

CALLIOPE



Calliope₁₉₉₇

Armstrong Atlantic State University
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Staff

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The Faculty Advisor selects the Lillian Spencer Award winners for Best Poem and Best Prose piece. John Welsh of the Languages, Literature and Dramatic Arts Department selected this year's Best Artwork winner.

Cover Art: **Stravinski**
Monoprint
Shawna Silverman

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*** Wall's Crest, Observing Moat**

Charles Parker, Jr. *Opening Photograph*



Wall's Crest, Observing Moat
Charles Parker, Jr.



The High Life

Step by step he proceeds with
arms extended out, hands
tightly gripping the metal bar to
steady his balance. He
places one foot out in front
of him, sliding it slowly
along the taut wire stretched
to stiffness beneath
his feet, his face a contorted
mask: jaw clenched, brow
furrowed, his trained eye fixed
on the tightrope he haltingly
traverses; every muscle
constricted with the effort
of his exertion, he is
oblivious to the eerie
silence which has fallen
over the once animated
arena, as he inches
his way across the span stretched
out before him, faltering
only once, as the crowd, perched
expectantly on their seats, expel
their breath.

Tammy Shealey Owens

Ode to Progression

My new ophthalmologist
prescribed progressive lenses
for such diverse distance work
of mine as painting, teaching,
research writing and computer.
“What are they and why do they
do what they do?” I asked.
“Perfection--your natural sight.”

I took my astigmatism
and prescription to optical
shop where I was measured
from center to center of both irises.
The new glasses have no tell-tale
elliptical bifocal lenses,
instead progress in distance as
I carefully cast my eyes down.

This is progress I pronounce,
adjusting my invisible pair
of berry rimmed glasses
to see what I could see.
A colored rainbow around
Daffin Park's spraying fountain,
has it always been there?

I see translucent beads of water
suspended on the outside curve
of terra cotta potted plant
atop the patio table
through my kitchen window.

It doesn't stop. This morning
the phone rings and I debate
whether to answer, just as a
thrasher wrestles with a wriggling worm.
I answer the phone and assume
he won, with body pulled so taut.

Rachel McReynolds Brown



Cups
Renee Hill

Appreciation

Catherine Hope Greene

She lay in the tub half-asleep. The water, to her chin, was cold. Unable to really feel it, she knew it must be because she'd been in it for hours. Just how long, she wasn't sure of either, but her fingertips were pruned, pink, raw.

She thought about the last three nights. They had been much like this.

She leaned forward to pull the drain cord, intending to refresh the water. The water glugged and swirled. Rapidly counter-clockwise.

The night before, it had taken three hours for the tub to drain. She'd watched the last drop swirl downward, wishing she could wash away everything as easily.

Tonight she felt robbed of something as the drain sated itself after five minutes. She turned the left spigot. Water streamed out. She turned it more and hot water gushed. She saw it bounce off the white porcelain and hit her legs.

She thought of a gunshot wound to the head, and in her mind, blood spurted upward and outward. The hot water continued to pour from the faucet evenly downward and she shook her head, seeing the tile of the wall to her left and then the white wood of the bathroom door. She caught glimpses of the mirrored medicine cabinet as she shook her head repeatedly, trying to lose the image of the bleeding head.

She realized she wasn't feeling the stinging slap of wet hair even as she shook her head harder.

This morning, her mother had left a note on her bedroom door. "Please clean your hair out of the drain next time you shower. Thanks, love, Mom." Well, that problem was cleared up. She knew her mother wouldn't have gotten the pun.

She fell asleep for a few minutes. It was Friday night but she had no intention of going out. She slept on, in the tub, the water turning warm, then cold. She dreamed of drowning. Sometime later, her seven year old brother woke her. He gave her the towel in which she found herself wrapped the next morning.

She wished he hadn't seen her naked. There was a time when she hadn't minded being seen naked. She had a great

appreciation for her body. As had Jonathan. Not just in a sexual way, but in the way one enjoys good food or moves to music one loves. She remembered standing up next to his bed, walking across his room, pretending to look for something just to know he was watching her, wanting her, most of all, appreciating her. He would always say *thank you*, not knowing how selfish her nakedness was. And she would smile to herself, *you're welcome*.

She heard her mother calling her to breakfast, heard her knock on the bedroom door, calling, "Are you hungry, dear?" and then turning to go when she got no answer. She must have assumed her daughter was asleep, briefly wondered if she had eaten recently, but avoided any discussion if not.

She was alone again and she jerked upward, sitting on the side of the high bed.

She wanted to jump up, run out to the hallway, tell her about the other night, scream. He hurt me, Momma, he hurt me, he hit me and threw me down, and crushed me and I bled, oh my God, I bled! But she didn't get up, didn't run anywhere. Her mother would only start crying and insist she see somebody.

Her head began to ache as she remembered. She felt the darkness just as it had been that night. She remembered thinking of Jonathan, wishing things were different. A twinge of anger had overcome her as she turned into the dark street that was her shortcut home. She'd lost him, all right, but was it really her fault? He'd said she was unfeeling and unresponsive. He'd said this because she said *me too* when he told her he cared very deeply about her. She wasn't unfeeling, just embarrassed. He should have known she loved him too. She just wasn't good at expressing her feelings. She'd thought the guitar she'd bought him for Christmas was a pretty good expression of her love. And the sex. He'd said it was the best he'd ever had and you could only make love like that if you truly felt it. She'd agreed and they'd had sex again. What else did he want? She spent most of her time with him. Maybe her self-expression was a bit off.

All around her, shadows had lengthened as the sun fell. She quickened her pace, looked around at the dark. She smelled stale beer and felt broken glass under her shoes. She started to run home but was pulled around half-circle by a mad, leering hand. She tried to scream, but her throat closed. Lashing out, she struck flesh and heard a man grunt, "Stupid whore." Whoever this man was became irrelevant and she thought, crazily, of her father and how he used to

chide her for coming home too late, for walking home alone. The man slammed his fist into her face, and she cried, through blood, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She had come to on the sidewalk, temples throbbing, naked waist-down. Thank God, I'm alone, she thought and slowly she got up, searching in the dark for her skirt. She found it and pulled it around her. Holding it there, she slowly walked home, a light wind chafing her raw lips.

It was late when she walked in the back door. Thankful her family was asleep, she went to the bathroom and after filling the tub, lay down in it. Unable to cry, unable to sleep, she got out and went to her room. Her long brown hair in one hand, she reached for her scissors with the other. Jonathan had loved her hair, often brushing it or braiding it for her. But Jonathan was gone now.

Then her hair was all around her on the floor. Looking into the mirror, she wondered if her eyes held that wounded, hurt look always written about in romance novels, and if they did, did it matter because the love of her life was never going to save her what with her head looking so big now that she was practically bald. She took the mirror from the wall and lay it glass down on the floor.

Three days later, she was in bed, listening to the clink of dishes and silverware as her family ate breakfast. She got dressed and went downstairs. They stared at her head. No one said anything. They probably passed it off as rebellion.

She walked out the back door. It was a bright Saturday, perfect for hanging out in the park, smoking pot with her friends. She thought briefly of calling a couple of them, but decided to take a walk. She walked until she suddenly stopped, realizing she was on Jonathan's porch. Her hands flew to her head, she felt her shorn hair, and she turned to go.

"What are you doing here?" He was angry, his voice guttural.

She remained facing away. She began to shake. All her hope of remaining numb left her. "Why are you still angry at me?" she screamed, surprising herself with the volume. "I did nothing to you." She turned to him and he was right there. She could smell the chocolate on his breath.

"Exactly. You did nothing. When I told you I couldn't stay, you said nothing. When I left, you didn't even watch me go."

She didn't reply. What could she say? I'm sorry, Jonathan. I got raped and now I need you back. No, she couldn't say that.

"What happened to you?" He reached for her head. She felt his hand slide until it came to rest on her shoulder. He touched her cheek. She started to cry, shaking more violently now. He leaned toward her, knowing from months of experience that she wouldn't lean into him.

"No," he said, "I didn't do this to you. You're not upset about me, are you? You'd never let me hurt you like this." He sounded upset by this thought, and she wondered if he wished he had hurt her, to prove something.

"I wish it had been you, Jonathan. Then I might've understood. The pain might have made sense." He didn't answer. "I love you, Jonathan. I thought you knew."

"Then why couldn't you say that to me, Katie?" He paused. "But I've thought about it in the last two weeks, and I realize that you express yourself differently. That those flowers and cheesy poems, and even those moans," he grinned here, "mean the same thing to you. Should mean the same thing to me."

"I don't want to go. But I don't want to talk anymore. Do you think you're the only one who can be hurt?" She stopped there, looking up to stare at his window. The curtain was open. She knew he'd been reading. He could only read by the window in the daylight.

"I was reading," he said, and she smiled. They looked at each other for a while. "Will you come inside?"

Thinking of the other night, knowing sex could never be the same again, she started to say no, but he reached for her hand. "If you want to tell me what happened to you, I'll listen. But you don't have to. Just let me hold you, run my hands over your head. It feels like velvet."

They watched TV all afternoon. At eight, he fixed her dinner. He asked his roommates to go out, and they enjoyed the silence so rarely heard in the house.

In the morning, she reached for her clothes lying next to the bed. They hadn't made love, but for once, she was happy about that. She leaned over, kissed his eyes, and he murmured, "Katie." She read by the window until he awoke.



Window
David Stanford

Dreaming Under the Light

A friend and I were mugged under the faint glow of a street
light.

I didn't feel the bullet, just a fading away.

I opened my eyes to find I hadn't yet awakened from my
dream.

The bathtub was full of blood-stained water.

I saw his scarred face as he wiped the vapor covered mirror.

The old man's eyes raised the hair on the back of my neck.

His high pitched incessant giggling echoed through the
cemetery.

I ran and ran but found myself in the same place.

The bulbs emitted a blue hue over the hall of the basement.

The chilled stone of the cave wall cooled my seared skin.

Opening the trapdoor revealed a lush tropical world.

The lion leisurely stalked me from sunlight to moonlight.

The night was enfolded in a thick shroud of fog.

Out of the darkness came the sound of wings flapping
furiously.

The waves looked like rolling silver under the light of the
round moon.

Tammy Shealey Owens



The Agony
Cindy Intorre



The Scrap
Nicole Weber

Stereotyped

Oh, Oh,
Another one.
Another one
with kids behind her.
Another one who's pregnant
again.
Another one who's probably scared, but not
worried.
She has the government on
her side.
Girl, young naive girl, didn't your
mother
ever talk to you about
BIRTH CONTROL
Or, let me guess,
She had you when she was
Fifteen too.
Understand your situation? Accidents happen?
I don't Understand, and
Accidents can be prevented.
You're gonna be another statistic.
I'll pay your baby's way, and I'm not even related to you.
But you'll be thinkin' it'll be a
free ride.
You're wrong,
Black girl.

Marti Baker

Another Night in America

Roseanne is on TV---Laughing
Dryly, I swallow stale Budweiser
With fat free pretzels

At the kitchen table. A battery
Worn out remote in my hand, I click
All 37 channels, nothing

But junk--Mrs. Clinton's chalky
White face stares at me from
The cover of TIME. A scornful look

In her icy blue eyes! My bones
Shiver like the windchimes of
Mr. Juvo nextdoor. He is a magician

Not old, not rich, not knowing
English as much as I do. A cloudy-fur cat
He has, but she does not understand

His Turkish- - ". . . must speak in
English. . ." I said once, but he
Won't. I never asked why because

It would hurt him. CLICK! OJ Simpson's
Dark face, dark smiles but dazzling
White teeth on the screen--"I am

Not" CLICK! My bones shiver again under
The Made in China silk nightgown. Red
Sirens are heard breathlessly far down

The street. I sip the warm salty
Budweiser nervously which tastes
Like Mr. Juvo's tears on my lips.

Kyonghee Ingraham



John and Yoko as Shawna and George
Shawna Silverman

Gibraltar

Freya Roseane Poller

I like to walk on the beach this time of the morning. It is always gray and cool until the sun emerges from the horizon. The sunrises here are not spectacular in any way, but they give me a comforting feeling of being all alone for once.

I have a favorite rock that I like to think of as all mine. Its mica flecked surface is cool and comforting; it is something I can grasp when it seems that I'm at risk of floating into the stratosphere. I have spent countless hours perched on my rock; reading, thinking and dreaming. The rock was all mine, the safest of havens, until I brought Andrew there, but now I'm not sure if I have any claim to it anymore.

Andrew is like that; he is the princely type who possesses all land within his sight, and every thing on it. He has never been any other way; he knows nothing beyond flashing a dazzling charismatic smile to force people to bend to his will, to his way.

I didn't see it like that at first; I saw him as one of those beautiful beings who exist on another plane, someone touched by luck. He lifted me out of my rather comfortable, somewhat complacent way of life into a world where people laugh and drink martinis and discuss politics and art. Before Andrew and the changes he affected, I felt mousy and ineffectual in "those type" of social situations. I did not particularly care for such things. But Andrew extended a strong hand and since that moment I have done that miraculous transformation known as "coming into one's self." I have become adept at small talk, and have learned the ins and outs of being the perfect ornament.

And I am marrying him.

We decided to get married because Andrew believes very firmly in a well-grounded family. He jokes about getting me barefoot and pregnant and keeping me that way. When we are at the dinner table, in the car, at the grocery store, most anywhere, he whispers, "Let's make love in the kitchen tonight!" or the garage or on the beach or whatever place tickles his libidinous fancy. He sometimes even substitutes the phrase "make love" with "make a baby." I look forward to having children too, but I want to do some things for myself first. I have never seen the Mediterranean sea, and

thousands of other things are still undone. We certainly will have ample money to travel, if I can talk him into it. I could always whisper sexy things in his ear about sex in exotic places. Still, I know that he is set on having kids, and I think I can stall for time, and stay on birth control. I just hope it doesn't provoke a maelstrom of disapproval from his doting and slightly eccentric aunts.

Last week at the wedding shower, his Aunt Eunice bragged to me about what a large penis he had as a baby and how our wedding night would be thrilling.

"You know, Claudia, there are certain things a woman must be prepared for on her wedding night," she coached, placing a jewel encrusted hand on my knee.

"We must always try to give our husbands the sexual attentions they need," she lowered her eyes and voice confidentially, "even if we are a little scared."

Her tendony hands felt for her diamonds, at her throat. Still there.

She continued, "And even though we may not enjoy sex very much at first, we'll learn to appreciate it in time."

I love that collective "we." I can't help thinking of Aunt Eunice standing beside our bed telling me where to put my legs and which body parts to kiss. The whole time she was talking, I debated whether or not to tell her just how thrilling I have always found sex. I held back, though, because anyone with a name as storybook perfect as Aunt Eunice couldn't handle it.

My wedding dress is a lavish, snow white affair with an obscene amount of lace overlay and a very chaste neckline. Andrew's aunts believe firmly in my virginity, and I hesitate to dissuade them. I will wear my dress of purity with a very small smile because I know the truth.

I always promised my mother that I would never get married before twenty-six. She says, "Claudia, please do not make the same mistakes I did!" She twists her turquoise wedding band absently. "After three marriages, I feel that I am qualified to give you motherly advice." She grins, and one eyebrow punctuates her half-silliness; half-seriousness. "Have fun," she says, and lights a cigarette. "Travel," she says, and inhales. "Live with the man of your choice for a while," she says, still holding her breath, "but don't jump into it," and she exhales. "It is much easier to leave your live-in than get a divorce. I only want the best for you." I have learned

this speech by heart; she's been telling me since I was eight or so.

So I guess that I'm a few years ahead of schedule. I couldn't let a person as together as Andrew get away, though. He is the quintessential "good catch". He is handsome, well off, and good natured in that classic way that the logo on a polo shirt is meant to imply. Is it unhealthy to marry someone because you are afraid that you will never do better? That if you don't act now he'll be gone because it is a limited-time-only-offer?

I think that I have just got a case of pre-wedding jitters. Andrew's aunts tell me endless anecdotes about how they had fears and misgivings, but that their marriages turned out to be very fulfilling. Aunt Eunice loves to tell me about how mismatched she and Uncle Arnold were. "Why, it seems like only yesterday that Arnold and I were newlyweds," she tells me in the voice that is almost exclusively used for telling secrets or relaying gossip. Or gospel. "We had the biggest argument on our honeymoon because he wanted to play poker with some of the men on the cruise ship." Her mouth stretches in an ambiguous smile, amazement/amusement, like she still can't believe it happened. "I barely saw him for seven days, and I just played shuffleboard and cried my eyes out." She stares at the pattern on the carpet, frowns, then smiles brightly. "By the end of the cruise, though, he had three new big clients and I got my full-length mink out of those deals. I know now that he only did it because he loves me."

I think about how much Uncle Arnold "loved" Aunt Eunice and how it seems that he really did not have her best interests in mind. And I wonder how it will be with Andrew and me. I really wanted to go to graduate school before I started a family but I guess my Bachelor's will have to do for now. It won't do me a lot of good, though, because Andrew tells me what a marvelous life I'll have, being married to so much Old Savannah Money. He does an imitation of "society people" to make me laugh, very nasal and with a million "dahlings." He does really believe in society, though, and tells me in the snobby put on imitation that "You'll have such a mahvelous time at the ladies' auxiliary; you'll learn to play bridge and mahjogg and between that and the kids won't have a spare minute left to pursue work, or even read much." He jokes about it but I know this life is a very serious part of who he is, regardless of the fun he pokes. He feels as comfortable playing golf as he does drinking scotch with his dad's friends. And he does a lot of both.

I really want to be a good wife for him. I just wonder if I'll have time left over after being a wife for being me. He has never really understood about my books; when he finds me reading he finds something else for us to do. I think that he is not used to not receiving someone's undivided attention at all times.

"Aw, come on, Sugar, what's in that book that's better than making love? Ha! there's nothing that's better than making love, is there. Give me the book, that's the girl, now where is that perfect breast? Mmph. I found it!" he says, and there goes another pleasant afternoon in another world.

It is not that I detest sex; I find it mostly pleasant, sometimes ecstatic. I just resent the fact that he uses it as a tool to pry me from my books. It makes me wonder if he loves the actual sex, or just the monopoly on my time.

When sex is best between us, it is fantastic. Andrew is skilled; he knows all the right parts to touch and really tries to please me. When sex is not my top priority, when he uses it to get my attention, I tend to concentrate less on the sex and more on the beige carpeting, the shmaltzy music he has chosen, or how the garage floor really is too cold to lie on for very long. I hate to mentally rearrange the furniture in the middle of sex, but sometimes it's all I can do to keep from exploding or committing some other uncharacteristically violent act.

I have been retreating to my rock more and more often in the past weeks, to read and to think. I get up early, before the shopping and fitting and the kibitzing with his family. I take my book and walk the mile and a half down the beach until I get to my rock. Then I escape; immerse myself completely for the small time in the day that's mine alone. I am reading an anthology on mermaids right now, and it seems fitting that I am so close to the sea. My rock is in the book, too, it seems. In most mermaid stories there is a smooth granite rock on which the mermaid suns herself and combs her greeny hair. I imagine that I am in the book; that a handsome, unselfish, uncontrolling merman comes to sweep me out to sea. I always imagine that he knows nothing of the stock market, has never heard of prime interest rates, and only wishes to feed me ocean delicacies after we have had long, exhausting, emotionally satisfying sex.

Sadly, the only man who appears is my Andrew, who bellows cheerfully, "Hey, sexy, the day's a wastin'! How's about

you and me gettin' cozy on that rock of yours!" and of course that's the last thing I want to do, so I clamber down and tell him how anxious I am to pick out that new flatware at Levy's. Or whatever excuse seems handy.

I curse myself every day for taking Andrew to my secret rock. I did it in a moment of weakness when I worried that I'd lose him to Olivia, the lovely blonde with such a charming lisp. She was interning in his father's office, and he would tell me such diverting stories about her antics when we were supposed to be having serious hand-holding-eyes-locked-across-the-table dates. I remember the conversation down to the very last word.

"She's just the brightest little girl, for being a blonde, and cute too!" Andrew gushed. It scared me, and badly, because I choked out, "I have something very important to tell you. Can we get out of here?"

We left Elizabeth's and drove to the islands. I took him to the far end of the beach, where the Savannah River merges with the Atlantic, to the place where my rock sits. I climbed to the top and motioned for him to join me.

I took a deep breath and blurted, "Andrew, you are very important to me. I don't know what I'd do without you. I just get so jealous sometimes. I know I'm only being silly, but I want you to know how seriously I take you. And how I'm afraid I'll lose you. That's why we're here. This is my favorite place and I wanted to share it with you. Because--" And then I told him that I loved him. It was the first time that I had said it, and it was a lie. Because though I was (and am) very attracted to his thick wavy hair, honest eyes, and statuesque form, these things do not constitute love. And those words sealed my fate.

From that moment on, he really has been in exemplary form. He showers me with gifts, proclaims his reciprocal love for me, and never lets me alone for a minute. He has about fifty pet names for me.

"Honey, sweetie, muffin, dumplin, sugar pie! I just want to eat you up!" is the way that he expresses his affection-- publicly-- for me.

He introduced me to his distant relatives, and bragged about how well I was learning how to conduct myself in "society". I overheard Andrew tell his uncle Arnold on the phone, "She has a way to go, but she will make the most stunning wife once we send

her to Aunt Eunice's hairdresser, James. He really is the best. He'll put some curlers in her hair and goo on her face and she'll be a different woman. And she really is very well rounded once you get past her affair with books. We are trying to get some hobbies going for her, so she won't always have her perky little nose hidden in a book." And though all of this sounds slightly negative, never once did Andrew show a bit of bad taste or un-gentlemanly behavior. He has the uncanny ability to turn vinegar to honey, and though I consider myself a fairly intelligent person, I never have the smarts to put my finger right on what he says that makes me feel so small until after the moment has passed.

It was a full year after I confessed my love to Andrew that he proposed to me. It was easy enough for me to accept after a whole year of repeating I love yous. I whispered "I love you." I told him in bed, in the shower, and over dirty dishes, "I love you." It was my mantra, my lie that became so convincingly real to Andrew and everyone else that I was even almost convinced. It made things seem so easy. It offered relief from the nagging voices in my head that insisted that I was plain and unspectacular. It allayed my private fears that I would grow to be an old spinster with nothing to write about. It seemed to be, at the time, a measure of security as comforting as my rock.

Andrew proposed one year after I convinced myself that I needed him at all costs. It seems, even now, to be a page out of any Harlequin romance, but devoid of that characteristic tawdriness. He really does things right.

He took me to the place most dear to me. He lifted me onto my rock and asked for my hand in marriage. He said, "Please, Claudia, I would be most honored if you would be my wife. Will you marry me?" And for once his manner of speaking was not callow or brusque or inappropriate. I felt my chest fill with panic--like the feeling of a narrowly missed car wreck-- and I knew I could not refuse this offer of a life with him. I could not refuse what seemed to be the first person ever willing to give me, freely, his undivided attention. And, I must admit, that I was a bit like a crow when I saw that shiny ring that I was now qualified to wear as my prize.

In exchange for three carats of sophisticated carbon, I gave my favorite rock. My rock is no longer the haven that it was, cool and tangible at six-thirty in the morning. It is a constant reminder of

the responsibility that comes with my impending marriage. I feel like Andromeda, chained to the rock, awaiting my marriage monster. When I try to escape, Aunt Eunice floods into my consciousness, giving advice and admonishment.

"Claudia, my dear, you really must think about the way you speak in front of the Hutchins'. You wouldn't want them to think that Andrew was marrying below his station, would you?" I imagine Aunt Eunice plucking nervously at a Kleenex. "It is imperative that we watch ourselves at society functions; it really is wisest for ladies to nod politely when the men are talking." Aunt Eunice's grey curls bob emphatically to prove her point. "We can always discuss in the ladies' room. And liberal politics really have no place at the Yacht Club. We got to our place in society through our husband's shrewd business sense and social skills." She admires and preens her mink coat. There are rodents on her collar. Their beady glass eyes stare knowingly. It is 75 degrees outside. "These men have no time or tolerance for new fangled, bleeding heart politics. Just let them carry the conversation, and please, dear, only speak up if you can agree."

I look around before yelling in my loudest voice, "Aunt Eunice, begone!" Of course the only witnesses to my exorcism are the gulls, the sea, and the sun. Aunt Eunice fades with the October wind. There is a sour, omnipresent feeling though, that I cannot possibly live up to their standards. James' makeover will only do so much.

Andrew also invades my privacy, physically rather than nagging on my conscience. He hates to see me all alone. He sniffs me out; he has a bloodhound's aptitude for detecting my private time. He "rescues" me from my "loneliness" with blustery, cheerful, hamhanded compliments, invitations, and gestures. He pops up with picnics, arrives with wine, and always joins me, uninvited, in a place that used to be all mine. I know that scores of women would beg for such an attentive man, but . . .

"My love," I'll say, "I would like so very much to finish this chapter." (He likes it when I "talk fancy") "Couldn't we please meet later for baguettes and coffee?"

He pouts, and refuses. "I just want you now."

And on and on until I give in and give up my book.

I dream of escapes. I consider becoming a cloistered nun. The idea appeals to me because in the books, nuns always have plenty of time for personal reflection and certainly don't have to pick

out dishware at the bridal registry. I do imagine a Sister Eunice Margaret, though, who says, "Now really, Sister Claudia, you must stop reading those novels! When you entered the convent you took vows of chastity and poverty and this book flouts both vows. Go to the Mother Superior!"

Then I imagine leaving him at the altar. "I'm sorry, my dear, I know that this must be a major social embarrassment, but I simply cannot marry you. You are too controlling, and do not treat me as an equal. I'm going to get my master's degree. In Women's Studies!"

But I realize that this would not be fair to him or his family that wants so desperately to see him married off. And fantasy will only carry me so far.

Aunt Eunice is helping me into my wedding dress. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Aunt Eunice's diamond solitaire necklace is to be the something borrowed. She reaches around my neck, her hands brushing cool and leathery on my nape. Goose flesh peppers my body as she does the clasp.

"You know, Claudia," she says, and as she catches her breath I anticipate her insipid speech about living up to family standards.

"Claudia, I want you to think very hard about the contract you are entering. I have been married to Arnold for forty years, and not always happily. It has been good for me, but I'm not sure that a day has gone by that I have not wished for a chance at something better. You are right for this family, and we would love to have you. I'm just not sure that we are right for you. Please, Claudia, think carefully before you go through with this. As much as I'd love to see you marry Andrew, I'd hate to see you as miserable as I have been for the past thirty years. Marriage changed me, and maybe not for the better. Make sure that you want this."

A confession like this, at the eleventh hour, is the last thing I'd ever expect from Aunt Eunice. I fight to dislodge the lump in my throat as we finish dressing me; something old, something new, diamond necklace, something blue.

It's time. My dress is really perfect, a fairy tale of white lace and tulle and pearls. "Good luck, Honey," Aunt Eunice says as she squeezes the breath out of me. There isn't much there in the first place. My chest feels tight, and my blood is racing with so much

intoxicating adrenaline. I step into the aisle with growing confidence. This is all going to be O.K. I have just been too nervous about this whole thing. It's time to relax. Deep breaths, deep breaths, just relax, Claudia, relax! I'm making the right choice. And I'm here. Relax. To have and to hold, till death do us part, I do, I do.

And we're back at the house. Andrew said that he had a big surprise for me before we go to Bermuda. I'm trying to peek through the blindfold, but the pattern of the scarf obscures my vision. Fuschia flowers everywhere. A flourish, and the blindfold is gone. There it is. He's so excited, like a little boy, practically falling over himself. And there's my rock. In the backyard next to the inground pool that he built for swimming laps.

"Do you love it? It's your rock! I had it brought right here so you wouldn't have to go all the way out to the beach. Oh, you're so happy you can't speak!"



Chain Reaction

Susan O'Connell



African Atlas
Marion Braxton

father's

hate tear the fear
after her safe star has set
after her tears
after he fats her

hate tear the fear
after the fresh frets rest
after the rat farts
as the Fates stare
after the era

hate tear the fear
after father's heat
after father's hate
as the ash eats her heart
after father's feat

Angie Mickel

Waiting for the Vicar

It is Saturday evening
just about six when
I walk into John's Bar
with its constant reek of alcohol,
shed my plastic mac,
 (it is raining again),
take a seat by the bar
 (with its dings and rings),
order a glass of scotch,
take out a cigarette and begin to smoke.
For a time, I watch the smoke
rise like a blue haze
and nurse both drink and smoke alike.

Even with the whiskey in me
the man behind the bar
hardly looks like the sort I want to be with,
he is as ugly as sin,
but then again, I cater to most men's sins.

I turn my back to the bar,
cross hosed legs
and daintily pull my skirt over my knees.
I wear a shade of light blue,
Thomas's favorite colour.

I watch the men about me
get slowly debauched
under the blue snakes of tobacco smoke,
such an appropriate place to meet the vicar.

I look at my watch,
quarter after,
that bastard is late again.
Half after and he finally shows up.
It is time for me to do what
his beloved wife will not do for him.

Maire Eithne y Loynaz

Exponential Beauty

I use the Distance Formula of a line;
it determines the length of her shiny hair.
The diameter of her soft brown eyes
is equal to two times the radius.

I do not know the formula
for the curve of her tender cheek
or the volume of her full lips,
but isn't math a beautiful thing?

Christopher Yeargin

The Tree

From the day of my birth
the tree has silhouetted my stage
-- the background for my soliloquy.

Performing life,
Dancing and Shouting,
"I am a God!"
scene after scene
with all my triumphs and failures.

The tree
with milk chocolate bark
spiny green needles
droops with the Spanish moss
from the flashing kiss
of an oak that once graced its branches

-- And as I grow older
and somewhat less spirited,

my livelihood having been spent,
I gaze out the window from my deathbed

and see the tree that stood,
from beginning to end,

as I lie feeble and wretched,

as it grows stronger,

realizing that I was the tree's brief scenery.

John D. Trainor



Mother
Mary Ragan

Blossom

A new kitten, what fun! Now what
Shall we call her? She must have
A name--how will she know
When she's called to come out

From behind the chair
Out of the beer-box
Down from the windowsill
Up from the basement wherever

She's hiding. Chuck will call her
Damcat with a grin and
Pretend he's tossing her out while he
Gathers her up in his arms

For a rub. Why not ZIP? We usually
Name our cats ZIP. It would be only fair
To retire the name, and
Come up with a new one

For her. Anyway, she's orange when I called her
"Punkin'" she came running leaping landing
In the cradle of my thighs while I sat
Indian-style on the floor why not

Tigger. She has stripes, no she's a girl
Or maybe Flower, no you can't call a flower
Maybe flower names: Daisy, Rosie, no I'll
Call her Blossom remember

Miss Blossom and her store on
The island? And her funeral when the family

Threw flowers down in her grave and there
Was crying and gospel singing and the rope broke on

The coffin. Such a shout you never heard, I can
Hear it now, yes, her name will be
Blossom.

Lynn Mobley Eaton



Possibilities
Shelley Strickland

Kiss Good-Bye

Mary O'Sako

When I look out of the window of Patty's room, I rest my hand against the glass expecting a lingering warmth from the late summer sun that set mere hours ago. It is cold. I jerk my hand back. A premature autumn wind has arrived unseen to our little Ohio valley this night as my sister's illness rails on, pushing her on. It presses hard against the fragile glass of this fifth floor room so high above the rest of the hospital. I can see Patty's reflection in the bed behind me.

"It's okay, Patty. It's only the wind. Remember when mom would always call it the *Alberta Clipper*?" I giggle aloud. "The *Alberta Clipper*, no matter what time of year it was. I think she just liked the sound of it, don't you?"

Patty doesn't respond. She has been this way since they started the morphine drip on her this morning. *It'll put her out*, a nurse had said to me in a low voice while I'd stood watching Patty watch them. *Them*, the white clad squadron of four that had descended upon this room while the clock still displayed an a.m. hour, each with a different job pertaining to my sister. One nurse had been for the chest x-ray, one for the blood, one for starting the IV. So many to tend to one so slight, to pierce the pain-weary flesh with yet another needle, to prod ever gently, ever more. And still Patty had looked my way and smiled.

"I'm standing just over here, Pat," I call out. Pacing on tip-toes from the window to the bed, I pause somewhere close to her feet. I don't think she can see me. Her deep brown eyes with their cache of amber lights--their Patty lights--roll restlessly in her swollen face. Unseeing. The morphine has taken her to a place where her body that has grown tall and strong and beautiful for almost forty years is still just that. Maybe in that place she no longer looks out from this paralyzed form that is bending back into the shape and helplessness of infancy; feet that so loved to run and dance curl uselessly inward, hands that fluttered and darted like white butterflies before her as she spoke are cemented into fists, and a bottom once too modest for swimsuits is now bound in plastic diapers.

"Don't worry, Pat, this bumpy road ends somewhere. It'll

ease up soon," I whisper softly. Even a whisper echoes in this closet of a room, things are so close in here. "I promise." The air is wailing and pressing against the window glass again.

"Just that wind, Patty. It's okay." I bend over to touch her leg through the thin, hospital-issue blanket. It is such a fragile leg, this leg. It doesn't belong to my older sister, who has always been the mountain, always looming ahead, protecting my valley with her shadow. The first to walk, to date, to try a cigarette, to leave home, and now the first to die. How could this leg ever possibly support her weight again?

Patty's eyes roll sightlessly toward the fluorescent light above her bed then outward in a weak circle. Her mouth has fallen open and remains that way as she sucks for air. I stand watching her this way for a while, my arms tightly folded across my chest, grateful when my joints begin to stiffen--a small penance. I wonder if the pills that Pat swallowed so faithfully over the past months really eased her from the pain of staying too long within the confined spaces her illness would allow. Did such tiny pills help her body forget the toll of lying in bed, day after day while she was forced to watch the last of her minutes slip away? I look at the bottle of lotion there on the stand by her bed. *I could help. I could* massage her arms and legs right now for her, but she looks so much like Grandma did lying there like that. *Grandma*, God! Our Grandma who had lain in similar twisted form those years ago. *Never mind Grandma. Never mind.*

"Show me the way. . .," I begin to sing aloud to her instead, wondering if my voice can carry through such a great distance. It's her favorite song, from that Peter Frampton album she used to have. I stumble over the words and hum the rest. "God, Patty, you'd think I'd know this song backwards. Remember that apartment we shared back when we first left home? You used to play that damned thing over and over until I finally threatened to cut off my share of the electric bill. You didn't care, you made me get up and dance right along *with you, you shit.*"

Patty's laughter is already a memory. A laugh right now would probably split her lip in two. They are looking so dry that the skin is flaking off and I wonder if the ragged passage of air to and from her lungs is sawing away at her. I realize suddenly that she hasn't had a sip of water since this morning, when she'd asked for one in the Emergency room. That was before a member of *The*

Squadron had hooked her up to the flow of liquid stuff that quenches her now from within.

"It's not like a really good cup of water though, is it Pat?" I whisper. No, the small bag hanging there above her is definitely not a holy grail, it holds no promise of life as it coolly fills her veins.

Thanks, Mary. Oh, that's good, Patty had gasped after a long sip from the plastic cup of ice water I'd held carefully to her lips those eons ago. My fingers had trembled from the slight effort of holding the drink up for her. Up, upright and sitting is how the nurses had positioned her on the gurney, with straps criss-crossing her torso to keep her sagging body from flopping over. "It's more comfortable for her this way," a petite nurse had assured me as she bustled efficiently about Patty. "It's so she can breath easier."

You look like Hannibal the Cannibal all bound up like that, I'd joked, already sorry.

Yeah, well, go to hell, she'd breathed angrily. The pain and effort of dying had already stripped her to the bone.

Easy, honey. I'm just kidding. I'm-- I'd shut my mouth when she'd looked at me. The daggers she'd thrown so helplessly with that look. *Save it, I'm dying and don't give a shit anymore,* flew soundlessly through the air, cutting heavily into me while they began to wheel Patty towards the elevator.

It's okay, Patty, I'll be right behind you, I'd called out to her just before the elevator doors closed. She'd looked up and smiled, a sad Raggedy-Ann smile. The iron bar around my chest had tightened a bit.

We'd said nothing more because the space around her had filled quickly with hospital-clad workers and there was no more room to stand. The doors had slid shut and she was gone, up to this white room of her final agony, hooked to the many tubes that sustain her now.

I push myself to move now toward the head of the bed, watching Patty's eyes as my joints crack loudly in the quiet. I realize that I've left my gloves at her house, the rubber gloves I had worn to protect her from things. To *protect*, I remind myself, and pause to think about raiding the nurses' station for a rogue pair, but that journey looks farther than I'd dare to venture. From the bottles, cards and make-up on her bedside table I quickly select the tube of chapstick and apply some to her lips, careful not to touch her skin with my fingertips. The warm passage of air that escapes her

laboring lungs caresses my skin and I pause there, bending over her and watching the Patty lights still trying to swim in circles within her eyes.

There is no scent of tea bags, rose water or urine surrounding Patty that I remember from Grandma's unconscious body. I guess some pictures never fade, no matter how much time they lie bare to exposure. Grandma, *our* Grandma, had taken ill in her home when we were still young and had stayed that way, bedridden and blind until the day she'd died. And always mom had made us kiss her good-bye after each visit. A single kiss to her marshmallow dry forehead before we could run back to our go-go boots and boyfriends.

There are none of those things here. I close my eyes and breath in Patty's moist scent. It is strangely sweet, soothingly so. For the hundredth time since I'd arrived to care for her three weeks ago, I try to place that smell. *Baby powder--no, lotion--no, soap--no, . . . Mock Orange blossoms--God, NO!*

Oh, Patty! I exchange the chap-stick for a nail file and force myself to sit in the chair at the side of her bed. Her nails have grown so long and yet have remained perfectly tapered pearls, not the yellowed claws poor Grandma had been left with.

"Don't worry, Pat, we'll get you fixed up," I whisper aloud then stroke her blanketed leg. I will tend to her nails and her make-up in a little while. There is still time. There has to be. Mom won't be in until five the next afternoon and my husband, Tim, is scheduled to come up for a visit at the end of the week. Of course I won't let them see her this way, especially when Patty has worried about it so much.

Don't let anyone in yet, she would say from the bed we'd set up in the living room back in her house, where she had lain for the past month watching the summer world fade too quickly beyond her window. *Please don't let anyone see me this way*, she would plead, when the crunch of a mail truck could be heard echoing loudly throughout those closed, warm rooms.

It's all right, Patty, I won't, I would tell her. Those huge eyes made larger by the absence of dark hair and lashes would relax and the pale skin of her face would melt back into her pillows until the next time.

And so had begun the downside of her existence. Each morning I'd risen from the couch near her bed where I'd taken up

residence, called from a light sleep by the harsh ring of an alarm clock set to remind us of the next round of pills. Always there were the pills. And each morning we went through the routine we'd agreed upon without words. I'd snap on my gloves and begin. In order of importance the list included medication first--pills ground into applesauce to ease the journey inward; bathing and changing next--very slowly to allow ever stiffening limbs to settle into each new position as quietly as the pain would allow; make-up last, a treatment that included eyeliner and lipstick. After this could I open the blinds, and then we would check the make-up again in the light of day. Patty would look at her reflection with glazed eyes that I couldn't read or understand. She would just nod and look away. Then and only then could the gloves come off.

Just to protect her skin, I'd tell myself.

Patty remained ready. Her last days wore on without interruptions, the television set blaring a soothing stream of idiocy until the sounds of that mailman's tread hit her ears. It fast became a routine.

You look beautiful, Pat. Everything is fine.

Your sure I don't look like shit? I don't want anyone feeling sorry, not like with Grandma.

Lord no, you're not like that at all!

I want to see.

Here, look. Up would come the ever ready hand mirror for her inspection.

You did a pretty good job. Okay. It's okay then, I guess, she would say with a smile. Thanks, you're an angel, Mare.

You're welcome, Pat. I would wink and touch her leg through the blankets. Always through the blankets. *Now we're ready for anything.*

Yep.

Of course no one ever came. My husband and I live in Georgia and I'd arrived alone and uncertain at the airport, dragging my suitcases impatiently through the tangles of strangers with their loud talk and laughter, intent on staying the distance, whatever the distance might be. The tears had come and gone in sufficient deluge later that first night in the shower after I'd learned that none of the aunts or uncles had been around to see her in weeks, and visits from friends had become sparse as her illness progressed. Aside from Mom's letters, a few cards had appeared out there in her mailbox

each week, and that was nice. I mean, doesn't a *Hallmark* always seem to suffice? Why face death when you can keep it as far from you as the cost of a single stamp. Pennies for pain. It was as if the cancer had been devouring her existence long before it would finish with her body.

"Well, now, Patricia," I say lightly, "Mom will be here tomorrow. Tim is coming at the end of the week. He got time off from work just to come and see you--he misses you. And you have a new card that was in the mailbox when we left. I'll read it to you later when you wake up. Then we can look at it together, okay?"

I still grip the nail file tightly in my hand.

"Don't worry about a thing. We'll get you fixed up and when you go home we'll have you looking like a Queen. And I'll make us some of those root beer floats you liked so much. Shoot, I still think you ought to just come back to Georgia with me and Tim instead of living all alone in that house. I'll fix you up with some guy or something. . . ." I lean back in the chair. There. I can see the occasional stream of visitors that pass by Patty's room. They are just flitting shadows out there in the darkness of the corridor, like moths, oblivious to all but their own. They dwindle in number as the hour grows late.

I think about turning on the television set to Patty's favorite program and can't remember what day it is--and that's important because there were certain shows assigned to certain days. There is *Jeopardy!* on Mondays, *The Nanny* on Tuesdays--wait, that's it. Today is Tuesday. I rise to turn it on then remember that cable service won't be turned on in this room until after seven the next morning. Some new thing they do to avoid extra cost.

"Well, Pat," I sigh, "you're stuck with me." I sit forward at the edge of the chair and hum the Frampton tune again. Patty still breathes in her washboard rhythm. I close my eyes.

You okay, Patty? Can I get you anything?

Oh, no. No. Just sit with me, Mare, she would sigh. We are back in the living room of that house again. The muscles in her face had grown more taut with her suffering. *I'm sorry to be such a bother, I know this is no way to live,* she'd say through clenched teeth.

Oh please. You're no bother at all. I'm the bother, hanging around you all the time. Let's see. I'd approached her bedside table with its forest of brown prescription bottles and stooped to read the

chart we'd made to sort out the doses. *Okay, well. It's okay to try another pair of these*, I'd said, holding up the bottle of white codeine tablets. They were supposed to numb any renegade pain that managed to escape each carefully timed barrage of morphine. Morphine was the big gun but even it had grown weak in the face of the enemy. So soon, the pills had been wearing out so soon.

I'd called her doctor.

Just follow the orders on the bottles as they are, the extra codeine is fine, her doctor, Doctor P. W. Pass, had recited to me in a monotone. *I know what's going on in her lungs. You can call an ambulance if she can't tolerate them, or if there is any other evident change.* Change? After I'd hung up, Patty's eyes had quietly followed the path of the bottle in my hand.

He says it's okay.

She'd nodded.

Now, just relax, Pat. It's easier when you try to relax, I'd coaxed, waiting with teaspoon poised in the air while she swallowed in anticipation of the medicine, her entire body flexing with the effort. I'd touched her shoulder through the cloth of her T-shirt. Always through the cloth.

It's okay? It's okay to relax? Patty would repeat with a light lilt to her voice that didn't belong to her while I nodded and placed the teaspoon of applesauce containing its crushed codeine tablets onto her tongue. She'd accepted it as reverently as a child receiving first communion, eyes and face wide open and waiting for the miracle that was certain to happen within.

"It's okay *now*, Pat. It's okay to relax," I whisper aloud. Her breathing has become heavier, more labored. Her chin has dropped almost to her chest in the unconscious fight for what little bit of life she has left. "And listen to that old wind out there, it just keeps on whining. Probably mourning summer. Summer, lord. Seems like just yesterday it was June." I talk quietly as the wind rises again. June. I have begun to hate June. That's when I'd heard her tell me that death was a certainty. She'd finally said it with words, and you can't dodge words like those. They were as hard as bullets. There were to be no more guesses or outs, only blind hope.

Hey, Mary, how's everything in Georgia? Patty's voice had been too full of cheer. It had been the first week in June, the fourth day of June. Only three months ago. So close in time and space.

Fine. Fine. Flowers are out, the sun is shining. What's up in Ohio? I'd answered, my voice high with an anxiety that I tried to pass off for some false high spirits of my own.

Oh, everything's going okay. You get any of those Mock-Orange blossoms out yet?

What? Mock-Orange blossoms? Yeah, I think so. I'd stood on my tip-toes and peered out the window. *Yeah, they're out there.* The delicate branches of my only Mock-Orange tree indeed bore tiny white blossoms. *How about Ohio?*

Nope. Not until the end of June or beginning of July, depends on the weather. We're a little behind you guys. Hey! Remember what Grandma used to say about them, Scary Mary? She'd laughed loudly into the phone and I'd cringed. She hadn't called me "Scary Mary" in a long time. The nickname had been earned years ago when I'd fainted at Grandma's funeral.

No, I don't remember, I'd lied, pinching the phone cord and wondering if it would cut us off.

Sure you do. 'When I smell the Mock-Orange boosh, then I know someone will die,' she'd drawled in what I remembered of Grandma's Hungarian accent.

Stop it. Your scaring me!

Oh, come on, Scary Mary! Why was it she'd always said that? Because Grandpa and the damned dog both died in June?

You know Mom hates it when we mock Grandma and her orange 'booshes.' It's about speaking ill of the dead, or some horse shit like that.

Oh, please! You're the one who was disrespectful fainting at her funeral and shit. Remember? Mom made you kiss old Granny good-bye and you fainted right there on the floor at Borowski's Funeral Parlor. You took that nice pot of sunflowers from Aunt Ray down with you. You even had dirt in your hair. That was a classic episode--OH! and everyone saw your big ass, you were wearing your blue panties with the Monday on it and it was Thursday! I thought I'd die then! I thought Mom would, too, she was so humiliated!

That's enough!

But it was funny!

You didn't have to kiss her or even touch her! Besides, I was only fifteen.

I was only seventeen.

I'd never seen a body!

Me, either.

And half the people there who saw my big ass were women. They don't count. Neither does Uncle Donald because he's gay.

He is?

Shut up.

Ha! She'd laughed shrilly into the phone.

Why are you bringing all of this up, Pat? I don't want to talk about that crap, it's ridiculous now. Let's talk about you. What's going on?

Sorry. It just seemed funny and I needed to laugh. I'm sorry it was at you, Mare.

It's not that funny, is it? Oh, it's all right, forget it. Is everything okay? How are you doing with those treatments?

Yes. I'm fine. Actually, no. No. I'm not. They stopped the chemo, Mare.

"Mary."

I jump from my muse. I hadn't heard the nurse come into the room. I must have been dozing. It's the same nurse who'd been on call that morning when Patty had been tucked away into this room. *Patty.* I look past the petite woman to Patty. Her eyes are still open and searching.

"I'm sorry. Were you sleeping? You know you can lie down in the bed next to your sister's. We won't put anyone else in here, so you will have some privacy."

"No. No, I'm awake. Thanks. Don't you ever get to go home?"

"Sure," she laughed. "Just working a double. Listen, there's plenty of fresh coffee down there too. Feel free. . ."

"Okay." I smile and stand, stumbling slightly against the chair as I make room for the nurse to get by. She checks the plastic bags that feed into Patty's body, touching them like a housewife checking her clothesline for dry articles. Next she wets up a sponge and wipes Patty's forehead then touches it gently to Patty's lips. *She's* not wearing gloves. But then, who did the gloves really protect?

"I did the chapstick thing earlier. Her mouth stays so dry," I blurt out suddenly.

The nurse smiles and nods. "That's good for her. Remember, if you need anything we are right outside."

I smile back at her and wait until she leaves the room before I sit back down. My watch says eleven.

"Been a long day, Patty," I say, settling back into the chair. I stroke her blanket covered leg again. Patty had stopped swallowing

just before dawn, during the four a.m. round of pills. The laced applesauce had lain unnoticed on her lips and some had fallen in fat drops upon her pillow as she'd smiled and began to talk about things that had no end. Her mind was rewinding.

I want to go home, where's home. Grandma--where's Mom? I want Mom! Oh, God, help me, God. What's that dress, Mare? Are those kids playing in the street again? Oh, God, I can't die now. This is, where is, Oh God, I'm late again, so late, is funny so, did you see that flower looks like a star, hey Mare? Where's, oh, God . .

It's okay, Pat, I would interrupt, touching the mound that was her foot beneath the blanket. And she would come back into her self for a moment and look directly at me with those brown eyes that she'd inherited from Grandma. Grandma. But my Patty couldn't be going there. That was a place of terrible cold, where flesh once marshmallow soft had turned to stone. And, Oh God, Grandma's eyes had been closed when I'd kissed her that last time and she'd had no scent at all. And mom made me kiss her anyway.

You'll show some respect; you'll kiss your poor Grandma, Mom had hissed, twisting the flesh of my arm while I'd stared at that corpse. That hadn't been Grandma. In her place, in that pink satin lined coffin, lay a crude replica of her person: thick undertaker's make-up lavished generously over its waxy skin, bright rouge on the overstuffed cheeks, and the lips stretched and pinned into an unnaturally straight line. Most of all it had been the non-smell that had gotten to me and turned out the lights. Enveloped in moist cold air with the empty scent of refrigerated flowers mingling with refrigerated flesh, it had filled my nostrils and my mind with a numbing dose of fear. My lips had brushed cold stone and I'd fainted.

"God, Patty. And now we can still laugh about Grandma, can't we?" I say aloud to her, not thinking. I lean forward and straighten the edge of her blanket. The bed next to hers is empty. I think about lying down and that I should go and wheel that bed closer to hers first so I can hear if she needs me, or to be close so that I could answer the phone should it ring. The phone. I realize the last time I used the phone was to call the ambulance this morning, after she'd forgotten to swallow the very stuff she'd come to live for.

I've called the doctor, Pat. He said we should bring you in to regulate your medication, I'd lied. It's nothing to worry about.

Her weary eyes had rested so heavily upon me and I understood that she knew everything. I could feel her inward sigh. It

was time. *Oh, okay*, she'd said plainly, *is everything all right? When are they coming?*

Soon. Don't worry, we'll get you ready.

I'd pulled on the rubber gloves and quickly got her ready, grateful for the pain in my back as I shifted her weight. It was more penance. We finished by pulling on a fresh T-shirt, the wig and some make-up. Just before the ambulance arrived I'd removed the gloves. I'd caught Patty watching me as I tossed them away. She'd chuckled softly.

Scary Mary, she'd whispered, her dark eyes gleaming.

My hands are rough, I don't want to scratch your skin.

She'd winked at me. *It's okay, Mare.*

The ambulance had pulled up then and the dark morning hours had now disappeared into the jaws of the evening. It was as if the afternoon had never been. She had been cheated, we had both been cheated.

"Well, Patricia. It's after eleven. You don't mind if I sit here and talk to you some more?" I whisper, pulling the chair closer to the side of the bed.

"We'll have to tend to your garden when we get back. I'll wheel you out into the sun. I don't know why I didn't think of it before--we can get that visiting nurse to help. Those ambulance guys really trampled your Mock-Orange 'boosh,' Pat. The one by the front steps. Oh well. Crazy idea to plant Grandma's bushes there anyhow. I'm surprised they lasted as long as they did in that spot, but maybe you'd like to try some nice roses there."

Patty's wig has been knocked slightly askew and before I can retrieve it, she stops breathing. I freeze. Her eyes cease to move; she has taken a pause. A flower closing in on itself. The gurgling in her lungs is silent. Seconds churn into the hours of a minute while we wait.

"Patty!" I call to her, leaning over the bed railing. I reach out and tug on her foot. The eyes move inward and she slowly, laboriously, begins to breath again. I hurry to the door and stop, then I return to the bed with its cargo. There is a chart tainted with a red DNR order hanging there, at the foot of her bed, framed by the sounds of her labored breathing. *Do not resuscitate*. Patty's signature sprawls in a delicate line across the bottom of the black and white page. She has even made those little o's for dots above the i's, the same way she'd done so in the letters she'd written to me over the

years. Her girlish handwriting just doesn't belong there. I pick it up and look at it, then let it fall back against the bed with a small bang.

"I'm sorry, Patty."

She toils on, oblivious to everything above the throes of her death snore. *Scary Mary*. I move to the side of the bed and pick up the fallen nail file. I smooth the edge of her pillow, getting ever closer. My heart is pounding. Pat's hand is sticking halfway out from beneath the blankets. I touch her fingers with my bare ones, marveling at the warmth. There. There is nothing of harsh dryness and cold, terrible moistness here. Stupid, stupid to think that there is, that there was. Slipping the file gently beneath the nail of her thumb, I begin to file.

"Show me the way. . . day after day. . ." I sing softly. My voice is shaky.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply her sweet scent. "I'm so sorry, Patty. It is okay to relax." *Forget Grandma, forget the cold*. Patty's breathing is like a slow cadence. I stop filing and sit on the edge of her bed. It's so quiet. Even the wind has stopped for awhile. Only the tiny beep of her monitor pulses out the presence of time while we wait. I decide it's too quiet.

"Remember when you sat with me after I had my tonsils out? I was twenty-one and I puked all over you," I tell her, laughing aloud. "I remember." Patty's was the first voice I'd heard when I'd awakened from that drug-sleep.

Relax, Scary Mary, she'd said. Patty had spoken from the side of the bed where I'd lain with my throat searing. The world had been spinning and so had my stomach. While I'd vomited noisily over the bed railing she'd held on fast to my hand.

Relax? I must look like shit, I'd croaked, holding my sore belly steady while the nurses pulled a fresh gown over my head.

Don't worry, Mare. We'll get it, Patty had chirped. I can still smell her perfume, something lilac. She'd stayed with me, dabbing my cheeks, wiping my arms, brushing my tangled hair. How the feel of her hands in my hair had worked better than any sedative. My eyes had drooped with the long, luxurious strokes of that brush.

". . . show me the way. . ." I sing again, my voice rising as loud as I dare within the walls of this room, chasing out the shadows of the past. I hold her hand and stroke the length of her arms slowly.

". . . day after day. . ."

Patty's chest rattles to a stop once more. I bend over her face, closing my eyes and waiting for the feel of the warmth that doesn't come. I wait, but there is no sound. No movement. I know that she has died. In the far distance the wind has begun to move again, but it flows more peacefully by our window and I wonder if *she* now moves with it, caught up in its soothing balm, perhaps traveling like a little being in a fairy tale; free to become as she pleases, a fragrant petal of a rose here, the boundless wing of a dragonfly there.

Patty is dead. Dead. That word doesn't belong with my sister. Not yet. I can hear the occasional swish of hospital personnel moving by in the distance but we don't see them. Patty's eyes stare blindly, her mouth gapes quietly. I lean and look closely into those eyes, my forehead touching hers. Searching. The Patty lights are gone; a milky glaze has begun to settle over the depth of the brown, quieting her forever.

"Pat," I whisper and place my hand flat on her chest. One tiny sound escapes from deep within her. It is only a final gasp of trapped air from her ruined lungs. It escapes to become part of the atmosphere, as invisible as a soul must be. I reach to smooth the wig, allowing my hand to caress the still warm softness of her skin. As the tears come, my hand takes on a life of its own, stroking first her brow, then her cheeks.

"They'll be here soon to check on you. But it's okay, Patty, we'll fix you up first," I say while I gather her make-up from the suitcase in the corner. I take my time and smooth the base on first, rubbing it over her brow, then her cheeks and chin. Next comes the eyeshadow, an earth tone that she once told me wouldn't contrast with the brown in her eyes, her favorite pink lipstick, and some eyebrow pencil, dabbing and blotting with my fingertips. I pull out a brush from my purse and arrange the hair carefully around her face.

"There," I whisper, finishing. "There, you've got Grandma beat by a mile, sister. A long mile. Look, it's already September."

Last of all, I bend and kiss her gently on the forehead.



Lily
Sara E. Goodson

The Emperor of Self

Soul Friend
Blood Enemy
Faceless Crowd
I cannot hear you
I cannot see you
I cannot believe you
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Disdain not I
with these hands
to build midnight Cathedrals
brooding upon griffin-wall'd cities
of hippogriff gate and celluloid street
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Molding the Earth of half-remember'd Dream
aflame with memory, desire, and sacred belief
I populate my soul with
Man, Woman, Child, and Creature of the Dawn
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Ice Cream Kings, Aged Virgin Queens
Worshippers of the World Snake
Pine needle dryads
Manticore peasants
Friends garbed in the rainbow silk of
Fantasy, bend not the knee to me
For I am the Emperor of Self.

And in dark-leaved forests of oak and thorn
I plant crimson-fur wolves, philosopher ogres,
and the Good Folk who laugh at the ways of Man.
My azure skies fly with gold-scal'd
Dragons and never seen Rocs while
Mermaids of foam-flecked tresses
Cavort with leviathans in crystal seas
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Cement-gray armies starve not my Soul
nor drown me in Baptist rivers of His blood
Because Byzantium is my right hand
and Persia my left
And the god-dog, Cerberus, is
my friend and childhood pet
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Soul Friend
Blood Enemy
Faceless Crowd
God songs and Child wonders I sing
with faltering tongue and ink-stain'd hands
And you listen
or laugh
or scorn
or cry
or turn away
or not
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Michael Williams

Castles In the Backdrop, Scurrying Monks

Somewhere in Rome--at Castlebreak, perhaps
Wild ivy and black berries ran away from a dank prison
While an old man with a buttercup
Danced until the chimes called.
He heard the thunderous hooves
And felt cold mud leap to his body.
He heard men grunt and yell
And he clenched his teeth and closed his eyes
As metal clanged against metal
And blood was tossed aside for pleasure.
The ivy and blackberries and daffodils trampled
While the chimes screamed.
They were small, hanging from the cottage
And swaying in the breeze.
They are gentle and delicate,
Those small metallic pipes
that feel like glass
But signal the end.

Jennifer Durre



Self Portrait
Jennifer Cohen

Life From a Front Row Seat

No decision till Friday, I try to explain,
I speak before Congress, but my words are in vain.
The Ghosts in the bathroom will find me again.

First comes my father, who calls for more beer,
The ghost of my brother! What's he doing here?
Then I see me, from the past, a pioneer!

The storm is raging--gripped by fear, I must crawl--
I'm outside! I can see the old garden wall,
But it's too far away, and I am made small.

Suddenly I'm flying at a dizzying pace
To the shack in the woods -- to a safe place.
I'll hide in the shade of the monument base.

Pulled from my car, I hear myself scream--
Where's the army? In the barracks! With cake and whipped
cream!
Oh God, what a circus! This must be a dream!

Lynn Mobley Eaton

Things I Should Have Done

Planted flowers instead of buying them.
Yelled when I felt the need.
Regularly embraced the ones I loved.
Celebrated Grandparent's Day.
Repaired repairable friendships.
Continued this poem.

Anslee Willett

Tybee March 3, 1997

Sand and waves, Flyers turn
against the porcelain sky,
spreading nylon pinions
to embrace the wind with rainbow wings.

Dip, swirl, bank, coast,
swooping like psychedelic angels
in the bright March afternoon;
carrying fantasies of watchers to the heavens.

C.R. UwasahaAgeya

Wasting Time

Wasting time --

I've spent too many hours
in the courtyard --

Drinking the fruits of my labor

The beautiful springtime girls
have bloomed,

Waiting to be picked
and adorned.

I sit --

Engulfing the scent of sweet perfume
-- and flesh. . .

that clings to my libido
as easily as it slips
from the slink in their walk.

Come closer --

we touch,
while spring is in the air . . .

and we can, for a moment,

our moment together,

waste time.

John D. Trainor



From a Distance
Debra Sutton

A Tale of Her Own

Dori Gann

Once upon a time, long, long ago and in a land far away, there lived a little girl whose name was Aurora. She lived with her family in a close little town, and had a normal childhood like all the other boys and girls she knew. From the time that Aurora was old enough to understand, she had been told by her parents that the greatest thing a young maiden could do was marry a king. This would bring great prestige to the town and bestow tremendous wealth on the parents of a girl lucky enough to be chosen for such an honor. So Aurora, like all her friends, dreamed of a handsome knight in shining armor who would whisk her away to a beautiful kingdom where they would live happily ever after.

One day, when Aurora was older, the news came to the town that a very wealthy and powerful king would be traveling the countryside in the near future, looking for a maiden to make his bride. This news greatly excited Aurora's parents, and they set about instructing their daughter in the fine art of capturing such a wonderful thing as a king. "Always look fresh and alluring," said her mother. "Never contradict him," said her father. "You must pamper him and always lavish attention on him," Aurora's mother advised. "Just remember, every man must always be a king in his castle," came the advice from her father.

At long last, the big day arrived. All the eligible girls were laced into their best frocks and paraded up and down in front of the king. The girls pranced and twirled, hoping to catch the king's eye, and Aurora, because she had practiced very hard for this, outshone them all. She was meek and demure with just the right amount of feminine mystery hinted at with a wink of the eye and a flirtatious flip of her skirt. She had, after all, been preparing for this all her life. Finally it was here. The big moment when all her dreams could come true, if only she could catch her man.

When the king chose Aurora, she could scarcely believe it. What an honor! How lucky she was! Aurora just knew her future was set, she would be a queen! The whole town cheered and waved as Aurora rode off in the king's carriage. How the other girls envied her. Aurora's parents were quite proud that they had raised such a

successful daughter, and bid her fond farewell. When Aurora saw the kingdom she was to live in, she was ecstatic. How beautiful everything was, and the castle was an incredible sight to behold. Built high upon a hill, it overlooked the entire kingdom. Rising majestically from a dark patch of forest, the castle seemed to shimmer and shift in the afternoon haze. As Aurora rose closer, she couldn't believe her good luck. To be a queen in a kingdom such as this. What more could she ever desire? Flags and banners lightly fluttered in the breeze from the tops of the many towers and turrets, and the trees seemed to bow to the carriages as the procession wound closer and closer to the castle.

On the night of Aurora's marriage to the king, she was ushered to his chambers. Inside the room, all was dark and silent as the door was locked behind her. The day's events had been a blur, and having spoken no more than two words to the king the entire time since leaving her home, Aurora was a little nervous. However, she was confident that the king must be a wonderful man, for didn't everyone want to be the king's wife? Having been thoroughly prepared for this big event by her mother, Aurora shook out her hair, licked her lips and struck--what she thought was--a provocative pose. Suddenly, from out of the shadows, loomed a huge, dark figure. My! The king certainly did appear frighteningly large, but Aurora remembered her mother vaguely mentioning something about the size not counting. But Aurora felt that there was something strange going on, and then she suddenly realized that this wasn't the king, this was a dreadful dragon! The dragon regarded her with beady little eyes that paralyzed Aurora in the spot where she stood. And then, in a hot, foul breath, the dragon told Aurora that he was indeed the king, and he fell upon her and ravished her. When he was done, the dragon took his mighty tail and squeezed it around Aurora's slender neck until she passed out; just to show her he loved her.

When she came to, she was locked in a tower with only a brush and a mirror, and a small case of cosmetics, so that she could stay fresh and alluring for her husband, of course. And so went Aurora's life. What an honor, how lucky she was! Aurora's days were spent in mindless wanderings around and around the great tower that was her home. Where could she go? How could she escape? And even if she did, who would believe her incredible tale of a king who was a dragon? She couldn't return home; the shame she would bring to her family was more than she could bear to think

of. Imagine, a girl running home away from the king; people would say she was crazy.

So Aurora stayed where she was and tried to convince herself that things weren't so bad. After all, she was a queen, wasn't she? What an honor, what a lucky girl! Somehow, those words didn't sound quite the same anymore. Then, one day a fairy godmother appeared before Aurora. In her hand she held a golden key. "If you search, you shall find; the way to freedom, in your mind," she told the miserable girl. "Use your head, and do not fear; there is a secret to learn here." Well, this was good news to Aurora, who hadn't quite been able to convince herself that she had the perfect marriage, and just the thought of that hot and slimy tail wrapping around her neck one more time was enough to convince her that she'd rather jump from a window to her death than stay in the tower any longer.

At the very top of the tower was a dark little hallway that Aurora had never bothered to explore, and at the end was a door that had several old and dusty boards nailed across it. The door was covered in layers of cobwebs, and Aurora could tell that it hadn't been opened in years. A small sign hung crookedly on the door that read, "Do not enter, by decree of the King." She pulled off the boards, and cautiously she inserted the key and turned; the door swung silently inward. A soft light beckoned Aurora inside. As she stepped over the threshold, a strange feeling began swelling up inside of her. Magic seemed to sparkle in the very air that filled the room. Books lined the walls in stacks and seemed to breathe a life of their own. As Aurora began to run her hands over the books in wonder, all the contents held in the pages seemed to flow from her fingers to her brain. Time seemed to stand still and Aurora trembled in shock. She learned so much, she felt sure that her head must surely explode. Aurora suddenly realized that she had as much magic within her as did the evil king. She knew in an instant that the king believed his magic was in his tail and that having such a mighty tail was what made him so powerful. But Aurora knew better now; the magic was inside of everyone. It had nothing to do with having a tail; the magic just needed to be recognized within and encouraged to grow. Aurora also knew that her magic was much stronger than the dragon's; her magic came through truth and knowledge, and the King's magic was based on his false belief that his great tail made him superior.

When the king came to the tower that night, Aurora was waiting for him. She stood in the shadows with her hands folded primly in front of her and her head bowed. When the dragon swung his head around and directed his leering gaze on her, she swung up her mirrored compact and pointed it at his face. The evil king's eyes met a reflection of themselves in Aurora's compact, and froze him where he stood. Aurora rushed around the helpless dragon and up to his tail. "Doesn't seem all that big up close," she thought to herself. And with a ferocious swing, Aurora brought down the nail file she held in her hand and sliced off the dragon's tail. When the dragon saw he had lost his tail, he became so angry that he broke the spell he had put himself under, and whirled around towards Aurora. With an angry bellow, he rushed at her, and when she deftly stepped to the side, the dragon plunged headfirst out the window behind her and fell to the ground with a thud. Aurora rushed to the window and peered out; far below her lay the broken body of the dead king. And so, Aurora became queen of the beautiful kingdom. She brought peace and sexual equality to all her royal subjects, opened up the magical room at the top of the tower to everyone in the land, and they all lived happily ever after. What a lucky girl!



Untitled
Katrina Deckle

The Scent of Vanilla

Maryanna Axson

Alton walks in with a huge smile on his face, so I put down my cross stitch and ask him how things went.

"It was nice. It seems so strange to be telling you this, but I really liked it." He scratches his ear and wanders over to the vast window. Scanning dreamily over the luminous city spread out below, he has a beautiful child-like glow in his eyes. He deserves everything in this world that sparkles with joy.

He turns his body toward me and leans against the gray overstuffed couch. "She's different from you, she's really quiet and she keeps her eyes closed. Everything is movement with her, it's all easy and fluid. But she also likes to be kissed on the back of her neck, the same way you do." He flashes me that same deeply dimpled smile that hooked me years ago.

I'm smiling wide at Alton, drawing up mental images of him caressing a smooth, graceful younger woman. My mouth tastes hot and metallic, but I decide not to mention this to him.

"Well that shows that she's got great taste. I mean, besides the obvious fact that she's attracted to you. I'm glad you had a good time last night," I say as I pack away my embroidery floss and needles into a basket. I push them under a table to my left and stand up to stretch. "My muscles feel all tense, Alton. Could you give me a back rub?" My face must look pitiful, because he makes a pouty-baby face and walks gently up to me to cup my cheeks between his hands.

"You look beautiful, Cynthia." He kisses my mouth and his eyes are crawling all over my face, in search of something. "Is that all you have to say about last night? 'I'm glad you had a good time?'" He looks sort of worried and I know he wants the truth.

"I guess it is. I mean, once I go out and have my turn, I'll be better able to relate, honey," I say as I turn away from him and pace at half speed around the large parlor in our Manhattan apartment. "Right now I guess I just don't know how it feels to be in your situation."

My eyes are searching the ornate black ceiling tile fourteen feet above me for some magic word that will free me. I don't really want to discuss our outside relationships until I have one, too. Even

if it's not really a "relationship" in the regular sense of the word. I knew he'd find a woman before I would. I just would rather talk about it after I find a lovely, strong woman like myself, even if it's only for physical experience.

The ceiling isn't helping me.

"Cyn, I know you're probably worried about the fact that Yvette is younger than you. But that's one of the reasons that you and I have been together for so long. I want to share my life with someone my age, someone who I can relate to on all levels. Sure, I can relate to Yvette on a physical level, but not much beyond that."

Alton presses himself thoughtfully into the gray loveseat across the room and pulls a quarter out of the breast pocket of his green plaid shirt. He's twirling the quarter through his knuckles over and over again, the way he always has since he quit smoking four years ago.

"You know, I really want this to work. Are you sure you're okay with everything?" His voice sounds so smooth and deep, and it relaxes me.

"Alton," I say, curling myself up next to him, "I'm glad we decided to have an open relationship. I want you to have everything you want. I want you to experience every opportunity life brings you." I'm snuggling my face into his neck, and I can feel the ends of his short hair gently prickling my nose. He smells like vanilla. I lift my eyes to look at his face. After sixteen years, he still has the same smooth skin and strong jawbone that first tempted me. Our eyes match gazes, and I see some gold flecks in his eyes that I never noticed before.

"Don't feel like you have to sacrifice anything for me," Alton says as he drops his quarter. "This open relationship is for both of us. I mean, I want you to have everything you want, too." He's looking at me with those gold-flecked eyes and raised eyebrows.

"I don't think I'm sacrificing anything for you, honey." My fingers are toying with a loose string hanging out of the cushion on the couch. "I guess I just knew that you would find someone to sleep with before I would. I'm too nervous to just go up to someone and tell her that I'm attracted to her. I mean, where in the hell is a forty-four year old woman supposed to go to meet another woman?" I can't help but laugh when I hear myself saying this. "Seriously, I

really want to meet someone," I say as I stretch myself across his lap. "I just don't know how."

"I'm not sure what to tell you. I guess you just have to dive right in and do it. He's massaging my shoulders with his strong, tranquilizing hands, and I feel myself growing tired.

"I think I'm ready for bed, Alton." I pick myself up from his lap and head for the bedroom, pulling him behind me with my left hand.

For some reason I'm always dead tired before I get in the bed, and then I can't fall asleep. So I end up just lying here with thoughts parading through my mind, like I am now. I have an entire scenario composed in my mind: I'm standing there on the cold ceramic tile floor in my bathroom here in the apartment, with the chrome fixtures all polished and the black towels hanging perfectly straight. My lover pushes the door open and asks, "What's taking so long? Are you finished washing your face?" She looks the same in all of my dreams--tall, with dark hair, dark eyes, beautiful breasts and a flat stomach. The cold tile and the sight of this woman give me goosebumps, even under the covers of my queen-sized bed.

"Yea, I'm finished." I'm looking at her stomach peek through the gap between her t-shirt and low-waisted jeans. "Actually, I'm kind of cold," I say. "Do you want to take a shower with me to warm up?"

Without really answering, she goes ahead and pulls off her white V-neck t shirt and I find myself face to face with this sleek, voluptuous woman in a mint green bra and jeans. I don't think I've ever seen anything so perfect. I turn around to turn the hot water on and I can feel her standing close behind me. As I turn back to face her, my eyes are fixed on hers, and our bare toes are touching. God, the feeling is surreal to me and I can feel my face and ears going numb.

I roll over in the bed and rub my nose, trying to get circulation going again, and in the process wake Alton up. "I love you, baby," he mumbles, then buries his face into the pillow and falls back asleep.

Closing my eyes again, I see myself standing behind my lover in the shower. She has a tattoo, a Celtic knot centered between her shoulder blades. My soapy fingers trace along the smooth,

intertwined lines of the tattoo and then down along her spine. Our hands, our lips, our fingers are everywhere, all over each other, kissing and touching and even laughing out loud.

As I lie in bed imagining all this happening to me, I can't help but wonder where I even met this woman, or if she even exists. I roll onto my stomach and ponder ways that I could possibly find a woman like her--a woman like myself.

My fluffy gray cat startles me awake by leaping onto my stomach from the floor. The sunlight is pouring into the bedroom, and I strain my eyes to see the clock across the room. 10:21. Alton's at work, at his office at Simon, Lange, and Hansen attorneys. I shuffle into the kitchen to brew some coffee and to feed my demanding cat, who won't stop harassing me until I do. Sitting down at the table, waiting for the coffee to brew, I contemplate the possibilities of our open relationship. I guess Alton and I have never really had an "ordinary" relationship. First off, we've been together for sixteen years and have never really had a true desire to get married. We used to stay up half the night discussing this whole open relationship thing as if we were talking about other people or something. I looked up at him from the chair I'm sitting in now. "How come we both agree that that's the best arrangement, but we haven't ever done it ourselves?"

Alton stood still--I think he was letting the words sink in--and turned to face me. "So are you saying you want to start an open relationship?" He stood there, scrambling eggs, looking at me with a small smile on his face.

"Yea, I think so. I mean, there's no reason not to, is there?" I remember waiting, thinking of the words carefully: "I know we could both enjoy sleeping with other women, and we both deserve to."

He looked at me with those beautiful eyes of his, and I remember thinking that he had never looked so in love as he did at that moment--his skin seemed to glow in a fresh pink color and his dimples punctuated his smile.

"Then let's go for it, Cynthia." He brought over my plate of eggs and pancakes and set it down in front of me, kissing my cheek.

I knew then that as much as I want to, finding a woman would be difficult for me.

When Alton comes home from work, I'm sitting in the dining room, working on a puzzle of the Sistine Chapel. He asks me how my day has been.

"Well, it's been okay, I guess," I say, digging through the box of mismatched pieces. "What do you plan on doing tonight?"

He throws his coat over one of the chairs and loosens his tie. "Well, Yvette called on my lunch hour and asked me if I wanted to go have some coffee with her when she gets off work tonight." He picks up the cat and scratches her neck, waiting for my response.

"Oh. Okay," I say. I'm still digging for that nonexistent missing piece.

"Let me tell you about the idea I got today," he says, pulling out a chair and sitting next to me. "How would you feel about meeting Yvette? I know you've had problems meeting women, and I think the two of you would have a lot in common."

I look up at Alton and scratch my head thoughtfully.

"I mean, she knows you know about her, so I don't think she'd be nervous around you, and she's told me that the idea kind of turns her on." I reach for my cigarettes and light one up. "At the very least, Cynthia, you'd feel more comfortable, don't you think?"

"So you want me to go have coffee with the two of you tonight?"

"Sure." He picks my hand up and kisses my palm. "If you want to."

I sit in silence for a few moments. The idea does kind of intrigue me--I've been wondering what exactly turns him on about her. And anyway, if I don't like her for myself, at least I'll know more about their relationship. It can't hurt.

"Okay," I finally say, "I guess I can do that. She just better not be sexier than me." I smile and take my hand back and return to my puzzle for a while.

Alton and I arrive half an hour before Yvette shows up. She's a waitress at an Italian restaurant a few blocks away, and I guess she didn't get off on time. So we order our coffee and wait at a table in the far corner of the cafe. I'm stirring the sugar into my second cup when I spot a young woman, twenty-three or so I guess, with luxurious straight black hair coming in through the door. Alton notices her about the same time and nudges me. "That's Yvette," he

says, and stands up to greet her.

"Hi there, Alton," she smiles and I notice a small gap between her front teeth. Alton, always the gentleman, pulls her chair out for her and introduces us. She's a slim, tanned girl with a firm handshake.

"So, Alton tells me you're a waitress. I used to wait tables when I was in college, and I hated it. How do you like it?" I pull a cigarette out of the nickel-plated case that Alton gave me last year and light it with one fluid motion. He gets up to go buy a newspaper from the machine on the sidewalk, and I watch him walk away, thinking that he must want for us to talk without him.

"Well, actually, I'm in school, too, so I hope I won't be doing it much longer. But it's not as bad as most people think. I kind of like working with people." This peculiarly appealing young thing flashes her gap-toothed smile and says, "Once I graduate, though, I'll never go back."

We occupy our time with small talk until Alton returns with his New York Times. She and I both look to him as he sits, and I can see from the corner of my eye that the expression on her face is much like mine--one that admires with a sense of knowledge about the object of my admiration.

"Yvette is an English major, Cynthia. Isn't that a coincidence?"

"Really," I say, with a new realization of more that we have in common. "Has Alton told you that I'm an English professor? But I'm taking a few semesters off right now. What do you want to do?"

"You probably think I'm making this up, but I plan on teaching, too. High school, though." I watch with thinly disguised attraction as she clicks her Zippo open to light a thin menthol cigarette. Her face has a strange masculine quality--her piercing eyes and strong, high cheekbones--that is somehow exhibited through distinctly feminine features. She exhales and says, "High school students are kind of fun, kind of carefree."

I smile coolly and lift my coffee to my lips. "Funny," I say. "That's one of the reasons I chose to teach at the college level. College students are more open-minded and willing to try new things. Well, a perfect example is the fact that we both have the same lover. I think high school aged people are too caught up in possessiveness to even consider sharing boyfriends. What do you think?"

"You're right on that," Yvette laughs. "Three years ago I would never have thought that I would do something so far out," and I laugh with her.

"I just realized how strange this must seem to someone who's not involved. Everybody would think we're crazy if they knew!"

"Well, ladies," Alton interrupts. "I hate to spoil the party, but I just remembered I have some work to do on one of my cases." He stands up and puts on his coat. "I forgot all about it until now." He looks at me with a smile, and then at Yvette with the same smile.

"But Yvette just got here," I protest, gesturing toward her.

"Oh, that's okay," she coos. "We don't need him just to have a conversation, do we?" She smiles up at Alton and says, "Sorry you can't stay, but you're not spoiling our party."

Alton kisses my lips, kisses Yvette's hand, and is gone, just like that. I look over at Yvette suspiciously, and try to decide if I want to order another cup of coffee. "I definitely wasn't expecting this," I say flatly.

"I know."

"How 'bout this, why don't we at least go to a bar or something so I can have a Bloody Mary?" I say, crunching out my cigarette. "I could use one of those more than this coffee," I laugh.

We stand to put our coats on, and I toss fifteen bucks on the table. Luckily, there's a good Irish bar just a few blocks away, so we won't have to walk too far.

After about three Bloody Marys, I turn to look Yvette in the eye and I tell her I think she's gorgeous. "Why would you want to hang out with an old lady, anyway?" I joke.

"You're not an old lady, and you know it." She grins at me and I can't help but smile back. I never thought that a younger woman would be so appealing to me. She lights another of her cigarettes and winks at me. Stepping down off her barstool, Yvette whispers in my ear, "Let's go to my apartment. I'll give you a back rub." I can feel her warm breath on my neck and nod to her. I never would have expected that this would happen today when I woke up this morning.

As we enter her cozy, green-carpeted apartment, I can instantly identify with the coconut incense that has obviously been burned here. It reminds me of my college days, when we used to

burn incense to cover the smell of pot in the dorms. Yvette turns the track lighting down to just a glimmer, and taking off her jacket, turns to me. "Well, this is it," she says, holding her arms out wide in a gesture akin to the ladies on The Price is Right. The dim light gives her smooth arms a nice glow and her lips just the slightest shine. I can feel my stomach getting all squishy and my chest seems hollow with the echo of my pounding heart. Actually I feel much like I did the first time Alton and I undressed in front of each other. I'm nervous about being naked, free from all disguise, but I can't stand to have these clothes oppressing me any longer.

I approach Yvette with deliberate movements, hoping not to embarrass myself, and stub my toe anyway, on the leg of the coffee table. My body feels almost like a vacant cavity, like some kind of hollow shell waiting to be filled with something. I can smell her sweet vanilla perfume and kiss her on her soft cheek. We press our noses together and I can feel her eyelashes brush mine when we blink. Her dark hair, straight and thick, fills my left hand, and as I touch her eyelids she wraps her arms around me and we fall, giggling like schoolgirls, into the couch. Her lips are fresh and full, and they feel so smooth when I kiss them. Her hand glides up the outside of my thigh and continues along my hip, under my loose dress all the way to my breasts. Her cold fingers feel surprisingly wonderful on my skin. We begin peeling each other's clothes off seductively until we both are facing each other, exposed and unprotected, on the couch. I squeeze her close to me, embracing the unfamiliar but fabulous feeling of her breasts on my stomach, thinking that this must be how it felt for Alton.

I wake to the song of the church's bells calling its parishioners inside. I sit up and blink, adjusting my eyes to the late morning sun beaming through the window. Yvette's bed is vast and white, smothered by a thick down comforter. Her hair is in sharp contrast to the white of the linens, and it's spread out like wings over her pillow. I'm sitting here thinking about last night. Everything was so perfect, it almost seems silly that I've been nervous for so long. Yvette is wonderful, beautiful, and I can't wait to tell everything to Alton, to share every detail about her skin, her voice, her smile. But then again, he already knows.



Feet
Mary Ann Donnelly



Aging
Sharon Robinson

Matisse's Dance

As night falls we dance, my sisters and I;
gone is the sun, dark is the sky.
We skip in the nude like Bacchantes in bands;
a circle of bodies, a joining of hands.

On green hills we dance, my sisters and me;
we are together, our spirits our free.
The circle of life, a communion of mothers;
two have let go to make room for others.

As night falls we dance, my sisters and I;
gone is the sun, dark is the sky.
As we twirl on the hills by the shores of dark waters,
Watch over us, Goddess, for we are your daughters.

Linda Marie Duncan

Moon-Watching At Tybee Pier

Water in
Velvety warmth

Sad faced souls
 Hovering along
The waves
And there above
February full moon drags down
Silvery hair as those of seaweed
Over his mid-aged shoulders

Heavy with a 30-year mortgage
Two cars third-grade son with wife
A lot more . . .
Pressures
From profession colleagues money
Hell! . . . Just life itself!

Scatters all over like
Day-old dandruff.

“Look! The reflection of the moon . . .”
“UmUm . . .”
“Isn’t it like a . . .”
“. . . shit-covered gold coin, maybe . . . uh?”

Sad faced souls nowhere to go
Wave back and forth back and forth . . .
While February full moon drags
His old feet as those of the Old-man in sea

His book-smelled fingers
Comb through my black hair
Again!

Kyonghee Ingraham

Darkling I Listen

Mary O'Sako

When Thomas sat up in bed it was still dark and he could not yet see where he was. The sound that had pulled him from sleep had been like a hammer hitting soft, internal things; living things. An undercurrent of a sound it was, like a mallet crushing an ant mound--*game over guys*. He had returned from time behind the fluttering eyelids of r.e.m. thinking the sound had soared to become the rusty drone of a large insect in irregular flight, alighting solely to feed upon him; a bit here, a bit there. It had transcended the dream he was having. *Another one*, Thomas thought, rubbing with both hands at his face to cleanse himself of the bitter dream gall that still clung to him.

In the dream he had been pulling his brother Pete who'd been twelve again; pulling him along in the rusted out wagon they'd shared years ago as kids, pulling him through a black world with no end. They'd been there before. He remembered that woman with the sea-green eyes. He'd seen her only three dreams ago, her deep laughter beckoning to him, her long legs swinging like ivory pendulums from her lofty seat. *She* was ahead, always just up ahead. Thomas had climbed towards the sound of her throaty voice, his breathing increasing rapidly with their journey. And there'd been Petey to consider. When he'd glanced back to see that Treva also sat in the wagon behind Pete with her meaty arms wrapped tightly about his shoulders, and that she was still in her nightgown, his heart had really taken off.

Treva's presence in the dreams always signaled the coming of *IT*. *IT* had come for them this night as well, making its arrival known from somewhere behind with steps large enough to shake the ground beneath them and breath strong enough and cold enough to turn his sweat to ice. Thomas refused to look back, knowing that just the mere sight of *it* would cause his racing heart to stop. He began to run, pumping his legs like pistons, ignoring the pain that shot down the arm that was cemented fast to the handle of the wagon and *its* weighty cargo.

Thomas had run as fast as he could but it had still gained on them, its loud gasping breaths becoming a *drone*. At the last moment, the green-eyed woman's laughter disappeared and his hand

had been allowed to slip from the wagon. There was no sound from Petey and Treva at all. Thomas chanced a look back; the wagon was gone, the thing had been fed. He was alone in the great darkness. He had awakened at that moment with a start, clutching his chest.

Thomas massaged his shoulder and looked over at Treva while he waited for his fluttering heart to subside. The leisurely rise and fall of her chest was the only sign of animation about her. Thomas' heart skipped a beat, something glittered wickedly from the top of her chest, some great eye...*Stop it! Things will get away from you if you let them. Stop and open your eyes, old man. Wake up.* Thomas looked closer, it was only a ring. Something gold and new, winking steadily upon her finger in the half-light of morning. He shook his head and brushed at the back of his neck with his hand and tried to stand up but something held on tightly to his feet. *It?* No. *It* had only been the air-conditioner. He could hear the loud, uneven, hum of the compressor that crouched just outside of their bedroom window.

The goddamn air-conditioner kicked on again. He shoved impatiently at his blankets, they were bunched and twisted around his legs like entrails. Finally he pulled free and stepped away.

"Who's calling?" Treva Johnson mumbled suddenly from where she lay spread-eagled atop the damp covers. Thomas gasped as her voice cut through the quiet roar of the morning.

"What? No one. No one is calling. It's that air conditioner kicked on again. I had it set to eighty-five and already it comes on. Open the windows, turn on the fans, and it comes on anyway and it isn't even daylight yet."

"Oh," she rolled over and threw an arm over her face. Her flesh looked gray in the dimness.

"Go back to sleep. I'll see to it."

"I can't sleep. I was dreaming about the phone. I still think I hear it ringing. Maybe it really was. Who could tell with all the racket?"

"Who would call at this hour?" Thomas stopped, still panting, and looked at her.

"I don't know. Maybe Pete. Who knows. You all right?"

Thomas shrugged and left, thinking sometimes it was better not to speak. Things could drag on painfully if he spoke. He turned on the hall light, squinted at the thermostat and grumbled quietly, "It's only seventy-eight degrees," then flipped the lever to ninety and

the air-conditioner stopped.

"God damn it all anyway," Thomas spat, wiping the back of his neck as he headed for the bathroom. He sighed when his feet left carpet to hit the deliciously cool tile there. Sitting on the toilet for a long time with his head in his hands, Thomas thought about how he might get up the guff to call Petey that afternoon, see how he was doing. The thought of calling Pete made him sigh again.

Thomas listened to the sound of things rising outside with the dawn. Birds, dogs, cars, lawn sprinkler systems. The endless cycle. Thomas thought he could make out the green-eyed woman's laughter somewhere beyond it all. It made the hair on his back rise all the way to his buttocks, and caused a long dead something to stir within his groin. *My darling, my darkling*, he thought with a chuckle. When his alarm went off he sprinted on tip-toes to turn it off before it disturbed Treva. She still lay with one arm thrown over her face and the other stretched out toward his empty side of the bed.

Thomas glanced down at her while he stood catching his breath, this wife of twenty-five years. The scent of her expensive night cream tainted his nostrils. It was something lilac, something too sweet and oily that was supposed to decrease the aging process. His stomach rolled slightly. Treva's nightshirt had ridden up to her waist and he could see the dark shadow of hair that began at the top of her thighs where it intersected with the thick area that was her pubic bone; thick and empty, with no children to show for their efforts. So still she lay; as still as death. Thomas shuddered and knelt by the foot of the bed, feeling about for his slippers until he heard her cough; then he hurried to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee.

By the time Treva came to the kitchen to start breakfast Thomas had already finished his first cup of coffee out on the patio. He sat on one of the metal wrought iron chairs that Treva had purchased just last week. It was hard but cool beneath him. Thomas eased his weight back into the chair and crossed his legs, blotting out the sight of the rising day with thoughts of the green-eyed woman and how very soft and long her thighs had looked. He wondered vaguely if she was someone he knew, or someone he had known. The second cup of coffee grew cold in his hands. When Treva began to bang pots and pans around inside the darkness of the screen door, he took a last sip of the coffee and winced. It had already begun to work its acid upon his fifty year old esophagus and sent darts of pain

shooting from behind his breastbone. Thomas leaned forward and coughed.

The sun was moving too swiftly, it had already reached the flower garden beside the patio. The reflection of pure light on the border of color there seemed as if it had been created by an artist's unseen brush only moments before. The rawness of birth. It made Thomas blink. He looked away and wished he'd brought his sunglasses from the house.

"I'm going to turn the *thing* on soon, Thomas! It's going to hit ninety by noon!" called Treva in a high, sing-song voice. It was Monday. Monday was shopping day for Treva and her good pal Catherine. Thomas cleared his throat and frowned. The sun had placed a strip of lighter gray on the concrete between him and the flowers, it began to inch towards his feet. Thomas shoved his chair farther into the shade of the house. He stared at the ground and concentrated on nothing. *Sometimes things seemed less complicated if you didn't think at all. Sometimes people think too much, Thomas thought, sometimes that was a problem in itself.*

"Turn it to eighty, then. Let it kick on at eighty," Thomas finally replied after a short while. He went inside after Treva closed the windows and turned on their twelve year old air-conditioner, an air conditioner that he'd put off replacing for too long. Thomas let the screen door slam shut behind him.

"Bob used to work in electronics." Treva was saying. "He told me a good air-conditioner should last twenty years, but I wonder if it will make it another year." She placed a fruit salad in front of him and stepped out onto the patio. It had a fringe of parsley around the edges and a gooey cherry on top. Thomas pushed it around on his plate and watched Treva until she'd disappeared to the shed out back. He hurried down the hall and turned the thermostat off, the compressor rattled to a stop outside.

"Bob who?" Thomas called out breathlessly when Treva had settled down in front of the strip of garden that was now covered in sunlight.

"Yeah, you know. Bob Martin from next door. His wife works at the bank? He used to work with air conditioners."

"Oh. Right. Well, I thought it would make it another summer too, even though it sounds rough. You can never tell about those damn things."

Treva said nothing. She knelt, leaning forward on the

concrete, her hands busy with the patch of garden. Thomas picked at his fruit salad and watched the loose flesh on her upper arms ripple softly while she worked.

"Everyone thinks your pushing it after twelve years!" he yelled out to her. "Everyone thinks that," he commented. *God, what I wouldn't give for just five years ago. Everything seemed so predictable then. Predictable can be good. Give me predictable anyday.*

"Yeah, well, don't talk to anyone until we talk to Bob first. Okay?" She churned at the soft ground relentlessly, her shiny trowel glancing in and out of the sunlight. Several twine-bound rose bushes were piled into the wheelbarrow beside her, their thorny branches grasping helplessly for freedom. "Oh, and I'm going with Catherine this afternoon. It's Monday, our *uptown* day. I'll be back to start dinner before you even leave work."

"You, wait on a new air conditioner?" Thomas laughed, his mouth full. It sounded like a cough. Treva ignored him.

Suddenly nauseous, Thomas spit out the mouthful of pineapple he'd been chewing on for the last several minutes. He pushed away his fruit salad, took another sip of coffee and readdressed Treva's back.

"Why don't you leave the zinnias? Roses are hard to care for. Expensive upkeep too," Thomas called out. He began to rewrap the salad in plastic to save for later then dumped it into the garbage disposal instead, plastic and all.

"I'm weeding *and* putting in the roses. The roses will last, they are classics. Don't worry about them, okay? Catherine *loves* them, has them planted all over the place. Says they aren't such a hassle. And you know how big *her* place is. Besides, I like the color. Don't you?"

Thomas didn't answer. He pretended not to hear as he ran the water into the sink, marveling silently over how easily the plastic had slipped through the porcelain. He thought of how his brother Pete used to like to garden. Petey could grow anything: roses, corn, tomatoes. They'd taken him crates of seeds over the years, he and Treva, driving over the backboard roads to Pete's little house with supplies for yet another of his brother's *drought periods*. Soap, milk, flour, cereal. Thomas had packed what he considered all of the basics. Treva would throw in some Danish and an expensive box of

chocolates. *He's probably starved for a little something nice*, she'd say.

Gardening. He hated it himself, hated getting the dirt under his nails where it stuck like black glue. It took forever to cleanse yourself of garden dirt. *Give me a lawn mower or weed whip just once a week, hell once a month and I'm happy*, thought Thomas. *A little distance between the hand and the soil was always better.*

"I guess I'm going to have to call Pete today. See if he needs anything."

"You think he's empty?" Treva called back loudly.

"Of course. Man's been out of work for seven years now," said Thomas, wishing he'd kept quiet. He wiped his hands on Treva's "just for show" rose patterned dish towel with the lace on the edges.

"What about our plans to go out *together* this weekend?"

"What? We'll see." Thomas squinted out at her. The sun was hitting that straw hat she liked to wear, the one with the silk sunflowers on the brim that left large shadows around the loose skin of her eyes. Thomas didn't like looking at her when she wore that hat. He belched softly and waited for the pressure to subside.

"I'm just talking."

Treva went back to her digging. Thomas shrugged and watched her profile, her slow deliberate movements.

"I've got to get these roses in," she said breathlessly, blinking hard, her lashes striking like miniscule snakes at her cheek bones with the passage of each word. He leaned out the door and tossed the last of his coffee out into the grass. Treva sat back on her heels and looked up at him with her steel grey eyes; she pointed with one soiled glove at her Gucci gardening watch. It was time for him to get ready for work.

Work. Thomas sighed at the thought. He maneuvered *old reliable* into his space within the cavernous parking garage and shut off the engine. The old blue sedan idled on for another moment, not realizing it had been shut off, before it finally died. Thomas thought about how Treva would respond to a suggestion about a new car over dinner this evening. Then he shook his head. *Sometimes things were better left alone, sometimes things were better when he said nothing at all.* Thomas patted the hot fender and entered his building.

Alone, Thomas was blessedly, sinfully, alone in the midst of the morning bustle. It had been only forty-five minutes since he'd last

spoken to Treva, forcing a quick kiss upon her warm, salty mouth as she'd leaned into him out on the front porch then calling out a hurried "good-bye" from over his shoulder. She was already as distant in his mind as the toll booth he always had to drive through on his way to and from work, shoveling in endless amounts of hard cash in exchange for this, for these few hours of being alone.

Thomas thought briefly about working over until seven this evening and began to whistle. He stepped through the glass tunnel that led from the parking garage to the main building that was actually a giant sheet of beige glass and stone that seemed impermeable to anything. A fortress. The air inside was consistently cool, noiselessly so.

Like the past few mornings, Thomas felt the growing heat of the June day still glistening upon his skin, he loosened his tie slightly with a tug of his index finger and smiled at Ingrid. Ingrid was the receptionist who'd been sitting there at her round desk in the heart of this building every day for fifteen years, the shade of red upon her generous lips never varying or fading. *Give me predictable any day*, Thomas hummed in his mind. Ingrid smiled back at him. And like every morning, he jiggled his keys in his pocket and let his feet talk in a whisper as he walked wordlessly past.

In the elevator he began to hum aloud. It was Monday, Monday, Monday. Thomas leaned heavily against the shiny metal sides while he stood with several other passengers within the space that glided effortlessly upward. *Destination heaven?* Thomas grinned when the fifteenth floor rang out and opened before him.

Thomas' own office was dark and cool. He had chosen the colors himself way back when he'd first earned the space. A deep forest green carpet stretched out like a magic rug beneath the modest oak desk and burgundy upholstered chairs; all built to last. His feet moved soundlessly as he laid his briefcase neatly on his desk then moved over to the window. The heavy drapes were also of a dark green that shielded him from the hard light of day. Thomas sighed and placed a tiny crack in the drapes, then removed his jacket which he hung neatly in the tiny closet beside his desk. He thought briefly about the air conditioner crouched in the back of his own home and wondered if Treva had reset it after he'd left. Thomas flipped through his desk calendar and jotted *a.c.* one week from today. That would do it. He would move on *this* without Treva's consent. He chuckled aloud.

Shaking his head, Thomas glanced over the neatly typed itinerary that he'd left on his desk top calendar Friday afternoon. There were an even number of clients to see today. *A good omen. Even numbers were always good. Give me even any day.* The amount of paper work that passed through his hands was also palatable and the phone rang conservatively as the morning melted away. At twelve noon, Thomas sat back in his chair and stretched, feeling the tightness take up a notch in his chest at the thought of lunch.

The phone line lit up. Thomas reached for it quickly, his face darkening. It was only Ingrid.

"It's your brother, Pete, Mr. Johnson," she announced. "He wants to know if you will have lunch with him today."

Thomas felt a light glaze of sweat begin to cover him like the icy sweat from his nightmares. Had *IT* returned to his land of consciousness to torture him with its breath of ice then feed upon his flesh? *No, no, things were better if you didn't think too much. Things were better if you could work them away.*

"No. I have too much to do. Tell him to call the house later."

"Yes, sir."

Ingrid was gone, taking Petey's presence with her. Thomas picked up the rolodex with its bulk of information. He would deal with Petey later, after he'd had a chance to deal with things about that air conditioner.

Don't call now, wait till you talk to him on Sunday, Treva had said. Sometimes she could sound convincing if he let her in, sometimes things *seemed* so convincing that way. *Convincing.* Thomas flipped through the rolodex and a slightly worn page with a business card taped to it caught his attention.

"Rogers Heating and Air," it said in bold red letters. Thomas smiled and pressed the numbers into the phone.

"Rogers Heating and Air," a deep, feminine voice answered.

"Yes, yes, I would like to speak to someone about purchasing a compressor for my air conditioning unit?"

"Certainly. I can help you," the voice answered. "My name is Rachel Forest."

Velvet, her voice was pure velvet. And her thighs would be like ivory pendulums, swinging softly in the night. Thomas' heart began to beat a little harder. Be you my darling, my darkling?

"Yes, Rachel, I'm Thomas. Tom. Tom Johnson. I would like to order a unit that I saw in a catalog. A TX100 Crane. You know the type?"

"I'm with you. We happen to carry that exact machine, I can check available stock for you. What size?"

"Two and a half ton."

"That's a standard size. For home?"

"Yes."

"Well, let's see, yes, yes. Computer says we have two in our warehouse. We can have it ready to install, let's see, by Friday?"

"Friday? That quick?" Thomas glanced at his desk calendar. *Dinner with Catherine* was inked in at seven that Friday evening. "Friday would be perfect. That will be wonderful."

"Okay, Tom," she laughed softly, a deep, throaty laugh. Thomas sucked in his next breath.

"Will that be cash or credit?" she continued.

"You accept Visa?"

"We certainly do."

"Yes, Ma'am," he answered cheerfully while he fumbled in his pocket. "Here we go." He removed his card from his well-worn wallet and recited the numbers slowly to her. There was a short pause while he waited for Rachel and her delicious voice to return to him.

"Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, here."

"Could you read that number once more?"

"Certainly." Thomas recited the numbers carefully, placing the tip of his pencil over each one as he passed over it.

"Mr. Johnson, the transaction has been rejected. Could it be a new account?"

"Rejected? No, it's not new. I mean, the card is new," he stuttered, flashing the smooth unworn surface of the card in the light. "But I have had the account for awhile, I just don't use it."

"Is it a joint account?"

"Yes, but I don't think my wife has used it either. There must be a mistake. Try it again would you?"

There was a silence, then, "I'm sorry, perhaps you would like to try another method?"

Thomas flipped open his wallet and dug out his Mastercard. "Try this, maybe they closed the other since I haven't used it in so

long," he said then recited another long stream of numbers. His throat felt too tight, too hot. He tugged off his tie with one hand.

"Mr. Johnson, I don't know what's going on with these machines," the voice replied, sounding soft and sympathetic. "Perhaps you'd like to try something else, or maybe try again later? We are here till eight."

"That's all right, I better try later," Thomas said lightly, fighting the urge to cough. He hung up the phone then sat staring at the cards on the face of his desk. They lay perfectly shaped twins; side by side, shiny, square, nothing. In his arm he felt the heavy ache return from his long journey with the wagon. Thomas reached for the phone again and punched in the number on the back of the Visa card. A robotic message answered, directing him as to which buttons to press for what information. Thomas followed instructions to the detail. He thought it must be like following the instructions on how to get to hell, then held his lips tightly against a giggle while the recording played out its tuneless message.

Goddamn it all, he thought, unbuttoning his top two shirt buttons. Thomas pulled his shirt-tail free from the back of his pants and shook out his shoulders.

He picked up the Mastercard and dialed its number. He listened closely, following the instructions carefully, ignoring the call-waiting beep on his monitor. *It's probably Pete again, or Treva; wanting something, always something. They would just have to wait. They could all wait. Things might be more clear to me if they would just wait.* When the message played itself out he sat with the phone cemented to his hand until an operator picked up the line.

"Cancel it!" he finally shouted after a short inquiry confirmed what he already knew. He slammed the phone into its cradle and ran his fingers through his damp hair.

Twenty thousand dollars! How could anyone spend Twenty thousand dollars? On what? Gritting his teeth, he cut up the cards into tiny pieces and let them fall like jagged rain onto the quiet green of his carpet. Thomas thought of Treva laughing at lunch with Catherine, the both of them sitting comfortably beneath the shade of her big, empty, sunflower hat. He thought about the air conditioner running and running. *It could run until it burst. Set it at anything she wants. Sometimes things were better left alone, sometimes things didn't drag out so long when they are left alone!* His chest squeezed hard enough to take his breath from him, he stood and staggered to

the window, pulling the drapes wide, acutely aware of the renewed weightiness within his left arm. *Let go of the fucking wagon. Hah!* He leaned his forehead against the glass and closed his eyes. When the pain in his chest eased up, he left the office in a hurry, ignoring Ingrid's stares as he passed by her desk.

"Take a break, Ingrid," he called out to her. "Take a fucking break, for God's sake!"

Out on the street, he waited until the mallet struck again, crushing his chest painfully before he began to run blindly into the sunlight. He ran as fast as he could, heading uphill until he was once again alone in the dark.

Humblebee

Zig
 zagging,
meandering above
beds bright
he goes up
 and
 down,
turns left,
 then right
quite quickly--yet quicker before he slows
spotting a succulent bull's-eyes below,
a giant, gold sun, her arms open wide
calling him with a wink of her soft, black eye
to come enjoy a drink, on her, nectar sweet
a gift for spreading her joy, miles or feet . . .

and next, into hands of those pink and white,
their pastel palms flat to the sun in spite
of the late month and the mercury's height,
open for business--a sugary invite
to stop, to sample, this candied delight

and back up above
blossoming rows
 a spiral,
 a corkscrew--
down
 again
 he
 goes.

Jennifer Rurka



Sunflowers
Holly Leigh Irick

All In a Wave's Work

Foaming and frothing, she's seeping sea slobber, lap
after lap against sand smothered shores, and she blues
up the maps and fills in the edges around continents
swimming through the universe while deep down inside her scat-
ter fish cults and critters, crustaceans, that creep, cuttled and
nautilied, through her tangle of kelp and coralish hair, and the sea
lilies, sea cucumbers, sea bass, saw/swordfish, white mottled whales
spraying and spawning within her salty womb, and all the while up
above her, schizophrenic skies spew torrents of rain,
whipping up westerlies, as she swallows up icebergs that break
in the arctic, drinking up biled rivers, so she endures all
this mayhem as beach breath beats her until she becomes bedlam,
and then come the seasons where, for awhile, she'll be rocking
and wafting grey gulls in her uncapped embrace on her unfurrowed
visage unpocked by the hail, while the earth's land masses barely adrift

On her easy heaving

Breast of green . . .

Donna M. Ferrence

