comes when they will be useful."

"And the ones who were cured?" Gabriel asked. He never flinched when she knew his name, but she knew instantly that he would not. She knew so much now, and it would have frightened her to death were it not for the chant that kept her strong. "Like you," he added, as if that needed to be said.

"We are timebombs," she whispered, her voice quaking with the reality of the words she spoke, "like a mole in a game of espionage. They can turn on us when they need us," she all but sobbed, reaching desperately for the young man beside her, the one with the gentle eyes. He gathered her into his arms, holding her close as silent sobs wracked her thin frame. "How did you know? My God, why haven't you stopped them?" she cried, the anger rising in her as she shoved him back with strength she had long

since lost. "Why did you let it go on?"

"We weren't sure, Beth. We only suspected," he replied solemnly, his soft brown eyes sorrowful as she hugged herself and fought to regain her chant, the mantra that kept her grounded when nothing else would.

"You're our first proof," he added, gently brushing a stray lock of hair from her face before turning to start the elevator once more, punching the button for the ground floor. "And we will not let them in. But my first obligation is to get you to safety. I have a car waiting to take you there. All your questions will be answered as soon as we get you well."

She could only stare at him as he whisked her out of the back door of the hospital and into a gray New York afternoon.

His words were true. Of that she had no doubt.





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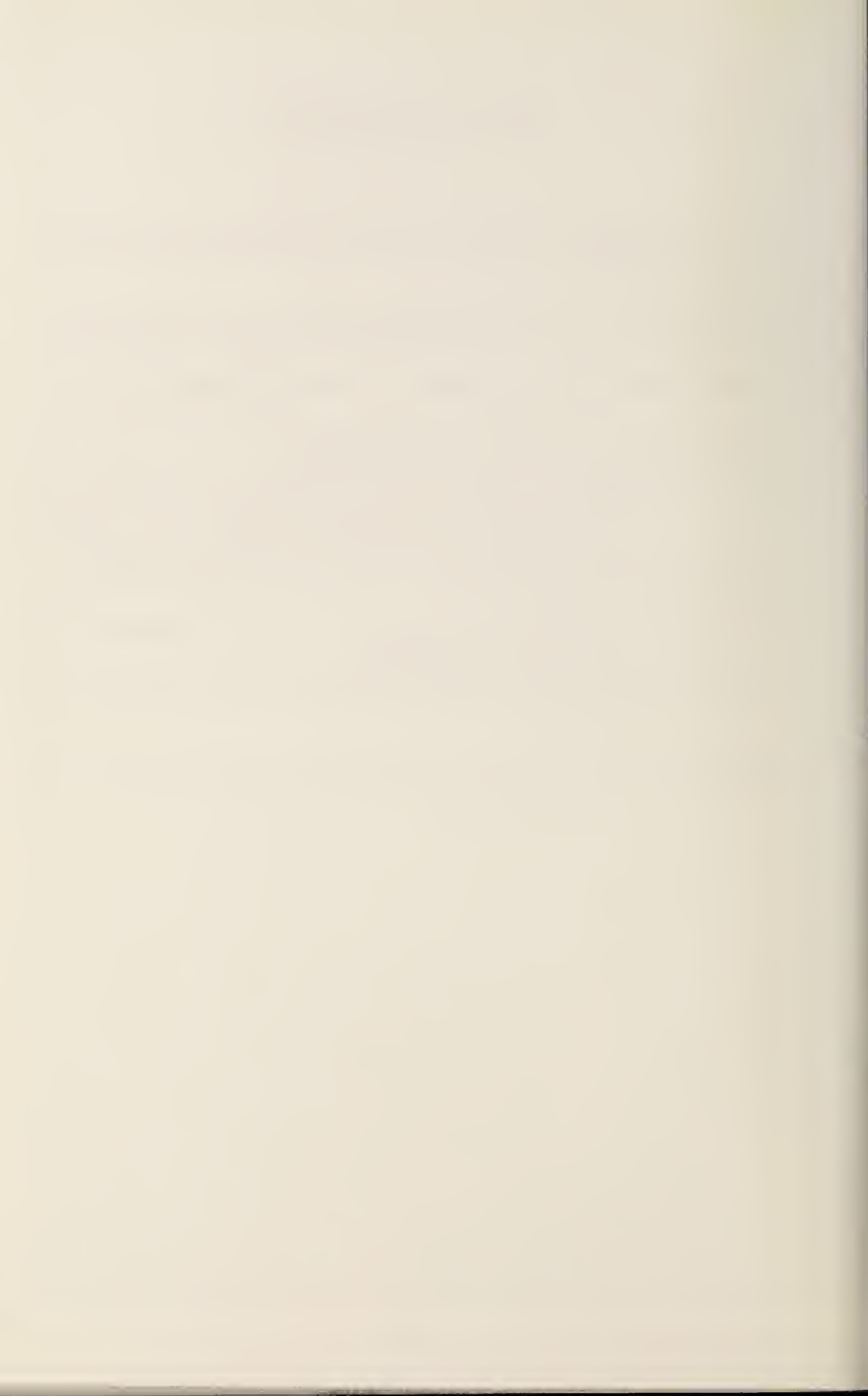
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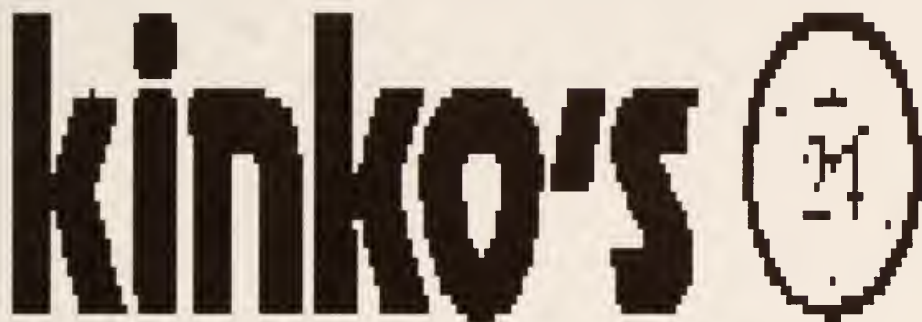
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