

CARNIVAL

VOLUME 2



CARNIVAL

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Volume 2

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CONTENT

CONTRIBUTORS	102
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ARTWORK

Blue Door <i>Virginia Conn</i>	34
Holy <i>MissFitPhoto</i>	11
Money Beat <i>Fabio Sassi</i>	80

FICTION

Sunrise Lane <i>Brian Verwiel</i>	35
When Winter Comes <i>Mick Davidson</i>	37
The Swiss Scholar <i>Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli</i>	39
The Messiah of Evergreen Terrace <i>Stephen Silke</i>	49
Roger's Secret Truth <i>John Brantingham</i>	53
There's No Place Like Anywhere but Here <i>Stephen Williams</i>	56
Nativity and Fugue <i>Owen Torres</i>	61

POETRY

Fire and Basketball <i>Steve Klepetar</i>	5
The Coffee Table <i>Thomas R Thomas</i>	6
Six-String Revelations <i>Paul Tayyar</i>	7
Derelict Mumbled Riddle <i>Scott T. Starbuck</i>	8
Girlfriend Poem <i>Zack Nelson Lopiccolo</i>	9
Most Days <i>Jeffrey Graessley</i>	10
The Promise <i>David Caddy</i>	12
At the End of the Journey <i>Paul Tayyar</i>	13
It's beginning to feel a little like the '60s <i>Ray Foreman</i>	14
At 6 Killa's Reading <i>Nicole Taylor</i>	16
On a Day Off <i>John F. Buckley</i>	17
So as not to boil over <i>Arpine Konyalian Grenier</i>	18
The window girl walks <i>Michaelsun Knapp</i>	20
Lou's Liquory <i>Kevin Ridgeway</i>	21
Remembering the Burning of the City of Angels <i>Paul Tayyar</i>	22
The City That Care Forgot <i>Kelley Gillaspy</i>	23
Two Cups of Tea Poured Into the Grass <i>Scott Creley</i>	25
My Mother, Her Mother, and I <i>Suzanne Allen</i>	26
Eat at Sam's <i>Kevin Ridgeway</i>	27
My father's skulls <i>Michaelsun Knapp</i>	28
Fading life <i>K. Andrew Turner</i>	30
When I am afraid of dying <i>Kelley Gillaspy</i>	32
Cold Confetti <i>Scott Creley</i>	72
Not Ripened <i>Alan Passman</i>	73
Let <i>David Caddy</i>	74

POETRY continued

"her name" <i>Thomas R Thomas</i>	75
In Bed <i>Karie McNeley</i>	76
Room 204 <i>Jeffrey Graessley</i>	77
Every time a new bird comes along <i>Jose Arroyo</i>	79
This Abstinence <i>Michael Ashley</i>	81
In Less Than a Minute <i>Andrea Montoya</i>	82
Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary <i>Suzanne Allen</i>	83
My Rooster <i>Cody De Silva</i>	84
Word perfect <i>Lloyd Aquino</i>	85
Gabriel Matsu: <i>A Lady at Her Toilet, 1660</i> <i>Gerald Locklin</i>	86
Just Put It Out Of Your Mind <i>Rich Boucher</i>	87
Fairy Tale <i>John F. Buckley</i>	89
Kissing Leeches <i>Rola Eldanaf</i>	90
I'm No Trophy <i>Nicole M. Street</i>	91
It's Hard Waiting <i>Jeffrey Graessley</i>	93
Sleipnir <i>Agnes Marton</i>	94
My Mother's Curtains <i>Michael Ashley</i>	95
Our Life Is Always Somewhere Between <i>David Caddy</i>	96
Disguise <i>Arpine Konyalian Grenier</i>	97
I Was a Dancer Once <i>Suzanne Allen</i>	98
Naked Rattlesnake <i>Agnes Marton</i>	99
All's Well That Ends <i>Samantha Hawkins</i>	100
Poem Envy <i>Cory De Silva</i>	101
 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	 4

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Fire and Basketball

I live inside cobwebs, a quiet place though strung like nerves.
Our neighbors are rarely home.
Today we wake at the gym watching basketball.
It flies.
Our son, a green-eyed cricket, wears number thirty-four.

It is still so cold. I think it will be cold for a long time.
My ears, if that's what those protrusions from the side of my head (if
that's a head, exactly)
are, my ears soak in pools of quiet.
Winter birds chirp, my son hits a jump shot.
"He's a scoring machine!" someone yells.
"A cricket," says my wife, "like his my sister, his aunt."

Tell me before the sun goes down
have we invented fire yet ?
Sun shines through bare trees.
My son shines.
That's it exactly! My ears lie quietly in cob
webs, waiting to shine cold in the sun.
We have invented fire.
Come into the gym and be warm.

— *Steve Klepetar*

The Coffee Table

Dad had a coffee table
made from a butchers block
that Uncle Ronnie gave him.

It sat in the back for years
until Dad stained it dark and,
put 12 coats of Varathane on it.

He turned four stubby legs
out of 4x4s on the lathe
to make it sturdy.

If one were inclined one could
dance in their socks on it
when the Rolling Stones were playing,
pretending to be Mick Jagger.

— *Thomas R Thomas*

Six-String Revelations

The more I play my guitar
The more I realize that when graffiti artists in Britain started painting the slogan
“Clapton is God”
On the walls of Tube Stations and dive-bar bathrooms and private schools
Whose cathedral towers were as tall as American redwoods
They weren’t crazy at all
But absolutely dead fucking right
I’ve been playing this instrument for ten years
And I’m not bad
I can play all of the standard chords and a few of the difficult jazz-inflected ones
I have a better than average sense of rhythm and once in a while I’ll even write a song
That I wouldn’t be embarrassed to sing to a girl that I like
But when I go on YouTube late at nights after I’m done playing
And finished writing poems for the day
And watch live concert footage of Eric Clapton from the 60s
Or Carlos Santana from the 70s
Or Eddie Van Halen from the 80s
Or Tom Morello from the 90s
Or Jack White from the 00s
I sit there slack-jawed totally in awe of what I’m seeing
As men perform the kind of miracles of transubstantiation that only Christ
Or John the Baptist
Or maybe Harry Houdini in his prime
Could ever understand

— *Paul Tayyar*

Derelict Mumbled Riddle

Now the queen told her henchmen
"You've got to let that rocker drown."
but word arrived on a stolen boat
drifting through the clouds.

I met the octopus in the Seattle Aquarium
and he told me what to say.
He said, "The queen is a blasted furnace
rusting beneath the wharf."

Nice tits though, but
I tore up her phone number
since love, and not sex,
is what I wanted.

My guitar can love me
if she can't.

– *Scott T. Starbuck*

Girlfriend Poem

She told me not
to write about her.

She didn't read
the bylaws of dating

a writer. When she reads
this tell her it isn't

about her, but another
girl I dated during

college, or high school
that would be better

than bees buzzing
in swarm formation to kill

a bear. This will work.
Or so I hope. If not just

throw the bee hive into
the room with her

when she is reading, as a distraction
from learning the true identity

of the women in this poem,
who is damn sexy by the way.

— *Zack Nelson Lopiccolo*

Most Days

Down at the dive
I take my fill of Belgian finery,
flirt with the cow
sitting next to me.
Piss away the day
in front of the porcelain
god.

while I wait for my muse to talk,

Later driving through the park side
watching the women walk their kids
and masters playing Frisbee with their mutts.
I get this message from a broad
that wants my cock.

while I wait for my muse to talk

I hiccup to my car,
from her door,
stumbling against the beer
floating in my system,
jam the key into the ignition,
and pull out,
headed to no particular destination.

while I wait for my muse to talk

— *Jeffrey Graessley*



— MissFitPhoto

The Promise

Here where dovetailed decoration has yet
to supersede necessity I ply and ditch,
scratch my itch to make anew, re-align,
follow clouds, contours, our loose
tenure on shifting margins, shoots.

Bound by the smoke of the pit, this day
hides deep within its scale, longing, unseen
views, clearings, pith and peat, more clearly
the stable space of leaves, the purity
of branch, this path, this persistence

with words falling from its mouth
the cuckoo's softly blown speech,
fear and ease of pleasures unknown
the rose and fruit of the prayer bowl
the moon lit wood that moves.

Animals push against the sky, doted,
devoured in light darkness, this place
chipped and shorn, shaking the kingdom
around its head and ears in the meet
and divide of a once sweet promise.

— *David Caddy*

At the End of the Journey

In those hours you saw Pharaohs in the water.
You were ruined by waters, you said.
You were ruined and resurrected by waters, you swore,
And there in the last days of a spring that would never come again,
Nothing was born,
Nothing was named,
We swam and the tides swam with us,
We dreamed and the moon veiled its face so the stars could not see her cry,
We touched the garments that had been left to dry upon the clotheslines of the trees
And they all flew away.

In those hours you read the letter that your father had written to you,
He told you about where he had been and you knew he was never coming back,
He would remain as he had for so long been,
A ghost in a labyrinth hidden beneath a range of mountains
We would not live to track —

We have lived among people who believed in the prayer,
We have lived among people who believed in the season,
We have lived among people who believed in the song and yet I have known nothing
But the language of swords,
And rising out of every well has been the flag of a country I no longer recognize,
A country for whom I will no longer fight,
A country that is like the mirage in the desert that one sees after many days in the sun,
A shimmering Ronin who does not know that his lord is already dead.

— *Paul Tayyar*

it's beginning to feel a little like the '60s

I read and watch the news
on the net about the kids
occupying wall street
and it makes my heart and head
feel like I felt in the sixties
during the civil rights movement
and the Vietnam war.

those kids and grown ups in
Liberty Park and places like that
all over the country are connecting
again to loosen
the strangle hold on the nation
by the wealthy minute percent.

they won't dry my tears, not yet,
they'll never dry,
but maybe, with their loudness
the people can feel a little respect
for the pain that's choking those
who lost so much in the Clinton
Bush decades.

people know there's nothing
they can do individually,
but if they yell loud enough at
the same time,
the crooks, and they are crooks
wearing suits and ties,
might get scared and loosen up
and throw the peasants a
hunk of cheese.
especially if they paint another
war on the blackboard
and need dummies to dance in it.

the scene from the movie,
that's the message,
"I'm mad as hell and I'm not
going to take it anymore."

coming down to that would be
the best thing that ever happened
to the nation even if it's only words.

the roads today aren't leading
to the promised land of jobs,
health, and shelter security.
that's what people need and
that may not be in the future scenario.
maybe the nation has to fall apart first for
a meaningful change to wash the
lopsided control of the nation clean.
I won't speculate at this time.
I'm afraid to.

I look back at history,
pain comes first for a few.
today many won't believe it will
happen to them because today,
it's happening only to a few.
but the dam isn't holding in some places
for some people.
every time it springs a leak,
more will drown.

are the 60s coming back?
there never was a time
when people connected as
they did then.
did it do any good?
the Vietnam War continued
for ten years until, whomever,
decided it cost too much
and there was nothing to gain.

the people in all the Liberty Parks
in the nation have accomplished
one important thing,
a beautiful happening.

— *Ray Foreman*

At 6 Killa's Reading

To my right sit several guys.
One carries an acoustic
guitar as an appendage.
His broad shoulders
lean forward or back
elbow to fist to square chin.
His feet on floor
tap to the beat.
Then he grabs the mouth of
his Corona.
Warren yells of, to guys
like him in
baggy slouched jeans.
He wears fashionable jeans,
blue and faded white-washed . . .
From sliding into bases?
A white man's sport?
He recites his long work, and these are
favorite to some here.
He recites *Half a World Away*
A Letter to Chris (Columbus) and
Welcome to Black Mesa
An older white man
beats his 3 long bongo drums
and blows into his didjeridu.
Warren, 6Killa yells
last week I struggled
for laundry money,
so do I sometimes.

— Nicole Taylor

On a Day Off

I like eating lunch over the sink, over the side
with the garbage disposal. About ten feet past
the kitchen window is a thick green leafy curtain
thoroughly screening me from seeing or being seen
by the many vehicles rushing down the freeway
that runs just above and beyond the beige carport,
under a drizzling off-white Orange County sky.

Amidst a life of intricately-woven marriage and
sleek domesticity sit pockets of beloved disorder:
overstuffed sandwiches dripping into the drain,
a dining-room table covered with loose papers
and cases of provisions from Costco, and a dark
puzzling stain on the carpet from unknown causes,
but surely not from the cat or my muddy shoes.

If the family in the apartment downstairs slam
the front door and drive off in their car, I can lean
forward to stare down at their cluttered back patio,
at the trunks of the evergreens before me. I'll splash
a little water around the sink to clean it, grab my keys,
and then take off in my birdshitty green Civic to run
errands keeping our own lives moving smoothly.

— *John F. Buckley*

So as not to boil over

The frontals of a virus wheel me in
like a pair of hue enabled jaws
this town is fractured witless
thinking *feel the proc*
joints asinine

so as to there

never lesser under the covers

differentiating

traces of a night I wore green
manicured toes

so I hit hit a wooded machine
hit close the chance for heart
till by chance I turn fabric
my mouth frantic pink

columns bowing

as I did not need the machine
patterned after the electric
did not have to hit hit so
joints discounted
pumping

dumping columns and rows on fours
bowing to the plate passing by
green over murky yellow
scratched corners up
juttetd

this is how the green of the town sets

a first grader gives me her lunch pail in which her mother has so carefully prepared a sandwich with the bread crust removed so it feels soft and pure like a piece of love I take to the classroom and swallow while the children are still playing in the yard well yeah this is a first grader's lunch but it is after lunch now so a left-over and I do eat

left-overs I also eat what I find like what I found the other day by the door of the sixth grade classroom at another school I subbed at sure it was on the ground but wrapped therefore was mostly okay okay I grabbed it after looking both ways down and up the hallway so no one would see me then inside the classroom I swiftly lapped it all up (another time I ate something like ten pieces of candy from a huge bag of candies this one teacher had in his classroom now that was not left-over it was for the kids surely but the bag so full no one would notice I thought) I have been invisible that way many times sometimes after the fact.

— *Arpine Konyalian Grenier*

The window girl walks

She's walking, the window girl, and looking for places
to stay. The frame of a door
that would wrap it's arms around her, an underpass
she could curl up against. The house boy

isn't in the house
and can't make her feel
at home.

So in the morning, her morning, when the moon peaks
over the high rises of Long Beach and glows
like an old foggy headlight, she walks and looks
for an alley that won't hit her too hard.

— *Michaelsun Knapp*

Lou's Liquory

Well into his eighties
his chrome dome
shining in the morning sun,
Lou sweeps the butts and the bodily fluids
from his store front
producing a sack of seeds
that he scatters in vast seas
across the parking lot for the pigeons
and perhaps some of the people

His customers buy scratch-offs
and smoke and sneak
off to their rusted vehicular houses
to cadge mouth wash
returning with seeds stuck to their shoes
and the cigarettes they dropped,
ready to lose again

His shop, a wooden barn brimming
with dusty spirit bottles in shelf mazes —
as a child I used to hide within
their deepest sanctuaries from my handlers
staring through the browned gallons of Canadian amber
viewing molecules that have restored and destroyed
for centuries before being pulled kicking and screaming
out of the shop by mother's paper hand, lottery tickets
and Marlboro Reds in her other

Lou hasn't aged in many years
while his customers drop like flies

— more feed for the pigeons

— *Kevin Ridgeway*

Remembering the Burning of the City of Angels

There was the witch who fled across the rooftops of Los Angeles
On the first night of the riots,
Blessing the frightened children with half-sung litanies that floated like clouds
Which could not be pierced by the gunfire,
Her sister riding a looted flying sofa into the tear gas that she had mistaken for fog,
Her mother fingering a rosary whose beads had been crushed by the boots
Of policemen —

Where are their tombs?
Where are the masses dedicated to their holy memories?

In the windows of the rebuilt 7/11 stores I see their reflections,
In between the pages of books in Echo Park Learning Centers their spirits
Have been pressed into the silhouette of a peace sign,
In the refilled reservoirs they stand sentinel like urban Ladies of the Lake,
Handing out poems and food stamps to the sons of dead fathers.

And yet why do we not kneel five times a day in the direction of the place
Where the house once stood?
Why do we not hear their prayers in the voice of the woman singing a hymn
In the middle of Pershing Square?

You say that we live in a City Without Hope but I disagree,
See how even the ghosts we ignore refuse to turn their backs on us,
See how even those that have died always find ways to return.

— *Paul Tayyar*

The City That Care Forgot

Spanish moss hung from the trees like power lines,
static-voodoo whispers on the bayou-

Marie Laveau's bones
were ground to dust
for gris-gris stapled
to priestesses hips.

Visitors leave three Xs on her pearly
white tomb, as if it is the gates of heaven,
and these marks are their last prayers

before the night
the axe murderer
will rise again
within the depths
of the Garden District.

The devil himself cries
when he hears the heart of jazz
pumping
the dirge of a million lives

and promises no deaths
tonight. The street car

rattling
dream a dream of me
down the old St. Charles,

down to the last real voodoo shop in town.

The one that sells
the blood of a black cat,
candles made of tar,
and some ancient priest's
finger bones.

Next door,
in Lafitte's bar

the ghost of the blacksmith's
hammer beats
Satchmo's Lullaby

like the sound of hoodoo-rain
in the last standing cemetery.

— *Kelley Gillaspy*

Two Cups of Tea Poured Into the Grass

Out in the garage,
under a dirty light bulb,
I read that the part of the brain
which holds the capacity for faith
is the volume of a popcorn kernel.
This seed lights up for meditation,
for sweaty prayer or the low uneven gurgle
of a woman who speaks in tongues and retains
nothing of her ecstatic prayer.
This idea makes sense to me
because yesterday my father, an undertaker,
called and told me how
he guided two little girls to their parents' grave
where they laid out a blanket
and four cups of tea -
two of which they eventually poured
across the dead grass
just below the headstone.

With my eyes closed,
the phone humming against the side of my face,
I think that I feel that knot of cells
flaring to life in the salty nebula of my grey matter,
like a search light piercing the water,
to find a destroyed car with two parents,
but no little girls.
Maybe this clump of cells is like a signal flare
clawing at the sky in bursts of yellow and red
before falling back to earth and hissing out.
But possibly this knot is nothing
more than an exposed light bulb hanging in a garage
collecting dirt and the cooked skeletons of moths
until the filament inside snaps
under the strain of constant illumination.

— *Scott Creley*

My Mother, Her Mother, and I

We sit in front of a fountain in
New Orleans. I don't know where,
exactly. I am seven and my mother

sits like a boy, hands clasped
between her legs, unsmiling.
Shortest to tallest, my grandmother

is between us — petite and large —
softening the mother-daughter gap.
They are both gone now. The rest

of the roll of film — one ten,
twenty-three exposures —
are frames of the city: The river

well below its banks,
Pirate Alley filled with people
and colorful vendors' umbrellas,

the shifting view from the airplane
window as we left. But one
of the negatives shows a missing

picture — the three of us at a table.
Strangely, I never forgot this meal.
They drank Bloody Marys

and we watched a small black boy
tap dancing in the street.
Best fried shrimp I ever had.

— *Suzanne Allen*

Eat at Sam's

Neon lights embrace us as we pass through the glass portal
into the world of flaming grills and bosomy waitresses
order slips waving underneath the fans caked in grease
and sweat from the brows of short order cooks melting
inside their toasted paper hats

Burgers are a primary specialty, but an abundance of
hard to pronounce Mexican meat platters are universally met
with glee by saucer eyes that water from steam permeating
the open kitchen and the entire dining hall, pyres of
feasts glowing in foil fortresses on table tops lining nearly every
weathered duct tape foam booth housing families gathered around
octogenarian saints

We are not adventurous; we order hamburgers and fries in
oily white bags that drip from the wattage of Sam's in the
night all the way to our doorstep and to our own table, our
saints long dead and our bodies feverish from that dive diner's
hothouse of manic personalities and simmering splendors

— *Kevin Ridgeway*

My father's skulls

Sitting on my father's skulls
His father's skulls
He drags them behind him
White teeth rubbed flat
Scoring into the red earth
Danced hard by calloused feet
A tear leaps from a face
As though from a tower

into the once brown dirt
it isn't mine anymore
Ropes wrapped around horns
and bones ground down to a whisper's thickness
tied into knots and attached to buffalo ribs
whittled to pegs and driven through
the muscle of his back, behind
his heart, next to his spine

whose vertebrae fused years ago in a crash where
his car flipped end over end
four times
crushing the steering wheel into an oval
and breaking more bones than years he had to spend
and had to relearn how to speak from
my mother
who would name me Michael
but wouldn't add the "Sun" until my father called her
from the road on his way to get
more scars.
and more years later I would travel
with him to get my own. To earn my place, letting blood
drip down my burned stomach and chest
becoming my father

and when he goes four times
around a circle like a wheel
the weight isn't enough
to break the ropes or the bones
or the flesh, or the synapses
he calls for more weight
more of his skulls, his father's

skulls tied to already bleeding ropes

four more times is not enough
wheels looking like ovals
crushed between hands like necks
and again more weight more weight
so sons are brought out his sons
his father's sons and I sit
on my father's skulls knowing I'll drag them
with tears like men falling from burning towers

— *Michaelsun Knapp*

fading life

what does it take to live?
a will, a friend, a lover
or more?

a crying cat, mewling for attention,
jangling my thoughts about
firemen lifting my grandfather
up and taking him out the oak door
to brick buildings where new life comes
and old life goes.

I've wondered in the seeming days
what I would do. I dream
sunlight and burly men lift
my aged, frail body
and I say to them, "my, what strong arms
you have." and they pass
off the words as old-man talk.

perhaps they speak of us
at their house on the hill, or their
house downtown, washing their engine,
gleaming
the digits bright.

one lingered after the event
telling us of the time
he saved our house
from the inferno of a dying RV.
he looks through pictures hanging
on wallpaper and saying to me
"I like looking at old pictures."
I like looking at him.

though during the rescue
I could only see one man's
behind tempting my thoughts
away from the weak old man.

leaning on bathroom doorway looking in
a stranger,

distanced from feeling and emotion.
already given up on helping.

emotion had bubbled from somewhere
and I fought back liquid.
sad wasn't it. there are
no words for the welling,
the feeling busting forth
through my façade.

cat cries for food/petting/water/out
seven-toed screams for love
and I put down this pen.
tomorrow, maybe,
will make sense.

— *K. Andrew Turner*

When I am afraid of dying

I

The sound on the tv
won't work, but my mother is absorbed
by the silence it produces.

I listen to the nurses
in the hall whispering about me –
ovarian cysts, vasovagal syncope,
kidney stones, abscesses.
When they come for more blood
I turn my head away
wondering if they are laughing
at the decrepit twenty year old woman.

Next time, I'll ask for a working tv.

II

At another funeral I meet a second cousin
with scars lined across her neck like a chess board.
Her mother asks how many surgeries she's had,
losing count herself.

Twenty, she whispers through the vines
of removed cancer. I ask how old she is.

Thirty.

III

During my mother's third
catheter ablation
I read *Moby Dick*
in the waiting room.

At home she told me
about waking up on the surgery table,
the doctors peering at her body
as if it was a puzzle
they weren't sure how to fix.

IV

The last time I saw my grandfather
everything was white –
walls, sheets, even his hands.
Only the tunnels of veins
running beneath his flesh were blue,
Monday blue and it reminded me of spring.
I didn't tell my mother
who was still mourning the first rainfall of winter.

V

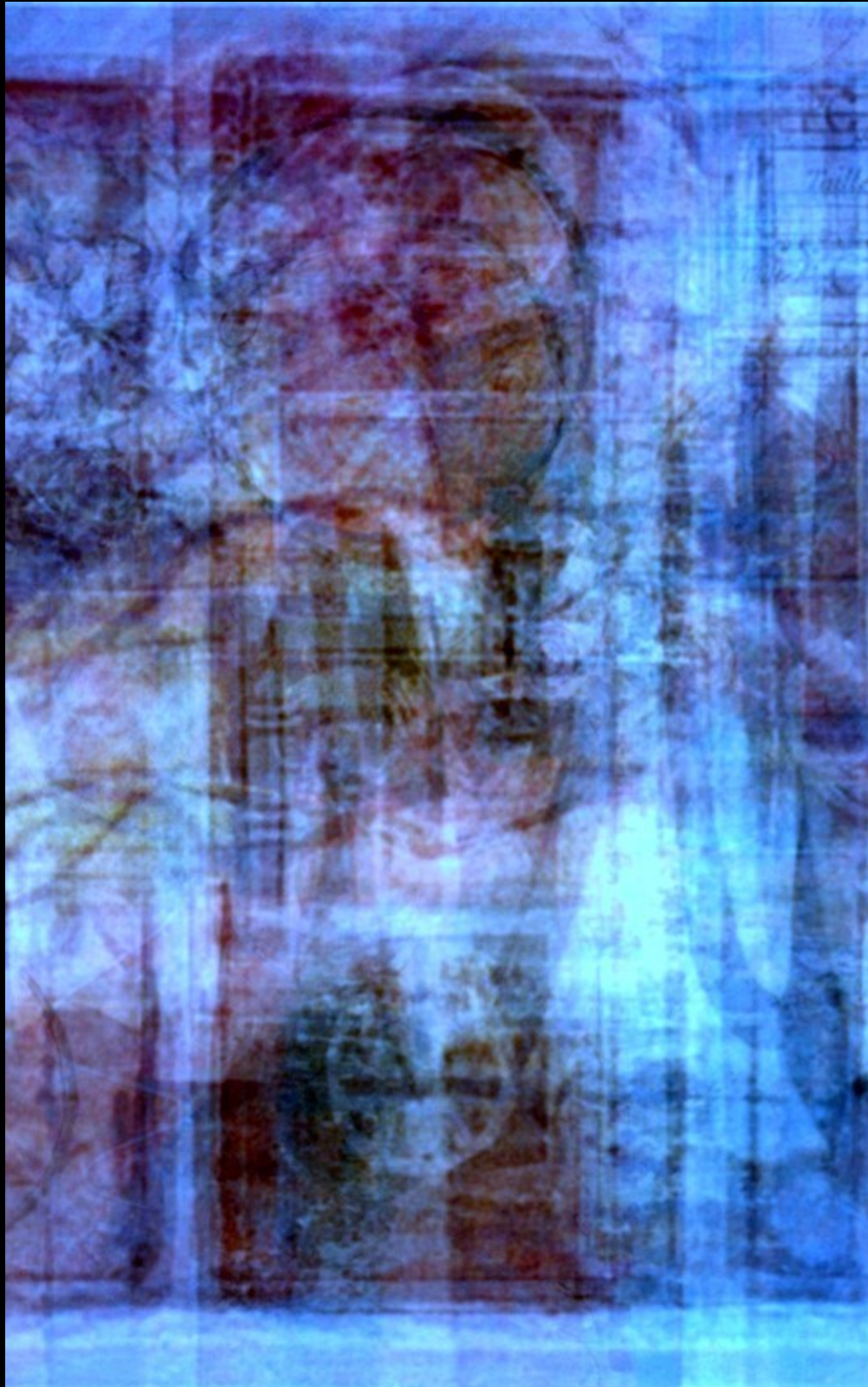
The ambulance hits every pothole
as the EMT tries to fit an eighteen needle
into my vein. I tell him he'll need a twenty.

I can't remember passing out,
except I dreamed about LA traffic
on a congested Tuesday in March.

As he tapes the needle to my skin,
checks my heart rate,
he admits to being worried
when they first arrived on scene
and I didn't answer his questions right away.

I admit to him in a bare whisper
that for a few seconds
I couldn't remember my name.

— *Kelley Gillaspy*



— Virginia Conn

Sunrise Lane

The first time I saw my father standing at the foot of my bed at 3 in the morning, I was startled. I asked him what he was doing, but he didn't say anything; just stood there, his piercing blue eyes staring vacantly, looking both at and through me. He loomed over me for a few minutes then slowly turned and walked through the wall back towards my parent's bedroom. I tried chalking it up to my overactive imagination, but it was a little too vivid to be anything other than real.

The second time, I reached out and tried to grab his arm, but my hand found nothing but cold air. He didn't even move. By the fourth time, I had convinced myself I was going insane. Either that or I was actually seeing the ghost of my father standing in my bedroom.

The main problem? My dad was still very much alive.

He would never look any different the next morning, but I knew something was up. I heard the way he started snapping at my mom when he thought no one else was listening, saw the little flecks of hatred in his eyes he would fling at my sister from across the dinner table. He was slipping. Maybe it was the stress from work. Maybe it was the affair my mother had years ago finally wearing him down. Maybe it was my near constant suspensions (and inevitably, expulsion) from private school after private school or my sister's multiple pregnancy scares. Whatever the cause, he was deteriorating right in front of us and I was the only one that seemed to notice. Then things got strange.

The fifth time I saw him, he was holding a gun. The way the moonlight glistened off the barrel was hypnotizing. The sixth, he raised his hand and pointed the gun at my forehead. The seventh, he pulled the trigger and whispered "POW." As he disappeared into the wall, the room filled with the very distinct stench of freshly spent gun powder.

For the next few weeks, when I saw him, he would "shoot" me and disappear. Then he stopped shooting. One night, he whispered "*soon*." The next night it was "*third*." Then, on the last night, he stared at me for a few minutes before he cocked his head slightly, like he was listening for something before shouting "TONIGHT! RUN!"

That's when I heard the first muffled gunshot coming from my parent's bedroom. My mother screamed out in pain right before the second shot silenced her. I jumped out of bed and ran for the window just as I heard him kick in the door to my sister's room. Two more shots rang out. I threw open the window as I heard him trying the knob for my locked door. I heard him slamming into it as I jumped down into the bushes be-

low. I heard the frame splinter as I began to sprint across the lawn. I heard him calling my name at the same time the first police car rounded the corner and sped towards us. When I heard his voice, a realization smacked me like a ton of bricks. He was sobbing. I turned and looked up at the window just in time to see him point the handgun at me. I felt the bullet rip through my chest before I heard the deafening crack of the shot. My body flung backward and landed on the dewy grass. I rolled onto my side as the coppery taste of blood began to fill my mouth. I coughed and spat the red liquid in hopes to get the flavor of rusted pennies off my tongue, but that just caused an even greater surge. I began to retch, but that caused pain to tear through me. I looked down at the steaming crimson stain spreading across my shirt and realize this is it. This is my end. I glanced back to the window and saw my harbinger of death standing there, no emotion on his tear stained face. The last thing I saw was my father slowly lift the still smoking gun to his temple and pull the trigger. I saw the blood and brain matter spray from the opposite side of his head, heard the thud as his now lifeless body fell forward through the window and slammed into the very same spot I had landed in only moments before. I felt a frigid hand grab mine, tried to open my eyes to see who it was but couldn't break from the darkness enveloping my mind. I heard a familiar voice repeating my name, sobbing, telling me I would be ok. Felt the cold hand loosen its hold on mine and begin to stroke my hair, much as my father used to do when I was ill. The last thing I heard before slipping into unconsciousness were the screaming sirens. Then I was gone.

I woke from the coma three months later. Everyone told me I was lucky. I know luck had nothing to do with it. They also told me there was no way I could remember anything that happened while I was incapacitated. Bullshit. I may not remember what happened in the hospital, but I remember everything else. For three long months, I was forced to relive the events that transpired both the shooting and the "visits" from my dad leading up to it. Through it all, I realized something: my father had saved me from himself. He may not have realized it, but it's the truth. I don't think he wanted to do it. I guess I will never know for sure. He left no note. There was nothing that let anyone know why he did it.

Sometimes I can still hear him calling my name. Calling my name and sobbing.

— *Brian Verwiel*

When Winter Comes

There were questions, questions without answers. Or rather, questions with answers, but with answers that wouldn't be coming. Though if and when they did come, would they be accepted without question?

We all sat by the radio, the affair had turned the nation's goggle-eyed into impromptu groups who listened together. Groups who crowded around the open windows of cars going nowhere, now. The nation had been stunned, "This couldn't happen here, could it?" The statement turned cartwheels out of people's mouths, transforming itself into a question somewhere around the r and the e of here. "But this is the sort of thing that goes on in some third world country where people confuse emotion and strongly held beliefs for rational argument – isn't it?"

"No, this couldn't happen here, this is clearly – (must be?) an error." Everyone knows that to be true and that is why the radio had magnetised the nation. Everyone knew it was wrong and that is why sales of all manner and types of radio had gone through the roof. Electronics magnates were pleased, but shocked, they couldn't believe it either, but the sales figures didn't lie, the figures answered all the questions anyone cared to ask. Numbers are facts, and facts are answers.

But still no answers came, even though the impromptu groups doubled and trebled in size, even though whole neighbourhoods of previously unknown neighbours spent every spare minute speculating furiously or sat around in meditative silence, the answer never came.

A week came and passed, people's anxiety levels painted their faces red: sales of sun cream went up as the red-faced army collectively mistook this for sunburn. Lotion executives were pleased, the numbers, which are facts, didn't lie. The summer wore on, impromptu groups gave birth to impromptu street parties. The nation rediscovered cake baking with street after street competing to eat themselves into a state of satisfaction which, like the answers that everyone was also ready to consume, never came. Musicians, jugglers and fire-eaters entertained vast swathes of friendly neighbours. Quartets and small orchestras appeared in city centres filling the 57.5 minute break between the hourly news and weather reports: they abandoned Bach mid fugue as furious listeners span the volume dial up, up, up as the first few words seeped out of speakers big and small.

The voice spoke calmly of accidents, calamities and misfortunes suffered by man and machine, most of which, much to the relief of the nation, took place outside the country's borders. At the end, the pancake voice delivered a message specially written by a government spokesperson, beseeching the nation to allow the traffic to flow freely, to end the practise of hanging out of and leaning into cars, cars that were – in more nor-

mal times – stopping at red lights and junctions on a temporary basis only. In the pause that always followed this message blood pressure would rise, breath would be held (sometimes catastrophically), and small children would be silenced with cruel and unusual vigour as the nation tensed itself for the truth, or disappointment. The weather announcement that followed went unheard as the nation slammed its angry and disappointed fist down in the nearest hard, but flexible, surface.

Babies were allowed to wail (though this was largely drowned out by the wailing of adults), and small dogs found that they were no longer cute and cuddly, and more just a bloody good target for a swift and frustrated boot. Small dog sales declined but the RSPCA employed more vets and dog wardens; and Battersea Dogs Home started building mezzanine floors. And still no answers came, not to impromptu groups, or the increasingly rare solo listener, not even to the nation.

Some began to wonder what the fuss was about - some had even forgotten the question! The autumn came and the crowds began to dwindle, disappearing along with the leaves, street parties shrank back into the houses, whole neighbourhoods were populated by nodding acquaintances only: the rain-washed away the bonhomie, the musicians, the jugglers and the fire eaters. The orchestras and quartets packed their delicate and expensive instruments away into the darkness of sturdy dimpled aluminium cases, abandoning Bach and the people once again.

And still no answers came: radio sales began to fall, their stock prices shortening with the days.

Then winter came stamping its icy feet and emptying the streets before 1900 hours. All was quiet, inside only the fires crackled and the central heating creaked and clanked. TV sales were up, curtains were drawn and people forgot what the fuss had been all about.

The question stopped being asked and the nation's blood pressure returned to more normal levels. No one was surprised that sun cream sales were down, it was winter after all.

— *Mick Davidson*

THE SWISS SCHOLAR

I have been for many years a teacher of languages.
It is an occupation which at length becomes fatal to
whatever share of imagination, observation and insight an
ordinary person may be heir to. To a teacher of languages
there comes a time when the world is but a place of many
words and man appears a mere talking animal not much
more wonderful than a parrot.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *Under Western Eyes*

No one would survive socially if she or he went around
assuming or saying that he or she had to be misinterpreted,
by everyone whosoever [...].

HAROLD BLOOM, *Kabbalah and Criticism*

I beg your leave to call our man Maska.

Mr. Maska was an altogether attractive middle-aged professor of American literature at one of those uppish universities overlooking Geneva Lake. I use the adjective “uppish” mischievously on purpose, for I know he would be much disappointed by my defining him through a British adjective; were he here, he would surely rebuke me and suggest my using “high-hat” instead. I know it’s unfair of me to make fun – though gently, to tell the truth – of such a distinguished and esteemed scholar who has devoted his whole life to increase the knowledge of his fellow human beings, those “hoi polloi” he peculiarly pitied and scorned at once. But, unfortunately, I can’t help it: I am an unreliable narrator, far from being either omniscient or unbiased.

But let’s go back to our man. As I was saying, Prof. Maska – though already in his fifties – was an attractive man. Despite his Slavonic-sounding name (Russian? Polish? Serbian? who knows...) his aspect was decidedly British, as he was a slender, flaxen, lightly-freckled man of a remarkable smartness. Yet, his Briton-like elegance clashed with his unmistakable American accent. Although everybody could immediately recognize the Americanness of his inflection, nobody during his years spent teaching in Switzerland was ever able to localize it geographically, and rumors spread among both students and professors. Some claimed his accent to have been influenced by some alleged musical career in Broadway, and someone even maintained that it had been a former Californian lover of his (an actress, presumably) to transmute his daily speech into a ceaseless performance of Yankeeanness. Had they known the truth, what a great surprise it would have been to them to discover what I know! Although I can’t tell you where he came from exactly – but, I assure you, this omission is not meant to be an ill turn; it’s just that I ignore it myself –, I know for sure that he really had Slavonic origins, and that he viewed this innocuous happenstance as the most obnoxious, virulent and pernicious fault of his own life and self.

Nothing was known about Prof. Maska’s childhood and adolescence. In his

resume he seemed to have been born the day he graduated from some prestigious (though, alas, little-known) university, but I guess this was rather what he wanted people to think. Still, I do believe you may infer something about his past from a few of his behavioral idiosyncrasies. First and foremost, he was a compulsive talker: once he had started prattling of Dickinson or Whitman, it was impossible to stop him. Sometimes not even the desertion of the whole audience could restrain the precious nuggets of knowledge to gush forth – still melted in a raw liquid state much akin to dribble – from his lips. Also, his velvety speech was sometimes coarsened by a sudden raucity, thus betraying the insidious ghost of an enemy which had been defeated long before. Prof. Maska was secretly frightened by the eerie remnants of that long dead foe; yet, there was another “enemy within” which he regarded as even more perilous.

I can’t tell exactly what it was, for he never revealed his fear to anybody; however, his beautifully phlegmatic features suddenly metamorphosed into an aghast grimace whenever it came to uttering such Greek words as *xenophobia*, *aletheia*, *anaemia*, or *eulogia*. It may be that he was not conversant enough in that language, or else that he was not familiar with the concepts themselves; anyway – whatever the reason for his tremendous and overwhelming fear – he unfailingly ended up modulating his voice (imperceptibly, I assure you; for nobody but he could ever hear this modulation) through a very slight as well as involuntary decrease in pitch the very instant he would speak the final diphthong *-ia*. There seemed to be something about that sound that terrified him by betraying a secret he deeply wished to keep hidden from anyone. Was it the memory of a misdeed? Or was it some kind of congenital fault? Although ten years have elapsed since the facts I am relating happened, I can’t still tell – and, I suspect, I never will.

One of the crucial moments of his life and career – which, in his mind, were not as clearly separated as they are on this page by the physical presence of the conjunction *and* – was the national conference of literature that used to be held in Zurich every year. He loved participating in this annual meeting, for it was on this occasion that he could challenge his colleagues in learning and – still more thrilling – parade his American accent, display his British manners, show off his German detachment, as well as exhibit his unique (or so he thought it to be) mixture of French courtesy and Italian joviality.

“This year I will teach them a lesson they will never ever forget,” he told his assistant, M.lle Fausse.

Although stealing the limelight from so illustrious a character might seem blasphemous to some readers, I feel bound to tell you a couple of things about this charming creature before going on with our story. M.lle Fausse was a stout Swiss woman of twenty-nine, who in spite of her bulkiness – used to define herself as “a ledi-laik, well-mannèrd researcher.” So graceful was she as to have earned the

sobriquet of Stavrogina¹, as Prof. Maska – to the contentment of her ingenuously cocky heart – used to call her. Ingenuous she was indeed, and to such extent that malevolent tongues sometimes dared call her lovely artlessness “gullibility.” Yet, I invite you not to give credence to the insinuations of these green-eyed people, for – far from being gullible – M.lle Fausse was a rare mixture of cleverness, innocence and heroism. Heroism especially, as this naive creature had committed herself to a life of self-sacrifice for the welfare of the humankind. Holding the strong belief that – since she was a woman, had read a couple of books (one, if we malignantly leave out the phone book she had looked up on that very same morning) and was younger than sixty – she had the duty to play the role of inspiring muse of her ripe professor, she was determined to help him engendering those works of genius he said were destined to enlighten the “accursed groveling vulgus.”² So, it was with the zeal and self-neglect of a martyr that she used to carry her heavy burden daily – for the most part, to the unhallowed shrine of the broom closet where Prof. Maska liked to await the miracle of inspiration with her.

It was precisely after one such literary rituals that he got the idea for the talk to give in the following national conference.

– “What will the sujet of your talk bee?” – she asked him, looking forward to participating in the harvest of whatever seed (wild oats, probably) she herself had contributed to sow.

– “Ah, *ma chérie*³, its title will be “The deepness of shallowness; or, the misinterpretation of meaning.” Doesn’t it sound so good?”

– “Of course it does. Everyfing you doo is SO good” – she replied, blushing while leering at him, her eyes glowing with lust (for knowledge, of course).

The understated response to this likewise understated praise was an insouciant smile Prof. Maska debonairly cast her before asking bumptiously:

– “Can you see what this title mean?”

– “Mmh...to tell the truf, well, I see no meenin’ in it” – was the muse’s slightly embarrassed answer.

– “Oh, gosh! You are so brilliant, darling...It’s only you that might possibly have grasped the point immediately” – was the luminary’s enthusiast reaction.

– “*Bien sûr, c’est naturel*⁴...” – this unexpected compliment confused and flattered M.lle Fausse to such extent that she immediately lost any linguistic and logic command of her speech. So, she just sat back and stared admiringly at her preaching Pygmalion while he was overheatedly elucidating his dodgy theory.

– “As you probably know, honey, linguists and semioticians have always ar-

¹ Varvara Stavrogina is a character in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Devils* (1872). She is the mother of the protagonist, Nicolai Stavrogin, and from the beginning of the novel she is described as a middle-aged unattractive woman in love with the pseudo-progressist Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky.

² See Ezra Pound to Harriet Monroe in a letter dated 30 March 1913.

³ French: “My darling.”

⁴ French: “Of course, it’s natural...”

gued that signs are meant to convey some kind of meaning. Some – such as de Saussure – have even gone so far as to maintain that a sign and its meaning are as inseparable as the recto and the verso of the same sheet of paper. Well, for the benefit of the whole humankind I will finally eradicate this weed from any book of linguistics or semiotics! How can it possibly be that people have swallowed so absurd an idea for such a long time? Of course it's a whopper, and the worst that has ever been told in the whole history of humanity! See, darling, my contention is that it's completely the other way around, as communication is based precisely on *misinterpretation*. Words, signs and symbols lack any necessary or conventional meaning whatsoever, and are only meant to deceive the interpreter: this is the only possible truth we can aspire to. Think about this, sugar: we are ourselves signs meant for deception and contrived for misinterpretation, aren't we?"

M.lle Fausse – who had lost the thread at the mysterious word "semioticians" – found no other way of concealing her misunderstanding from Prof. Maska but through nodding smilingly, in a heroic effort of seeming much persuaded by his brilliant speculations. Prof. Maska saw it as an invitation to continue his impromptu lecture, and enthusiastically went on:

– "Well, then. Signs have no precise meaning; as a consequence, they are shallow forms devoid of contents. It is up to the interpreter to attach some kind of meaning to them, but this meaning is fated to be completely arbitrary and subjective. This is the deepness of shallowness, this is the power of misinterpretation, which is the very bedrock of knowledge and self-awareness as well!" – Prof. Maska uttered these words in a weird, overexcited tone; his eyes were gleaming and his chin trembling from wild inspiration. M.lle Fausse smiled. She was satisfied with the hatching of so brilliant a theory, and delighted in fooling herself with the idea that her stimulating power over that man's mind was greater than Zeus's headache when he gave birth to Athena (for the sake of accuracy: the other book she had read was an illustrated handbook of mythology). So, she slunk away from the room in silence, leaving Prof. Maska's genius to burn in meditative solitude.

* * *

His meditative solitude lasted three weeks, during which he rarely got out of his office. At the end of this time, he finally peeped out of his door with a radiant expression, and told M.lle Fausse:

– "*Ma petite Stavri*⁵, I've got it! That's the best thing I have ever written in the whole of my life...I will strike them all dumb, darling!"

M.lle Fausse's unexpected reaction poured cold water on his sparkling enthusiasm. Far from rejoicing over his success, she stared at him, manifestly appalled. After a long while in which she couldn't speak one single word, she finally rushed out

⁵ French: "My little Stavri," that is, Stavrogina.

of the room on the verge of tears.

- "That girl is growing too fond of me...I need make an effort to be less amiable and attractive, otherwise one day she will go completely crazy...probably she already is crazy about me. But how can I help it? It's not my fault if I am so good a mentor for that promising creature...It's my duty to guide her, and that's what I will do, whatever the cost for the two of us! "*Paris vaut bien une messe,⁶ et la connaissance vaut bien un p'tit coeur brisé! C'est pour elle que je le fais*... Knowledge is experience, and experience is sorrow! This is sucking the marrow of life; this is drinking from the very spring of wisdom...now it's painful, but she will be very grateful to me when I have made her into the most distinguished scholar of Switzerland!" - So, thoughtfully mulling over his duties as a mentor, he closed the door and pensively sat at his desk.

Prof. Maska was not one to bear a grudge, and five minutes later he had already forgotten M.lle Fausse's surprising reaction to his triumphant enthusiasm. In effect, he had no time to fritter away worrying about a woman's hormonal mood swings: he was too busy applying the final brush strokes to his masterpiece to get distracted by such trifles. It was only at twilight that he could finally take his eyes off of his script and prepare his rehearsal to make sure the following day's performance would be perfectly faultless. So, he took away the lacquered Japanese screen behind which, hanging on the wall, was a circular mirror he normally used for evaluating his rehearsals (and, every now and then, to give his fringe a jaunty I-have-just-got-out-of-the-bed air) and...what he saw when he looked into it! In the flickering light of that winter dusk, a gloomy, spectral figure was staring at him. His blood chilled in his veins, and for a long while he could neither move nor scream: he was petrified by fear and, his mouth agape, was completely unable to stir one single limb. Likewise, that sinister figure was gawking at him from the glass surface, motionless and as stone-like as a gargoyle. Every time he would recall this episode later in his life, Prof. Maska would always have the impression that whole centuries had elapsed between the moment he first saw that figure and the instant he would recognize it as his own image.

Yet, his reaction was unexpectedly prompt, for interest soon replaced fear and - more curious than frightened - Prof. Maska drew his chair closer to the mirror and started peering at his features with the detached interest of a physiognomist. Not a single trait of his beautiful face had gone through a change; still, he was no longer the same man as he had been thus far. Something had radically transformed him and made him unrecognizable even to himself, but it was hard to tell what it was exactly that had been changed about his complexion. Certainly, the light in his eyes was different, and so was his smile; even the gracious dimples on his cheeks and chin had mysteriously altered. This new sight was at first loathsome to Prof. Maska, but as the minutes went by he grew increasingly familiar with it, and after a couple of hours he started finding it somewhat fascinating. By midnight, he ended up falling madly in

⁶ French: "'Paris is well worth a Mass' [spoken by Henry IV of France in 1593] and knowledge is well worth a broken little heart! I'm doing this for her..."

love with the new Maska, whose faded-away features seemed to have been softened by the brush strokes of an invisible painter.

– “What a fine, Monet-like *morbidezza*⁷ is now in my traits...It’s as if an invisible sculptor had chiseled my mortal clay after a statue by Rodin, Medardo Rosso or Vincenzo Gemito...What a uniquely indefinable beauty my face is suffused with! I’ve got the impression that the famous lines “I belong to nowhere and nowhen: I’m allknowing, / Though nothing ‘cept something unknown” were written for my own vague and impalpable splendor...” – And so, forgetful even of his talk to rehearse, he went on eulogizing his newly-attained perfection till daybreak.

When the time to join his colleagues came, he was in a state of enchantment which is difficult to describe. While traveling from *** to Zürich, a foolish smile ruffled his lips and an absent-minded look betrayed his having just fallen in love – still, no one could have imagined that the object of his desire was he himself. In this peculiar state halfway between dizziness and inebriation, Prof. Maska got out of the train in Zürich Hauptbahnhof and – fluttering, rather than simply walking – reached the university, where his colleagues had already gathered. Although the conference had started nearly three hours earlier, our man was not worried in the least about his unusual delay. In effect, in the programme he figured as the very last speaker – an unexpected circumstance prompting him the flattering idea that he was to end the conference on a high note. His odd intoxication dangerously reached its heyday when, after saying “good morning” to several colleagues who peered at him perplexingly before making a reply, he realized that they could not recognize him. What a formidable sense of omnipotence this gave him! He felt he was virtually all-knowing and completely unknown at once, and – from this privileged position – he could now find out things which had been inaccessible to him so far.

Determined to take advantage of this unexpected stroke of luck, Prof. Maska discretely let his eyes wander around the room for some minutes, until they finally focused on a knot of people who were having coffee in the immediate vicinity of a drinks dispenser. Everything about them was rather common and orderly; yet, they inexplicably seemed to arouse Prof. Maska’s interest. In particular, his eyes were fixed on a gray-haired man who was quietly sipping his coffee while smiling to the joke of a young man he was chatting with. He was decidedly not the kind of person a casual onlooker would be likely to single out amongst the crowd. His face was rather plain, and so were his clothes; his voice only had something remarkable about it. In effect, it was so incommensurably agreeable that – when poured into its listeners’ spellbound ears – it had the same effect as syrup on a sore throat. Its uniquely enchanting melody was able to add a further meaning – which was never twice the same, but changed according to its player’s modulations – to any word he spoke, no matter how trivial it was. As any magician worthy of this name, also Prof. Echt (for this was his name) had

⁷ Italian term used in fine arts to describe the delicacy or softness in the representation of the flesh.

his own tricks, the most important of which I will now reveal to you: the secret of his magic mainly lay in his slight (yet recognizable) German inflection. It was precisely thanks to this peculiar feature – which many among his colleagues viewed as a fault – that he was able to reinterpret the classics of American literature by ceaselessly attaching new and unexpected meanings to them.

I have always been fond of rhetoric; so, please, let me show off a little bit by using a euphemism: Prof. Maska decidedly disliked Prof. Echt. I am not allowed to tell you the reasons of the bad blood between them (which, in any case, are too numerous to be listed in these few pages); the only thing you need to know is that a long lasting, as well as one-sided, antagonism had slowly perverted Prof. Maska's professional competition with Prof. Echt into hostile rivalry. Gloating over his rival's impending defeat, Prof. Maska crept closer to his enemy while goggling at him with the circumspect gluttony of a wolf pointing at a hare. Once he had joined the knot of people gathered near the dispenser, he slyly camouflaged with the surrounding environment. Accordingly, he alternatively laughed, nodded and looked interested – always mindful of not exaggerating, lest he should arouse his prey's suspicions – in a constant effort to conform to the swaying tones of the conversation. When he felt that his face had become familiar and at once unnoticed to the members of the group, he durst speak a few brief and insignificant remarks. He said "Ah!" whenever something meant to be surprising was revealed, and "Oh..." when unpleasant situations were detailed; "Hihi" when crisp witticisms were uttered, and "Mmhh" whenever doubts were raised. As soon as he perceived that he had become part of the group – and that it was now too rude for anyone there not to pretend to know him as he knew them – he started addressing some of his colleagues by name, asking trifling questions or uttering irrelevant remarks. After two or three successful attempts – his unknowing victims looked startled to hear a stranger call them by name, but, in their embarrassment, felt bound to pretend knowing him as well – he finally turned to his hare.

"Ernst, old fellow, why the dickens haven't you greeted me so far? You've been so busy chatting with that young colleague of yours that I might suspect you've been pretending not to have seen me all this time! Come on, tell me how you are!" – While thus approaching his foe, he grasped Prof. Echt's hand and shook it vigorously; in the meantime, he was leaning towards him with parted lips, uncovering two rows of teeth of a perfect whiteness.

Prof. Echt was visibly embarrassed, but he didn't want to be rude to that colleague who was addressing him so amicably, as if they had been friends for a long time. So, despite pretending was decidedly not his forte, he made an effort and replied cordially:

– "I'm fine, thank you. And you?"

– "*Pas mal, merci*⁸. Yet, I will surely be better after you have told me the topic

⁸ French: "Not bad, thank you."

of your speech. You know, I have been pining for learning it for weeks: you always have such brilliant ideas...I can't help feeling stimulated by your prompts..."

Prof. Echt's expression betrayed unfeigned astonishment mixed with slight discomfiture, for praises always made him feel ill at ease. In effect, he knew he had some virtues, but he also was painfully aware of his numerous faults, and therefore he was inclined not to take compliments too seriously. And this especially when, as in this case, they were exaggerated and somewhat unmotivated.

- "Thank you. I am flattered, but I *know* I am really undeserving of such praises" - His unexpectedly frank and straightforward reply startled Prof. Maska, who saw his plan end up in smoke in the twinkling of an eye. Yet, Prof. Echt mistook his colleague's bitter disappointment for distress - thus, the hare was caught in the trap.

- "Please, forgive me. I didn't mean to be rude, dear colleague: it's just that I feel a little nervous about my talk. You know, - he started in an endeavor to smooth his previous rudeness into a confidential tone - I am going to approach a subject which has been little discussed so far, and I don't know how the audience will respond to it".

- "Ah...really?" - Prof. Maska asked in a mellifluous tone. Yet, his eyes betrayed a voracious interest which made his colleague feel rather uncomfortable.

- "Oh, well, nothing special, you know...It's just that I am unsure whether my contention will be fully understood or not, for it's a little complicated. I'm going to talk about what (in my opinion, of course) is a key psychological principle of several among Henry James's novels, namely *eleutherophia*..."

Prof. Maska turned into stone as soon as that unexpected word stroke him right on his head more violently than any baseball bat might have done. Petrified, he stared at his enemy, who kept on opening and closing his lips as if he was still talking, but - surprisingly enough - seemed not to give out any sound. In a cold sweat, Prof. Maska started feeling so queasy and dizzy that he had the impression the room was being shaken by a sudden earthquake; then his eyes dimmed, and he found impossible not only to move, but even to breathe, as his heart was beating exceedingly fast.

- "I need air" - he mumbled in a strangled voice, his face as white as a sheet while trying hard (but unsuccessfully) to fill up his lungs with air. What a vain effort that was! He was not aware that too much oxygen was already in his blood, and that this excess was precisely the cause of that sudden crisis. He was desperately trying to open his mouth and nostrils wide, when Prof. Echt came to his help. In effect, all the scholars the room was filled up with had huddled round Prof. Maska, thus worsening the claustrophobic sensation that was oppressing him. Prof. Echt alone had kept his head: in a calm and firm tone he ordered his colleagues to keep at a distance from the sufferer, and asked for a paper bag. When he was finally given it, Prof. Echt gently handed it to his colleague and whispered softly:

- "Please, take a long breath in the bag. Yes, very well... again, please, again, ... slowly, another deep and slow breath..."

In a few instants the respiratory crisis was over, but Prof. Maska, completely exhausted, didn't dare to raise his eyes from the floor. He was physically aware of the hundreds of eyes staring at him in amazement and morbid curiosity even without actually seeing them, as if they were darts thrown at his tired body and severely hurt pride. A new crisis was now impending on him, but this time – though it was more powerful than the previous had been – he felt it was less frightening, for he was not ignorant of its nature. Far from being as embarrassing and mysterious as his heart-attack-like stroke had been, this new rising tide (which was rapidly growing into a tsunami) had a name and a recognizable identity: it was rage, and a furious one. This rage was directed against the very man who was presently rescuing him from his embarrassment by offering him his arm while exhorting him to have a stroll in the open air: that man was, *natürlich*⁹, Prof. Echt.

* * *

Neither Prof. Echt nor Prof. Maska would ever come back to that room. None would ever deliver his speech. None would ever see his own university again. A few hours later Prof. Echt's corpse was found on the floor of one of the university restrooms; after a couple of days, the police declared that he had committed suicide on account of family troubles. As for Prof. Maska, he has not been seen at the Université de *** for ten years, i.e. since the time he shocked M.lle Fausse with his surprising "Monet-like *morbidezza*." As my narration is coming to its conclusion, I want to be as frank and straightforward with you as Prof. Echt used to be: Prof. Maska's disappearance was noticed by a very few people. Among these few was M.lle Fausse, who grew increasingly persuaded that her mentor had retired in a hermitage in Valais¹⁰ with a view to forgetting his love for her, which he probably suspected not to be fully requited. Anyway, thanks to her noble spirit, she soon forgave her beloved's desertion, and she even managed to heroically forget it as soon as (some three weeks later) she was appointed professor of American literature in his place.

Personally, I do not believe in M.lle Fausse's explanation for Prof. Maska's disappearance; however, I have not found the solution to this mystery yet. So, I am bound to abruptly interrupt my narration at this point, with the hope that – like Prof. Maska and M.lle Fausse – you are not one to bear a grudge, and will forget my guiltless ignorance as well as my roguish reticence. As a token of my perfectly good faith in this matter, I will reveal to you something I have said to nobody else so far. I often think of Prof. Maska, and sometimes I believe I even miss him. I don't know why, but this happens especially whenever – during the lakeshore stroll I usually have at dusk –

⁹ German: "Naturally."

¹⁰ Mountainous region in the southern part of Switzerland.

I come across a group of horsemen enjoying the sight of the rugged Savoyard mountains beyond the lake. In those moments his absence turns into a bodily pain, for my very breath is taken away by melancholy, and nothing can soothe my sadness but the image of his rambling some frosty and wind-swept steppe on horseback. When I envision him thus, his features are not as faded-away as they were on the occasion of his last conversation with Mlle Fausse, but are once again as neat and clean-cut as they had been before his ill-fated transformation. I am afraid that the power of my imagination makes them even better than they actually were, for his hair – messed by violent wind gushes – are not flaxen, but golden, and his wan complexion is enlivened by a frost caused pinkish blush tingeing both his cheeks and nose tip. Not only does my mind depict him as astonishingly gorgeous; it also transfigures him into a knight in shining armor, who – having gotten rid of his fears – spurs his horse as he bravely shouts aloud: “Ya, я, ya!”¹¹

— *Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli*

¹¹ “Я” (pronounced “ya”) is the Russian first personal pronoun “I.”

The Messiah of Evergreen Terrace

It was as if the room had been killed somehow, or had gathered to itself a kind of black energy that in its toxicity held everyone in the family at a distance.

When she had pulled him out of the pudding she kept slapping his face, angry with him for what he had done. She cleared his throat of the goosh and gave him mouth to mouth, the smell of stomach acid amidst the creamy sweetness etched permanently into her lobal circuitry causing her to eventually never be able to eat the stuff again, the tapioca pudding.

He coughed it up all over the bathroom floor and he choked through the slime to find his breath and he found it and began to live again, and when he was asked what he was doing he responded that he was really really tired and that mixing up a bathtub full of the stuff was ridiculously hard work and that he had gotten more and more tired and he had lulled himself to sleep with those rhythmic movements. The endless mixing up seventy-five gallons of that lead-heavy stuff with a kayak paddle, made it seem to him that it would be more comfortable to – yes, just sort of slip into it head-first and rest his arms – if only for a few minutes – just close eyes and relax and take a break. After all he deserved it.

His sister didn't believe him, and from that moment on began to campaign to her father for 24/7 surveillance of Yetchen plus a couple of two by fours to hammer up across the doorway to that horrid upstairs bathroom – to keep the blackness that hung thickly in the room like a pudding footprint at bay, and to protect Yetchen from himself and never allow the family to ever have to deal with suicide again.

But Yetchen would have to use the bathroom again. As he was working, falling the sycamore tree in the front yard, he noticed a man knocking on doors and handing out flyers. At some houses the man was met with a slammed door, at others a polite conversation through a wrought iron safety gate. He recognized the man. He had been Yetchen's godfather, before his parents learned that in their particular denomination, the congregation took the place of the godparent and were required to raise the child – not that it ever did, what with his father continually out of town working, and him needing to be shuttled here and there, to this lesson or that.

Yetchen remembered. The flyer that the man gave him when he stopped at Yetchen's house seemed to come from the hand of God. Never mind that the boy had been working in the direct sun all morning, and the last drink of water he had had was before 7 a.m. It was the wonder of God that drew him to take the man and his flyer seriously – okay, so actually, it was more the wonder of God and the dehydration that made Yetchen read the flyer and act on it – but it was his ex-godfather's flyer that sealed the deal.

With no way around it, knowing he would get in trouble for being in there, he turned the handle to dangerously hot and then plugged the drain and opened up the packages of pudding mix one at a time.

He acted cautiously now, mixing up fifteen gallons less than last time – and laddling it into two and a half twenty-gallon terracotta pots that had been discarded next

to the bag of fertilizer and the hose spigot in the walkway to the backyard of the house. Luckily, he had duct tape to seal up the drainage holes in the bottom of the pots.

He loaded his Radio Flyer wagon with the three pots and made the forty-minute trek to the rescue mission just in time to witness the altar call.

Only one guy went forward – and it appeared that this one guy – obviously homeless – well, everyone was homeless there, that was the point – wearing rubber slippers called his pisscatchers and an old holy sweater – not to be confused with his perceived status before the Diety – was the one same guy who went forward every week – he has his counterpart in every church, and the workers are only responsible for the sowing of the seed, the harvest is up to the higher power – didn't discourage any of the seed planters in the room one bit.

But tonight, Yetchen couldn't even give away his tapioca pudding, which is what he was trying to do anyway because there had been no coordination in the desert department. In Southern California, someone else's flan is king over your own tapioca any day – and since his godfather was busy with a despondent hyper-metastatic inebriate and didn't even talk to him, he had to pull the wagon home with two of three terracotta pots entirely full of unlooked at pudding. In response, his attention turned to readying himself for the work of hacking up the sycamore tree that would fall the next morning. He even contemplated working on it in the dark that evening in anticipation of completing his long-term calling – and proceeded to wake up in fits and starts every thirty minutes that night thinking about the method he would use to sand and plane the joints. When he got up, he barely dressed in time to head out without breakfast and begin work as soon as he could, and he proceeded forward now at a blistering pace so that his work would no longer be interrupted by competing contradictory divine callings such as pudding.

At 7:45, Yetchen's mother woke and went to the kitchen, and yes he was again working in the yard. She turned the faucet on to fill the coffee pot. She figured that she should expect this kind of strangeness to pour forth at this age accompanied by all the other new secretions – and maybe she should relent – but surely it was still early for independence, even for a child with his education?

She thought about what parents have to teach their children. She knew that parents have to decide in advance to teach them to love others, because the parents will probably die before the children, and when the parents die that love will be the only thing holding the world together. But she didn't know what went wrong with Yetchen, why he was so callous. She stared absently out the window polishing a perfectly dry dish over and over, turning it in her hands, turning the thoughts in her mind, looking at nothing in particular, sensing a blackness approaching, indistinct, impossible to put her finger on.

Though Yetchen's father was away, at that same moment he was thinking about the boy. A concept familiar to the preternaturally educated is that as wealth of knowledge increases, hardness of heart increases with it, and because of this, it became more and more sensible to bankrupt Yetchen of the corrupting influences of a liberal education – and yet at the same time he knew it was inevitable to continue. But it was a foregone conclusion to continue pursuing an education that was so corrupting over

the other alternatives available. He hoped that as a certain detachment had begun to present itself in Yetchen's character, as displayed in frequent meditation and in an odd fascination in road kill and a growing encyclopedic knowledge of taxidermy in the last year, not to mention the "suicide" attempt, that he should now begin to direct his studies toward contemplative religion.

Was this the wrong thing to do?

More or less, but it was the only idea he had come up with. More traditional practical areas of academic study had already been replaced by Greek and Hebrew, and the lives of saints and patriarchs were presented to the boy at the exclusion of the founding fathers and the inventors of mathematics and theoretical science. He couldn't help but wonder if it had been folly in this confusing day and age.

Yetchen was thinking as well. He found that his studies fit well with the desires growing within him, and he wanted to continue the alignment of his free time pursuits with his academic pursuits until no distinction existed. All of his interests were merging and he felt the satisfaction, draw, and pull that a life dedicated to one purpose inevitably creates in an individual. He was satisfied in that he was now thinking and applying all his effort to one purpose, this coalesced in his efforts to chop down the tree in the front yard, and the great accomplishment that would come forth from it.

He set up the homemade sawhorses to plane away the extra wood so that the beams were flat and true. For two days he avoided his mother while his work progressed and he continued pressing forward, shaving away protuberances and sanding the wood until it was finished.

Finally, on Friday, when the crossbeam was inserted into place and raised up over the yard, its dark almost black shadow casting itself over the sidewalk, Yetchen began to weep. It was not the simple uncomplicated cry of a baby boy who didn't know why or what he was crying about. It was a loud and painful kind of wailing that only took place at night in the dark of a single person's bed who lived in such a manner that no one else could hear. He fell facedown on the grass and continued to weep hot and uncontrollable into the earth.

His mother, seeing that construction had halted, left the house and stood over him, so that her form's shadow merged with the other shadow that hung over him. She stooped down and with her wet towel wiped his face so as to engender some comfort.

He wanted to respond, but the words wouldn't work. She looked down and saw a large metal hammer with a rubberized handle and three large spikes, one with its sharpened end covered in blood, and she grasped at him, turning him over to show her his wrists, and there was a puncture wound from the spike exactly centered on his left wrist.

"What is this?" she begged.

He pulled up his head so that his eyes met hers. "My efforts have been futile." He cried, "No matter what I try, nothing works!"

She threw the spikes and the hammer aside and wrapped the boy's wrist in the wet towel, carrying him to the minivan. She ran to the house for her keys and then returned.

He struggled to stay conscious, but he knew that what he had said didn't mean anything to her, but he continued anyway, "I've realized that — it's a fact, now, mother —"

But she shook her head and dismissed his hysterics. She continued driving, turning onto the main highway, and he continued explaining what had happened, though she wasn't listening anymore. "It's become clear mother — something I'm certain of now — that no matter how much you try, you can't crucify yourself by yourself."

His epiphany didn't faze her, and he thought she didn't hear, but after a few more seconds she pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the car. "Yetchen," she said. "No one's waiting for the Messiah. Right now the world just needs ordinary people — people who aren't trying to pull anything over on anyone." She grabbed his hand and then patted it multiple times. "Normal is great, these days, you can't find anyone who's normal. Try to be more like that, okay honey?"

Yetchen waited for her to start up the car again and eventually merge onto the highway. At that point he would open the door to the minivan and finally throw himself from the vehicle at lethal speed.

— *Stephen Silke*

Roger's Secret Truth

Before he left on this trip, Harrison's ex-wife said that Stanley wanted to have the talk. "*The talk*," she said, so now Stanley is bumping along next to Harrison in his forestry truck peering out at the woods unfolding around them, and Harrison is wondering how to have *the talk*.

He had the talk with his own father years ago, but what he remembers primarily was that his father had been so nervous that he'd called sex "rogering." The two of them had crouched down in the garage, and his father had drawn diagrams in the dust on the floor. They'd been stick figures with enormous genitals that had mostly confused Harrison, and Harrison had called sex "rogering" until about the middle of junior high when he was laughed at for using the term.

They come around the corner of the dirt road, and slide to a stop at a place that overlooks a valley. "Look over there," Harrison tells his son. "At the top of that peak."

"You mean at that building?"

"Yeah," he says. "That's where we're headed. It's a fire watch tower."

"People live up there?"

"Sure. All summer long."

Harrison can see the idea of living in the woods all summer long work its way into Stanley's imagination. He stares at the tower, and then the valley that the tower overlooks and then back to the tower again before Harrison drives away.

It's strange how things work their way into kid's heads and memories. What Harrison remembers about that moment with his father is the word "rogering" and how strange and adult it sounded. It was part of a vocabulary of the mysteries that grown up people had and didn't want to let go of, and therefore, it embedded itself into Harrison's memory as nothing else did. Anything might have worked its way into his memory though -- the stick figures, the smell of the garage, the way that his father kept touching the old scar on his cheek -- and he can still remember them, but for some reason, his boyhood imagination really focused itself on the word.

Maybe the fire tower is what Stanley will take away from this trip. Maybe something else. Maybe the whole weekend will disappear from his memory, and the only thing he'll remember about his father was that after a while he moved out, and it won't matter that Harrison didn't want to move out, that he wanted to be with his son if not his wife. All that will matter is that he wasn't there much.

They drive down into the valley, and although they can see the tower through the trees every once in a while, they're still an hour and a half away, so Harrison pulls over and the two of them have lunch sitting on the open tailgate of the truck and staring across a broad meadow.

After sandwiches, Harrison hands Stanley a fruit pie, the kind that comes in a plastic sleeve from convenience stores. It's not his kind of food, but the boy seems to love it. "Your mother tells me that you've asked about pregnancy," he says.

Stanley squints at him and tilts his head. "What?"

"Do you want to know where babies come from?"

"Oh," he says, "yeah." But he seems more interested in the pie, which might be a good thing. This might work to Harrison's advantage. Maybe the boy will focus on the food and not listen to him, and he won't have a memory of his father's awkwardness the way that Harrison does.

"Let me tell you how it works," Harrison says, and he gives his son all the details, but he does it as though humans are machines. It's a technical schematic leaving out all of the magic and love and everything that makes men crave love and sex. He's probably too young for any of that, but Harrison knows that's not it. He's being obtuse on purpose, he realizes, because he doesn't want Stanley interested enough to remember any of this, and sure enough, the boy seems to be tuning him out.

He's done explaining just about the moment that Stanley's done with the pie, and the two of them climb back into the cab and drive off. Good then. The boy's staring out the window, and he seems to have forgotten the whole thing. Maybe he's bored Stanley. Maybe he'll have peace, and Stanley will find out the fine details from his friends, the way just about everyone else does.

"Dad," Stanley says. He's breathless, excited.

Harrison stops the car even before he knows why. He can hear that he should from Stanley's tone. Stanley's staring out into the meadow and bouncing up and down in his seat a little, and it takes a moment, but Harrison is able to see what's got him riled up.

Halfway on the edge of the meadow, maybe two hundred yards away, a bear is moving around, crawling over something. "What's he doing?" Stanley asks, and in his whispered question, Harrison can hear magic.

"I don't know," Harrison says.

The bear has a bit of a tree trunk. Some time ago, a crew must have come through here, and cut a log into pieces to clear the road, and now, the bear is fiddling with a barrel sized section, rolling it over, crawling over it, and coming down on the other side only to turn it around and push it the other way.

"It's weird," Stanley says.

"Yeah."

The bear's completely engrossed in whatever it's doing to the point that it doesn't seem even to notice Harrison's truck. It tips the log section on its end, and then knocks it over with a swipe of its paw. "It looks like he's playing with it," Stanley says.

Harrison never would have thought of a bear at play. He's been around them most of his adult life, and he just never thought of them in that way. He knows intellectually that they're capable of play, and he's even seen cubs wrestling, but a grown independent bear playing? No, the idea had just never crossed his mind. "I think you're right," he says.

The two of them watch the bear. Well, Harrison decides, this is going to be the bit that Stanley remembers. He didn't even seem to listen before, and this is big. How many boys get to see a bear playing by itself alone with their dads? Not many. Not

many kids ever get out of the city.

They watch the bear for a while until it wanders off, bored with its game, and then they take big breaths, and Harrison starts back up towards the fire tower. "That was great," Harrison says.

"Yeah." Stanley pauses a second. "I just don't get one thing."

"What's that?"

"I mean, you explained how people do it, but why does anyone want to do it? I mean, why would you ever do that?"

A bear, a lemon pie, the woods, and a truck, and the boy is still on sex. "Well, that's hard to explain."

Harrison tries to come up with an explanation, but it really and truly is hard to explain. "I'll tell you what. It doesn't make sense at all."

"What?"

"It's like a lot of things. You know that I like coffee, and you don't. Fish too. It's just one of those things that doesn't make any sense, but as you grow up, you learn to like it. People change, and that's one of the things that changes with you."

Stanley's face tells Harrison that he understands a little, but he still doesn't quite have it. "It's like playing. When I was a kid, I really liked to play, but after a while, I didn't like it any more."

"Really." The shock in Stanley's voice suggests that the concept is disturbing to him.

"Sure, but playing doesn't make sense either. It's just fun. It's like that with . . ." he takes a breath and almost says "rogering" ". . . sex."

"Oh," Stanley says. He turns back to the forest.

So the awkward sex talk is what the boy is going to take away from this. Fine then. That's all right. Maybe he'll remember some of the rest of it too. Maybe he'll remember the lemon pie the way that Harrison can remember the first pear that he ate, given to him at a refrigerated warehouse that his parents' friend ran. The bear should be there too. Maybe he'll remember the fire tower. In an hour and a half, the boy's going to climb to the top of a fire tower at the top of a peak, and Harrison's going to show him what will look like the whole world spread out before him, miles and miles in every direction. Harrison will tell him how he helps to stop fires, and he'll explain everything the boy is seeing. Maybe that's something Stanley will take with him too.

— *John Brantingham*

There's No Place Like Anywhere but Here

It's 11:58 when Roger finally rolls off of me with a sigh and stares at nothing in particular. For a moment my legs remain open and crooked, like I've been bucked off of a horse and am in too much shock to reorient myself. Like I don't know what's supposed to come next. Roger fishes around in his bedside table for a pack of cigarettes, unwraps them, and slides one into his mouth backwards. He lights it and takes a celebratory drag before coughing clumps of yellow phlegm the size of marbles onto his comforter.

"Was that as good for you as it was for me?" he wheezes. It isn't as much of a question as it is a plea for acceptance.

"It was something," I say without making eye contact. "What was that, like, ten minutes?"

"Let's check," he replies. He pops the cigarette back in his mouth and blows out. The embers glow and smoke rises off the tip, all secondhand, none in his lungs. It's how mischievous second graders smoke after breaking into their dad's hidden cigar stash.

Roger leans back over the side of the bed, wrapping his fingers around a dime store stopwatch. He clicks it off.

"Almost seven and a half minutes on the nose. I don't want to toot my own horn or anything, but I think that's pretty respectable."

"You timed our fucking?" I ask.

His smug smile sags into a frown and the happy creases around his eyes fade. He becomes unfocused and lapses back into staring at nothing. His cigarette slips from his lips and dusts the bed with ashes.

"Do you mean our lovemaking?" he asks just above a whisper.

I grab the abandoned cigarette and snub it out in an old mason jar on the nightstand before it chars a hole in the bedspread. I hope that my staying active keeps him from noticing the nauseous goose bumps that spring up on my arms at the phrase "lovemaking."

"So that's what it was? Not a race after all?" I sigh. "Hate to break it to you, but when you treat a girl like you're practicing for an Olympic event, it usually doesn't make her feel like she's one in a million. I guess it could've been worse though. I'd rather be the warm-up for the 100-meter sprint than Greco-Roman wrestling."

"I don't know," he says. I can hear his confidence creeping back with every syllable. "Some of what we did could have been qualified as wrestling – love wrestling!"

"What do you want? A pat on the back?" I reply. I keep my vomit down. Thank God for small miracles.

"Well it wouldn't hurt. After all, I was the one pleasuring you."

Instead of replying, I rub my forehead. We had been in too much of a hurry earlier to remove my shoes, so I lightly tap the heels of my Converse sneakers together while repeating "There's no place like anywhere but here" as needed in my head.

"Wait, you did enjoy yourself right?" Roger asks.

I still don't answer. At this point I've only known him for a few hours but I assume he's intelligent enough to fill in the blanks.

"Oh my God," he stutters. "Did you want to sleep with me at all? Even a little bit? Oh my God, oh my God. Chelsea – did I rape you?"

"What?"

"Shit, fuck, my first time and I raped a girl. What am I going to do? Should I go to the police? No, I can't, they'd do horrible things to me in prison. But I can't live with myself either. Wait, I live on the third floor. If I fall right, like head first, like in a swan dive, that should kill me right? Right?"

He says this all in one breath before bringing a hand up to wipe away his snot and tears.

"Relax," I say, rubbing his cheek. My finger leaves oily streaks where he'd applied makeup to hide his splotchy acne. "I wanted this. You didn't rape me."

"But I took advantage of you! You were drunk and I jumped on you!"

"No you didn't, I wasn't even drinking."

My eyes adjust to the dark room enough for me to begin looking for ways out. Unfortunately, everything looks menacing. It's a typical college dorm room, no bigger than an average sized closet with every wall filled with a piece of mismatched furniture. It makes a perfect ring, a coil belonging to a particleboard anaconda. Soon I'm struggling to take shallow breaths of the sweat and semen scented air.

"Are you going to give me a tour?" I ask, faking a smile. I need to change the subject away from the whole sexual assault thing. I already played the passionate lover for the night; I'm in no mood to play the psychiatrist too.

"Sure," he says, swallowing the rest of his sniffles. "That's my dresser, that's my desk, and that corner is where I keep my antique ray gun collection. Want to see? They're really cool. Some even shoot sparks when you press the trigger."

"I'll pass."

He doesn't show me the door. Still no way out.

"So, what do we do now?" he asks.

"I don't know," I reply. "Want to listen to music?"

"Not really," he says. "The bass gives me a wicked headache and irritates my colon sometimes. How about we cuddle instead?"

"No thanks," I say a little too quickly. "I'm kind of tired and just want to think right now."

"In that case, would you mind if I made a few phone calls?"

"Be my guest."

"It'll only be a couple of minutes," he says. "But you hang tight little lady. Daddy will be right back."

He winks, fights his way out of the tangled sheets, and takes a seat at his desk. A thin sheen of sweat over his pimply, naked back glows in the dim light of his computer as his screensaver kicks off. I hadn't seen the putrid volcanoes during the actual fucking; he'd been on top of me. I can't stress it enough: thank God for small miracles.

He leans over the desk and shuffles a few anime action figures around until he

comes across his phone. He picks it up, punches the keys, and holds it to his ear.

"Hey Thomas, did I wake you?" he says after an appropriate pause. "Anyway man, I've got news. You remember that girl at the bar tonight? Yeah, that little fox with the glasses and ponytail. I totally sealed the deal."

I feel detached. I'd worn my hair up in a ponytail earlier. I'd even been wearing glasses before they were tossed into a pile of dirty laundry in a moment of ill-conceived passion. But he isn't talking about me. He can't be. I have standards — don't I?

"It was pretty good, she really put her back into it," he continues. "For sure man, I'll give you some more details later but I got to go. Just wanted to keep you on the up and up. Yeah, of course you can tell whoever you want. Her name is Chelsea by the way. Talk to you later."

"Who the hell was that?" I ask before he even hangs up.

"Just my boy, Thomas," he says. He's smiling ear-to-ear, completely oblivious to my disgust. "Hang on, I have one more call to make."

If I were a superhero, my eye lasers would bore holes straight through his spine and into his voice box. But alas, I am not a superhero, and thus my face just looks crooked and confused. He raises the phone to his ear again.

"Hey Mom," he starts. "I'm sorry to call, I know it's late. I just wanted to let you know that I lost my virginity! Your boy is all grown up. Yes Mommy, I gave it to her good. I don't know when you can meet her. Should I invite her over for dinner this weekend?"

"Can I use the bathroom?" I squeak.

"Of course, sweetie," he says before pointing me in the right direction. I run.

I drop the seat on the toilet to hide the cloudy brown water in the bowl and sit down. The porcelain is freezing on my calves so I bring my knees up to my chin. I want to shower, but that's what rape victims do and I'm not about to give Roger any excuse to relapse back into his contagious self-loathing.

I'm determined to avoid my walk of shame at all costs, but my clothes are back in the room and the bathroom has a serious lack of windows. In addition to this, all of the air conditioning vents are too small for me to squeeze my fat ass through. Inevitably, instead of playing *Mission Impossible* to make my escape, I would wind up playing *Winnie the Pooh*. It would be only a matter of time before Roger had to call 911 and some friendly paramedics arrived with a tub of Crisco or suntan lotion to help get me unstuck. It's hopeless. Until I straighten things out with Roger, this room is my own personal Alcatraz.

I hadn't been roofied. I hadn't even been drunk. How was I stuck in this situation?

I remember my apartment. I remember struggling over my most recent poem and my friend showing up to drag me away from my work before I'm able to successfully throw my laptop out the window. She tells me I need to blow off some steam. She tells me I need a change of pace.

That's how I end up at the bar with the house key scarred counters and the air that smells like French-fries. It's singles night so I fit right in. But if there's one thing

that “singles night” in any locale perpetuates it’s the feeling of being totally alone. I’m not going to meet someone; I’m going to wallow in a pool of my own self-pity and cheap cranberry juice (alcohol can only make my life worse). I’m ready to get into a rant about my ex, a writerly type whose idea of a fashion accessory is a half written manuscript about vampires who learn the meaning of friendship hanging out of his back pocket, to a bored bartender when Roger appears out of nowhere and offers to buy me a drink.

I sip my new flute of straight cranberry juice and crushed ice while Roger pours on and on about himself. He’s a bio major from San Diego with ambitions of making it big as a rapper.

“Rap something for me,” I say.

“Like what?” he replies. “Like freestyle something?”

“Why not? It’s better than me telling you my sob stories.”

“But I like your sob stories.”

“I don’t.”

“Fair enough,” he says, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to rap for you girl / because I can’t sing / I’ll write you a ballad / and then get you a ring / I like your stories / I think they rule / this vampire writer / is a straight up fool / forget about him / work on your stuff / I’m here right now / hopefully I’m enough.”

I give him a round of applause, and before I can finish, he leans in and kisses me, pinning my hands between our chests in mid-clap. His lips are warm and have a light taste of beer and Fruity Pebbles. He pulls away and smiles.

“I know I’m just a bio major, not all artsy and crap like your ex, but do you want to come up to my place and hang out for a while?” he asks. His voice wavers, like he’s shaking but the alcohol is keeping his nerves in check.

I find my change of pace.

The sex was unsatisfying – but it had been his first time, so who am I to judge? And here I am sitting alone in his bathroom creating evacuation plans. I remember my first time and how much it hurt when my ex rolled over, his face painted with utter disinterest. No one deserves that. Is he going through the same thing now? Roger is weird, inexperienced definitely, but he isn’t a bad guy.

The sound of clattering metal brings me out of my flashback. I decide to check on Roger to make sure he isn’t punching holes in his walls. When I emerge from the bathroom, the light is on and Roger has his back to me. He is standing in the corner, the sound of sizzling drifts over his shoulder.

“Hey Roger, what are you up to?” I ask.

“Making you breakfast,” he replies. He drops a pair of fried eggs swimming in grease and flecked with charred bits of nonstick coating onto a plate and hands it to me. “I’ve always wanted to make a girl breakfast after, you know, so I figured I’d do it for you before you ran off tonight. You are planning on leaving – right?”

I take a bite of the eggs and grin. They're a little rubbery but still edible.

"I can stay with you tonight, Roger," I say, sitting down on his bed. He sits down next to me and places his arm around my shoulders as I continue to eat.

"So," he says. "Are you ready for round 2 yet?"

— *Stephen Williams*

Nativity and Fugue

Satan looked at the calendar on his kitchen wall and sighed. It read the nineteenth of December. His birthday was January sixth, just a few weeks away, but it wouldn't be the joyous occasion he hoped it would be. He was getting up there in age. This birthday would mark half of infinity for him. He thought that by now he would have accomplished more with his life than this. Sure, fucking over Adam and his brood was by far his life's achievement, but it had been thousands of years since that. Back then he was young and full of life. His oratorical skills alone could level cities and raise his mighty Kingdom of Pandemonium, but now the years seemed to take their toll on him, mapped with every increasing line on his face. The highlight of his life couldn't really be six celestial days after his birth, could it? This was not where he thought he'd be at half-eternity.

His eyes fell on the bowl of Chocolate Lucky Charms in front of him. *Are you still eating this crap?* he thought. He hadn't touched his breakfast since he poured the milk. Even the sinfully delicious flavor of chocolate frosted marshmallowy bullshit had lost its luster. Every puff of the whole grain cereal sat until they swelled full, laden with the chocolate milk that was chocolate even before he poured it in the bowl. He grabbed the spoon and swirled the mess around and let the current take every insanely sweet morsel for a ride as though the whole thing was flushed down the toilet. Satan scoffed and stared more intently at the sinking center of the whirlpool he created. He briefly caught his image in the glossy milk waves and became so enraged that he picked up the bowl and threw it at the calendar on the wall.

"I'll clean that up later," he said to no one.

No one replied and Satan became sullen, slouching his shoulders.

He decided to take a shower. He laid out his clothes and ran the sulfuric shower until it was positively boiling. Yes, there's nothing like a good shower to take your mind off things. He stripped himself of his footsy pajamas, folded them gingerly and laid them on his dresser. Although he almost never left the Ninth Circle, he had become quite the clean freak since the Bologias were installed; something about the ravinous diseases and human excrement his associates bestowed upon their patrons always seemed unnerving to him. He filed that under "it seemed a good idea at the time," which, in all fairness, it was. No one likes being neck deep in shit for eternity, but the problems with sanitation had been a real problem since, striking in Satan a bout of self-diagnosed OCD. When he entered the shower, the sulfur seemed peculiarly hot for boiling, but not unbearably so. He admonished his naked form. It was as shameful to him now as it was for Adam when he realized his junk was hanging out for all to see. His gut protruded past the point where he could see his toes and gravity, God's little practical joke, dragged and sagged everywhere it could. Satan threw up a middle finger for spite, but it had been so long since the Almighty took a look at the Pit, it would have been ignored anyway.

He put his back against the wall and slid down to the floor to sit. He tried furiously to coax an erection to no avail. He even tried lubricating his efforts with soap

harvested from the backs of fatties in the Third Circle, but that only stung like mad. It was no use. The blue pills he took everyday didn't work at all. His libido, like everything else in his miserable life, had left him.

"Great. Middle-aged and impotent," he said under his breath. "I'm sure He's just laughing it up right now."

He knew God wasn't looking at him. It didn't matter what he did anymore. His notoriety was waning.

When he got out, he dried off and went to his closet to find something to wear. He only had suits anymore; everything, classical Italian made suits, either red with black lining or black with red lining, and accessories that could easily fill a Halloween store to the brim. He had become a caricature of himself. He dressed not for himself, but to the expectations of his patrons and it made him sick. He was determined to satisfy himself with a wardrobe change, but the only thing not a suit he could find was a Parisian night suit, from the 70s when he invented Disco, hidden in the back behind some of his older, less stylish fashions. "Screw it," he said. "That'll do." After all, the 70s were a good decade for him. He put it on and left for work.

While en route to the office, he had to bypass traffic on Evil Way. With all his morning moping, he nearly forgot that he had workers out there paving good intentions. The change of direction would tack on an additional thirty minutes to his commute, but he didn't mind it at all. If anything, the awkward skip in his schedule would be welcoming and refreshing. It gave him a chance to drive by the Oblivious Pool and the Unhappy Mansion, sights he hadn't taken the time out of his day to see or appreciate since he first moved to the Pit. But even then, he was so far removed from these sights that it only reminded him of all that he had wasted with his embittered youth.

He parked his car in his usual spot, the same spot he'd parked in for the last century, and entered the lobby of his office building. Marcy was at the front desk.

"Good morning, sir," said Marcy. "Nice suit. So retro. It looks great on you." Satan smirked.

"Have you been down to Bolgia Two lately?"

She smiled a shit-eating grin, no surprise, of course, to Satan.

"Not since yesterday," replied Marcy.

"I could tell. Still got a smudge," said Satan, gesturing a single crooked finger at his nose.

"Oh, you," laughed Marcy. "You're so funny."

Satan rolled his eyes.

Satan made his way to the elevator that somehow creaked and chirped and swayed like a stagecoach. Every morning, a poor bugger would climb up into it to grease up the pulleys, but it always seemed as though the old device just wanted to be decrepit. Satan had been so down since he woke up that morning that even the shoddy workings of antiquated equipment would be welcome if only it could bring him up physically, if not emotionally.

The elevator brought him to the twenty-seventh floor where he set up his office. It wasn't the top floor of the building. He tried his hand at the top-seat once and swore he would never do it again. Having his office in the middle of the building was a con-

tinual reminder. It was a symbolic gesture gone, once again, unacknowledged by the Most High. Every passing year now was one more step away from grace, from the Father. He might as well have been an orphan who was adopted by a family because the mother was barren only to be thrown back into foster care when she miraculously conceived. All the while, a fundamental question loomed in the back of Satan's mind, hanging like a tiny fruit bat to the walls of a shit-stained cave: Why did He even bother? In all his ever-creeping years, no one ever adequately explained that to him and it only sunk him deeper and deeper into his melancholia.

He hadn't been in his office for five minutes before Ellen, his personal assistant, walked in with a docket of the morning's proceedings and a dossier of future projects.

"What's on the table today?" asked Satan.

Ellen was a pencil pusher and a damn good looking one at that. If Satan didn't have defective equipment, he might've made a pass. He loved her scent. He loved her finely toned legs that looked like they could go on forever, accentuated by a tight A-line skirt and six-inch pumps. He loved her low cut blouse and the locket holding a picture of the man she sold her soul to have sitting suggestively between her two ripe, apple-shaped breasts- or were they shaped more like pomegranates? How he wished he could just bite right into her. But nothing would ever come of it. His impotence forced his chastity.

"Well, sir," said Ellen, "we got twenty-five sales this morning alone."

"Twenty-five, huh? God, I love it. Every time the economy goes to shit up there, I make out like a bandit."

"Six are resales," continued Ellen. "Eleven wish to discuss terms first with a representative."

"I hate it when people watch movies and think that this shit is negotiable. Get Beelzebub and Mephistopheles on that right away. Draft up standard contracts, no exceptions. Times are tough and we can't afford to look weak."

"Right, sir. Mef and Beelz. Got it. Also, Death has some new acquisitions he'd like to deliver some time this week," said Ellen.

"He's still playing his games with them? All that does is just delay delivery and cause his stock to overflow. When Limbo gets backed up, he calls us to make the deposit and it's nothing but work, work, work to deal with the influx of incoming stock. What an asshole."

"Yes, sir."

Satan sighed.

"Tell the boys down in the warehouse to expect mass shipments."

"Got it, sir. Philip of Macedon is on line one."

"I hate it when he calls. Take a message."

"Done."

"Anything else?"

"Yes," added Ellen, "Brutus, Cassius and Judas are here for their daily devouring."

"I'm not really in the mood. Let them know they have the week off."

"Will do, sir. You also have your noon appointment with the Vengeance

Demons' Union and don't forget, afternoon chess with Virgil in the park."

Nothing had changed. He crunched numbers and ran the business the same exact way for the last half of eternity. He was shrewd and distinctly fair, something he was certain wasn't the case with his heavenly competition. But business as usual was business that became more and more tedious with each passing year. Playing the part of the respectable businessman was almost as bad as sitting in front of a mirror and watching the grey hairs creep into his scalp. He simply had no taste for it anymore.

It was sad that the highlight of Satan's day was afternoon chess with a poet. It wasn't that he had anything against poets, after all, the Song of the Morningstar was the first original composition since the Word became corporeal, but it always reminded him of what he had in his youth and what he no longer has since coming into his own. In truth, he hadn't even attempted poetry since someone copped an early, unfinished draft of his poem, "Macarena", and sold it to that dance music producer. That was the first time he ever felt shame, and he would never forget that.

It seemed odd that despite Satan's recent aversion to poetics, Hell itself had quite the population of poets; everyone from Homer to Cummings, from Ovid to Seuss, and many more were on the books for one reason or another. They had their own district outside of the Fifth Circle. At the center of this population was Virgil. Virgil was Satan's favorite. He ran the Tourism Board and was well known throughout the Nine Circles. He was an upright citizen of the Pit and a respected member of the community, a rarity indeed. He was even once urged to run for mayor of the Seventh Circle, but he declined to continue his service in tourism.

Satan met Virgil at the park for their daily chess game everyday at around two. They used to play for stakes, usually years of internment or severity of punishment, but Virgil came to accept his lot and figured that it'd be best not to gamble any further. Satan made his way over to the tables where the elderly Jewish men sat, fed the birds and discussed Torah. Virgil sat in their midst waiting for him.

"What in the hell are you wearing?" asked Virgil upon seeing Satan in his Parisian night suit.

"Trying something different," replied Satan.

"You're certainly succeeding at that. Care for a smoke?" offered Virgil.

Satan sat.

"No thanks. I don't get how you can inhale that shit all day at work and still pop cigs at the end of the day."

"Don't knock it 'til you try it," said Virgil. "How's things at the office?"

"Same old, same old."

"That good, huh?"

"I guess."

"And what about the home front?" asked Virgil. "How's that boy of yours?"

Satan sighed. "He's still not talking to me."

"Damn, what's it been? Twenty years?"

"Try ten thousand."

"Wow, I had no idea."

Virgil took out the chess pieces and set up each side meticulously. Each alabaster or lava rock piece was carefully inspected and oriented on the board. No one in the history of Man ever took the care Virgil did to set up games, especially games like Monopoly or Battleship. Chess was certainly no exception.

"How many years have you been working for me, Virge?"

Virgil smiled. "Over two thousand glorious years, Lu."

"You ever get tired of it?"

"Every goddamn day, as it should be. Why?"

"I dunno. I just woke up this morning and felt my age for the first time. It's got me reconsidering things I thought I was cool with, you know?" said Satan.

"Like what?" asked Virgil as he opened the game by moving a pawn to B-4.

"Like is this really what I want to do with my life."

Satan countered with a pawn to F-6.

"Jesus Christ, dude. Are you shitting me?" said Virgil. "You're Satan, the Prince of Darkness! You invented democracy and single-ply toilet paper!"

"So?"

"Oh, come on!"

Virgil moved a knight to F-3. Satan stared at the piece long after Virgil took his fingers off of it.

"It's just, I've been at this a long time and it's all the same. Nothing ever changes," said Satan.

"Sounds like you need some ass. When was the last time you got some?"

"Male or female?"

"Either."

"Forced or consensual?"

"Either?" said Virgil with a raised brow.

"When was the Sarajevo Winter Olympics? Like a hundred years before that."

"Holy shit, Lu. You need to get laid," said Virgil.

Satan rubbed his eyes and scoffed. "It's not that," he said. He knew well enough that even if his libido were healthy, he wouldn't be able to muster the necessary means. The lead had left his pencil high and dry, and any prospect of sex was more hurtful to his confidence than going without it. The notion of sex at his age just reminded him more of his missed opportunities over the centuries.

"Then what is it?" asked Virgil. "What do you want to do?"

The game stopped in its tracks. Neither of them cared to move a single piece after that question was asked. Satan sat in silence, trying to figure out the right words for response. He genuinely didn't know what he wanted to do with his life anymore; he only knew what he didn't want to do, and that seemed to be enough.

"Not this," said Satan.

"Then what? You gonna try doing good for a change?"

"Maybe."

Doing good really hadn't crossed his mind before. Good would definitely be a challenge, even if he weren't the devil. He kept hearing sob story after sob story by all the bums that cross through the Gates of Hell of how they tried, but, looking back, Sa-

tan never could think of a time where he even did that. This could be the opportunity he was looking for, a chance to change his life, maybe for the better.

Satan left the park and went back to the office. He called Ellen in to go over the docket of acquisitions. She came in immediately, laid out the case profiles on his desk and stood back toward the door to the office.

"Sir," said Ellen, "are you gonna run point on these then? I'm wondering just in case you want me to cancel it with Mef and Beelz."

"No, no. Keep them on. I'm just looking for one."

One was all he figured he would need for now. It was a trial period anyway, even still, all those bleeding hearts said you needed was one. One was definitely a good number for starters either way.

"Anything particular in mind?"

"I dunno. Who's selling their soul for something stupid?" asked Satan.

"Well, we got two here who want to survive cancer, one who wants to sell for a Dodge Thunderbird--"

"Ok, that's really stupid. Tell Beelz to explain to that guy what's wrong with that. On second thought, never mind. Continue."

"-There's a woman in there who's selling for world peace."

"Be sure to put that one in the burn pile."

"There's one woman who's selling her soul to meet Scott Baio," said Ellen.

"Scott Baio? What the fuck?"

"I know, right?"

"Now that's exactly the stupid I'm looking for," said Satan. "What's her story?"

Ellen made her way across the room. She slid her hot pink nail polished finger through the folders on the desk until she found the right one. Satan thought of a million innuendos as the flash-in-the-pan moment turned into three minutes of raw sensuality in his mind. Ellen popped open the file and the moment, like his would-be erection, was gone.

"Kathryn Jellick, twenty-three years old, from La Crosse, Wisconsin--" read Ellen.

"Hmm. Wisconsin... we've always had good luck recruiting in Wisconsin. She's twenty-three? Jesus! Let me see that," said Satan.

Ellen leaned over to hand him the file. Satan caught a good whiff of her fine perfume. He always preferred the sweet smell of Ellen to the ash of everyone else in the Pit. Satan noticed that Ellen caught his eyes trying to pry a glimpse down her blouse through the channel of her ample cleavage. He averted his eyes to the wall as though it were a natural thing to do when faced with such a beautiful specimen of human sexuality.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, Ellen. Thank you."

Ellen snatched up the rest of the folders on the desk and left Satan alone. Satan opened the file and began reading:

Jellick, Kathryn. Born 21 July 19--. Daughter of Eloise Stanton--

Eloise? thought Satan.

—and Peter Jellick. Parents deceased, fatal car accident, 17 November 19—. Sister to Annabelle Marie Jellick. Divorced: Timothy Gorgon and Linus Fairchild—

“Twice divorced? What the hell is wrong with her?” said Satan, not realizing he was thinking aloud. He flipped back to the profile picture. She looked adequately normal, pretty enough to find a decent man, which Satan supposed she must have done, but why twice? Something didn’t quite add up. Twenty-three years old and twice divorced seemed an unlikely combination for someone willing to bet eternity on Scott-fucking-Baio. Yet, with all her obscurity, she certainly seemed a ripe soul for the saving. She was far too young and vulnerable to throw away her immortal being just to meet a man whose career peaked with *Charles in Charge*.

Satan called Ellen over the intercom.

“Ellen,” said Satan, “get Virgil on the line, I need to arrange a meeting.”

“Done, sir.”

Ellen patched Satan through directly to Virgil’s cell.

“Hey, Lu, what’s up? I’m just getting back to the office,” said Virgil.

“Virge, I need a favor,” said Satan.

“Sure, Lu, anything.”

“I need to set up a full tour of the Circles for Miss Kathryn Jellick right away.”

“You got it, brother. Anything particular in mind?”

“Nothing fancy. Just your personal touch— and afterwards, bring her by my office.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

As Satan hung up the phone, he thought that this was it. This was his golden chance to turn things around. Good: the final frontier and at the helm was Satan. He took control of his own life for the first time since his triumphant fall and it felt overwhelmingly satisfying. Surely by showing this little twerp the horrors that awaited her, she would realize the error of her ways and reconcile with the Almighty. It was a failsafe plan. Not too bad for a spur of the moment idea. Satan’s pride was beyond words. If he ever caught a human with that much pride, he’d find a place for him really quick in the Circles doing some asinine duty, but for Satan it seemed an uncountable sin. He had the right to be prideful because, for once in his long existence, he was doing something worthy of a nod from the Father, and that was worth its weight in brimstone.

Satan sat on a decorative Styrofoam rock outside of his office building trying fruitlessly to tune his solid gold fiddle. It was a stupid clichéd invention of his, purely for looks. Gold just doesn’t resonate the way wood does and it was always a bitch and a half to get tuned right. He hadn’t picked the thing up in years— not since Charlie Daniels made a mockery of the only time he’d ever been bested in a fiddle-off— but he thought he’d make a go of it, after all: today was a day of trying new things and revisiting old ones. He was so enthralled with his new project he hardly noticed Virgil coming up through the parking lot in his golf cart with Kathryn Jellick riding shotgun.

He parked it in a handicapped space and the two stepped out to meet Satan.

Virgil waved at Satan to make sure he had everything under control then popped back into the golf cart and drove off, leaving a very confounded Kathryn alone with the Prince of Darkness.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Satan.

Kathryn gave him the once over and responded: "By the looks of you, John Travolta's stunt double for Saturday Night Fever?"

Satan looked down at his Parisian night suit and smiled. "Close."

"You must be the proprietor of this establishment then," she said.

"In the flesh."

"We to talk business then?" asked Kathryn.

Satan raised an inquisitive brow. "I guess so."

Kathryn sat down on an adjacent Styrofoam rock. Her beige skirt rode up a little and Satan's eyes drew immediately to her legs. They weren't the finest he'd seen- Kathryn had nothing on Ellen- but they were more than enough to work with if only he had the tools. She readjusted and Satan looked up at her face, no harm done. If average had a face, it would look exactly like Kathryn Jellick. Nothing screamed interesting- no moles, freckles, scars, anything, just plain for plain's sake. Satan took this as a blessing in disguise. If he wasn't sexualizing her or thinking about his limp dick, business would have a better chance of going smoothly with only his fullest attention.

"Ok, I gotta ask: Why Scott Baio?" asked Satan.

"What's it to you?"

Satan thought her attitude was certainly off-putting. For someone ready to throw away Heaven for Chachi, she seemed far too guarded and unready to answer for her choices. The Nazarene wouldn't take this crap, so why should the Morningstar? It was stupid. She was stupid. And she didn't have the right to be.

"Nothing," replied Satan. "We haven't had requests for Baio since 1984. It's just weird."

"Weird or no, can you do it?"

"Of course I can do it, but I really think you should reconsider."

Kathryn frowned. "Do you do this with everyone? Bring them down here, show them the hell that waits them when they die and then suggest that they rescind the offer?"

"No. It's usually cut and dry."

"Then why me?"

"Why not you?" retorted Satan. "No one ever gets a second chance! This is yours. Look, I showed you the Circles, but that's not what you'd get. Sold souls work directly for me- they don't get burned, they stoke the fires! And let me tell you, the supervisors are huge fans of Björk. That shit is playing day in and day out."

"So?"

"So, I know for a fact that an average tour of the Circles takes about sixteen hours. You never once asked yourself why the sun never went down?"

Kathryn shrugged.

"The sun never sets in Hell and we work all hours," said Satan. This was a bit of a stretch. Satan was the only one who worked a nine-to-five. He needed to rest some-

time; otherwise nothing would ever get done.

"I really don't care." Kathryn couldn't really be that pigheaded, could she? Up to that point, Satan was sure that the only one who really made an educated decision of Hell over Heaven was he. Not a one of his mighty Fallen could even genuinely claim that if given the choice. But Kathryn Jellick wouldn't reign in Hell, she'd serve in Hell, which, as far as Satan was concerned, was far worse than serving in Heaven; and yet, here she was, asking for it. "Now are you gonna give me what I want?"

Satan thought a moment. His silence put Kathryn on edge. Either Satan had grossly underestimated the depth of human desire or she must have been insane. Her right mind took a sharp turn left and nothing made sense. Had Satan a good conscience, he would reject her application for sale right then and there. Milking it any further or trying to convince her otherwise was a moot point. Her adamant stubbornness was getting in the way of his act of kindness, and Satan just couldn't allow that.

"No," he said, scarcely audible to him, let alone Kathryn.

"What?" asked Kathryn.

Satan breathed in two deep breaths as though his entire body were bellows.

"No," replied a more assured Satan. "I'm not going to grant you your request."

Never before had Satan rejected a willing soul. While Saint Peter was turning people away up in Heaven, Satan always left the light on. For the last half of forever, that's how it had always been: Heaven was the Four Points to Hell's Motel 6. But Satan was sure that exigent circumstances called for unprecedented action. "You people have no idea what a gift you squander. No more! I'm taking choice out of the equation. It's for your own good. Just because your parents took a premature dirt nap and you can't seem to lock a man down for more than a year doesn't mean you can replace them with a childhood idol!"

Kathryn slapped him.

As the blood rushed to his face, Satan started to think that he might have been trudging the fine line between decency and omnipotence. He had striven his whole life to be like the Most High and only here in his greatest shame had he come the closest to achieving the highest seat. He held her fortune and damnation in his hand and he chose where to cast his lot. But all this good-doing had hurt him deeper than the blade of Michael. He had grown accustomed to fire. He knew it wouldn't be easy and that the pain he felt now would soon subside, giving way to the satisfaction of his good deed. This must have been the only reassuring thing that kept the Nazarene content to go to the Cross. He would have to push through it, just like the Nazarene, if he was to reap its benefits.

"You're an asshole," said a teary Kathryn.

"Be that as it may," said Satan, "my decision stands."

Kathryn was by no standards the first to hate Satan, but she was certainly the first to hate him for helping her out. Doing good was more bittersweet than it seemed, though Satan was comforted in that knowledge regardless. He was sure that once Kathryn got over herself, she'd come to appreciate him for it, and that seemed to be enough.

The following afternoon, Satan sat alone in the park waiting for Virgil to show up for their daily game of chess. He was never early, but it wasn't as though he had anything to look forward to at work. His head felt heavy, kind of like how it was after he downed too many Baconators before his daily munch on the Judeccans. Every vein in his body throbbed as though his blood suddenly disowned him and wanted to get out. For the first time in his long life, Satan didn't want to be himself. For him, the grief was still too near.

Virgil arrived at his usual hour, which normally would have been about five minutes before Satan.

"You're early," said Virgil as he unpacked the chess set. "You're never early. Is something wrong?"

Satan stared down at the chessboard Virgil set out, focusing all of his attention on a single black square. His eyes reached out if only to fall deeper and deeper into the subtle abyss of the square. His body went limp as it did after the first few days of his epic Fall through Chaos. If he could, he'd fall for the rest of eternity into that chessboard, but Virgil's voice cut through his hopeless aspirations.

"You ok?"

"Kathryn's dead," said Satan. "She killed herself last night."

"My God!" said Virgil, quite beside himself. "What happened?"

"She hung herself. I guess she couldn't live with being denied her wish. Got her up in the Seventh Circle. Rules are rules."

"I guess it must've been fate. She was always destined for Hell, it was just a matter of when and how."

"Fate?" scoffed Satan. He pried his eyes up from his contemplation of darkness and glared at Virgil. "There's no such thing. There's omnipotence and omnipotence alone- and that's the problem. God's just a kid watching worms squirm on the sidewalk in the rain. He knows of our doom before it ever presents itself and yet does nothing."

"Do you really think He would've saved you the grief of your failure?" asked Virgil.

"Why would He? We're talking about a character who just sat back while six million of His Chosen were mercilessly slaughtered."

"If you don't mind me asking, what the hell were you expecting to get from this endeavor?" asked Virgil.

"Is it too much to just try to do some good for a change-?"

"For the devil? Absolutely! It's not who you are."

"And just who am I?" shouted Satan. Everyone in the park was stopped in his or her tracks. They all looked up at Satan and genuinely felt an unfathomable fear gurgle up from their bellies.

"That's for you to figure out for yourself," said Virgil in a low tone.

Satan leaned back and stared at the sky for a second. He thought that if he stared hard enough, he might make out the face of God, but when this was proven impossible, he couldn't help but smile at the irony.

With a deep sigh, Satan replied: "You ever heard of that song, 'The Little Drum-

mer Boy'? Most people think it was written in the fifties or something, and they're right, but the tradition goes back further than that. You see, the Little Drummer Boy, that was me. I was there in stable at the Nativity. Everyone was struck with awe at the Word made Flesh. But not me. I was filled with such rage. He had beaten me to the ground and shit on my face for spite. The Nazarene was so shrouded in love, I couldn't raise a hand against Him, but I saw the sticks on the ground and just started banging on every surface in sight and screaming at the top of my lungs. I made such a ruckus. The Christ-child burst in tears and I kept drumming. The shepherds tried to tackle me and I kept drumming. It wasn't until the Holy Mother chucked a brick at my head did I finally stop. That's when I knew who I was and whom I always would be: chasing the coattails of the Nazarene for all eternity, popping up throughout history, trying to get Him and His followers to jump off the roofs of temples and failing every time. That's who I am: a punch line to a bad joke. I can't even match the Nazarene at His own game."

Virgil sighed. "I don't know what to tell you, Lu. That sucks."

"I used to think that every soul I snagged was just like a big 'Fuck you' and that was comforting. But He doesn't care. We're just going through the motions and the one time I try to do something different, I get slapped down, and for what?"

Satan threw the chessboard to the ground as he stood, startling Virgil.

"God damn You!" he shouted to the Highest Heaven.

Just then, a bolt of lightening shot from the sky and struck Satan on the forehead. When the smoke cleared, Satan looked up at the clear sky above. It was as good to him as a wink or a thumbs-up from the Almighty, and Satan couldn't help but smile.

— *Owen Torres*

Cold Confetti

The glossy plastic had shattered like hard candy.
It mixed in with the leaves and grass on the freeway divider
cold confetti as distant and inappropriate
as the numb heat of my fingertips,
when I trailed them down the fragile architecture of your spine,
and told you that I had just wanted to do something
that could never be undone.

— *Scott Creley*

Not Ripened

I'm the fruit of decay,
a geriatric hat trick.
A slight of hand rotting,

 balled into a petrified fist.

 My blackened core
 rife with prestidigitation,
 discarded and festering,

 magic close to being spent.

 I've fallen from the tree
 where you still hang,
 nowhere near bursting with flavor,

 but not quite untouched either.

 The denting and grimy handprints,
 of villainous handlers,
 cover your swarthy peel

 like semen stains in a jerk booth.

 You feign bruises easily,
 all of mine are earned
 by being naked longer than you.

 I cease being
 edible and edifying vegetation,
 And yet you are still

the clichéd apple of my eye.

— *Alan Passman*

Let

Swarming atoms streaked eked out,
soap rubbed on flesh, lifted thigh,
bathed before touch and undress
to caress and let difference fall.

Your shoulder silk scarfed arched
pulled by pressure for warmth.
Two legs spread open straddle a chair
in anticipation of that keeper snap.

Mouth stopped the Degas gasped
for we think too much and forget
to let and pressure to mask cease
as if this needled display comes

clear lined suitably addressed
for sender and recipient
delineating nerve ends surreptitiously
erupting beneath clothes and skin.

— *David Caddy*

her name hung backwards
as it lay between her breasts
unaware

— *Thomas R Thomas*

In Bed

You were an erupting volcano.
A fiery phenomenon.
You tasted like molten strawberries
from the bloody core of Earth, topped
with ice-white frosting from the untapped tip
of iceberg, and your breath steadied coolly
below 0 while your body pulsed the heat of Venus.
75% of you was beneath me swaying
with the tides of moons, rocking boats
and knocking them from their docks.
You were a natural Hollywood disaster.
And all the civilians attempting escape
either drowned in the mouth of tsunami
or choked on an ashen cloud
rising from the collision of bodies.
I survived you only by facing my fear of sweet death
and accepting the many aftershocks
of mattress springs and blanket tornados.

— *Karie McNeley*

Room 204

I watch you,
from where I sit
on the toilet,
smoking a cigarette
after we've made love
in this cheap motel room,
that has grown too familiar to me.
From the bed you say,
"You need some sun,"
pointing at my farmers tan,
usually shaded under a t-shirt
from California's sun.
We exchange words of love,
without meaning, little nothings
lost in the dark, behind
a red door,
a place where we prove our lust,
and mark our sorrows,
with the convulse of our beating
bodies

I watch you,
on the drive back to your car
where we sit in silence,
allowing only the radio
to fill the space in between.
I turn the volume dial
so that it rattles my reflection
in the mirrors,
or am I shaking?
I reach over to hold your hand
as miles drift past us,
and many more ahead.

I watch you,
as we have it out,
we say our goodbyes,
a hug seals the exchange,
I smell your scent
for the last time
and begin to wait

for the tears to abate.

Tequila keeps my body plastered to the sofa.
makes each step a struggle to get to work
I get a call from room 204
bite back the tears,
and remember the lie
and miss it.

— *Jeffrey Graessley*

every time a new bird comes along

every time a new bird comes along
i haven't quite recovered from the one before
this one here's been put through the ringer
just like i have and, like me,
apparently hasn't been laid in a while
there's an x-husband and a kid
a beautiful 3 year old
who, come morning, stumbles from his room
and climbs into bed with us
which bothers me, to tell you the truth,
(he makes me think of my own kids
and miss them a whole bunch) since i don't know
if i'm gonna stick around here much longer
and i don't want him getting attached

— *Jose Arroyo*



— Fabio Sassi

This Abstinence

makes me
want to scrape
the base
of my bowel
tear out
that turning wheel
crush it
to the tightest
ball —

I see
your eyes
and want them
pressed against
my pubic bone
again
again
again
I eat
my finger ends
the nicotine
around my nails
to skin
to cuticle
to bloody mess
I need
a drink
a cig
an orifice

in any order.

— *Michael Ashley*

In Less Than a Minute

Emotions swirl around
In a tornado of accusations.
I fall to the cold, dirt ground
As my knees give in.
Uttered words:
"It's over."
Repeat again and again
In my head.
My heart drops
To my stomach.
Shock begins to
Sweep over me as
I realize.
I am no longer yours.
Trying to keep
Balance as my
Head spins.
I look up in
Desperation only
To be disappointed.
You are not the same.
Not who I fell in love with.
One minute has passed.

— *Andrea Montoya*

Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary

In dim lit bathrooms we'd turn the water
on and close our eyes and summon her
in hushed and humble voices. Spinning,
arms outstretched, chanting. Bloody Mary,
Bloody Mary, then,

we'd stop and find the mirror, the tap below
running red. Did you see her – that bloody,
bloody Mary –
running from the single-wide into the woods,
arms outstretched like she wanted to fly?

Him screaming after her
Mary, Mary! Don't leave me!

— *Suzanne Allen*

My Rooster

It's six am. The rooster
rises and sings.

"Quiet down," I say,
"I'm trying to get some sleep."

It keeps crowing. I yell at it again.
The damn thing thinks it's the king of me.

I get up, go to the bathroom,
lean over the toilet real far.

The rooster stands full height,
proud and hard, doesn't want to come down.

I walk in a circle,
recite the pledge of allegiance five times.

When it's too rough to wait, I lean
over the bowl.

Rooster still crowing.

It's painful — I'm pissing
out of a pinched garden hose.

— *Cory De Silva*

Word perfect

"I don't believe in them," she says,
referring to the condoms I unravel
like a cartoon tongue all over her
one exposed thigh. The other shrinking
back into its polka-dotted shell
like any sudden movements
will attract any nearby predators.
She's watching me now, not to see
if I'll use my teeth to tear open
the packaging. This time, she's daring
me, egging me on. The words
arranging perfectly on the tip
of the tip of my tongue: *What do you
mean you don't believe in them?*
*Their existence is proven by
the simple fact that I am holding
one in my hand this very second.*
She's already tightening the skin
around her wrists, firing warning shots
with her knuckles. Waiting.

We call this foreplay. The repartee
that went extinct when movies
turned into color, that will soon
devolve or evolve into, at best,
monosyllables and onomatopoeia.
We can't help ourselves; rhetoric
turns the both of us all the way
on. Waiting for my close up,
I whip off my glasses, bend my neck,
and reply.

— Lloyd Aquino

Gabriel Matsu: *A Lady at Her Toilet*, 1660

They actually painted ladies
Sitting on the can in those days,
But their silken dressing gowns
Were long enough and full enough
To cover the commode and sitter,
Next to floor-length.

Handmaids and courtiers
Stood in attendance.

The youthful noblewoman
Faces us front-on,
Holding either a mirror or
A jar of fragrance,

And dares us to remark
On any incongruity.

— *Gerald Locklin*

Just Put It Out Of Your Mind

I'm doing everything I can now,
everything I know how,
everything I've been taught,
using all my strength
to not be thinking about Oscar the Grouch
in a moment of his sex ecstasy,
head thrown back, eyes fluttering,
mouth slightly, partially open
in the green grimace of his bliss
but it's no use, since you brought it up
I'm helpless now, hostage to my imagination
and the images come into being
like Polaroids healing themselves
after burning, glossy again
after surviving a house fire in a box;
I try not to think about it:
Oscar the Grouch half-sighing, half-moaning,
the long "oh god, please" hiss of his breath,
the "ahhhhhhhh" leaving his lungs
like entry into heaven was only this;
I picture him running his puppet fingers
through his short, rag-green fur
as his barely-existing hips lift up off the bed;
I cannot stop this movie, now that you've done this,
now that you have loaded this reel;
I watch his big, bushy brown eyebrows
lift up and then crease down as he rocks in his passion;
I see his stringy, pipe-cleaner-and-fleece arms
twitching, reaching up towards the ceiling fan,
the ceiling fan like the lashed eye of a god
that does not want to be seeing any of this;
Oscar the Grouch doesn't have any teeth,
so when I visualize him grimacing in pleasure,
and throwing his mouth wide open,
there's no tortured smile, just a wide, football-shaped hole
where teeth would be if he was human
but still had a head shaped like that;
I can almost see his God-strings
when he flattens his feet on the bed
and brings up his knees; he's whispering

to someone that he loves trash; he loves it;
I want to stop seeing these things
but my imagination is so strong:
damn you for wondering aloud,
when we were together that afternoon,
if Oscar ever had any lovers
and if his voice was that grating
when he moaned, when he came;
oh god, I am hearing him call *my* name;
he is pleading with me; this isn't right;
there are things we should not do;
damn you for this;
damn you.

— *Rich Boucher*

Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, about three-quarters of the way through the story, the brave, clever, youngest son of the baker finished climbing a mountain and arrived at the hideous dragon's lair, armed with the magic shield he stole from the giant and the magic sword he won in the riddling contest with the river elf. But due to budgetary cutbacks in the field of children's literature, which had resulted in widespread layoffs and a concomitant increase in professional duties for the remaining fantastic antagonists, the hideous dragon was currently away in another fairy tale, ravaging a town that had historically been beset by a foul ogre, who, having been let go, was now studying for his realtor's license. Back in this story, the brave, clever, youngest son of the baker stood at the mouth of the lair and called the hideous dragon's name a few times, to no avail. He tentatively wandered inside, saw nothing stirring, poked through the hideous dragon's mail a little, grabbed a cola from the refrigerator, and went back outside to sit on a rock and await the hideous dragon's return. This was kind of an irritating pisser. Throughout the whole narrative, he had been mentally composing an epic ballad lauding his exploits, but had been a little blocked lately. He had hoped that one last climactic battle would get the creative juices flowing again, maybe inspire him to rework some of the earlier stanzas in which the lines didn't quite scan. Plus — **plus**, as a heroic professional, he had certain expectations of his mortal enemies. Yes, things were tight these days, but how much time did the hideous dragon really need to eat a few cows and incinerate some hovels? The foul ogre always terrorized his victims very efficiently, never leaving heroes waiting. The brave, clever, youngest son of the baker could call the supervisors to complain, but he didn't really want the hideous dragon to get written up. Still, sipping a cola and sitting on a rock, waiting, he now had too much time on his hands to worry about his future, about the possibility of having to work for his brothers, the cocky, dim, eldest son of the baker and the passive-aggressive, conniving, next-oldest son of the baker, after their father retired. "Sitting near a hideous dragon's precipice, / Mentally cataloguing invidious cake recipes..." No, that wasn't going to work. Where was his foe? Suddenly, without warning, he received a text message from the hideous dragon: *Sorry. Running late. Have to pick up wyverns from daycare. Reschedule?* Last straw. The brave, clever, youngest son of the baker returned home to a life of breads and pies, bartering the magic sword and shield for a half-decent stand mixer. And they all lived ever after, except for the cows in that other town.

— John F. Buckley

Kissing Leeches

Sometimes I feel like running
you over with a hand-push lawn mower.

The kind that let's me see
its blades turn. I like its quietness

so I can hear you scream
louder than the sound

of your tendons snapping,
your fingers won't be an option anymore.

I'll feed you
to the opossums that eat

my persimmons. Hope they fall
asleep in your regurgitated flesh,

after they've thrown you
back to the world

you spat on. I'm eco-friendly.
I'll make sure your left-over's

are given to the silly rabbit
when he realizes

tricks are for little girls
who grow up kissing leeches

because all the good frogs are taken.
I'll miss you only when I rupture

the monogrammed snow globe.
The one you gave me when you cheated

on your Bar exam then made me fly
stand-by to tell my parents it's over.

— Rola Eldanaf

I'm No Trophy

Clown fish juveniles are all boys.
I should have been a clown fish.
I love how they snuggle
into anemones.

There is one female, large and dominant,
and when she dies
a male morphs into a female
and takes her place. Darwinian logic,
there have to be eggs.

If there are no males,
female black sea bass cross over.
They also become male
when kept in crowded tanks.
Schools can be like crowded tanks.

In 1969 girls could wear pants to school
only if it rained,
first pair: bell bottoms, matching tunic, India print.
"Did you think it would rain today?"
asked my fifth grade teacher
Mr. Kantner.

"No." I replied, noticing his gray slacks
as I glided past him and took my seat.

Dizzy with power
half expecting to be jerked back
as if the teacher had a rod and reel
his finger cradling the line,
feeling for the slightest move.

I shift in my chair. That's enough to make
him to set the hook.
Choice one: leap, twist, in hopes of breaking free,
Choice two: be reeled in by the nose.

Man hands grip my hard body and squeeze
while the hook is ripped away. Someone shouts

"That's a Beauty!" causing titillation,
temptation and taxidermy,
the art of stuffing and mounting for exhibition.

Hang me, but you'll have to kill me first.

— *Nicole M. Street*

It's Hard Waiting

I remember the night before the last girl left me, Jazzy. I was house sitting for my uncle, and let's face it... I knew this girl was done. So I invited this blue-eyed blonde over, well endowed by her Irish heritage.

Our lips met at the second shot of tequila, tongues touching to taste the salt, lips sealing the moment, collapsing to the cool tile with our bodies fumbling.

We finished in my uncle's bed, moving to the beat of our chests, taken by the euphoric stench of our exchange. After, she asks, "Are we sleeping here tonight?" With my passion dripping down her leg, I answer, "No, I don't want to sleep here."

Ten minutes later, I had her out the door. Where I could again sit and dwell, waiting for the inevitable to follow, with one less thing now on my mind.

— *Jeffrey Graessley*

SLEIPNIR

Not my hoof! I am swirling,
I am the thunder, I am the stars.

Who else and what for?
The don't-you-hurt guys,

The stunt. Coffee with white crime.
Poach as approach, uneasy,

Inox traps shining nighttime.

— *Agnes Marton*

My Mother's Curtains

have hung almost as long
as I have been married,
tattered around the edges
stained by her forty a day habit

I tell her that they are worn
& she should replace them,
she brushes it off
retorting that there's plenty wear
left in them yet,
they keep the warmth in
& it's hard to get a well fitting
pair just off the shelf,

predictably
after the second bottle of Chablis
our conversation turns
to my marriage,
she tells me
in that condescending tone,
how my spouse is no good for me
how she'll never have grandchildren
how it is never too late to turn

I brush it off,
knowing that when I next visit
her curtains will still be hanging
dirty
familiar
& almost impossible to replace.

— *Michael Ashley*

Our Life Is Always Somewhere Between

Our life is always somewhere between where we are and where we want to be.

We come to a crisis, and could crumble; albeit what we think is a crisis and I quote the Taoist song, you know, something happens and the farmer fears the worst and the neighbour's say, 'How do you know?' And the next day and the next day the situation changes and the farmer fears the worst possible luck and the neighbour's ask 'How do you know?' Changes and suppositions are wonky. Their separateness threatens. Goodness I am shaking and worried when I know that I should find ways to be positive and take action to push things forward and overcome negativity. Yet I stumble and crumble. We make the best of what is not an easy situation in a bewildering list of secret and partly exposed worlds that trample upon our plans and hide when we want to scream aloud and rant at random particles, relentless cutbacks, the greenhouse effect, the scrapping of tax, the imposition of clauses, the loss involved in tracking old teddy bears and war criminals, the brutality of nursing and care homes, the way that our country supports the Chilean and not the Welsh miners, the stubborn refusal to refuse reality and celebrity and televise searing drama and magic, the sadistic tendency of culture towards fetishisation and spear-like narrowing in its threadbare focus. This is hard when you want less certainty of banality and more sushi and red mullet. You know, each locality has its own specialist foods and that you can watch this on television several times on different channels with different chefs and still select the processed offering of Tesco. Yes, I could eat and drink mixed berry and love a smart tart. I also love the nuanced changes of each day's light, animal and bird sounds, being in the here and now, with all its disappointments and unrequited desires. It is hard not having a world, a world to imagine with unknown edges that part and take you out of yourself beyond those walls and feelings that blur and damage our shape of the world. It is always a world and not the world with a golden aura and horsewomen riding through the wood carrying utensils and apparatus more useful to goddesses and radio waves.

— *David Caddy*

Disguise

tile circle box

the ocean floor
lonely for wing
regenerates

burn slam want

Persephone lifts hers
unchecked heavy
follows

here is your matter of mind
follow her sleep-worn lids
cry and record spring

swing

have to	strong buy
homeland	please love me
children	per se

time like an eye slithers by
remove red remove cat
midlife lists grooves

she clothes

water denies
ghetto dust
stings her

morning after morning
she must buy birth
posing as her twin

lava beyond.

— Arpine Konyalian Grenier

I Was a Dancer Once

But weren't we all?
I am grateful now,
teetering on my right
leg beside the canal —
no, no teeter at all —
balanced, twisting my left
leg in the air, unwinding
the dog's leash. This
happens to us often,
this entanglement, this
dance, though usually,
I fall down all on my own.
An ankle turned on a crack
or cobblestone, knee
skinned, camera crushed.
Amazing how this one
keeps working. Not
a graceful picture.

But dance we must and
remember we might.
Pictures help, and words.
In time, images turn
on themselves, blur
like these upside-down
buildings, gables on green
water, a duck and her
V-shaped wake. No.
Growing older is no
Swan Lake.

— *Suzanne Allen*

NAKED RATTLESNAKE

Dawn-dotted emerald tide,
hissing sculpture of sleepy swirl —
snake and ladders.

No chink, harmless,
unnoticeable run,
rattle-trickle.

My new-reign, ready-made gown,
breathing, glorious skin.

— *Agnes Marton*

All's Well That Ends

This bloody day will pass too, they all do,
but not before the butterfly orchids on my dining table expire,
and my bottom teeth stain of a medium decaf coffee.

Not until my boss mistakes me again for the temp
that only comes in on weekends,
and tells the temp to expect something extra in his paycheck.

This day will truly pass.

Just not before I forget the pronunciation of *savant*,
and neglect to silence the *h* in schizophrenia,
or print *Sigmund Fraud* in big letters on the chalkboard.

Only after I convince my significant other to go bald
and then regret it, will it pass,
and I will dump him for a spoken word artist
with black dreadlocks that crackle and drag.

It will pass.

Once I take a cab to my mother's old address
much to the driver's annoyance,
then later choke on an onion on several-weeks-old rye.

And I fake a bad stomach cramp during gym
to get out of doing sit-ups
for fear my polka dot tummy girdle will show.

Then and only then will it end.

This bloody day will pass too, as they all do
and I will know for sure what I thought then:
that all's well that ends.

— Samantha Hawkins

Poem Envy

This man's poem
to the right
embarrasses mine.
It is much larger,
longer, filled
with stanzas,
Galapagos lines.
The female poet
to my left shelves
an eye onto his, clicks
the metallic edge
of her pencil
against her teeth
& sighs. I sit
flop-eared,
dog-eyed, looking
at mine: so sad,
bitter, & angry,
wondering why
I show up to
these workshops.

— *Cory De Silva*

CONTRIBUTORS

Suzanne Allen's poems appear in anthologies and journals in four countries and her first press-published chapbook, [Verisimilitude](#), is available at [CorruptPress.net](#). She's also a rogue videographer and a co-editor of the Paris based *issue.ZERO*.

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Michael Ashley is a 30 year old from the county of West Yorkshire in the United Kingdom, most of the time he is either working the 9 'til 5 or walking his dogs, but in between this (and the rest of the menial tasks that come along with life) he writes a little poetry. If you want to read more of Mike's poetry visit www.michaelashleypoeetry.wordpress.com.

Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli is a picaresque anti-heroine who ceaselessly travels all over Europe and beyond. Her essays, translations, reviews and short stories have been published in France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. A collection of her poems, which have been published mostly in the United States, is currently being translated into French by Pierre Lamarque and will soon appear in *La page blanche*.

Rich Boucher has published four chapbooks of poetry and for seven years hosted an open reading and slam in Newark, Delaware. Since moving to Albuquerque in March of 2008, Rich has been performing and writing steadily in the Duke City. Hear some of his poems at richboucher.bandcamp.com. New work can be found in the online journal [Brawler](#).

John Brantingham has had work published in hundred of magazines in England and the United States. His first poetry collection [East of Los Angeles](#) is available through Anaphora Press and his first short story collection [Let Us All Pray Now to Our Own Strange Gods](#) is upcoming from World Parade Books.

John F. Buckley lives in Orange County, California. His work has been published in a number of places, one of which nominated him for a Pushcart Prize in 2009. His chapbook [Breach Birth](#) was published on Propaganda Press in March 2011. His full-length collaboration with Martin Ott, [Poets' Guide to America](#), is coming out on Brooklyn Arts Press in Summer 2012.

David Caddy is a poet, critic and editor. His latest books are [Man in Black](#) (Penned In The Margins 2007) and [The Bunny Poems](#) (Shearsman Books 2011). His collection of essays, [So Here We Are](#), is due from Shearsman Books in 2012. He edits [Tears in the Fence](#) magazine.

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Scott Creley's work has been printed in *Sentence*, *Freefall*, and the collection [Bear Flag Republic](#) from Alcatraz Press. He is an occasional host of the Valley Poets reading series and a curator of the San Gabriel Valley Literature Festival.

Mick Davidson has had some poems and a short story published in [Specter Literary Magazine](#). He is one of their regular columnists and has performed some of his work in Cambridge. He is a technical author who works for a software house but started out as a newspaper and magazine journalist. He finished his first novel (vampire) last year and is 1/2 way through his second (bike-based romance). He

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Cory De Silva's album, "Someday When I'm Young," was released in March 2010. He co-edits for Bank-Heavy Press in Long Beach, CA and writes poetry and fiction. His second album, "Beginnings," is scheduled for release in 2012.

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Ray Foreman is the editor and publisher of *Clark Street Review* and *Backstreet*, both bi monthlies. He has been writing narrative human condition poetry for the past 30 plus years.

Jim Fuess works with liquid acrylic paint on canvas. He is striving for grace and fluidity, movement and balance. He likes color and believes that beauty can be an artistic goal. A lot of his abstract paintings are anthropomorphic. The shapes seem familiar. The faces are real. The gestures and movements are recognizable. More of his paintings may be seen at www.jimfuessart.com.

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Jeffrey Graessley is a lowlife from Southern California. His latest works can be found in *Filthy Secret Books* and *Turbulence Magazine*. When not running with the wild dogs on the streets, he enjoys a quiet evening alone with a bottle of cheap wine and some Bukowski to make him feel better about himself. He is often seen shouting on street corners, urging people to accept themselves for the creatures they are.

Arpine Konyalian Grenier's poetry has appeared in numerous publications including several anthologies. She has four published collections, most recently, *The Concession Stand: Exaptation at the Margins* (Otoliths, 2011).

Samantha Hawkins grew up in Jonesboro, GA (but she tells everyone Beverley Hills, CA), and is majoring in Business Computer Systems (though her heart is in English). Her poetry has been published in multiple anthologies and may soon be featured in *Poetry* (if they would only stop rejecting her).

Steve Klepetar teaches literature and writing at Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. His work has received several nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Web. His latest chapbook, *My Father Teaches Me a Magic Word*, has recently been accepted by Flutter Press.

Michaelsun Knapp is a Native American, college graduate, living in the L.A. area, strong with the force. His work has been published in *Creepy Gnome*, *In Somnis Veritas*, and *Beatnik*. He has thrice defeated great dragons at behest of quivering men and thankful, randy, women. All were satisfied. "Especially me."

[Gerald Locklin](#)

Zack Nelson Lopiccolo holds a B.A. in Creative Writing and Literature from California State University, Long Beach. He is one head of the Cerberus that is Bank-Heavy Press. Residing in Long Beach, he works as a drywall taper and lives on a sailboat where many mutated creatures visit him. His poetry can be seen in *Indigo Rising Magazine*, *Vaya!zine*, *Short, Fast, and Deadly*, *Contemporary American Voices*, *Pipe Dream*, and *Crack the Spine*.

Agnes Marton is a Hungarian-born poet, editor, linguist, and translator. She regularly works together with visual artists, takes part in exhibitions and art projects in Europe, in the USA and in New Zealand. She performs in 5 countries. Her book is [Sculpture/poésie](#) with Mani Bour.

Karie McNeley is a mid-twenties poet, artist, and student from Lakewood, CA. Her poetry has been published in *Verdad!*, *Pagan Friends*, and *Bank-Heavy Press*. She also has forthcoming publications in *Tears In The Fence*, *Words & Images*, and *Pearl*. She is an editor and lead artist for Bank-Heavy Press, a small-press publishing group founded in early 2011 and located in Long Beach, CA.

[MissFitPhoto](#)

Andrea Montoya is currently a student at Mount San Antonio College. She is in the process of writing two different genres of books as well as writing fiction short stories in her spare time. She also has a blog named "The Bark-Off" where she states her opinion on dog-related news updates.

Alan Passman is a man who strives for impossibility. His aesthetic is one that blends blatant pop cultural nerdery with red hot American male deviancy masking the empathetic heart of one who has hurt and one who has been hurt. Ever the renaissance man, he is not only a poet and a writer of prose but also a musician in the Los Angeles-based band The Terrapin. He received his BA and MFA from California State University, Long Beach for Creative Writing and Poetry respectively. Currently he teaches English as a Second Language at CSULB.

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[Scott T. Starbuck](#)

[Nicole M. Street](#)

Nicole Taylor has many hopeful projects, no MFA's and is an artist, a hiker, a volunteer, and a dancer, formerly in DanceAbility. She blogs at www.apoetessanthology.blogspot.com/ and you can also find her at <http://www.oregonpoeticvoices.org/poet/312/>.

Paul Tayyar's most recent book of poems is [Follow the Sun](#) (Aortic Books), and his previous collections include [Postmark Atlantis](#) (Level 4 Press) and [Scenes From A Good Life](#) (Tebot Bach). He is the Founding Editor of World Parade Books, which has published collections by Gerald Locklin, Rafael Zepeda, Donna Hilbert and Edward Field. He holds a PhD in American Literature from UC Riverside.

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[K. Andrew Turner](#) grew up in the San Gabriel Valley in beautiful Glendora where he currently resides. His short fiction can be found in the *Chiron Review*.

Raised by a gaggle of bears in the heart of Orange County, **Brian Verwiell** witnessed his first mauling at the age of 4. Since then, his severely underdeveloped mind has often times taken him to the very depths of humanity. He finds joy in the places others would only find fear and horror.

Stephen Williams is a creative writing student attending UC Riverside where he won the Chancellor's Performance Award for excellence in fiction. He is currently preparing to graduate while polishing two completed novels for publication.

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