

COOWEESCOOWEE



A Journal of Arts and Letters

•

Rogers State University

Cooweescoowee, a journal of arts and letters published by Rogers State University, features poetry, fiction, and art from outstanding writers and artists. The journal is edited by Rogers State University faculty and printed on campus at the RSU Print Shop.



| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Sally Emmons-Featherston | Managing Editor |
| Gary Moeller..... | Art Editor |
| Mary Mackie..... | Poetry Editor |
| Emily Dial-Driver | Fiction Editor |
| Bryce Brimer | Layout and Design |

ISSN 1541-0846

Cover Illustration:

I saw in the distance men with their bombs and the beast's mark by Joshua Meier

We would like to give special thanks to Connie and Trudy at the RSU Print Shop, without whom this commando publication would not exist.



Upon publication, all rights to works contained
herein are retained by their contributors.

Rogers State University does not discriminate on the basis
of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or veteran status.

Cooweescoowee's name has its origins in Cherokee language and history. Now anglicized, the term was known in ancient times as the onomatopoeia for a large bird, *gu'wi'sgu'wi*, said to have been seen at infrequent intervals in the old Cherokee country of the present-day southeastern United States. Usually observed accompanying migratory wild geese, the bird has been described as resembling a large snipe with yellow legs and un-webbed feet. The word was also the Cherokee name for John Ross, Principal Chief of the Cherokee during the 19th century removal period, subsequent "trail where they cried," and re-establishment of the Cherokee people in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Currently, Cooweescoowee is the name of the Cherokee Nation district where Claremore and Rogers State University are located.



Disclaimer: We are not responsible for the potty language herein, nor the seedy characters who seem to be like someone you know, nor the offensive art that is certain to shock your sensibilities. If you are considering legal action, what do you say we avoid the lawyers and just settle the whole thing with a game of high stakes poker?

CONTENTS

Fiction

- 1 **The Last Guardian** • Vicki Salloum
- 21 **Bed and Breakfast** • James P. Hanley
- 33 **Deathbed** • Rob Brannon
- 49 **Malchas** • Diane Glancy
- 57 **Remember the Truth...** • Michael Leone
- 79 **The Struggling Poet** • Michael Milburn

Poetry

- 85 **Ode to Love...** • Ryan Kittrell
- 87 **The Only Angels...** • Glenn Sheldon
- 89 **Burning** • Gaylord Brewer
- 90 **Only Insomnia** • Gaylord Brewer
- 93 **Phantasia** • Beryl Markham
- 97 **Soweto** • M. Doretta Cornell
- 99 **Examen** • M. Doretta Cornell
- 101 **My Daughter's Bedroom** • Cherri Randall
- 103 **Ghost of Candide** • Nancy Simpson
- 105 **Bone Game** • Allan Peterson
- 106 **Illusion of Spirit** • Allan Peterson
- 109 **When White Space ...** • Jordan Ferguson
- 111 **Gargantua Reduced...** • Naomi Feigelson Chase
- 112 **Cold Comfort** • Naomi Feigelson Chase
- 113 **Marrow** • Naomi Feigelson Chase
- 115 **Condone** • Aubrey Hill
- 116 **Canvas** • Aubrey Hill
- 119 **Lord of the Bowl** • Andrew Brasier
- 121 **Dark Soul** • Debbie Hendryx
- 122 **The Storm** • Debbie Hendryx
- 125 **Falling Through Water** • Joanne Lowery
- 127 **Haiku** • Rebecca Lilly
- 131 **4TH of July** • Kyle Aylward
- 135 **Subjectivity** • Laura Smith
- 136 **Tip** • Laura Smith

Art and Photography

- 17 **Major Hass** • Josh Hass
- 18 **I saw in the distance men...** • Joshua Meier
- 19 **To the Moon** • Alice Mattingly
- 31 **Milkin' Caterpillar** • Andrea Barnes
- 47 **Self-Portrait** • Josh Meier
- 55 **Space Chicken** • Andrea Barnes
- 74 **Hannah** • Brandy Cohen
- 75 **The White Lady** • Toshona Jones
- 76 **Alone like Winter** • Cassandra Trahan
- 77 **Ashley** • Brandy Cohen
- 91 **I saw you in the warm glow...** • Joshua Meier
- 107 **Beauty** • Amanda Dishman
- 117 **Untitled** • Kaci Scott
- 123 **The Nude** • Ashley Etter
- 129 **Bones** • Ashley Etter
- 133 **Kathleena** • Brandon Jones

Vicki Salloum's short stories have been included in the anthologies *When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple* (Papier-Mache Press, 1991), *Pass/Fail: 32 Stories About Teaching* (Red Sky Books, 2002), and *Voices from the Couch* (America House, 2002). She resides in New Orleans.

THE LAST GUARDIAN

Vicki Salloum

It was not yet six in the morning when Roberta got a call from Hannah.

“Roberta . . . “

“Yeah, Hannah? What’s going on?”

“My house burnt up.”

Roberta drove over, brought her new husband along, introduced him to Hannah and Mrs. Mariarty, who were sitting outside on a stoop. Hannah smiled at Roberta but she could tell she was exhausted. Hannah escorted them into the house, showed them the ravaged rooms, the blackened walls, her cherished knickknacks reduced to ashes from the flames. Walking like a zombie, Hannah told them the fire had been started by the family who lived in the other half of the shotgun double. (They’d absconded in the night, Hannah found out, apparently after getting an eviction notice and torching the place out of revenge.) She’d awakened at two to the acrid smell of smoke, seen smoke billowing through the rooms, then run to wake her mama to get her out before calling 911 and fleeing the house herself.

She and Mrs. Mariarty would be going to live for a while with her half-brother Alphonse in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, a small town in Tangipahoa Parish an hour’s drive northeast of New Orleans. Alphonse wouldn’t be able to pick them up that night but would the first chance he could. What can I do to help, Hannah? Nothing, she assured her. Where will you sleep tonight? She and her mama would sleep on the floor in the living room, the least damaged of the rooms.

Roberta was aware of standing before Hannah about to ask if she and her mama might like to spend the night with her. She waited for the words to come, waited for them to roll loosely off her tongue so she would be doing the right thing and not disgrace herself—turn her back on her—as she’d been tempted to do increasingly. Instead, no words came. She merely looked at Hannah, and Hannah smiled back in the silence.

Roberta glanced quickly at the house, charred and ruined in the steamy dawn of a New Orleans summer. She remembered when she first saw that house exactly a dozen years before. It’d been a stifling August morning. The shotgun double, orange-pink in a dilapidated block of run-

down cottages and camelbacks, looked on the verge of collapse. The front yard was bare—no grass, plants, shrubs. A huge slab of plywood partitioned one porch from the other. As she ascended concrete blocks that served as steps and opened an iron grille that shielded the door, Roberta remembered thinking she'd never seen an uglier sight in her life.

Then she opened the door. Memories come and go, but the thing she would never forget was the look in her eyes: expectant, excited, kindly. She had cropped, wavy hair, skin like cream-drenched tea, and she couldn't have been taller than 4-ft. 9-in. Hannah invited her in.

Roberta couldn't believe her eyes. Every room—every single inch of space—was crammed with knickknacks: posters, papier-mache art work, figurines, balloon lanterns. A brightly-decorated Christmas tree stood by the door. Posters of Batman, Superman, and Cher hung from the walls. Figures of Kris Kringle and Donald Duck adorned coffee tables and bureaus.

She introduced herself as Hannah Mariarty, said she'd gotten everything on sale: the bank and goody holder for 20-cents at an after-Halloween sale; the elf figurine for a nickel at Schwegmann's Supermarket. She never forgot the dates of each purchase: the ballerina on April 10, 1959, the heart-totting angel on Valentine's Day '53. Hannah escorted her through all four rooms, picking up a trinket, cradling it, discussing its history as though it were a queen's diamond.

"You like this?" She was holding a peridot ring. "I bought it at Woolworth thirty years ago." She erupted in a fit of giggles.

"Why . . . that's beautiful, Hannah."

"How much you think it costs?" Giggles.

"Oh . . . let's see . . . twenty bucks?"

An explosion of giggles. "No! Twenty-five cents!" Hannah put her hand over her mouth to suppress her jubilation.

In the early days, Roberta tried to teach her to read. They'd trudge away at it in the sweltering afternoons with only a fan blowing in the kitchen. After months of repetition, Hannah could barely read a sentence. On a miracle of a day, an entire paragraph without stumbling. Then Roberta would come the following Saturday dying to hear her read and Hannah would not be able to recognize a single word. Roberta was baffled by it, then came up with a theory. It was that Hannah was so emotionally tied to her mother she didn't want her mother to think she could live without her. In Hannah's mind, her mother would stop loving her and surely abandon her. So Hannah would go on being the helpless child out of fear of abandonment. Roberta didn't know if her theory was right or wrong, but something happened to give credence to it.

She'd taken her to the library a year after they'd met. Hannah loved being there. She'd even gotten herself a library card. Roberta was thinking she was on her way to becoming independent. "Hannah," Roberta said, as they were leaving, "one day I'll show you how to ride the bus. Then you can come by yourself and sit in this library and read."

But when she returned the next Saturday to resume the reading lesson, Roberta was in for a shock.

"You read two whole paragraphs about Cher last week. Now you can't understand a word about Goldie Hawn?"

"I guess I jus' forgot."

"What do you mean, forgot?"

"I didn't get a chance to practice. My mama needed me."

"You didn't have an hour in the whole week to read?"

"I had to cook for my mama."

"But that doesn't take . . . Don't you want to be able to go to the library and read?"

"I guess . . ."

"Well, how are you going to do that if you don't study, Hannah?"

"My mama may not want me to."

"Oh, Hannah, she'd be proud."

Hannah only shrugged. Her reading skills declined until Roberta finally gave up. Instead, she'd take her to Central Grocery in the French Quarter on Saturdays. It wasn't easy getting her out of the house.

"Mama, you sure you don't mind me goin'?"

Mrs. Mariarty, a dark-eyed woman even shorter than Hannah, sat in her rocker reading the *Times-Picayune*.

"No, Jay, go on."

"Don't you wanna come?"

"Go on." She waved.

"Aw right, we'll go—'less you needs me to stay?"

"No, Jay, scoot."

Roberta and Hannah would make their way to the door and then Hannah would back track, return to her mama and the ritual would begin all over until Mrs. Mariarty, impatience blazing in her eyes, would shout, "Get the hell outta here!" But that wouldn't stop Hannah who, having run to the door at the first angry utterance, would stop, turn, and shriek, "Mama, is you surrrrrreeeeeeeeee . . .?" and Mrs. Mariarty cursing and throwing her paper against the wall.

The worst was yet to come.

"Where ya takin' me?" They were in Roberta's Volkswagen heading for the Quarter.

"The sign says I can't make a left turn here."

"Whatcha mean? Where ya goin'?"

"I can't make a left turn, Hannah. I gotta make the turn where it says I can make it."

"This ain't goin' to the Quarter. Where you takin' me?"--eyeing her suspiciously—"Turn here! Turn —!"

"—You're gonna make me have an accident!"

Hannah fumbled for the door; Roberta slowed to a crawl. Cars screeched behind her.

Halfway out the door, on the verge of tumbling out, Hannah heard her terrified screams and returned to her seat. But when they reached Canal Street and crossed into the Quarter, another crisis was in the making. In the early '70s, the French Quarter was known for its heavily trafficked streets and few spaces in which to park. Roberta, who'd lived in the city for a while, knew her best bet to find a parking space was on the lesser-trafficked Dauphine Street. It was at the opposite end of the Quarter from Decatur, where Central Grocery was located, and a little inconvenient to walk, but it was the best chance they had. But when she finally did find a space on Dauphine, Hannah wasn't happy.

"What's the matter?"

Hannah had gotten out of the car, looking fiercely in both directions.

"Why did we park here?"

"There's no other spot."

As they walked toward Decatur, Hannah crept cautiously along, looking behind her, eyes wild, darting, then settling in a nystagmus of recognition upon a man. When she spotted a mounted police officer, she took off running.

"Misterrrrrrrrrr . . . !!!!!" she shrieked. "Misterrrrrrrrrr. . . Heeeeeellllpp!"

They had approached Royal, a bustling street filled with antique shops and art galleries and couples gawking at her. As she neared the officer, she began talking and waving frantically. Then she pointed to a stranger.

"See him," Hannah shouted, nearly spooking the officer's horse.

"He been followin' us foe blocks." She pointed to an elderly gent in a seer-sucker suit.

"See him?" The old man looked at them. "We been comin' from Dauphine. He been followin' us the whole way. That man"—voice trembling—"he tryin' to kidnap me."

The old man froze.

The cop gazed at him skeptically.

"Hannah," Roberta wailed, "that man's not after you. He's probably heading for the French Market just like we are." She turned to the officer, told him Hannah wasn't used to getting out, and, with stone-faced indifference, he turned and trotted away.

"Hannah," Roberta scolded, "why did you do that? Would you like to go home?"

That panicked her even further, knowing they'd be returning to the quiet street to be at the mercy of the "kidnapper." Instead, they headed past Decatur and onto the Moonwalk overlooking the Mississippi River. There, they sat and talked 'til Hannah was brave enough to return to the car. After that, whenever they'd go to the Quarter, Roberta paid six dollars to park in a lot on Decatur, figuring it was worth that and more to get Hannah off her back. But soon she tired of paying, and their visits to the Quarter ceased.

Hannah lived on Ruby Street in Mid-City near the Dixie Brewery. Roberta continued her visits but soon grew bored listening to Hannah gab about her knickknacks or potted plants in the tiny space she called her yard.

So her visits became fewer. That's when Hannah began calling her.

"Roberta," she'd say, "what color is your tennis? Mine's orange. But, you know, I only bought 'em in case I go somewhere important."

She'd want to know what color tennis Roberta's friends wore. Or what she ate for lunch. Or, she'd ask how old did Roberta think she looked.

"You don't look older than 20," said Roberta.

Giggles.

"I don't look like I'm 48?"

"Nope."

"I bet I don't look smart, do I?" Giggles.

"I think you do."

"Do I look like I can't read?"

"You look as smart as anyone."

"You think I look it but I bet you don't think I am."

"I think you are. You do a lot of things better than most people I know."

"I don't look retard like they say at Project Revival?"

"What makes you think they say that?"

Muted giggles. "I know what they say." Pause. "Roberta. . ."

"Yeah?"

"Why'd you go there?"

"To Project Revival?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I'd just moved to New Orleans and didn't have much to do with my time so I thought I'd do some volunteer work and help other

people.”

“Is you sorry you got me?”

“No.”

Giggles. “You ain’t sorry they gave you me?”

“No.”

Giggle. “Is you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Do I look like I’m aliteracy?”

“You look like anybody.”

“Do I look like I’m . . . colored?”

“Oh . . . well . . .” Hannah didn’t think much of the blacks in her neighborhood, didn’t approve of some of their ways.

“Can people tell I’m . . . colored?”

“Well, you’re very light-skinned.”

Giggles.

“You like tattoos? Want me to come over and feel your leg?” Raucous giggles.

And it would go on like that for hours till Roberta finally ended the conversation. Hannah could talk forever. Her whole world consisted of her mama and her house. And though she never complained, Roberta could tell that wasn’t enough. Whenever they’d take a walk, Hannah would scream with excitement when she’d see someone she knew on the street. She’d run up, greet them, introduce them to Roberta, and have the time of her life gabbing—it was a special celebration. And when they’d leave for their walk, she’d tell Roberta all about the folks on the street: Karla, the hooker; Lucian who lived with Alfred, who got shot in the neck .

She’d even talk about her family. At age 17, her mama had an affair with a black man. Roberta didn’t think she’d ever met her dad; she rarely spoke of him. Her mama, who was white, went on to marry a man of her own race. They had six kids—Hannah’s half brothers and sisters—and none of them was good, except for one. The rest were hateful, from the way Hannah described them. She’d tell things like, when she was a little girl, they’d make her eat her meals off the floor. They’d throw her off the porch, kick her, lock her in a big cage, put her under the house, and there she’d stay for hours.

Hannah never went to school. Her mama was ashamed she’d had a child by a black and kept her home to hide her. When she was older, she went to a school taught by black Sisters of the Holy Family, but by then she couldn’t keep up so that only lasted a few weeks.

The one good thing in her life was her brother Timmy, the last of the children. She’d tell about the antique store on Royal where Timmy

worked, the lover he lived with, and all the things he did for her. He'd take her to Schwegmann's to "make groceries," take her everywhere she needed to go and to his place to meet his friends. He wasn't ashamed of Hannah. He bought her the greatest gift, a daschund she named Peppermint, now old and decrepit with cataracts and arthritis. These were her greatest loves, Timmy and Pep. And Roberta knew Hannah liked her, too; she treated her special when she was around.

But Roberta wasn't seeing Hannah much anymore. She'd taken a job as an office manager for a group of doctors. She was taking acting lessons and dating a man she liked. It seemed pointless to go to Hannah's now that the tutoring was off. And it was too much of a hassle taking her places. So their "visits" were limited to a phone call now and then:

"Roberta . . . happy birthday!"

"Why, thank you, Hannah."

"You is 31 today, ain't you, Roberta?"

"That's right. You always remember. . . . How are you?"

She sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I ain't been doing good." Hannah hesitated. "Pep's sick."

"I'm sorry."

"Roberta . . . can you come over?"

When Roberta arrived, Hannah took her to the kitchen, where a blanket was spread on the linoleum floor with a pillow on top of it. The dog lay insentient in the center of the pillow, his bulbous eyes visible in the dark. Hannah stooped, surveying him like a mother a dying child, rubbed his head with such tenderness it was heartbreaking to watch. Mrs. Mariarty, in the next room, sat in her rocker, reading. Roberta took her seat at the kitchen table and Hannah stood up. This is what they did whenever Roberta came over. Hannah never sat, not even during their reading lessons.

Another peculiar thing always happened during her visits. Mrs. Mariarty would always be in her rocker. She'd greet Roberta cordially, but after she had been there 15 minutes or so, Mrs. Mariarty would rise, go to the bathroom, shut the door, and never come out. She'd never hear the commode flush or anything else going on in there.

On the evening Pep was sick, everything was as usual, Hannah standing as they talked, Mrs. Mariarty hiding out in the bathroom, Roberta seated at the kitchen table. Except nothing was as usual. Hannah would bend over Pep, rub his head and kiss him. In the dreary darkness, sorrow radiated from her. Hannah would fetch a bottle of liquid, spill some on a biscuit, break it in pieces, and hand-feed the bits to him. This was his medicine, she said, tears falling down her cheeks. After a while, Roberta left.

She didn't hear from Hannah for months. Then she got a call.

"Roberta . . ."

"Yeah, Hannah . . . How've you been doing?"

"Not so good. Roberta . . . I lost 20 pounds."

"Why haven't you been eating?"

"I ain't got no appetite."

"How's Pep?"

"He died."

"When?"

"A week after you came."

Roberta came over. Hannah was gaunt, a little bitty thing now the size of a starved child, yet carrying herself like a tired old woman.

Hannah tried getting a little dog after that. She'd keep Roberta posted on her progress, telling her she'd called a dozen dog owners who advertised their pups for sale and that this one or that would promise her a pup but nothing ever materialized.

Time passed. She didn't hear from her. She thought of her often and considered calling, but the prospect of another marathon phone conversation was more than she could stand. Besides, she was absorbed in her own life, the man she'd been dating. And now they were engaged; she was planning a small wedding. She hadn't told Hannah about Kevin because she knew she'd ask a million questions. She thought about inviting Hannah to the wedding, but she nixed that idea because who would take care of her, bring her there, take her back? Having Hannah at the wedding surely would be a nightmare. But Hannah never was far from her mind. And it was three days before Christmas when Hannah finally called. Hannah asked her to come over. She'd gotten her a present.

When Roberta opened the door, there was a solemnity about the place. Mrs. Mariarty was seated in her rocker, a bitter, frowning figure rocking back and forth, staring at the wall. Hannah, shoulders hunched, looking more defeated than she'd ever seen her, smiled wanly, happiness briefly shining in her eyes as she greeted Roberta at the door. They sat on the sofa—at least, Roberta did—and exchanged gifts. Roberta bought her a potted plant; Hannah gave her an envelope with a twenty dollar bill in it. On a card, she'd scrawled her name.

Hannah asked to go to Central Grocery. She didn't pester her mama this time, quietly getting her money bag and saying goodbye at the door. She didn't put up a fuss as Roberta drove to the Quarter, looking far too preoccupied to be worried about little things. She bought Greek olives and feta cheese, carried them to the car (no panic over the parking), then asked if they could walk to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church to say a prayer

at the Shrine of St. Jude.

The chapel, which houses the shrine, was on Rampart Street, not far from Dauphine where they'd parked. On the way there, Hannah started asking questions.

"Where do people go when they die?"

"I don't know about other people, but I believe in heaven."

"What do you think it's like?"

Roberta told her about something that had happened when she was nine. She was a skinny kid then, with long dark braided pigtails. She had been walking in the front yard of her parents' home on the beachfront of the Mississippi Gulf Coast where she grew up. She remembered it was windy—a beautiful summer day—and the sea breeze rippled the branches of the live oaks that towered over the grounds not far from the beachfront highway. She remembered walking toward the Mississippi Sound against the strength of the wind when an incredible feeling came over her.

She could hear the gorgeous wind music, feel emotions so powerful she knew she would have to capture them into words, resurrect the splendor of the emotions, because she would never experience them ever again. Not in this world—in this life. Somehow, she knew that. Knew nothing would be so beautiful ever—not on this earth. And the words that came to her were peace and joy and love. Only magnified a thousand times from what she had ever known. A tiny glimpse of heaven. Always did believe in it.

"Do you think prayer can make a person well?" asked Hannah.

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Do you ever ask Gawd for certain things?"

"I don't ask God for things, just ask Him to help me find out what He wants me to do and give me the strength to do it."

"What if somebody's sick? Can you ask Gawd to make him well?"

"Who's sick, Hannah?"

"Just somebody I know."

"Well, I guess I would ask God to do what's best."

They reached the steps of the church and entered, made the sign of the cross, walked down the center aisle toward the altar, Hannah leading. As they approached the altar, Roberta genuflected, then sat in a pew at the far left side. Hannah had made her way toward the statue of St. Jude in the left corner. As Hannah stood before St. Jude, she put a dollar in a metal box with a slit in it, picked up a candle from another box, lit it, then removed a lighted candle from the top row of candles nearest St. Jude and put her own lighted candle in the empty holder. At that very moment, a figure materialized from the shadows. They heard her voice loud and clear: "Whatcha doing with my motherfuckin' candle? You put that motherfuckin' candle

back where it belongs. You goddamn put it back!”

“Lady,” wailed Hannah, “. . . please, lady . . . this is the house a Gawd!”

“Put that motherfuckin’ candle back, ya hear?” the voice hissed from a pew behind Roberta. She turned in the direction of the voice, saw a stunted old woman with angry eyes and a hand balled in a fist. Hannah was outraged. “Shame on you, lady!”—wagging her finger. “You ain’t got no . . . reverence!”

“I show you what I got!” The old woman took something out of her purse, stormed from the pew, heading for Hannah. They both had the same idea—tumbling like balls of fire out of a side door and into the street. Roberta dropped Hannah off, went home to prepare for her wedding.

A month later, the phone rang.

“Roberta . . .”

“Hannah . . .?”

“Roberta, Timmy died.”

Roberta came over, asked Hannah why she hadn’t told her Timmy was sick. What were friends for? Why hadn’t she confided? She could have helped, done something. Hannah said Timmy never wanted anybody to know he had AIDS. She kept it to herself out of respect for his wishes. That day, Timmy was all she could talk about. He was only 29, wasn’t that young? He was the one gave his mama that big grandfather clock in her bedroom. How he always talked good to her, defended her against the others. And what was she going to do without him now? How she visits his grave every single day, brings wildflowers. How she always was there in that hospital room watching over him, and when they let him go home, how she took good care of him—she, her mama, and his lover, Jon-Claude. “Don’t you think he loved me better than anyone?” Or, “Wasn’t he beautiful?” she’d say, showing off his picture.

Roberta recognized the face.

She was at Sunday Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church once with her fiancée, Kevin. Sitting in the same pew a few seats away was a waifish young man who looked as though he knew her. He had the most radiant smile, almost angelic in its sweetness, and left her baffled as to who he was. That day, following his death, Hannah told her that Timmy had seen her a long time ago. She realized then who the smiling stranger was. How had he recognized her? They’d never met. Hannah said she’d showed him a picture of her once. Then she remembered seeing him and that smile that looked as though he thought she was a friend, almost like someone he loved in a way, and it all made sense.

Who would take care of her? For years after Timmy’s death,

Roberta checked up on Hannah, trying to take Timmy's place, as though she was the last guardian she had left. But she was afraid. What was she going to do when Hannah's mama died? Mrs. Mariarty was 77. How long is it reasonable for a woman that age to live? And when she died, what would happen to Hannah? There wasn't a soul left who gave a damn about her. Timmy was dead, Project Revival long defunct, gone the way all badly funded charities do. And she suspected her siblings only meant her harm.

Once when Hannah and Roberta went for a walk, Hannah told her about her brother, Marcel. He'd just asked his mama if he could live with her. Marcel, 45, had been fired by the sewerage and water board for drinking on the job, and he couldn't pay his rent. So he figured he'd come freeloader. "Roberta, you know I tol' Marcel I was crazy," Hannah giggled. "He say I ain't crazy, jus' a little slow. I tol' Marcel if he come live with us, the whole responsibility'd be on me. I'd have to wash his clothes and cook his meals and take care a' him when he come home drunk. I say, 'Marcel, you know I jus' a little bitty thing. I can't carry you to the bed when you come home loaded.' He come here, spill beer on the floor, can't tell you how many times, and don't bother to clean it up. Other day, I clean out the freezer and icebox. He go in, spill cream all over the inside of the icebox and don't even say he sorry. Leave me the mess. He take all the canned foods outta the safe and spread em all over the kitchen—"

"—Safe? You mean pantry?"

"Yeah. And the other day, he tell me to wash his clothes. I give him six bucks, tell him to go to the laundromat and wash em hisself." She paused. "You know, Roberta," she frowned, "I'd be cleanin' and cookin' and wipin' up his mess from mornin till night if he move in this house. I tol' him if I was in his shoe and I ask him to do my clothes cuz I don't have no money, he wouldn't do nothin'. He never done a thing for me. Last year, when his big, fat girlfriend come to the house and steal the money out my purse, I tell her to put it back. She don't put it back, she grab my arms and squeeze so tight she make bruises. And Marcel jus' stand there, watchin'. The only good thing he ever done was take me to Schwegmann's. And you know what he done? Lef' me there. Lef' me to walk in the broiling sun with three bags of groceries all the way home. Me and Timmy, we the only good ones."

She rarely complained. Most times, Roberta would find out things only when she asked. Once, during the holidays she asked Hannah what she was doing. Fixing turkey and dressing and sweet potato pie. The day after Christmas, she called, asked if she'd had a good Christmas dinner with her family. Didn't eat with her family. What about all the food she'd cooked? They'd loaded that in the car and took her mama along with them

and her mama ate Christmas dinner at her sister's in Ponchatoula. But she had a good Christmas anyway, fixed scrambled eggs and ham and biscuits baked from scratch and spent the whole day on her hobby: making castles out of popsickle sticks. She never shared holidays with her family; they never asked her.

So what was going to happen after her mama died? The thought preyed on Roberta. She knew the onus would be on her to take care of Hannah. And she desperately didn't want to. Roberta had too much to do to be taking care of anyone. Besides, what would she do with her "things," put flamingo lamps on her coffee table and posters of Cher on the wall? She didn't know much about Hannah's finances, only that she drew SSI. Would Roberta have to support her? And would her siblings try to take her money? Roberta wondered was she capable of living alone or was there a group home she might live in and who would do the investigating and make all the arrangements? Or would Hannah need to stay with her a while and would that "while" stretch into years so she'd be saddled with Hannah forever?

She had to remind myself she wasn't responsible. She did all that she could. She had a life, a new husband, didn't have time for Hannah's troubles. So she stuffed things in the back of her mind and got on with her life.

Then she got the call.

In the scorching heat of dawn, amid the stench of burnt out wood, Roberta wanted to hear an invitation come out of her mouth but silence only followed. Hannah thanked her for coming, said she'd call when they got settled. As Kevin and Roberta left, relief flooded over her at not getting caught in Hannah's mess. That's not how she phrased it. One doesn't put it in such cold terms and still be able to live with oneself, but still that's how she felt.

She didn't hear from Hannah. Her thoughts were with her. She suffered pangs of conscience for leaving her like that—an unease, discomfort—but nothing she couldn't handle. She wondered how she was getting along, told herself she didn't know how to get in touch with her. But it doesn't take a genius to look up a number.

Then she got a call.

"Why didn't you call sooner? It's been months since I've heard from you!"

"Alphonse and his wife wouldn't let me use the phone."

"Can I come over, Hannah? Where are you?"

Hannah said her landlord had renovated the house and that she and

her mama were finally home. Roberta came that day. Hannah escorted her through the remodeled little shotgun, proud of all the things her landlord had done. She looked old, tired, like she'd lost more weight. Roberta was alarmed to see the hollows in her cheeks, her heart-shaped face even more accentuated. She asked a dozen questions. Hannah said after the fire, Alphonse didn't come to get them for four days and that they had nothing to eat so she got food from the Red Cross and later bought fast foods from "the street." Then Alphonse showed up and brought them to his house. He and his wife were "bossy," wouldn't hardly let her eat anything though they made her do all the cooking and cleaning. Couldn't use the phone or watch TV. Couldn't wait to get out of there. And now she was home. "Know what Alphonse tol' me? Tol' me when mama die, he ain't gone do nothin' for me." Hannah looked at the barren walls and a light shone in her eyes. "I got a lot to do, Roberta," she said happily. "Got to clean this place and take what furniture we saved out of storage and get this place lookin' like a home again. You know, mama and I has lived here 38 years."

Roberta felt shame when she returned home, thinking of Hannah seeking food from the Red Cross and how she'd never asked for one thing from her. What kind of friend was she not to have invited her to her house or brought food? At the very least, inquired about her. Even a stranger would do that. If she was that kind of friend, she should leave her alone. It would be more honest. So she vowed to get out of her life. She got on with her business, was busy, tried to be productive. She had friends, a job, a husband—a lucky life when compared to Hannah's.

But she couldn't get her out of my mind. She'd go to Central Grocery to get olives and think of Hannah being so particular about the cheese she bought, bossing the man at the counter. On her walks, she'd think of the time they trekked to the Quarter all the way from Hannah's house on a blistering June morning and how they laughed and did silly things. Or the time she took her to the dentist and Hannah was scared; it was a dump of a place she'd picked, so she didn't get her teeth cleaned, got the hell out as soon as possible; or the time they went to the doctor's and she talked the doctor's head off; or the time they went to the museum and she hated Toulouse-Lautrec.

Roberta went about her business encased in loneliness. When she thought about it—really thought about it—it was only when she was with Hannah she felt good about herself. Most of the time, Hannah treated her as though being in her company was a privilege. She was smarter, kinder, more popular than anyone on earth because Hannah thought so. Her life was to be envied because Hannah envied her.

She sat at P.J.'s Coffee House drinking coffee with her friend, Judy.

But her thoughts were with Hannah. Hannah would have liked being here. Hannah would have had great fun with Judy. Hannah made it a point to know everything about Judy. What color tennis does she wear? What did you and Judy do today? She knew every detail of Judy's surgery and the time Judy spent in intensive care and what Judy's house looked like when Roberta had her wedding there. She thought about the day she told Hannah about her wedding, how excited she became over the events of that New Year's morning, standing there, eyes gleaming, as though experiencing it all with her. She'd left her house feeling washed in her goodness, her unworthy self redeemed by her presence. She'd left that house feeling sick to her stomach. What was more important than to have had Hannah there? She set down her cup, buried her face in her hands. She wanted to run to Hannah, tell her how sorry she was.

She found a phone.

Hannah had come home the day before. "Where've you been?" The hospital. "Why were you there?" Her mama. "What was wrong?" But you could never get a straight answer ever out of her. She'd stayed with her mama day and night for three weeks, she said. Slept in the same room, crying. Unable to eat. Except when nurses insisted, then she'd walked down seven flights of stairs to the cafeteria because she was scared of taking the elevator. She didn't have to do much walking—she only ate one meal a day. Wasn't hungry. That was why she got sick. Making herself sick worrying about her mama.

My God, Hannah! Roberta had no idea what ailed her mama but suspected Hannah herself must be anemic from the medicine she said she was taking. Hannah said she was so tired she could hardly walk. She'd lost more weight. She was trying to keep up her strength so she could take care of her mama. She had to make sure her mama took her medicine. Had to watch her sodium intake and sugar intake. And now that they were home, she would be cooking all her meals and nursing her back to health. But still she was scared her mama would die. "How much do you weigh?" "Seventy pounds."

"Hannah, that won't do."

Hannah opened the door when Roberta knocked, a shrunken, desiccated figure who moved unsteadily as she escorted Roberta to the back of the house. Her hair was quite gray, brushed forward so that a tiny bald spot appeared in the back. As Hannah moved, Roberta was alarmed by the helplessness she sensed in her but figured the doctors never would have let her leave the hospital if they thought something was seriously wrong. They entered her mama's bedroom. Her mama sat in the rocker, looking like a choleric and outraged bird.

"Mrs. Mariarty," Roberta asked, "how are you?"

"I had three heart attacks! I nearly died! I'm so weak I can't stand up. Can't do no walking. Doctor say it's my heart." She put her hand over her heart. "He don't even want me to walk 'round the room. My heart can't take it."

"But, mama, you're gonna be all right," Hannah shouted. "I'm gonna take care a you. Gone feed you, give you medicine so you'll get your strength back."

"Can't eat nothing!" lamented Mrs. Mariarty, her querulous eyes on Hannah.

"You have to!" Hannah turned frantically to Roberta, asked if she could take her to Schwegmann's to make groceries. They went that day. Hannah was so weak she couldn't shop for long. But Roberta continued to take her every two weeks, and, gradually, she got better.

Roberta was hoping they could be the way they were—not the disinterested do-gooder she'd become in her own eyes and surely in Hannah's. She wanted their friendship back. Hannah loved their trips to Schwegmann's. Eyes lambent, she'd stroll up and down every aisle, taking fifteen minutes just to select bananas and, hours later, when they were ready to go, returning and exchanging them for an even fresher bunch. She'd smell every cantaloupe, inspect the vegetables for price and quality, picking them up and scrutinizing them as if buying for the most prestigious, five-star restaurant. She had Roberta read the sodium and sugar contents of each canned good and package. Sometimes their grocery shopping would last the entire morning—it was like a holiday to Hannah.

But something was missing. Hannah always acted as though she were glad to see Roberta, but she did not act as if she had missed her. And Roberta noticed that Hannah wasn't gabbing freely as she did in the past. Now, her talk was self-consciously polite as if they were distant relatives or courteous neighbors. She wasn't asking a million noxious questions or prying into her life. And, in turn, Roberta felt like a stranger. And what saddened her most was the formal way she thanked her for taking her to Schwegmann's, thanking the disinterested do-gooder she chanced to have known for so many years. No more gossip, raucous teasing, only Hannah the grateful now.

Roberta had been more unconsciously than deliberately seeking a way to make amends for her neglect. And the moment had come. She brought up a subject that had been bothering her a lot.

"Hannah," Roberta said, steering the cart piled high with food, "you know your mama's not gonna live forever."

"I know." She picked up a box of doughnuts, eyed it suspiciously.

"Have you given thought to . . . I mean . . . where you'd want to live if . . . if . . ."

"— if my mama die?" she said gravely. Slowly, she put back the box of doughnuts.

"Yes," Roberta said, ". . . if . . . that happened." She paused.

"Hannah, do you think you might like to live alone? Hannah . . . because . . . because . . . if you can't live alone . . . you can come stay with me. Me and Kevin. We'd love to have you for as long as you'd want. Because . . . we love you, Hannah."

Hannah looked stunned then shyly turned away. She reached for a box of vanilla cream wafers and pretended to be examining the list of ingredients on the back. She looked up. "Thank you, Roberta," she said, eyes brimming. "But I can live by myself now." There was a peacefulness in her tone and, as she turned from her to the row of wafers, a solemn dignity in her eyes. "Are you sure?" said Roberta, sounding like Hannah in the old days. "Yeah," she replied. "Maybe I couldn't before . . . but now I can."

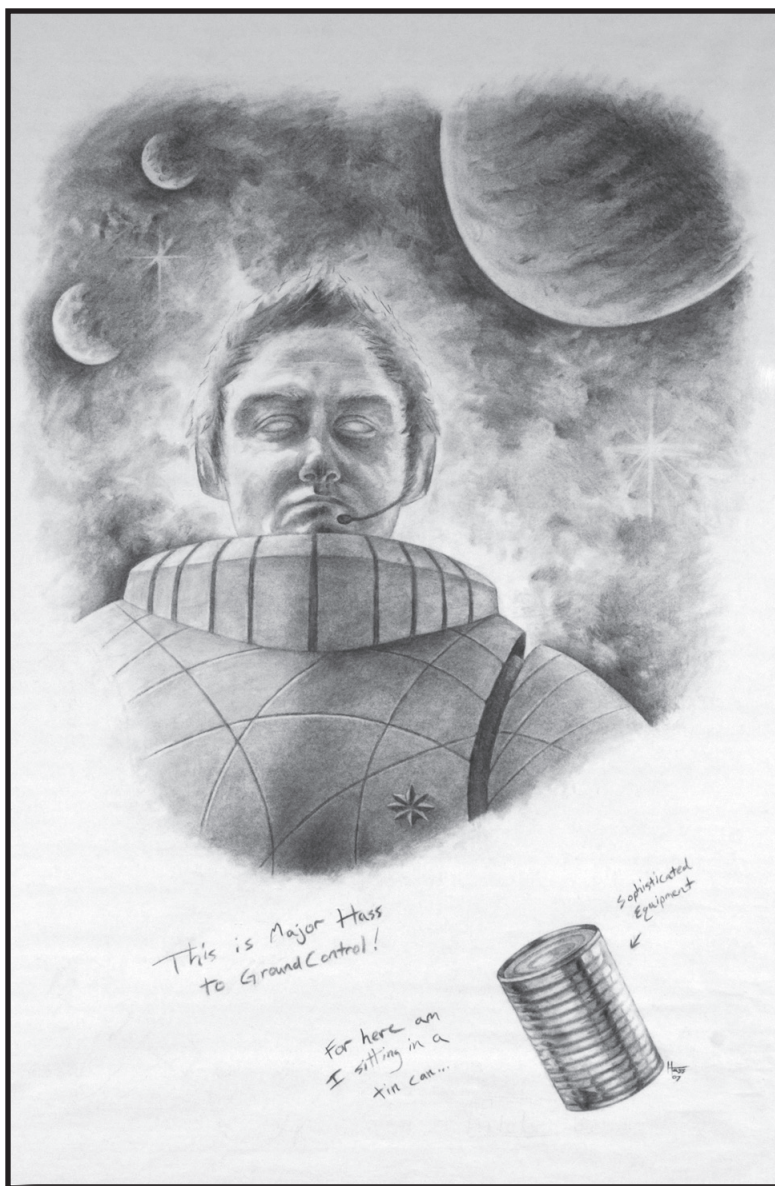
An emptiness settled over Roberta. A strange and baffling grief. Because it came to her that Hannah would never stay in her home, not even for a day or two, something in her eyes told her that. And the stinginess of her ways filled her with disgust. And for a moment she felt heartsick. And then she thought of Hannah. She knew from the calm expression on her face she could live alone and knew that she knew it and that she'd do well and that all she had gone through had brought her to this place. Roberta looked at the wafers—sugar-free for her mama—and was reminded it was Hannah who was taking care of her, Hannah who had moved their things out and back in after the fire, Hannah who had taken care of Timmy, Hannah who had cared for Pep. "Roberta," Hannah said, finally putting the wafers in the cart, "let's go get the chicken." They headed in the direction of the poultry department. A man swinging a broom looked at them with a peculiar, amused expression, and she thought what an interesting sight they made, the white woman wheeling the loaded grocery cart for the tiny mulatto in the orange tennis.

"Roberta," said Hannah, turning shyly to look at her. "Do I look 60?" She smiled, barely suppressing a giggle.

"No, Hannah, you look 30."

"No, Roberta," she said, "I don't look that young no mo."

She blushed and smiled then turned ahead and led the way.



Major Hass
Josh Hass



**I saw in the distance men with their
bombs and the beast's mark**

Joshua Meier



To the Moon

Alice Mattingly

Jim Hanley is a human resources consultant living in southern Maryland. Having had articles printed in professional journals, for the last several years he has concentrated on fiction in the mainstream/literary and the mystery genres. His works have appeared in *South Dakota Review*, *Center*, *Futures* and others.

BED & BREAKFAST

James P. Hanley

“Son of a bitch,” he shouted, “they didn’t flush; do they go home to a pig sty?”

“Warren,” Marlene called to the handyman as a warning to temper his words, “we have guests.” Her voice, in masking her annoyance, took on a singsong quality. Marlene asked the young lawyer sitting on the flowered couch about her trip, waiting for Warren for finish.

“Please, it’s Lisa,” the attorney said when called Ms. Reverson. “Is anyone else staying here?”

“A couple will be arriving later; two people with different last names,” she answered with a tone of mild disapproval.

“Is your husband working on my room?” Lisa asked, looking up the stairs toward the voice that had called out.

Marlene giggled, “He’s not my husband; Warren’s a good friend who helps me keep this place up. He’s fixing a leak, and actually you can pick any room.”

She led Lisa to the second level where the rental rooms were marked by brass labels with bird names on each door: the Eagle, the Heron, the Cardinal and the Robin. Lisa chose the Cardinal—a square room bright with a cherrywood bed covered by a multi-colored quilt, yellow-papered walls, and a large heater in the corner glowing with the faux flames of a fireplace and emitting waves of heat from the coils behind the cast iron front. There were electric candles in each window and the wooden magazine rack was filled with publications on country homes and gardens. A high pine dresser filled the wall opposite the bed, and the carpet, rubbed by recent vacuuming, was thick, softening footsteps except in spots on the floor where the weaker wood underneath creaked.

When the sun went down, the night sounds came out as if the second act after twilight intermission: cacophonic, discordant, but with predictable frequency. The couple, having arrived a few hours later, sat outside on the cushioned Adirondack chairs and talked in low voices of intimacy. Lisa came out, nodded at the two, and sat on an unpainted stool at the edge of the deck. Moths circled the bare bulbs over the screen door. Reflecting off the thin creek that ran across the northern edge of the property, the full

moon formed a layer of light on the black soil of the fields that were freshly churned by the tractor parked near the neighbor's barn.

Marlene walked up the steps onto the porch with Warren following behind. "I could fix the leak in the Robin; it'll just take a few hours," he said.

She declined. "You go home, it's late. Don't want you earning overtime."

This was their private joke she explained to the unlistening couple and Lisa after he left, "On the days when there were no guests, I'd make him a huge breakfast for extra hours worked. Speaking of breakfast, it's at seven-thirty."



In the morning, the chiming clocks in the living room and hallway at the bottom of the stairs, set to silence over night, sounded the seventh hour. Marlene was in the kitchen mixing eggs in a bright bowl with painted hummingbirds in a circle near the rim. Coffee perked in a chrome pot plugged in the wall near the stove and the aroma of the hazelnut blend seeped from the spout.

"Good morning," Lisa said cheerily as she walked around the dining room, lifting the small candles and locally made jams with handwritten price tags lined on the shelves near the window.

"Oh, hi," Marlene said, "did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I love the mornings in the country; there is such a natural sense of the hour: birds at sunrise, the morning sun at eye level. In the city, everything is shadowed by tall buildings and the only birds are pigeons and sparrows. You always need a watch to tell the time," Lisa said.

Marlene laughed, "We're in a street of houses on the edge of a small town, but some of the local farmers call us townfolk. All relative, I guess."

Lisa looked at the table. The dark wood was scraped of varnish in some spots; knitted place mats were lined up on the edge near the four chairs pushed close to the table.

"Your other guests come down yet?" Lisa asked.

"I suspect they'll be a bit late," Marlene said, chuckling.

Lisa colored slightly, "I guess so."

Marlene placed a grapefruit on the table in front of the young woman: the yellow fruit was slightly browned with crystals of sugar imbedded in the veined pulp. While the young lawyer ate the fruit and the following omelet and strips of thick bacon, Marlene cleaned in the kitchen. Later she carried a cup of coffee in the dining room and sat across from Lisa.

"Are you going to the Brookville facility?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Not many companies in this part of Pennsylvania would need a Philadelphia lawyer."

"When someone makes a charge, they send one of us to investigate."

"What kind of charge?"

"I can't discuss that, probably shouldn't have made any mention. Doesn't matter much at this point."

"What do you mean?"

Lisa laughed, "Do people tell you their life's story over breakfast?"

"There's something about a hearty meal in a rural morning with someone you'll likely never see again that's prime for confession."

"Well, I'm a lawyer and we don't give up facts easily," Lisa said smiling. "What about you; how did you come to own a bed and breakfast?"

"My kids were grown, I was divorced and needed to get away. I always thought a B&B was a nice way to meet people and make some money." Marlene's pale face was expressionless and her voice flat as if the description was a quick, rehearsed response to avoid detail. "I hope the couple comes down soon; I have to go to work."

"You have a job, too?" Lisa asked with an inflection of surprise.

"Oh, yes, I handle ad placement at the county newspaper. I can vary my hours, but Wednesday is the busiest time."

The creak on the stairs drew their attention. The couple in their unwrinkled pajamas came in the dining room and, seeing Lisa in her business suit and Marlene made up and dressed in sweater and slacks beneath her apron, reddened as if embarrassed by showing up for a formal affair in casual clothes.

"Come in," Marlene said getting up from the chair. "Breakfast is ready."

As they talked, Lisa noticed that the couple often punctuated their sentences to each other with a light touch, and their attention to her was a courtesy. Lisa felt mildly envious because they seemed relaxed and unburdened; their only concern was what to do with the day. But as Lisa glanced at them before heading upstairs, she saw a look on the man's face and was drawn back to a relationship once promising that died of inertia, she'd explained to a friend.

In her room, Lisa gathered papers she'd scattered on the dresser and neatly folded the towels in the bathroom, obeying the sign on the bathroom wall near the sink that asked guests to reuse towels on two-night stays. She looked around and thought about her own minimally furnished apartment in Philadelphia, with bare walls, worn furniture and unpacked boxes in

the large closet. "There is nothing of you here," her friend had once commented. On her way out, she waved at the couple and they cheerily called, "Goodbye." Marlene came out of the kitchen and said, "I'll be back by late afternoon but you have a key. Good luck, today."

Lisa came back midday after picking up a sandwich at the local market. She sat in the wooden chair on the front porch and looked at the houses of the unfamiliar town. A woman across the street was sweeping the concrete walkway of dried leaves, the postman walked up the wooden steps at another house, the mail curled in a bright-covered magazine, and a small boy played in a fenced yard, pointing a plastic gun at an indolent dog. Lisa collected words and applied them to remember scenes: quotidian came to mind—the comfort of familiarity that heightened when uncertainty became unsettling. But as she sat longer, she felt apart from the surroundings as if viewing a film, the images momentary, yet the place in Philadelphia that she would return to was not permanent either. She thought of the game she'd play with her brothers: she'd stand halfway between them as they tossed a ball just over her head and she'd run to either side near one or the other to catch the throw. Unsuccessful, she would settle in center, on neither side, leaping at the spiraling ball, sadly watching the smiles on their faces as they kept her at a distance. Lisa left to return to work, gulping water from a bottle as she walked to the car.

Her day ended early and she went back to the Bed and Breakfast. Arriving before Marlene, she changed into jeans and a cotton blouse, and went back onto the porch.

The fading sun was surrounded by a few drained clouds that stayed after the mass of thunderheads from an early afternoon storm had left. The bushes and trees were beaded with transparent drops. In a distant field, cows ambled toward a gray barn and birds flew overhead in a halo circle.

Lisa saw a station wagon slow near the entrance. Marlene took a hand from the wheel and waved. As she stepped out the car, Marlene stumbled, her heel twisting in the pebble walkway. She put her hand out to lean against the car hood. Lisa was startled, more by the look of fear on the woman's wan face. When she started down the wooden steps, Marlene waved her away, and flashed a nervous smile signaling she was fine. "I should pave the driveway," she said, "I'm always stumbling over those small rocks."

Neither had seen Warren walking from around the back until he was nearly next to Marlene, reaching out to grasp her arm as a late gesture; she pulled away from him.

"Have another spell?" he asked.

"Of course not, I just tripped over these damn pebbles. You know I do that often." She was looking at Lisa as she spoke.

Warren stood there for a moment as if unintentionally posing. He wore jeans; the cuffed denim underside rimmed the dark blue pant legs. His wide brown belt dipped in front, below his ballooned stomach. A square of worn-white denim was outlined on his back jean pocket where he kept his wallet. His tight tee-shirt had gray lettering across the back: US Navy. With his hair recently cut, pushed back and glistening from a layer of hair cream, he reminded Lisa of old pictures of her father in his defiant youth in the 50's. All Warren needed was a pack of cigarettes rolled in his cotton sleeve, she thought.

Lisa reached out to touch Marlene as she passed—an uncommon gesture for her. Marlene smiled at her and asked, "How was your day? I'm going to change and, if you are still out here, I'll make us tea."

Lisa nodded agreement.

After the older woman went inside, Lisa looked toward Warren who simply shook his head, conveying accustomed acceptance. "You're just the kind she tends to adopt, even for a short stay."

"I don't mind," Lisa answered.

Within the hour, the sun was declining into the furrows of a distant field, the final rays still strong in the clear air. The ducks that swam on the oblong pond during the day flew away. Lisa was watching the tumbling clouds take over a corner of the sky, gathering strength to dominate by morning. Marlene came back, carrying a tray with two rose-pattern cups and a small pot with the tea-bag string and paper labels hanging over the side. "Chamomile," she explained. The two women sat quietly, sipping the hot liquid and watching Warren put away the garden tools.

"Quite the looker, ain't he," Marlene said, and they both laughed.

"But I love him," she added with a lightness, meaning only affection.

"Sometimes being dependable is enough," Lisa added wistfully.

"Pretty wise for someone who's maybe twenty-five."

"Twenty-nine," she corrected. "Anyone else coming tonight?"

"No, it's just us. Did you make dinner plans?"

"I hadn't even thought about it; where do you recommend?"

"Supper here, nothing fancy, and it won't be on your bill."

An hour later they sat at the chipped table; bowls of vegetables rimmed the plate of heated roast beef slices at the center, and the tall glasses to the side of the dinner dishes were filled with carbonated orange juice.

"Are you ill?" Lisa asked as they finished the meal. She regretted the blunt question—the directness of her occupation sometimes spilled over.

Marlene was surprised, delayed answering, then said softly, "I have a heart condition; if it worsens, it could require a transplant. I don't hold out much hope for that."

"You don't show your distress, you're very brave."

"I'm frightened," she said without detail. "Let's talk about you; how did you get to be a lawyer?"

"Watching *Law and Order*," Lisa answered with a laugh. "Wanting to do good, intrigued by the drama of the courtroom. Everyone is drawn to the occupation by the thought of defending a wrongfully-charged murder suspect. Like when I was in first grade in parochial school and the Father came in and asked who wanted to be a priest and most boys raised their hand. You outgrow it and settle for something different, usually something less."

"Are you a good lawyer?" Marlene looked at Lisa and saw that her innocuous question had drawn tears.

"I'm not partner material, I've been told, as if that were a full explanation." Lisa lifted her napkin to wipe her mouth and dab at the corner of her eyes. "People always think it's best to spare you details. They don't know how to say: it's you, not your skill, not your performance—it's just you. That's so cowardly, and frightening. It's like saying, you're a good person but not loveable."

Marlene reached across for Lisa's empty coffee cup but diverted her hand and laid it over Lisa's.

"Maybe," Lisa said cheerfully as she picked up her plate and glass to bring them to the kitchen, "I'll move here, become a small town lawyer, handle real estate closings, divorces and wills."

"Small town's no refuge," Marlene said.

The two women stayed longer at the table, at first sipping from half-filled cups and then just conversing, ignoring the time. There was an ease to their talk as if having shared something of enormity and all else following seemed a natural flow.

"You're here one more night. Why don't we have dinner tomorrow night and go to a movie."

"Sounds fine but let's we eat out, my treat," Lisa answered. "I'll see you for breakfast."

Lisa read in her bed until falling asleep. In the morning, she was surprised when Warren came out of the kitchen holding a battered pan and asked what she would like for breakfast.

"Where's Marlene?"

"She wasn't feeling so well this morning. She asked me to take care of you."

"You needn't bother, Warren, I'm late anyway. I'll get something on the way but I'll take a cup of coffee." She hesitated near the coffee pot. "Is she all right?"

"She'll be fine; said she was looking forward to dinner with you."

Lisa stared at him with a practiced expression of incredulity and coaxing.

"Don't look at me like that. You'll go home, Missy, and I'll have to deal with her crossness because I told you too much."

Lisa finished by three o'clock and drove around town and stopped at the florist on the east end of town. When she returned to the Bed and Breakfast, Marlene was shaking out sheets in the backyard. "I used to have a clothesline to hang sheets even though they'd been through the drier. The cotton would pick up the sweet smell from the flower fields. Then neighbors complained that no one puts things out on lines, so I stopped and do this instead."

Lisa grabbed the edge of the fluttering sheet and the wind seemed to welcome the challenge of a double grip and pushed the material up as if to launch the unintended sail. The two women, looking at each other like children with the same mischievous thought, held their corners and heightened the sway by moving their arms up and down. After they'd folded the sheets and stacked them in the plastic, mesh basket, Marlene asked, pointing to the bouquet, "Speaking of flowers, who are they for?"

"For you," Lisa said.

"That's very nice," Marlene said.

Lisa laughed; "Every time I hear that word—nice, I think of the plaque on my manager's desk: It's good to be nice, better to be billable."

For dinner they went to a small restaurant in the next town. The only other diners were an elderly couple in a rear booth and a man in a wrinkled suit, pouring his glass to the brim from an unlabeled wine bottle. Escorted to a table still wet from a recent wipe down, Marlene and Lisa sat for awhile, ignoring the menu and the waitress' repeated question, "Are you ready to order yet?"

"You didn't have anything to eat this morning Warren said. It is a bed and breakfast; seems like you're only getting half what you paid for."

"I'm not paying for it, the company does and I don't think they care if I have a morning meal."

"It not a question of someone caring, it's an issue of entitlement."

"Also don't forget," Lisa said, "the last time I saw Warren holding a

utensil was when he was unplugging an unflushed toilet,” Lisa said, “not an appetizing image.” Marlene laughed.

They talked of family. “My mother died when I was young; Pop lives in Florida,” Lisa explained.

“You call your father Pop?”

Lisa hesitated. “My brother and I never called him Dad. Maybe it’s too endearing a term. He wasn’t that way.”

As they ate dinner—the weekday special of catfish and under-cooked potatoes—Lisa said: “I talked to a local lawyer at the depositions, and he said his firm is looking. I told him I’d email my resume when I got back to Philadelphia.”

Marlene’s face was placid. “Maybe you should do something else.”

“I don’t know what else I can be. Pathetic isn’t it; the only description of me is what I do, and I’m that only by others’ permission. I’m Lisa the Lawyer—alliteration, like characters in a children’s book,” she added sardonically. “I’m just disappointed and I don’t know what I’ve done wrong, or could have done better. I feel unsettled and that’s a frightening feeling for me.” Suddenly, as if capturing meaning in Marlene’s words, she added. “Don’t you think I should look for something here?”

“Decisions you make out of hurt are seldom right. I know, my life is full of them.”

They ate a piece of crumbling pie for dessert and left. Lisa was driving and she opened her window to let the moist evening air come in and swirl around the back window. “If I’d stayed at the Holiday Inn instead, these last two nights would have been so different. Maybe there’s another unexpected twist to my life that will change everything.”

“Do you mind if we skip the movie?” Marlene asked.

As Marlene turned the key to the front door, she said, “I’m very tired. Why don’t you watch television if you’re not ready for sleep.”

Lisa watched a program then went upstairs. The upper floor where Marlene slept was dark. Lisa took out her briefcase, and jotted notes, assembling her recordings and opinions in tight paragraphs. She felt the comfort of a child in bed, safe with the protected guarding of an upstairs parent. Perhaps, she thought, if I handle this assignment well, spare the client company the embarrassment of a charge that could become public, the partners change their mind—a fragment of hope that, like shrapnel, has the greater capacity to wound. Later that night, unable to sleep, she took out a folded copy of her resume and penciled in changes until tears of frustration blurred her vision, and she closed her eyes.

In the morning, Marlene was late setting the table for breakfast. Lisa was sitting on the couch sipping steaming coffee from a mug with the emblem of a high school football team. "I hope you don't mind that I made myself, us, some coffee."

"Not at all," she said, "not exactly guest china," pointing to the cow in football helmet on the cup.

It was obvious that both had reflected on things they'd said the night before, asking questions for amplification over breakfast, revealing in slow sentences, as lovers might, savoring the detail.

"You look tired. Not like someone after a night's sleep," Lisa said.

"I didn't sleep well. Must have been too much coffee. I felt like my blood was rushing through me like a downhill stream."

"I hope you'll see a doctor about that."

"I'm sorry you're leaving," Marlene said.

"Me, too," Lisa responded cheerily. "This investigation will likely continue. I could be back."

When Lisa was upstairs Marlene called to her, "You don't have to worry about leaving by check-out; I kept you late with my blabbering."



Lisa dressed slowly, ignoring the shuffling she heard downstairs. As she packed, she thought she heard Marlene's voice but assumed she was on the phone. She was sitting on the bed editing her notes when she heard a distant siren churn the air, getting louder until the shrill sound charged through the open window like an intruder. Walking down the hallway stairs on uncomfortable heels, Lisa saw Warren circling fretfully. "Warren," she asked and had an eerie recollection of a Frost poem where the same name was said as a question. But he didn't answer. Lisa looked past him at the prone, still form on the dining room floor. Two men with clanking equipment rushed through the front door and knelt over Marlene. Lisa could do nothing but stare at the blocked drama. Her cell phone rang and she ignored it. The radios, which hung from the belts of the blue-jacketed men, spat static and the occasional decipherable word. After a while, the paramedics lifted Marlene reverently onto a pale-cloth stretcher and walked unhurriedly to the ambulance outside. Warren righted the fallen chair and sat limply on the gray cushion tied in even bows at the back of the wooden base. Lisa's cell phone rang again. She knew who was calling, knew the beckoning ring programmed in ironic rhyme—a child's nursery song. She turned toward Warren and rationalized that her unfamiliar touch on his shoulder would be an intrusion into his private grief. As she stepped outside, she saw the swirling light of the ambulance at the top of the sloped street, and stared until it turned sharply at the corner and disappeared. The faint siren and the

still ringing phone were beckoning sounds, symbolic and tragic, pulling her toward and away, but both signaling finality.

Back in her room, she folded the moist towel over the tub's edge and made the bed as if returning. She went upstairs to Marlene's room—the door was slightly ajar. Lisa pushed gently and looked into the neat room, the bed already made and clothes hung in the corner closet. There were pictures on the dresser and scattered change on the night table. She picked up a book from a plain chair and her own business card, stuck between pages as a bookmark, fell out. Lisa felt the urge to shut the door and stay, soaking in sense of the woman who once filled the room and the house with consoling, infectious affection like the faint smell of her flowery perfume. Ascending the stairs later, she looked back into the dining room and saw that Warren was gone. Numb, she closed the outer door as she stepped onto the porch, dragging her suitcase. For a moment, Lisa felt as if she were betraying the woman who'd been comfort for a while. She'd thought about coming back in a few days, but there was no longer a reason. Locked out by her own pull on the brass knob, she felt a separation from the recent days and the uncertain time ahead; but feeling no choice, dialed the caller on her messages, her hand still shaking, and walked reluctantly to her car. She turned slowly at the end of the street as if uncertain of the path.



Milkin' Caterpillar

Andrea Barnes

Rob Brannon is an award-winning journalist and author from Tampa Bay, Florida. He is also a graduate student studying history at the University of South Florida. Rob's first novel, *Sinister Intentions*, was self-published in 2004. His second novel is due out in late 2007.

DEATHBED

Rob Brannon

The building sat downhill from the highway, a strip mall on one side and Wal-Mart on the other. A neighborhood was behind. It was made of cinder-block, off-white, paint peeling. The roof was gray and missing a few shingles. The windows each had black shutters, the paint on them coming apart even worse than on the block. Two tacky columns held up an overhang near the front door, and a chipped sidewalk guided the way. I thought to myself as I approached, "So this is where Grandma is going to die."

It was a difficult realization for a child of 12, one that had been forced on me by my parents. They had cornered me after dinner one night with an ominous "we need to talk." Grandma was sick, they said, very sick. I tried to wrap my mind around what that meant. Did she have the flu? The shingles? Post nasal drip? I had been sick a lot that winter as well. It must be going around.

My parents saw the confusion. But they were unsure how to proceed. Terminal cancer is probably more than a little girl can understand. The best they could come up with sounded much more chilling than they probably intended.

"Honey, she's had to move out of her house into a place where people can take better care of her," my father said. "She won't be going back home."

"She's going to die?" I asked, suddenly and acutely aware of the depth of the situation. My father's final sentence would haunt me the rest of my life.

"Probably in the next couple of months," my mother said.

The rest of the night had been a blur of disbelief and tears. I thought of Grandma's house. I pictured the bees buzzing around tomato blooms in the garden and the taste of her apple pie. In vain, my mind tried to conjure up the smell. It was a mix of mustiness and Velamints, which she chewed incessantly, her dentures working through about three packs of them a day. Her house was the only place on earth that smelled that way. When I was older, even if I got a whiff of just one or the other, it reminded me of home.

The night melted into day, and here I was approaching a place so un-Grandma. She was still alive, I thought as my mother and I walked up the winding sidewalk, but my childhood place of comfort and warmth was already dead.

My senses were alive as we approached this strange new edifice. Outside, a row of men sat, many of them in wheel chairs. They paid us, and each other, no attention. Most were too busy concentrating on their cigarettes. Wrestling one out from the pack had been enough of a chore for their feeble hands. Now, they put all their energy in their lighters, hoping they had strength enough left for one hard push. The pastel colors of the lighters fit poorly with the dour group.

The moment the door swung open, the weight of what was beyond struck my senses. We moved in slow motion through drab hallways. I heard the “clink, slide, clink, slide” sounds of an ancient woman, nearly bent in half, pushing her walker down the scuffed linoleum. That rhythm was interrupted by the moan of a dementia patient. The heat was blasting and the air was oppressively hot, though I heard several people wrapped in shawls complaining of a chill. The smell was vile, a mix of stale urine and acrid cleaning solution. Soon we came to Room 574. I realized suddenly that this is the room where Grandma would die. It’s weird, I thought, how our life is bookended by room numbers. We were born in a delivery room with a certain number, and die in a place like this with numbers. Then I realized Grandma was born on a dining room table, or so the story goes. We turned the corner to step inside.

What I saw wasn’t as shocking as what mom had told me I would see. Grandma was extremely pale, her lips cracked and bone dry. But otherwise, she looked like herself. Her ashen face sagged below thinning white hair. Her penetrating and intelligent eyes, dark brown reminders of her Italian heritage, lay deep in puffy caverns. Afraid she might be frail, I was careful at first not to run to her. My fears were soon allayed.

“Come here, pum’kin,” Grandma said, and I ran into her arms. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I was relieved that her nightgown smelled of home. I breathed deeply, hoping to capture the scent forever in the scrapbook of my memory.

“Hi, mom,” I heard my own mother say above me. “How’s it going so far?”

“Oh, I’m fine, fine,” she said. “But I don’t understand you all bringing so much of my stuff here when I’m going to be going home soon.”

I heard my mother let out a sound that was somewhere between sigh and groan. Her voice faltered, like it does when she has something to say to me she doesn’t want to say. I had just heard it the night before.

"Mom, we talked about this...."

"I know what you said, dear, but Dr. Richards said I can go home soon."

"No, mom, he said, 'We'll see,'" my mother said in a patient voice I knew all too well. "I don't want to sound mean, but that was a nice way to tell you no. You kept asking him and he didn't know what else to say."

"I may be old, honey, but I'm still your mother. He said I have two months left on this earth and I intend to die at home warm in my own bed."

"Mom, Dr. Richards said for you to go home you would need 24-hour care. Daddy didn't leave much money when he died and Jim was six months without a job after he got laid off. We can't afford that kind of care, and neither one of us can stay with you, what with the kids and all, there's just too many other things. Mom, I just don't have a solution."

"One will work its way out."

"Mom!"

"Just two months," my voice cracked so badly that the words were barely audible. "You won't be around at Christmas."

"Probably not, honey," my grandmother said, so matter-of-factly it startled me. "Jamie, do you know what cancer is?"

"I know it's bad. I know it kills people."

"Well it's killing me, very quickly. And I'm old, honey, 74 years. It's my time to go. Now, I'll be hanging around for a bit longer, so I want you to come here as often as you like. We'll have fun and when the time comes, I don't want you to be sad. By the time Christmas comes around, you enjoy your presents and don't think too much about it anymore."

"But you won't be there to make cake and cookies."

"Your mom knows how to do that. This is the way it is, honey. It's my turn. Someday it'll be your turn, but not for many, many years."

I looked up at my grandmother a bit bewildered. But she was finished with what she had to say. She quickly changed the subject.

"So, have ya'll met my new friend yet? Her name's Gladys. She's really a peach. When I first got here, we talked for hours and it felt like minutes. Just wonderful."

"Not yet, mom, but I'm sure we will. But we can't wait around now. I have to pick up some chicken for dinner and get the boys fed."

"Well, come back soon."

Before I was ready, my mother was hustling me out the door. I didn't even have time to say goodbye. It struck me that from now on I needed to remember to kiss my grandmother ever single time I left her side.

I didn't have much of an appetite. My mind was having trouble

grasping the enormity of what was happening. We were always short on money, and we lived with Grandma up until just a few years ago. Up until she got sick, I spent most of my afternoons at her house. Daycare on our income was out of the question. Since the awful day Grandma went into the hospital with severe pain in her back, I'd been hanging out with whatever friend or acquaintance would take me in after school. My mother knew this situation couldn't last. I had heard them talking about what they were going to do. Apparently some of my friends' mothers didn't like my coming over during the week when they had homework.

"Honey," she began with a nearly imperceptible sigh. "I talked to the nurses at the home today. They said it'd be alright with them if you hung out with Grandma after school. There's even a back way into the home. All you have to do walk through the playground and across the street and you're there. Is that OK with you?"

It wouldn't be OK at all if it weren't for Grandma. That home felt like a dungeon to me, worse than being trapped with 30 other kids at a daycare. But I thought about grandma, and fought back the tears.

"Yeah," I said, as cheerfully as possible.

The first few days at the home, I walked in and went straight to Grandma's room without looking around. She was always happy to see me, even when I could tell she wasn't feeling well. We would talk and play games for the few hours it took Dad to get off of work and come get me. I was glad to be with Grandma, door closed, the rest of the home kept at a distance. Our biggest distraction was a daily visit from a nurse carrying a tray of pills, or the occasional early visit from the nice man who handed out the dinner trays. Grandma, I noticed, wasn't eating even though the food smelled quite good. She would take a few sips of milk and leave it for the man to take away.

"I've been cooking for myself all these years," Grandma would say, trying to explain it away. "It just doesn't taste right not done my way."

Maybe it was because I saw her every day, but I couldn't tell Grandma was getting worse. But deep down I knew what she finally said one rainy Tuesday was coming. I had dreaded it for two weeks.

"Sweetie, your Grandma is feeling a bit tired today. How about you go on out exploring for a bit and let me catch a quick nap. It's alright. The nurses all know who you are now. You can watch television down in the living room or play bingo with the girls in the dining room. Just stay out of the nurses' way and don't go in anyone's room unless they invite you."

I knew better than to say no. Silently, sulkily, I slinked out of the room and into the corridor. It was a vast new world to me, one of tubes, bad smells and nurses' stations. I'd never really paid attention to what was out-

side Grandma's door before, I'd just hurried past to the safety of Grandma and her Velamints, which in her sick condition, she still fiendishly sucked. They were probably her only source of calories besides the milk.

Slowly I moved forward, receiving a handful of friendly salutations from passing nurses. I came quickly to the living room. Two residents were watching *Oprah*. They gave me a disdainful look, as if I didn't belong, and went back to their show. That was a much bigger reaction than I got at the dining hall. The residents were so enthralled in their bingo, the four walls around them could have tumbled to the ground and they'd never have noticed. With each passing number, the room of mostly women quivered in anticipation. If a player had one of the numbers, her marker fell much harder upon the score card than it needed to, as if to punctuate for the rest of the room that she'd scored. Eyes darted about. There was a certain intimidation factor at work.

"Bingo!" came an almost apologetic cry from the back corner.

"Shit!" shouted a toothless 90-year old near the door.

A quick conference was held with the supposed champion and the high school student volunteer running the game. It was announced to the delight of the rest of the crowd that the bingo was not valid. The 90-year old piped up again.

"She's a newbie," the woman said with a spiteful reptilian hiss to those around her. They nodded in irritated agreement. Then, loud enough for the entire room to hear, "People who don't know what they're doing need to shut their damn traps."

Shamed, the false victor returned to her seat. She looked at her marker as though she were too frightened of it to pick it up. The game continued, and the tension became palpable. Bored, and a little concerned a riot was about to break out, I decided to move on.

After my first two stops, I had exhausted the public parts of the facility. I nervously strolled down the hallways, reading the names on the doors to keep my mind occupied. Doris MacIntosh, Simon Fullerton, Maud Brockman. I wondered at the lives of the people who had thought of those names, living so long ago. I wonder if it was, as my father said, so much better back then. If it was, I felt so sorry for the owners of these names. They'd seen the good times, and watched their lives sink into the bad.

Most of the doors were closed. The ones that were open were usually darkened with the television running. The television noise drowned out the groans I occasionally heard coming from inside. Every time I heard one, or smelled some awful smell, I shuddered. I said a quick prayer, asking God to give me a long life, but to take me before I ended up somewhere like this.

Near the end of the hallway, I noticed an open door. The name read "Norma Linghouser." This room was different. It was bright and airy, the late afternoon sun pouring beneath pulled blinds. Just as I reached the opening, the bathroom door swung open, and a sprightly woman in her mid-70s tumbled out. She immediately noticed me and beckoned me in the room. She was like no one else I'd met in the home, and I wasn't scared at all. She was more like the kind old ladies at church than someone who belonged in here. Tempted by this interesting woman, and the bowl of Hershey's kisses on her nightstand, I answered her waving hand.

"Hello there, my dear. Aren't you just precious," Norma said. "What's your name?"

"Sarah, ma'am."

"Oh, don't call me ma'am. You make me sound old. But you are adorable. You have the cutest big cheeks and rosiest lips, and those eyes, so blue, you could be a movie star some day! But you'll have to dress a little more ladylike. Does your mother know you wear pants outside of the house? And look at your hair! It's so gorgeous and soft and auburn as a late autumn leaf. Why do you cut it off so short? You look like a boy! Does your mother know?"

"Yes. She doesn't like it either. But I like boys better than girls."

Norma chuckled. "You'll mean that in a different way in a few years. And you'll grow out of this too. The girl'll be along someday."

The girl had never left Norma. She was dressed now in a long and lacey white dress. From her wrists to her neck and ears, Norma's body glistered with several pounds of gold jewelry. She smelled as though she'd taken a swim in cheap perfume. Her eyelids were heavy blue, her cheeks pink and her lips bright red. The colors were streaked and uneven on one side of her face. That side didn't move when she talked.

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"Well you better run along dear. The big dance starts in an hour, and it promises to be packed with handsome men in uniforms. This is a job for the big girls!"

And then she started to dance quite precariously on legs that didn't work well at all. A couple of times, she nearly stumbled. I was beginning to think that I ought to do or say something when I heard a gasp behind me.

"Norma! Stop before you hurt yourself," a nurse exclaimed. She charged into the room, an elderly gentleman fast on her heels. He moved deftly for his age, and together they subdued Norma and sat her on the bed.

"Why, Nurse Hawethorne, what on earth has gotten into you? I was simply limbering up for the big dance. And who is this old man? He

follows me everywhere, and gives me the shivers!”

“He’s your husband, Norma. His name is Ronald and you’ve been together for 52 years.”

“Balderdash. I’m not even half that old.”

“I’ll get the mirror,” the elderly man said. He retired to the bathroom and returned with a hand-held mirror.

“Norma, where do you think you are?” the nurse was saying.

“I’m in London, England working at an infirmary. It’s May 1944, and this island is positively teeming with young boys. Where do you think you are, nurse? Are you shell shocked, as they say?”

“Norma, we go through this every day. You’re in a nursing home in Missouri. It’s the year 2007.”

“Poppycock!”

With a resignation born of routine, Ronald handed the mirror to the nurse. She held it up for Norma.

“Well, who is that?”

“It’s you, Norma.”

“No,” she said, at first with a laugh. Then she noticed something. Maybe she saw her reflection moving as she moved. Her second “No” was less a statement and more a plea. “No! No, no, no!”

Ronald and Nurse Hawethorne let her work it out on her own.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. I’m old!” she shrieked. “How did I get here?!? Oh my....”

The words became unintelligible, disappearing into a scream. Ronald held his wife, and the sounds she made chilled my blood. Sufficiently startled, I turned to run. For a moment, I thought someone else was standing in the doorway. But no one was there. With hot tears dripping down my puffy cheeks, I stormed back to Grandma’s room. My mother was already there. On the way home, I recounted my story. That night, my parents fought about whether it was a good idea for me to visit the home. At least, I thought, they had something to fight about tonight. Usually they just fought about nothing at all. They decided they had no other choice. After their fight, my mother came into my room and taught me about dementia.

After a month in the home, my grandmother was noticeably thinner. Her skin had grown saggy and loose, and she didn’t move much more than her head. Her voice wasn’t as strong, but she retained her personality. We talked like we always did, and more times than not she managed to stay awake for the entire two hours of my visit. She and my mother fought constantly about whether she would be going home. My mother usually stormed out, exacerbated. But even though Grandma was sick, her death never seemed eminent, and its impending affect on my life didn’t really

register. Maybe that's what made the events of a Tuesday five weeks after she arrived so troubling.

I bounded in after school for the first visit since Friday. We'd had a three day weekend, and hadn't come to see Grandma once, the result of more fighting among my parents. But when I came around the corner to Grandma's room, a male voice gave me pause. It was our preacher, and he was praying. I heard him finish, and then take several deep breaths.

"Now Mrs. Buchanan, uh..."

"It's OK, Frank, you don't have to think of a way to sugar coat it. We need to figure out how you're going to send me out of here."

"Yes, ma'am," he said somberly.

"Buck up, you ain't the one dying. Listen, I'm not picky in the least. I just want two things: red roses and someone singing 'Amazing Grace.' Jack used to always come home with red roses when I was mad at him. Otherwise, keep it short and snappy and don't give anyone too much to cry over. The will is already with my attorney, so that's all handled."

"Excellent, Mrs. Buchanan. There's just one or two other things..."

I couldn't take it anymore. Tears flowing down my cheeks, I ran into the room. My sobs were staccato, each footfall sending a puff of air through my wailing vocal chords. I plunged my head onto the bed next to Grandma. The preacher politely indicated he'd come back later, and left.

"Oh, sugar, I'm sorry, you weren't supposed to hear all that."

I didn't know what to say. I had known for weeks Grandma was fading. But now it felt so real. I pulled back from my grandmother, and looked around the room. Below the bed, her urine hung in a big clear bag. So indignant. It disgusted me. Below my hand, I felt a diaper crinkle around her nonexistent waist. All of it had escaped my notice before. This woman, she wasn't my grandma. She was a skeleton with skin. I leaned forward into her, and was struck by the worst realization of all. She didn't smell like Grandma anymore. Gone was the stuffiness and the Velamints, replaced by the smells of urine and feces and vomit and death. I felt bile well up into my mouth, and with my grandmother calling behind me, I ran from the room.

Gasping, panting for breath, I stumbled down the hallway until I found a wheel chair outside of a patient's door. I fell into it, my shoulders quivering and snot oozing from my nose. I whipped it on my sleeve and attempted in vain to regain my composure.

Several minutes into the struggle with my emotions, I began to hear voices across the hall. They were so different, calm and patient, almost a lover's whisper, not at all like the normal din at the home. Shivering, I felt myself stand and scoot toward the doorway as if pulled by a rope. When I

got to the door, I saw an odd sight. Laid out on the bed was a person, withered and inhuman. His face was gaunt, eyes closed and he wasn't moving an inch. Encircling the bed were nurses, kitchen staff, administrative personnel, six or seven of the home's employees in all. Some of them were crying.

"My favorite memory of George was the time he told me about his experiences at war. George, I'll never forget what you said about what happened in that jungle. You really changed my thinking," one said. Then another spoke.

"I'll never forget the way your face lit up the night I brought you a beer against home policy. Such simple pleasures are what life is all about, and you seemed to know that."

I listened as each in turn relayed some memory about George, who I took to be the man in the bed. I watch, fascinated, when....

"How ya doing, cutie?"

The voice was the raspy product of thousands of cigarettes. It belonged to a tiny old woman. She didn't crack five feet and she had virtually no waist or hips. Her hair was a rock solid perm, silver in color. It framed a wrinkled face and a crooked smile hidden behind hot pink lip gloss. I didn't answer her. I wasn't sure what to make of her.

"Aw, don't be scared. I'm your grandma's friend, Gladys. And you must be little Jamie. What a doll you are."

I smiled at her. My grandmother talked about Gladys a lot, but I had yet to meet her. For some reason, she made me feel instantly comfortable.

"What are they doing?" I asked, my attention diverting back inside the room.

"Honey, they're saying goodbye," she said. "Old George there, he'd been here about a year. He died about 15 minutes ago. What they do here, when someone dies, they honor their life instead of grieving for their death. So everyone who worked with George comes into the room and tells their favorite memory. When they're done, they'll clean the body and call the proper people to come and take him away."

I didn't answer. I was enthralled by the memories. These people learned a lot about George in one year.

"You know, they'll be doing this for your grandma soon."

I was shocked at how she said it. She so was matter-of-fact and began her sentence without the sighs and uncomfortable glances of my parents. But it strangely didn't hurt me. Gladys explained why.

"You see how much easier it is when we just come out and say it. Your grandmother's going to die, and you're trying to come to grips with that."

"And other things," I heard myself saying far away. "My parents are getting divorced."

"I know child, I'm sorry. That's an awfully big burden all at once for a girl your age. But why did you run out on your grandma earlier? She was concerned about you."

"I don't know. I guess, I just, she's seems so unconcerned that she's about to die, like it's no big deal. It feels like it's a much bigger deal for me than her."

Gladys smiled as though she already knew what I was going to say.

"Let's go for a walk, honey." Quietly, we strolled down the hallway. We seemed to walk for a very long time before she spoke again. "What do you think happens to people when they come to a place like this?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think it's like prison? Do you think they just lock themselves away and wait to die?"

"I, I..."

"What does your grandma say?"

"She doesn't talk much about it."

"What does she talk about?"

"She usually asks me about my day and I tell her about school and homework and sports and boys. Then we watch TV and laugh at the crazy people that go on *Judge Judy*. We also watch the *Simpsons*, but my mother usually comes before it's over."

"Does she usually talk about herself or tell her what's going on in here?"

I thought back. "Never."

"That's what I thought. You see, the thing about people in a place like this is they know they're going to die. But they don't want to dwell on it or make it their entire existence. Many of them keep right on living, doing what they always have, enjoying their family. They live, Sarah, they don't die. In fact they live right up until they die. Let me show you."

Suddenly, we were inside a room. An elderly man and middle age daughter were sitting around a table, talking.

"You know, I says to the guy, I says you don't treat a woman that way...."

"Dad, Cindy is going to come see you on Sunday...."

"And I says, I'll give you two choices, you leave quietly or I'll go get my buddies and we'll get a little...."

"And she's bringing the kids, Jacob is so big now...."

"So he cowered out of there, and I turned to that beautiful young lady and I says, may I have this dance...."

"And Cindy misses you, she hates that that stupid husband of hers up and moved the family to Chicago for what? For work? He can't get a job here? Oh well...."

"And that, Sweetie, is how I met your mother."

The pair fell silent. Then the old man's eyes glistened.

"I love seeing my daughter. Look how beautiful you are."

"Oh, dad! You're embarrassing me."

We were back in the hallway.

"You see that? They weren't even having the same conversation.

But it was the fact they were together that mattered," Gladys said. We were suddenly in another room. A woman sat on the edge of the bed wearing a gorgeous dress and white stockings. The door swung open and in strode a bald, beaming red-faced, man. He was old, but he strutted like Casanova.

"How are you sugar?" he said.

"Freddie, when did you get here?"

"This morning. My idiot son dumped me in this place."

"How long? When's the last time I seen you?"

"About 50 years, sugar."

"It gave me such a fright when I saw you. Like a ghost. I didn't, I hadn't even thought about you until this...."

"Shhh," Freddie said. "I'm going to do something I shoulda done in the first place, before it was too late."

And he leaned forward and kissed her.

"Honey, I loved my wife. I would have married you before I ever met her if it weren't for, well, you know."

"And I guess I've always loved you."

"I picked this home for a reason."

The woman let out a loving sigh. They stayed in their embrace for several minutes. Then Freddie grabbed a glass of water, and swallowed a blue pill. Gladys was laughing.

"We better get out of here before this gets any more serious." And we were out again, back in the corridor. They'd never even known we were there.

"Gladys?"

"Yeah, hon?"

"Is my grandma scared?"

"Only thing she's scared of is what this is doing to you."

"What should I do?"

Gladys was silent a moment. "What do you think of the people you see here? What were they doing?"

"They're like other people."

"That's right. Whether it's bingo, or television, or private moments like those, people just want to live until they die. That's all your grandma wants. But she's too sick to do those things. The only way she can live is by watching you."

I was silent for a moment, thinking.

"Why don't you go talk to her, hun? See what's on her mind."

With that, I was back in Grandma's room. She was waiting for me, and seemed relieved when I entered.

"Hi, darling," she said, her voice suddenly as strong as it had been in weeks.

"Hi, Grandma," I said, and hugged her.

"You doing alright?"

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm not skipping any rope, but I get by," she said, and smiled.

"Are you scared, Grandma?"

"You mean of death? Not at all. I'm actually excited. I'll get to see your grandpa again soon." She paused a moment, her brow furrowing in an attempt to think past the pain drugs. "When you were born, I only really wanted one thing. I never got to meet my grandparents, and whenever my parents talked about them, they seemed like the most interesting people, and I felt like I was missing something by not knowing them. So when you were born, I prayed that I would live long enough that you can remember me. And I did. So now, I can go on to whatever's next in peace. I can tell you from experience, honey, you won't remember any of this. It'll be better times. Every time you eat one of my recipes, or smell something that reminds you of my house, you'll think of me. And somewhere, I'll be thinking of you."

"Grandma? Is it OK if I don't cry anymore?"

"It's more than OK. You're a good girl, and there's no reason to cry about this."

In the days after that, Grandma inexplicably rallied. Dr. Richards was beside himself, kept talking about how he'd never seen anything like it. She actually started gaining some color, and looking like her old self again. Finally, after about a week of the rally, Dr. Richards said if the family stayed with her at all times and a nurse visited once a day, she could go home. My mother still didn't have the money and couldn't afford to take off of work, but she acquiesced, I think as a final salute to her mother. I felt like gloating. Grandma proved my parents wrong. She was going home. But Mom was so depressed these days that I knew it was best to keep my mouth shut. My dad moved out, and I saw him only on weekends the rest of his life.

It was a Thursday, and I spent the entire day at school beside myself

with excitement. Tomorrow was the day Grandma was going home. She'd done it! She'd proved them all wrong!

After school, I practically sprinted to the home. I tempered my excitement long enough to go through what had become my routine. I lit cigarettes for the guys out front, stopped by and said hello to Norma, who was primping for the ball. I ran by the dining hall and playfully yelled, "Bingo!" The players mocked irritation and shouted their greetings before returning to the game. Then, I ran around the corner to Grandma's room, curious about the voices I heard coming from inside. Playfully, I grabbed the door frame with one hand and pirouetted my head through the door.

Grandma lay flat and motionless on the bed. She was surrounded by seven or eight home employees. One was talking about her, telling a story about how she couldn't stand it the last month when they wouldn't let her have her Velamints. Grandma apparently told her she used to smoke four packs a day, and the way she'd gotten off cigarettes was by chewing her mints all the time. I'd never heard that story before. The employees didn't notice me at first.

"Hi, hon." It was Gladys, standing behind me.

"When did she die?"

"About 20 minutes ago. They came to tell her she would be heading home this afternoon. She said no, she wouldn't be. They said yes she was. Then she told them that yesterday about this time, her husband came to her while she was asleep and asked her to come with him. Your grandma told him no, that she wanted to see you one last time. She told him to come back tomorrow, then she'd be ready to go. She was, and she went."

I was silent for a moment, considering the scene. Grandma looked peaceful. Her gaunt face looked somehow more alive than it had when she first arrived here. It was apparent she'd died happily.

"Gladys?"

"Yes, hon?"

"I don't feel sad. Is that weird?"

"No, hon. It means that you've got a head on your shoulders better than most adults."

Silently, I listened to the stories as they were told.

"Why don't you go to her," Gladys said. Then she was gone.

The employees realized I was in the door, and gasped almost imperceptibly. The room fell silent. I walked up to Grandma's bed, and took my place in the circle. Someone asked me if I was alright.

"I'm fine," I said, and then paused. "I remember my grandma's cooking. Mom used to say she would make us all fat. Every time she knew I was coming over for dinner, she would bake a dessert. But she knew my

favorite in the whole world was chocolate brownies. So she would always make a batch of chocolate brownies, just for me.”

I reached into my pocket, and produced a pack of Velamints. I slipped them into Grandma’s hand, and touched my soft, peach-fuzzed cheek to hers.

“Goodbye, Grandma,” I whispered. “I love you.”



Self-Portrait

Josh Meier

Diane Glancy published three books in 2005: *Rooms, New and Selected Poems*, (Salt Publisher), *In-Between Places*, (essays, University of Arizona Press), and *The Dance Partner, Stories of the Ghost Dance*, (Michigan State University Press). A new collection of poems, *Asylum In The Grasslands*, was published in 2007. Glancy is a professor at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she taught Native American literature and creative writing. She is now on a four-year sabbatical/early retirement program.

MALCHAS

Diane Glancy

Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it, and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchas— John 18:10

One of them smote the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. And Jesus said, Permit me, and he touched his ear and healed him— Luke 22:50-51

He remembered holding the ear to his head. The doctor tried to sew it on, but there was not enough ear. In time, he would have a prosthetic ear. Pinna—the doctor called it—the ear flap outside his head. But the doctor could not replace the other words he learned—ear drum, canal, hammer, stirrup, anvil—

Malchas had been with his cousins and other boys lighting fire-works—Malchas' father and uncle in the house playing pinochle. No one knew where the bottle-rocket came from. It tipped or fluked and slammed into his head. Then he was underwater somewhere. The sounds he heard were subterranean. The other boys ran. One of his cousins stayed with him until his father and uncle came, his uncle in his undershirt and suspenders holding up his trousers. Then Malchas was beached on earth. His mother's screams were piercing. He was surrounded by the absence of water.

The world came on a gurney. The bright, round light in the surgery-room was the moon. In his head, he carried the explosion of the sun.

His name wasn't Malchas, but they called him that after Miss Pinkney told the Sunday-school class about Malchas—the man whose ear Peter cut off when the soldiers arrested Jesus. But Jesus didn't want Malchas to be without an ear. Jesus touched his ear and healed him—but Jesus didn't heal Malchas. Each night he felt the aftershock when his bed jumped from the floor and he woke with a start.

After the surgery, all he knew was the sound. Maybe it was the static of the universe that overshadowed his hearing ear. Maybe it was cosmic radiation outblasting his ear. Whatever it was—sound was bloated. It would lessen, the doctor told him, but it would not.

If only silence flanked him.

His father and uncle had warned the boys. Didn't they listen?

It was sound waves Malchas rode. He struggled for balance. He felt the tilt of the earth. The tides of the ocean. He heard the whale's cry— \\\ \\\ \\\ \\\ \\\ \\\ — One night watching television he saw the blast of a harpoon. The stream of blood. The whale's cry sounded like his own voice.

Boys in the neighborhood stayed away, but slowly they came back. Malchas looked at them as though from underwater. He could see their mouths moving, but all he heard was the buzz of a motor boat headed into the distance.

The cousins stayed away for a while also. Maybe it was the large bandage on the side of Malchas' head.

A phantom sound haunted his ruptured eardrum. It disrupted the hearing ear. Each Sunday Miss Pinkney longed for a miracle to show everyone that Jesus still committed his acts of healing. But healing for Malchas remained distant as the cries he sometimes heard in his missing ear.

In school, Malchas couldn't understand what the teacher said. The teacher moved him to the front row, but that only made the noise worse. It only made louder what he couldn't understand.

Malchas took medication. He had another surgery to graft skin on the burned spots on his head. He had lessons on how not to hear noise. How not to be terrified by explosions in the night. How not to let it bother him when people stared at his head—at the place where his ear had been.

He heard his father and uncle arguing. They had hard looks on their faces when they talked. It probably was about money. He heard his parents arguing. He thought what it must cost them. How much insurance. Who was responsible.

It all was defeat to Malchas—even when his uncle came to the house with the older cousin, red-faced and shaking, to apologize. Malchas knew he had been crying, which meant he had received a beating. There was no other way he would confess. Malchas sat before his large cousin, not understanding his cousin's words, but knowing what he said—he snuck in a bottle-rocket, lit it, it tipped and flew into his head. Malchas knew the cousin had not cried over what he had done, but that his father had forced the confession from him in front of his younger cousin. A bottle-rocket tipped and flew into Malchas' head—he knew the older cousin was repeating his confession. All the same—the cousin somehow conveyed defiance or the idea of defiance. He was only confessing because he had to. Malchas could imagine the welts on his cousin's backside.

Malchas couldn't hear, but he could see the feeling balled up in the

spoken language. Words came packed with meaning he had never known. There were little explosions inside them. Words were fireworks.

Imagine—Miss Pinkney said—Jesus was with his disciples. The soldiers came to arrest him. Peter, always rash, drew his sword and, not knowing what else to do, severed an ear from a servant. Jesus was about to be arrested. He would go to the cross and suffer unspeakable agony—agony beyond description—and one of his disciples raised a sword and cut off an ear? What was a fisherman doing with a sword? Did he use it against the fish. Did he catch them by goring them?

Malchas saw the students in the Sunday-school class snicker. He knew they'd heard another absurdity from Miss Pinkney. Malchas was beginning to differentiate between expressions on those he saw—those things he was too busy to see before he was half-deaf. More than half.

Now Miss Pinkney was reading Leviticus 8:23—she showed the passage to Malchas. A priest carried the mark of blood on his ear. Malchas was marked. He was a priest with blood on his ear. How exuberant she was—just like Peter getting in the way of what was happening. Malchas wanted to be ignored, not noticed, but Miss Pinkney always was shining her light on him.

He didn't want to go to church, but it was preferable to a beating.

Malchas felt his bed jolt in the night as if a whale bumped him as it surfaced. But no whale was there. Just the ghost of a bottle-rocket hitting his head.

Next it was Amos 3:12—a shepherd took out of the mouth of the lion two legs and a piece of an ear—where did she get this? Should Miss Pinkney be under scrutiny? Should authorities be alerted? Malchas knew he was the sheep she meant. The explosion of a bottle-rocket was a lion that had his ear in its mouth. Malchas felt it chewing. In his dreams—in his terrors of the night—he saw Miss Pinkney pull part of his ear from a lion's mouth.

One of the boys with an older brother said Malchas would be exempt from military service. But the way his ear sounded, Malchas already was in war.

Malchas couldn't go to school. The burned spots itched his head as they healed. He couldn't sit in class. He often was dizzy. He had headaches. It was all that noise. He couldn't understand. The bottle-rocket had confiscated his hearing. No, Malchas could hear somewhat. It was the understanding of the hearing that had been replaced. The ear that didn't hear stood in the way of the hearing ear. The buzz in his deaf ear overrode any sound that would come through.

Miss Pinkney flew one way and another like a strange bird on a bar-

ren coast. Had there been complaints? Was it only Malchas who objected as the object of her attention? What about her half-crazed exuberance? Her sword? Her breath of ice? The death. The shed blood. The whole of the story.

In his dizziness, he felt the flight over water. The slippery dreams. The engine in the ship. No, it couldn't be a ship. A ship did not have an engine. The whaling vessels were sailing ships. How confusing his deafness was. His partial deafness. All the elements that needed to shape his being were misshapen. What was this field-trip underwater?

He felt the little dogs, the rupturing of dogs breaking out in yapping. What were they doing? Were they the whale-station master's dogs?—poisoned like the neighborhood's dog that had yapped all day before it died? Maybe it was gale winds.

Malchas had another surgery. He felt wrapped in blue. It was the ocean after all. And the sky that looked down upon it. Malchas sank into the waves. He heard the water breathe. He learned to breathe as the water breathed. He turned his head and was dizzy again. Sometimes he fell. Sometimes he caught himself against a wall before he fell.

Malchas took lessons to read lips, but he kept thinking he was watching the whale's mouth. He kept thinking he was hearing the ocean spill. He wanted to tell them there as another world—a subterranean world beneath the one everyone took for granted. How much depended on hearing. Malchas took hand signals—sign-language lessons. He went to live with the water.

He liked to follow ships, though his parents told him that they were dangerous. He should not get too near. They had harpoons that had taken many of his relatives. Now he had a cane to balance him—the way the moon balanced the earth.

A whole story took all the different parts to tell what happened—The gospels needed to be read together to find which disciple was involved—and what the servant's name was—Miss Pinkney said. Jesus had just been betrayed and his unruly, rowdy unmanageable disciple cut off an ear. For what purpose? What did Peter intend?

Malchas' uncle and cousins came back to the house. The men played pinochle again. The women talked in the kitchen with its big, flowered curtains. The older cousin, a bully in the past who had been subdued, was a bully again.

Almost every night, Malchas felt the explosion. It hit him like a whale. No, he was the whale. The dream hit him like a harpoon. His ear fell off. They tried to sew it back on. It would not work. He heard, but his hearing was distorted and intercepted with noise. Questions were answers.



Space Chicken

Andrea Barnes

Michael Leone lives in Brooklyn, NY. His short stories have appeared in *Wind*, *Green Mountains Review*, *North Atlantic Review*, and *The Jabberwock Review*. He is a regular book reviewer for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Plain Dealer*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *American Book Review*.

REMEMBER THE TRUTH OF WHO YOU ARE

Michael Leone

Not the best weapon, but the only thing in her hand at the time, Regina Margaret DeMarco clutched her pink Reebok mule like a club and slammed her boyfriend Clyde over the head with it, collapsing him to the futon.

“You’re just a jerk, you know that Clyde? An absolute jerk. You don’t want to sleep with me, and yet you’ll jerk-off to any booze bag you see walking down the street. You call yourself a musician and I can’t even remember the last time you played your guitar. You’re just a loser. A complete wasted pot-head loser.”

Clyde clutched onto a pillow, buffering himself from another blow. “You seriously need to take a look at your life, Regina. It’s like ever since you’ve gotten this job you’ve turned into a corporate fascist or something. And you know why we don’t screw? Since we seem to be airing out all of our crap here? It’s because I don’t feel like calling you and scheduling, okay? I like my sex spontaneous. Something you could never be if your life depended on it.”

“Well, at least I do something.” She raised her arm for a repeat clout but stopped herself. “Oh, just look at me. Screw you! I’m so through with you.”

She shoved her mule on her foot, grabbed her jacket from the back of the dilapidated curve-backed chair that sat next to the dusty Gibson that Clyde never played, and the bagpipe-like hookah that he always did, and stomped out into the rainy Manhattan night.

She was thirty years old and she was finished with losers and talentless men. But two months later she was out with her friend Stacy in a cramped singles bar with dingy lights on the Lower East Side. She’d told herself she wouldn’t stay for long, but one drink led to two and two to four and before long there she was, loaded and lustful. A guy eventually maneuvered next to her and bought her a drink and told her his name was Hank Lane. A bit gawky-looking, with black wooly hair and a crooked nose like it had been busted a few times, he had a pale face and a stubbled chin, but he was cute. He was also alone.

He told her that he was an actor—surprise, surprise—and then he

told her his real name was Donald LaPrue and that he'd done some very "serious" work including an indie horror film called *The Crutch*.

"It's an awesome film. Has loads of integrity. It's about a kid who gets muscular dystrophy and his mother freaks out about it and goes around killing all the doctors who diagnosed him. Ever heard of it?"

"Nope."

Regina was ready to leave but there was something in the way this guy talked, she couldn't quite figure out what it was, that compelled her to listen to him. Unlike any other guy she'd gone out with, this guy seemed to really believe in himself, and his confidence was almost contagious. He spoke about discipline, about being focused, about not losing sight of his goals, and he spoke earnestly and passionately. So at the end of the night when the lights were dim and the bartender was sweeping the bar debris into her hands with a rag, Donald scribbled Regina's number inside the cover of a matchbook and she told him, rather curtly, not to expect much.

Two weeks later she was writhing with him in the back seat of a taxicab. She barely remembered getting out and rushing past the doorman and through the opulent lobby of Donald's Upper West Side apartment building—an actor with money?—and being thrown damsel-like onto the bed and having her clothes scraped off. As his hands rummaged through her body he told her how beautiful she was, how he loved her "sexy green eyes" and how "perfect and taut" her body was. He performed miraculous cunnilingus on her before screwing her in nearly every position with a feral passion she hadn't experienced since college. Afterwards, breathless and amazed, she lay smoking, and he said to her, his face sweaty, "You want to see some of my work?"

"Thought I just did," Regina said.

He jumped up naked and pushed the television closer to the bed, sending a stack of books crashing to the floor, and he then ran to the closet where she heard him banging through some stuff and came back with a videotape. He put it in and she watched it, the whole schlocky, humorless, seventy-eight minutes of it: *The Crutch*. Regina tried to remain objective, and while she ignored the dumb plot, she was determined to find a glimmer of talent sparkling through the awkward mannerisms of Donald "Hank" LaPrue, but there was no doubt about it: this guy sucked. His presence on the screen was ungainly; his voice, even-toned in real life, became a bray when he performed. Maybe it was the character he was playing? No: his gestures were too exaggerated, caricatures of how a real person behaved, and there was an obvious attempt to overshadow the other actors in every scene by overacting.

"So what'd you think?" he said, shutting the tape off.

"Not bad," Regina said. "Kind of a strange movie."

"I know the movie's just okay, but I guess I want to know what you think of me. Of my performance."

"Well—" Regina paused. "You've certainly got intensity."

"Yeah, that character was wild to play. I mean, you could probably argue I overdid it a little bit—"

"Maybe in that scene when you ripped your T-shirt off and set it on fire at the gas stove—"

"But that was what the role required."

"Yeah, I guess, but—"

"But what?" His eyes swelled to the size of quarters and the tip of his nose began to twitch.

"Let's forget it," Regina said.

"No, no—" Donald removed her cigarette from her mouth and stubbed it out in the plate posing as an ashtray.

"Hey—"

"This is talk time," he said.

"I wasn't finished with that."

"You think I can't handle it, huh? You tell me what you really think and you'll see if I'm too much of a pussy to take it. C'mon."

"Think about what?" She sat up, gathered the comforter around her naked body.

"Tell me what you think about my work."

Regina snickered. "Your work?"

"What's the problem?"

"You talk like you're Laurence Olivier or something."

"Hey—" He shrugged. "I take my work seriously. If that's a joke to you then fine. Now tell me." He was so determined that it was almost a challenge for her not to tell him how bad he was.

"Okay, if you must know, I thought you overdid it. Big time. Even by low-budget horror film standards."

"Yeah, but I just said that that was what the part required—"

"But just because you're playing a character who might be melodramatic doesn't mean you have to play him that way. The opposite might be more effective—"

"Oh, well, listen to Mr. Stanislavski over here. For your information, missy—" He stuck his face close to her and his sharp teeth flared from his lips and for a second Regina thought he was going to bite her. "The director of this piece, who has gone on to make a slew of successful films that I'm sure you've never heard of, *The Bludgeoned*, for one, and *Cats and Rats*, a comedy in the Kevin Smith tradition, told me to play the role that way. A

professional actor never asserts his presence on the set—”

“And what was this ‘set’? You and him with a cheap camcorder in his backyard? This movie looks like it cost about fifty bucks to make.”

Donald winced. “What an attitude you have. So sour. Independent cinema depends on scrappy people making do with very limited resources. Godard used to say—”

“You know what, Hank—” Regina said his name like she were spitting something rancid out of her mouth. “Despite this fabulous conversation, I’m afraid I’m bored to death. I’m going home.”

He let her. When she left he was lying naked on the bed, and Regina could see his thin hairy buttocks reflected in the opposite mirror, the remote control in his hands, staring at a frozen image of himself on the television screen.

Regina didn’t expect nor particularly want to see Donald again, but when she got home from work the following Monday her next-door neighbor Rebecca brought over a rose that had been delivered earlier that day. It was a single white rose in a slim plastic vase and the card bore a long scrawled message that covered both sides. It read: “Please forgive my totally inappropriate behavior the other night. You are the best. Please let me make it up to you. How about next week?” Also enclosed was a ticket to the Broadway musical *Wicked*.

“Oh, Christ.” But she went, deciding to give him another chance. He was in an excellent mood. He laughed during the show, even though it was very silly and not all “artistic,” took her to a café in the Village afterward, proud that he could pay (“Got a check from dad this week”). They went back to his apartment and he again performed miracles with his mouth and Regina felt obligated to return the favor by taking him in hers.

Donald may have lacked talent, but he had relentless drive, and Regina found it impressive. All of his energy went into his career. Because he had no agent—and it was impossible to get one, he told her, unless you looked like Tom Cruise or graduated from Yale or Juilliard—he worked doubly hard. He often went to bed early to be “fresh” for a morning audition. He took expensive acting classes at the Stella Adler school twice a week. He saw plays as often as he could, obtaining discount tickets from friends. He read voraciously: classic novels and plays, but mostly contemporary plays, the stapled yellow and red booklets of which lingered everywhere around the apartment. He spent hours tucking his head shots—the glossies of which sat in boxes stacked up on his desk—in envelopes and mailing them out to talent agencies. The wall above his desk was starkly blank except for a sign that read: You Have to Work like a Slave to Live like a King.

"I have to admit," Regina said over dinner one night, "that your determination is really commendable. I mean," she laughed self-consciously, "every guy I've ever been with, every poet, every musician, every filmmaker, whatever, has been such a faker, you know? Poseurs and what not. But you're—"

"The real deal?" Donald nodded smugly. "Well, I figured I don't exactly look like Brad Pitt, right? So I'm screwed there. And what I lack in connections I'm just going to have to make up for with good old-fashioned hard work. But I'll let you in on a little secret. I have help: I use an affirmation."

"Like a saying?" Regina said.

"A mantra, really. A very special one."

"Oh, yeah." Regina nodded. "You know, I never really bought into those things."

"Bought? What do you mean 'bought'?" She could tell Donald was getting irritated because his nose began to twitch. "It's a simple affirmation. And it works. That's how I got *The Crutch*. I honestly believe that."

Regina was tempted to ask him how he could account for the millions of other jobs that Donald had lost, but she decided against it. "Okay, I believe you," Regina said. "Whatever works for you."

There was silence, then Donald said: "You want to hear it?"

"What? The affirmation? Isn't that kind of personal?"

"I'm offering it to you. Maybe you could use it to improve things in your life."

Regina dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. "Why don't you help me solve the mystery: what's the matter with my life?"

Donald waved his chopsticks at her. "I don't know. Sometimes I feel bad for you. Stuck in that office, you know? Receptionists. Cubicles. Eek. It's like corporate Auschwitz."

It was back, that tightening in her chest, the mallet—like pounding of her heart that signaled an approaching storm of rage. Last time she'd felt it she'd attacked Clyde. She was determined to remain calm. "For your information, Hank"—she was doing it again, using his stage name against him—"I actually made a decision to take this job, to leave my dance career—and I use that word lightly because I never really had one. It may not have been your decision, but I'm perfectly fine with it, thank you very much."

"Whoa, whoa," Donald said. He reached over and squeezed Regina's shoulder in a way she found patronizing. "See? That's what I'm talking about. This anger you have. Do you do yoga?"

Regina flung her napkin on top of her plate. "Of course I'm angry.

You just completely insulted me.”

“I remember the truth of who I am,” Donald said.

“Excuse me?” For a second she thought Donald had lost his mind.

“I remember the truth of who I am. Say it.”

“That’s your ‘special’ affirmation? It sounds like it came from a fortune cookie.”

Donald said the words a third time.

“You know what? You should remember the truth of who you are,” Regina said, standing up so abruptly she bumped the table, “because you’re an asshole.”

She marched out of the restaurant, but Donald caught up with her down the street and in a dramatic parody of an apology—he got on his hands and knees in the middle of the sidewalk—he said he was sorry and begged her to let him take her to this great place where they served gelato. Regina agreed and the night was saved.

In her more desperate moments Regina called her pill-addicted mother in Springfield, MA, convincing herself that she’d receive some support for her love life woes.

“It’s your attitude,” her mother said.

“My attitude? What the hell’s wrong with my attitude?”

Her mother broke into a storm of coughs before she could speak again. “For one thing, you’ve got the temper of a lion. It’s because you’re a Leo. And I hate to break it to you, Reg, but you’re also a real snob. You always were.” Regina heard her mother exhale her cigarette smoke.

“A snob?”

“Not just my impression. Your brother thinks so, too.”

Her brother, whose favorite T-shirt read NYA, the purpose of which was to prompt a person to ask what the acronym meant so he could say with a loud guffaw, “Nothing, you asshole!” was twenty-eight years old, unemployed, and still living at home with their mother.

“Boy, it just kills me that Tommy thinks I’m a snob, Ma.”

“See—there you go. That tone. That ‘look at me, aren’t I special ‘cuz I moved all the way to New York City’ tone. Who wants to deal with it? You need to assess.”

“I need to assess? You’ve been secretly popping Percodan pills down your throat for fifteen years. Doesn’t that strike you as a bit strange?”

“My back still hurts.”

“You assess.”

Regina slammed the phone down. She was upset, and ignored the compulsion to grab the bottle of wine she’d just bought. She went and

looked at herself in the mirror: a pretty freckled face, shapely lips, a tiny scar at the edge of her left eyebrow from when she fell from her bike when she was twelve, but otherwise she was a pretty woman. She knew this. She was smart. She had a sense of humor. What was the problem?

She would not drink to find the answer. Instead, she went out, ran a few laps around Prospect Park, came back, showered, and then went out again with Donald LaPrue when he called her later that night.

At first she was glad. They got some wine and take-out Indian and rented a DVD and went to his apartment. The DVD they had rented kept skipping and Donald got frustrated. The movie was a classic, *The Third Man*, and Donald had wanted to show Regina, as if she didn't know, how brilliant Orson Welles was, not just as a director, but as an actor. When Donald kept banging on the DVD machine, Regina suggested that they just watch the television. He relented, and she began flicking through the channels and *Forrest Gump* came on. It had barely started when Donald got up and snapped the TV off.

"What's the matter?" Regina said.

"I can't watch this."

"What do you mean you can't? Why not?"

"It's gonna sound stupid to you, but I can't bear watching something I should be in. I mean, that should be my name up there."

"Excuse me?"

"Me! I should be in films. I should be working. Goddamn it! What is the point of having a SAG card when you're not even allowed to use it? It's just—this has been a really bad month for me." He sat down on the couch and socked the pillow.

Regina tried but couldn't control her smirk.

"What the hell is so funny?"

"For crying out loud, Donald, it is Tom Hanks, isn't it? Star of *Philadelphia*?"

"Yeah, and *The Man with One Red Shoe*. Remember that turkey?"

"Yeah, and a guy who won two Oscars—"

"Oscars! You know how many geniuses never won an Oscar? Orson Welles, Cary Grant, Richard Burton."

"So—"

"So—," he mimicked. "Everybody knows an Oscar is the last indicator of talent."

"So I guess you'd be offended if you won, huh?"

"It's like the Pulitzer Prize. Look at the list of writers who have won them and tell me if you've heard of them."

"Um, Ernest Hemingway?"

"How about Ernest Poole?"

"William Faulkner, Norman Mailer. These people aren't exactly nobodies—"

"Caroline Miller, Harold Davis—"

"Harper Lee."

"Ah, what the hell do you know." He grabbed the bottle of wine by the neck and tilted it to his mouth, spilling some. "It's people like you, your attitude, your negative attitude, trying to keep people like me down. But I can cope with you people, with your projections—"

"Yeah, I keep you down all right," Regina said, half-hollering now. "Down to earth. Instead of up in the clouds with your ridiculous delusions. Give me a break, Donald. You don't even have an agent and you're crying to me about one of the most famous movie stars in the world? Do you know how crazy you sound?"

"Maybe if you substitute 'committed' for crazy that last sentence would be accurate."

"You should be committed—to an asylum."

She was proud of that last sentence, and she strode across the living room and whipped open the door and slammed it and started walking down the carpeted hallway and then—shit!—she realized she'd forgotten her purse. She went back, knocked on the door. It opened and Donald stood there, holding the purse from its straps in his long fingers.

"We're going to have to stop breaking up like this," he said.

Consolation was hard to find from her friends. Most of them were married with families and plagued with problems of their own and Regina didn't feel like whining to a mother with two kids who had influenza and whose husband had just been diagnosed with testicular cancer that she just couldn't manage to find love.

So she called her dad. She hadn't spoken to him since Christmas; it was now June. He lived in Seattle.

"Oh, what's up, baby?" he said, obviously impatient and distracted and not at all happy to hear from her. He was chewing something.

She began a preamble to her disastrous love life.

"Gotta play hard to get, baby," he said. "Tease them to death. Give them the blue balls, you know? Then they'll start sticking to you like flies."

"Give them blue balls? Tell me that's not your advice, Dad."

"Hey, hold up a sec—what?" And he proceeded to yell at the voice—her stepmother—bleating in the background. "Oh, crap, baby, can I call you later? I have to attend to Ms. Starved for Attention over here. Can I do that? What's your number again?"

She gave it to him, knowing he wouldn't call, and he didn't.

•

A few days passed after her fight with Donald. Regina lost herself in her work, sometimes working twelve-hour days. There were times she'd be stuck inside her airless office for so long that the only sunlight she felt on the back of her neck was what she found on her way to the subway in the mornings. Sometimes she thought Donald was right: was this a life? This was what she left dancing for? The people in her office seemed so drab at times, so pale and overweight, cemented to their chairs, gazing at their computer monitors like hypnotized drones.

She was overworked. The morning supervisor Carolyn, a withered woman with brittle, bronze-colored hair and a sneering mouth, hated Regina for some reason and gave her the most complicated jobs and required her to report to her immediately in the mornings, before she'd even removed her coat. Regina began to perceive an awful sameness to the place and it made her wonder if she should consider looking for another line of work.

She was in precisely this kind of funk—doubting everything around her—when she received an e-mail from Donald. He'd sent her an e-card with a silly frog on a lone lily pad burying its nose into a Kleenex: it read, "Come out with me, again."

That night, he called. They spoke almost all night, Regina mostly listening to Donald. Once again, there was something in the animated way he spoke that galvanized her. The previous night he'd driven all the way up to Poughkeepsie for a stand-up comedy routine in a cheap bar just to practice his improv and to be in front of a live audience, even though he wasn't getting paid and he wasn't a comedian at all, and he found that he actually "cracked them up." Just as they were going to hang up he asked her what she was doing tomorrow night, Saturday. She told him.

Stacy was in a community production called *Stop the World I Want to Get On*. It was a revue, held in a high school auditorium in Nutley, New Jersey, with an amateur cast, and even some high-schoolers were going to be in it. Donald asked if he could come, and when Regina told him that it was nothing special, that it was in a high school even, he insisted that they go together and that they would have a blast.

"I love local theater," he said. "Those are my roots, man."

They went; a long train ride that began at Penn Station and carried them through the bleak suburbs of New Jersey. Before the show Regina introduced him to Stacy, Donald looking awkward backstage where some young kids scuttled amid the sagging cardboard trees and stalks of plastic streetlamps and hula-hoops that lay strewn on the floor. During the show, as they sat uncomfortable in their metal folding chairs, Donald squirmed. He

also developed a distracting cough and when Regina asked him if he wanted some gum he declined. While the crowd laughed, Donald just shook his head, one time leaning over to Regina and whispering, "God, this is worse than I thought." He joined in the laughter, making distorted, obnoxious, guffaw-like sounds, and clapping long after the applause in the auditorium had ceased.

"Do you want to leave?" Regina said sharply.

"No," he said. "I'm just horsing around."

"Well stop it. It's obnoxious."

After the show Donald kept looking at his watch, begrudgingly giving his assent when Regina told him she had to say goodbye to Stacy. They went backstage and Stacy came up to the two of them, her hair still in pigtails and big bloody patches of rouge on her face. Donald stood stiffly.

"So you're an actor, too, I hear," Stacy said cheerfully.

"Uh, yeah."

"Boy, I bet you were just awe-inspired by this production."

The gesture of humility was received by Donald and refashioned into a dart that he pitched back to her. He said, with a sour twist of his lips: "To be honest, I haven't dabbled much in community theater."

A few seconds of silence shrouded them all.

"Okay, well, we should get going," Regina said.

On the way back to the train station, Regina, angry and resentful, planned carefully in her mind what exactly she was going to say to dump Donald forever. The last thing she wanted was a fight—she was so damned tired of the fighting—and she was so disgusted with his behavior that she feared articulating her thoughts just yet.

They boarded the train and sat down. They rode for some time, neither speaking, sitting next to each other but not at all intimate. The train made its retinue of stops, people came on, got off, and when a good thirty minutes had passed, Regina spoke.

"We need to talk," she said.

"Me, too," Donald said. "I have something I want to talk about. Been thinking about it all day. Can I go first?"

"I guess."

Donald looked around, aware that a few other passengers were within hearing, and he spoke softly. "I'm telling you this because I consider you a friend. Well, more than that—whatever you are—and I hope you will understand."

Regina nodded, rolling her mind's eye.

"I'm just gonna say it: I don't think we should see each other anymore. I mean, I like you, but there's just this energy thing—or lack of,

is what I mean—that brings me down. I can't handle low energy in my life. I need to be around charged, positive people and I get this feeling that you have a really negative attitude sometimes—.”

Regina was so angry she could barely breathe. “You e-mailed me, remember?”

“I know, I know. And I'm not saying you're a bad person. I just think you need to focus, you know? Channel your anger somehow. This knot,” he interlaced his fingers and held them up before her, “of twisting emotions. I think you'll find your life improving a lot if you do this.”

The train car suddenly seemed tiny to Regina, the seat where she was sitting with Donald as comfortable as a clamp. She got up and sat down on the seat opposite but facing him.

“You are crazier and more deluded than I thought,” she said, “and to be honest, I think you're nothing but a creep.”

He sat up. “I guess that's what I get for trying to be honest.”

“I haven't dabbled in community theater,” Regina mimicked.

Donald looked at her, confounded. “What's your problem?”

“Could you have been more offensive to Stacy earlier?”

“What?”

“I told you that this was going to suck and you said ‘Fine, let's go, it'll be fun.’ And you acted obnoxious all night long and you insulted my friend. And now to end this perfectly horrible night you're sitting here telling me that because I drag you down you're dumping me?” She laughed, loudly, so loud that other people in the train began to look.

Derricks, refineries, and power plants, ablaze with fluorescent light, floated past the windows.

“And you know what? Mr. ‘I haven't dabbled in community theater’? Maybe if you had there's a chance you'd be at least a half-assed actor. But then again I doubt it.”

“What was that?”

“What part did you miss?”

“Wow. I never expected you to hit that low, Regina. You can't even be an adult about this? You have to insult me.” He shook his head, pouted for a second. “I know what this is all about, Regina, and I've seen it before. You're jealous. Yeah, that's right—don't look at me that way—you're jealous. You see me devoting everything I have to my craft and because you simply couldn't hack it as a dancer you turned yourself into this drippy corporate clone and now you're jealous of me. I've met people like you—” He pointed, his nose quivering, “people who are talentless and empty. Yes, empty. And you take all your miserable emotions out on people who strive to better themselves.” He rapped himself on the chest. “People like me—”

Regina slapped Donald. It was a sharp sound that rebounded in the train car. Her pink finger marks were branded to his cheek.

"You pathetic piece of shit," she said. She stood up. "And for your information, I'm dumping you. I'm so through with you."

She couldn't have timed it better: the train released a heavy sigh, as though it were exasperated with their fight and was happy it was over, when it wormed into Penn Station. The doors split open, and Regina stepped calmly out onto the platform.

"Whatever, babe," she heard from behind her. "Whatever."

•

For a while Regina felt very good about herself. She began to work out, and when not working out she applied herself to her position at the firm, attending a series of training sessions for an advanced software package they were thinking of implementing in the document production department. But as the fall turned into the grayness of winter, she felt her heart begin to deflate a little. Holiday season tended to sadden her. It was often a miserable choice: go home to Springfield and be ridiculed by her mother and endlessly guffawing brother, or call up her Dad and hint that she wanted to go out to Seattle, or just stay home. She chose the last option. She saw her friend Stacy on Christmas Day but she couldn't help feeling like the pitied-upon guest, and she noticed she repeated phrases like "I love this tree," and "This stocking is so cute," just because she thought they sounded right and because she didn't really have much else to say. It was during these moments a voice would enter her mind like a cluster fly, buzzing: Donald LaPrue. Maybe she was negative? Maybe something in her life really had to change? Was there something wrong with her?

The dreary Christmas season passed, and spring was upon her and spring brought its own harsh demands: just how fat had she become, and would she be able to handle watching all of the love-consumed couples parading their passion around the city? And then the worst happened: one day she was scanning the Arts section of the Times when she found a review of an off-Broadway production of a David Mamet play. One of the stars was a "riveting newcomer named Hank Lane." Her eyes glossed over the name and then—as though she'd been stabbed—she just stared at the name, breathlessly.

"Oh. My. God," she said as she finished the article. It went on to say that the "flat production and overly schematic direction of the play was salvaged by Hank Lane's impassioned performance."

"Wow," she said. She felt her body sag.

It was like a bomb had gone off—the bomb of Donald LaPrue. The critically acclaimed role had gotten him tons of press. He guest-starred as a

psychopath with Tourette's Syndrome on an episode of *Law and Order*, got a few roles in notable independent films, one of which won the top dramatic prize at the Sundance Film Festival, and a few months later he snagged a role in a movie with—of all people—Tom Hanks. Regina read about it in *Entertainment Weekly*.

It wasn't possible. It just simply was not possible, Regina kept saying to herself.

That fall the film came out, and for a Tom Hanks vehicle it hadn't done very well, but again—all of the reviews seemed to focus on the fine performance of the supporting actor Hank Lane.

More press followed. His face began to appear everywhere: in *US Weekly*, *People*, *Interview*, and on television tabloid shows like *Entertainment Tonight* and *Extra!* Obviously drowning in dollars, he'd bought a Tribeca loft and a proud picture of him standing in the middle of his high-ceilinged apartment was plastered in the real estate section of the *Times*.

"I can't even look at a magazine anymore," Regina said to Stacy. "He was on *Conan O'Brien* last night. You believe that? What the hell is happening? I mean, I saw him act, Stacy. He was awful!"

"Maybe he got better? Did you see the movie?"

"I'm afraid to."

"Forget about it."

She tried.

But the rise in Donald "Hank" LaPrue's fortunes seemed to coincide with the decline of Regina Margaret DeMarco's. Carolyn continued giving Regina all of the horrible jobs. As soon as Regina got in, Carolyn called her up at her cubicle and told her there was a rush, while other operators skulked around, and filled their coffee mugs, chatting and laughing. Regina was getting tired of it and though she'd already reached up higher in the chain to complain, and a few memos had been sent, the situation stayed the same.

One morning Regina came in, more grumpy than usual because she hadn't slept well, and she went to fill up her coffee and Carolyn strode into the pantry carrying a thick document.

"Regina—this is a rush. The attorney's waiting for it. Get moving." She slammed the document on the counter.

"Hey, Carolyn," Regina called to her.

Carolyn stopped and turned around.

"I'm just wondering if there is some reason why you continue to hand me the shit jobs while everybody else in this place is allowed to goof off. Is there a reason? Because if there is, I would really like to hear it come out of your ugly little fucking mouth."

Just as Regina uttered “fucking,” a senior partner of the firm, escorting a client from General Motors, was passing the open pantry.

She received no severance pay and was unable to collect unemployment. She sent her resumes out, but soon her lease was up and the landlord had increased her rent, asking for almost twelve hundred dollars for a Park Slope studio apartment. Regina couldn't do it. She used the apartment, and the fact that since she'd quit dancing she found less and less use for expensive and cluttered and noisy New York, as an excuse to clear out. But where?

She chose Ogunquit, Maine. She'd vacationed there as a teenager, always liked its rugged coast and piney woods. She knew friends who vacationed there regularly and she could probably still see them in the summer months. And maybe it would be nice to live somewhere pretty and peaceful and that made her nostalgic. Why not? She decided to make a brash decision for once and she sold all of her useless furniture and packed the rest in a Budget rental truck and drove up to Maine. She found a temporary job as a clerk in a health food store, and another job as a waitress at a small restaurant that was open for ten months of the year. She found it difficult to make friends in such a transient community, but in the meantime she busied herself with hobbies: she took a tae kwon do class and started studying Italian and on spring and summer afternoons would lose herself in reading and studying at the beach. Before long her phone began to ring and she even went on a few dates—but she found most of the men rather dull, if not depressing.

She adjusted. She finally secured a job as a word processor for a small consulting firm in Portland, and even though it entailed almost an hour's drive in her sputtering Dodge Neon, everything seemed to be going well—she earned her orange belt in tae kwon do—until she read an article in the *Portland Press Herald* about a film being shot on location in Ogunquit. The star of this film was the actor Hank Lane.

“This is just absurd,” Regina said. She was bent over at the bar at the restaurant where she worked part-time.

“What?” said the bartender, Roger, a ruddy guy with a potbelly and a tattoo of a Celtic cross on his arm. Regina had slept with him a few times. She told him.

“No way,” he said. “You knew him?” Regina knew he doubted her.

Everybody did. She had told the story before, about how awful Donald LaPrue's acting had been, and what a creep he was, and how he was nothing but a spoiled brat living on his father's paychecks, but as she said the words she began to realize that she sounded bitter, a miserable person with a sour attitude. And so in the future she decided to keep quiet about it.

One Saturday night Regina took a walk down Shore Road, all

the way to Perkins Cove. It was May, the beginning of tourist season. The shops were lit. Tourists crowded the sidewalks. The salty air freshened her face and a bright moon squatted on a bank of clouds. As she approached Perkins Cove, she saw two long trailers perched on the side of the street, the entrance to the cove barricaded by a row of orange cones. A cluster of large looming lights illuminated the cove parking lot, and cables as thick as garden hoses were taped to the ground.

"Oh, shit." Regina walked, joined the crowd of people that had gathered. A man with a clipboard and a flashlight stood guard, speaking into his walkie-talkie every now and then. Faces leaned out of cottage windows, and people in the crowd yipped excitedly, their necks craned, trying to glimpse the spot where two actors and a director in a fluffy orange sweater conversed in front of the wooden drawbridge that spanned the cove. Regina knew that one of the actors, with the profile of the aggressively nodding head and the lumpy nose, was Donald.

"Oh, please," she muttered loudly. Some people glared at her for spoiling the mood, and Regina snorted and marched back down the street to the Ogunquit Tavern. It was a place made quaint with all kinds of lobster traps and sea-corroded buoys and large starfish stapled to the plywood.

She sat at the bar, had a beer, and that's when Roger came in, exuding a tangy cologne. He turned the wooden bar stool around and sat on it. He rapped her on the arm and pointed with his thumb.

"Did you see that out there?"

Regina said yeah, she had.

"What? That's a first for up here, you know. You're not impressed?"

She told him the story about Donald again, because Roger, who never remembered anything she said, had forgotten it.

"So you really knew that guy?"

"Yes. I fucking knew him, okay? Nobody seems to believe me. And to tell you the truth, he was a creep. And for some god-forsaken reason he continues to haunt my life. I mean, shit: I came up here to escape from all that New York City crap and here he is shooting a movie right outside my window. A big-time Hollywood movie from a guy whose only claim to fame when he met me was this stupid piece of shit called *The Crutch*. Ever heard of it? No, of course you haven't. Because until now it's probably been rotting in the three-for-a-dollar bin in every used video store in the country." She stopped speaking, aware suddenly of the silence she'd created, and the wary glances from the customers sitting at the round tables behind them.

"Boy," Roger said, sipping his beer. "You're juiced up with jealousy over this guy. You gotta chill out."

"If you tell me that I have a bad attitude, or that I'm negative, and

that my 'energy' is dragging you down I swear to holy hell I'm gonna slap you silly, Roger. I'm not shitting you."

Roger began to laugh. "That's what I like about you. You got the fire in you." He laughed again, clapped her on the shoulder like she was one of his buddies from high school. "Let me get you something a little stronger," he said.

They had a few kamikazes, and later they went out to the back porch, the sky big and blowzy with stars, and smoked a joint. Afterward they stumbled back down Shore Road to Roger's apartment. The people had cleared, the grips were shoving the movie equipment back into the open backs of the trucks. At Roger's apartment—the second floor of a crumbling duplex—it wasn't long before he began fumbling at Regina's blouse, then at her pants. She tumbled to his bed, or more appropriately, his mattress, as it was bare of sheets, and Roger stuck a condom on and took her from behind. He was rough: he pinched her nipples and accentuated his thrusts by tugging on the hank of her hair. He was done quickly, and he rolled over in exhausted pants. Regina was glad it was over. She lay on her back and lit up a cigarette, telling herself she would quit soon.

Roger's raspy snores filled the room. It was a bachelor's bedroom, cluttered and stinky, with no evidence that it had ever seen a scrap of sunlight. How many rooms like this had she been in? She fought back the self-pitying tears, but they were relentless and they continued to spill down her face. She realized, partially, that they were drunken tears, but because she was drunk she also relished the emotional release they gave her. It was a mistake, though: because soon enough her face was flooded and her nose began to dribble and she began to choke a little. She feared waking Roger up so she got out of the bed and staggered to the living room, burying her face in a sweatshirt she found. Was it possible that Donald was really in the same little town filming a movie? Maybe he was right? Maybe everybody was right—she was the negative one.

She went to the kitchen, opened the fridge. There was no beer. She opened a cabinet and found half a bottle of vodka. She poured some in a glass, filled it up with some orange juice from the refrigerator and drank it. She walked to the bathroom. She was naked. She inspected herself in the mirror. Her breasts were still firm, and she had always been proud of her dark-colored nipples, which a guy once joked reminded him of little sombreros. She had a pretty tummy, and though she'd put on a few pounds, shapely hips. She was thirty-three years old. She had obligatory wrinkles around her eyes and a few crimps around the corners of her lips, not helped by her propensity to smoke. Her green eyes, though a bit swollen and red from the tears, were beautiful. Yes, she was composed. It was all a big ugly

coincidence. She was beautiful, intelligent, still young, with lots of hope, Regina knew this. Nevertheless, she found herself thrusting her face into the mirror, as though trying to suffocate herself, whispering over and over: “I remember the truth of who I am.”



Hannah

Brandy Cohen



The White Lady

Toshona Jones



Alone like Winter

Cassandra Trahan



Ashley

Brandy Cohen

Michael Milburn teaches high school English in New Haven, CT. He is the author of a book of poems, *Such Silence*, from the University of Alabama Press, and a book of essays, *Odd Man In*, from Midlist Press. A new book of poems is forthcoming from Word Press.

THE STRUGGLING POET

Michael Milburn

One has made oneself a master of an art. One may forget that it is in making oneself a master of something that mastery consists.

Robert Fitzgerald

It is my rather subversive opinion that a writer's feelings of anonymity-obscurity are the second most valuable property on loan to him during his working years.

J.D. Salinger

Twenty-five years ago, my college friends and I used to sit around discussing our favorite writers' *Paris Review* interviews and fantasizing about our own future encounters with the journal's editors. Today, I still find myself imagining trenchant responses to questions about where and how I write, my process of revision, and attitude toward fame. Unfortunately, my comments on the latter topic remain speculative, for I have yet to produce any poems that merit interrogation by the *Paris Review*. I do, however, possess two and a half decades of experience as a struggling poet—that is, one who cannot count on his work being published. As such, I belong to a species never heard from in interviews, though surely more poets strive for recognition than publish to even modest acclaim.

Despite our numbers, all accounts of literary neglect that I have read end with the writer being discovered and offering a tidy moral such as “persistence pays,” or “believe in yourself.” Yet the perspective of a chronically struggling writer can be just as instructive as that of a Nobel laureate. Obscurity might even be the optimum condition for American poets, affording them a degree of motivation and independence that diminishes when they acquire an audience. In my view, at least some of the mediocre verse produced by established poets—that is, those whose work receives prompt and prominent exposure—can be blamed upon their success.

Adversity can serve as a spur. Every rejection that I receive makes me work harder to write a poem so good that both I and my appraising editors will recognize its quality. This isn't necessarily a realistic goal (after twenty-five years of writing and submitting, I doubt that recognition will come suddenly), but it contains just enough possibility to keep me working. After years of railing against the abysmal taste of editors who reject my poems, and melodramatically threatening to give up poetry, I have learned that the best cure for my discouragement with writing is to sit down and write. If I were to receive a phone call today conferring publication, money, or fame, I wonder what would get me back to my desk tomorrow. Since these rewards would disorient me as much as they fulfilled me, I'd have to find a new source of motivation to replace the old indignant striving. Like an Olympian in training, the struggling poet may never be so fit and focused, or so anonymous, as in the days leading up to victory.

What happens after victory? Relieved of the initial craving for affirmation, where do poets find their incentive? Of course, many will say that they have always written to please themselves, or to satisfy an intangible urge, or to honor poets that they love. But the fact is that after poets receive a certain degree of recognition, their new books will be more likely, if not certain, to see print. This change in status can't help but affect the way that these poets write and think about their writing. A few may manage to tune out the factors that accompany success, but for others the attention can be ruinous.

To test this view, I selected from my bookshelves five of my favorite poetry books from the past four decades. All were published in the early or middle years of the poet's career, all gained their authors wider recognition (three won Pulitzer Prizes), and all but one were followed by books that disappointed me. In the latter cases, not only did the quality of the poems deteriorate after the poet's success, but the subsequent books appeared with increasing frequency, at an average rate of one every two and a half years. The only poet in the group who managed to sustain the quality of his work was the one who published at a rate (a book every seven years) and in a quantity (four books in all) that strikes me as appropriate to the demands of the genre.

When asked about the writing process in forums such as the *Paris Review* interviews, established poets tend to focus on creative strategy. Secure in the knowledge that their work will proceed efficiently from their typewriter to an editor's desk and then to readers' hands, they worry about little other than whether to employ three- or four-line stanzas, or if a particular word should be kept in or taken out. One would think that such circumstances would help writers, allowing them the freedom to concentrate

on composition. But if this is the case, then why do so many abundantly published poets who produced exciting verse in their youth now write as if they are going through the motions, bereft of inspiration?

Maybe loss of inspiration is the problem; many poets produce their best work before their forties, with fertile older masters such as Yeats being an exception. Or maybe the anonymous poet's preoccupation with extraneous matters such as getting published and finding a job is a good thing. Struggling poets continually question their behavior, viewing each completed poem, if not each writing session, as a victory over discouragement. They wonder why they persevere, contemplate other uses of their time that would yield more financial and psychological rewards, and fantasize about conditions that the established poet takes for granted. These uncertainties can provide the strugglers with extraordinary independence. Far from being reassured by the existence of an audience, they are driven by their longing for one. This prods them to write as ambitiously as they can while allowing them to remain the sole judges of their achievement. For all of the strain that it places on self-confidence, then, obscurity may provide poets with an indispensable opportunity, freeing them to experiment in an anonymous laboratory with no expectations drawing them toward or away from certain styles and subjects.

Established poets don't necessarily bend their poems to others' tastes, but I don't envy them the burden of recognition. I imagine that the number of poems a poet discards before submitting them diminishes when he or she achieves success; efforts that once would have gone into a drawer or the trash, or yielded to better poems as a manuscript circulated, now make their way into envelopes simply because the poet knows they will be published and read. When an Academy of American Poets chancellor or Poet Laureate submits his or her new collection to Knopf or Norton, a few poems may be returned for fine-tuning, but I doubt that poets of this stature often receive their manuscripts back with the comment "It's not up to our (or your) standards." Yet isn't it conceivable that some of this work might be unworthy of publication? If editors accept these books based upon their authors' reputations rather than the quality of their poems, then who gives the celebrities honest appraisals of their work? One can see how quality might deteriorate as fame increases. Pop singers such as Mariah Carey who follow a hit debut with several flops might find themselves dropped by their profit-minded record label, but it would have taken more than a few weak books for Knopf to stop publishing James Merrill.

Many established poets also seem to interpret their success as an invitation to generate as many poems as possible. John Ashbery, one of our most celebrated poets, published eight books in the decade between 1992

and 2002. Brief periods of prolificness have suited the talents of some poets such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, but Ashbery appears to have settled into making poems like a professional in any line of work, regarding productivity less as a matter of inspiration than of showing up and putting out. Increasing output in response to demand may work in the business world, but among artists it can result in a lowering of standards. As Mark Rudman observed about two other poets whose outputs exploded along with their reputations:

How does a reader deal with 120 pages of poetry written over a two-to-three year period? When I read Amy Clampitt or Derek Walcott in large doses, I hear Elias Canetti whispering "One should fear words more."

Surely Elizabeth Bishop, who published ten poems between 1965 and 1976, when she was at the height of her renown, possessed a healthier regard for the demands of her art.

Of course, not all established poets sacrifice quality for quantity, and I am sure that many want to keep improving their work. Still, they cannot claim solidarity with poets who have few or no published poems and have yet to fulfill even modest literary goals. An established poet who tries to approach every new poem with the mentality of a nobody is like a trapeze artist who pretends that the net has been removed. One can't fake obscurity. Unlike their struggling counterparts, established poets don't write in order to stave off despair or to maintain their identities as writers. If they give up writing for a day or a month or a year, they can still feed off past approval, and the sight of their books aligned on the shelf will confirm to them and to others that they are still poets. If strugglers stop working, they give up their sole tangible credential as writers—the fact that they write.

Whether they are aware of it or not, all poets face a quandary when they begin to write: the recognition that they aspire to and that drives them to do their best work also threatens to corrupt them if they attain it. They yearn to be successful, yet also want to maintain their standards and produce better and better poems. Barring a decision to relegate their work to a drawer, however, poets cannot ensure lifelong obscurity, nor should they want to—all writers need some acknowledgment, which sends them back to their desks with renewed optimism. Their best strategy is to hope that success does not come too early or abundantly, and to appreciate (or at least not resent) their obscurity. They should remember that these may be their most productive, if not their happiest, years as writers. The luckiest poets may be those recognized late in life, when they are too conditioned by the

capriciousness of public favor to succumb to its allure.

I don't mean to condemn all successful poets to careers of self-delusion and mediocrity, though sometimes the current state of the art makes me fear such an outcome. One cure for complacency would be a return to a more rigorous criticism: when Randall Jarrell deplored the decline in W.H. Auden's poetry in the 1960's, everyone concerned with Auden's career, including the poet himself, heard him. Although no publisher would have abandoned such a superstar, I like to think that Auden returned to his study with indignation and perhaps even renewed resolve after reading Jarrell. Nowadays, poetry primarily receives either descriptive reviews or scholarly exegeses where evaluation is secondary to interpretation. Opinionated critics tend to either rave or condemn, causing readers to dismiss them as biased.

In the absence of external checks, established poets must recover their own high standards. Seamus Heaney recalls reminding himself "You're mortal, you're mortal" as he grappled with the onslaught of fame. W.D. Snodgrass identifies the motive behind his poem "A Flat One":

In relation to a poem like this, I'm much more moved by a desire to compete...and to write a poem that's as good as so and so's....I'm sorry to sound so unconscientious, but I have a dirty suspicion that if Robert Lowell and Tony Hecht and John Berryman weren't around I might not have wanted to re-write that poem....

Perhaps William Butler Yeats remains the best example of a poet who never settled for mere recognition; lavished with fame during his life, he nevertheless kept pushing himself to improve, as evidenced by his worksheets for such late poems as "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Yeats continued to write from within the struggle which motivated him as a youth and which, after talent and experience, constitutes a poet's most precious gift.

Ryan Kittrell was born on August 14, 1985, and has lived his entire life in Owasso, Oklahoma. He is currently working towards a bachelor's degree in liberal arts at Rogers State University. "Ode to Love" is Ryan's first work to be published.

ODE TO LOVE: ROSES AND VIOLETS

Ryan Kittrell

Great lies are forged from truth,
and those held closest hurt us most.

Like fruit that grows for a season,
and rots in a day—beauty is fleeting.
Those who have it all gamble everything.

Should foul creatures bother with love?
In a world where kindness kills,
we are pigs choking on slop.

Glenn Sheldon is a widely published poet and critic. His first full-length poetry book, *Bird Scarer*, was published by Cervena Barva Press (West Somerville, MA) in 2007. Currently he is an Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Toledo. One of his favorite courses to teach is Food and Eating in U.S. Culture.

THE ONLY ANGELS FOR A SEASON OR TWO

Glenn Sheldon

The ballroom dancers take over
the Miss Liberty Diner,
its tamed jukebox, its very air.

We turn because that's
what spectacles demand of us.

Both sexes wear pancake makeup
and clothes smaller than
the original figleaves.

Most ask for salad.
Some start dancing in the aisle.
One orders a steak ("so red
that it looks like a ruby").
None of them admit we're here too.

They've kidnapped the rumba
of later Carmen Miranda films—
throwing themselves into the air
so certain that gravity means no harm.

One has taken off her shoes, and her toes
look like bones of crows.

The waitress returns to us
just to share her sighs,
"No one is young forever."
Or shouldn't be,
but look at these dancers
unafraid of their passions.

Gaylord Brewer is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he edits *Poems & Plays*. His most recent books of poetry are *Let Me Explain* (Iris Press, 2006) and, forthcoming, *The Martini Diet* (Dream Horse Press, 2007). His work also appears in *Best American Poetry* 2006.

BURNING

Gaylord Brewer

A father accused, a son, a smell of cheese.
The boy on a keg of nails, his feral gut twisted
with wanting. The Justice cracks the hammer,
case dismissed and they're back on the wagon,
the whole ragged family, busted stove,
silent clock pointing the way clear of town.

You study this wretched cycle, find yourself
when the father strikes you, his black immensity
carved in light of stingy fire, your second
beating of the day. He's wrong: You'd have lied
for him, you'd have done it. Twenty years
passed, you still taste that Snopes blood fierce

on your tongue, still hear the gunshots,
still walk a dream of black trees all around.
Twenty years and waking to the agonized truth,
your heart's pull and despair, waking cold
with the old man's limp. Whippoorwills still
predict the dawn as you walk the stiffness away.

ONLY INSOMNIA

Gaylord Brewer

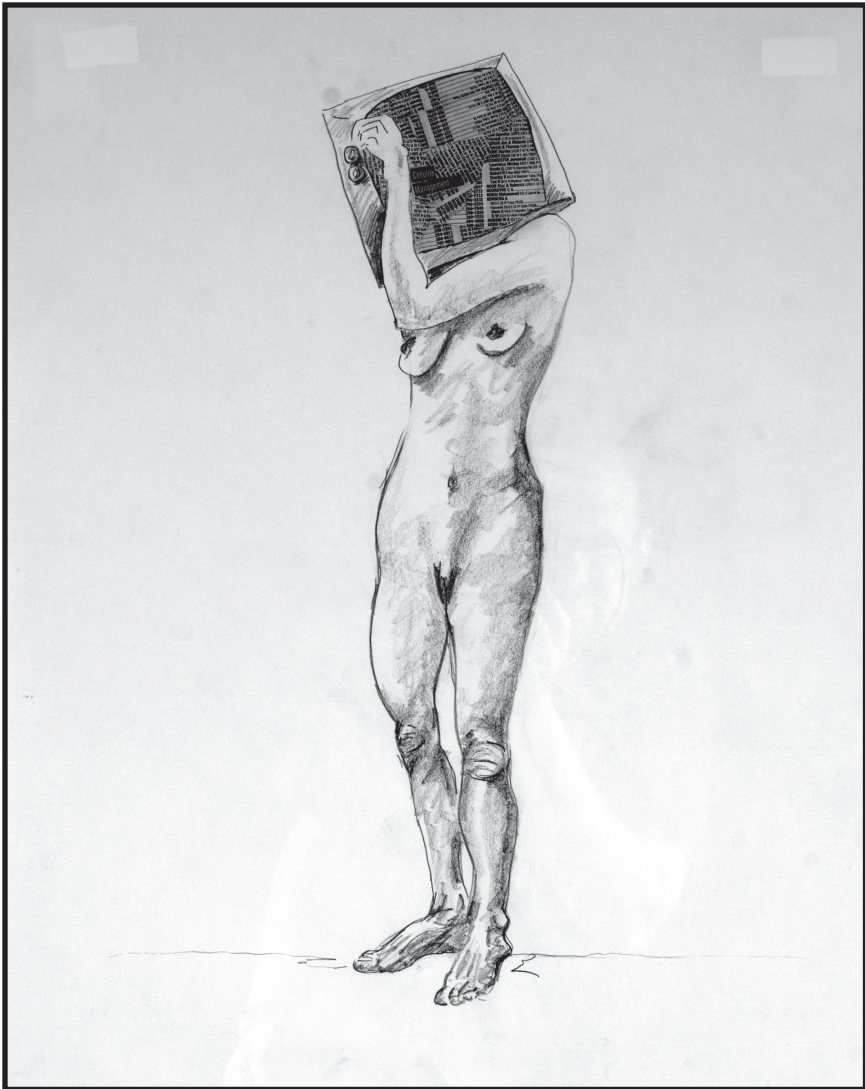
You stand before the unpolished bar
of the bodega with what spare dignity
one may muster for these hours.
What is the time? It is late, friend.
You stand, quietly alone in the residue

of a smile for a prayer of nothing.
You still see the old man, deaf
but nearly steady, departing the café,
vanquished to night and perhaps
a bed, perhaps a dreamless sleep.

You hope so. Other possibilities,
they are less good. And your confident
young friend, with humbling lessons
to learn—but not tonight, not tonight—
he is most certainly home, woman

soft against the angular certainties
of his body. Now you too, friend,
must leave, turn from the barman
who has turned from you, step cautiously
from these oblique and pleasant lights

and again toward the late shadows
of the trees. So late, in fact, it will
soon be early once more. How strange.
With dawn, perhaps you too shall
sleep, and that is all you ask of mercy.



**I saw you in the warm glow
of late night static**

Joshua Meier

Beryl Markham grew up with her father in Africa, where she played with native children, got mauled by a lion, became a racehorse trainer, and flew cargo over mostly uncharted land. In 1936 she became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic from east to west. Ernest Hemingway felt humbled by her autobiography, *West with the Night*, from which the following italicized passages are gratefully borrowed. Her husband, however, felt bitter.

PHANTASIA

Beryl Markham

I have no
envy. No penis.

I wore pants out of practicality
I
did not hate the man who raised me
I
thrust forth a spear
from necessity.

You cannot hunt an animal with such a weapon unless
you know the way of his life. You must know the things he
loves, the things he fears, the paths he will follow. . . . He
will know as much about you, and at times make better
use of it.

Walking in the rustled grass of the Serengeti
or flying over
there are lions.
A woman could be mauled
anywhere
anytime.

The sharp wind steals a tear from my face. Just one,
one is enough to mingle with a lion's roar
spotting the dust, whether my face
is pressed near the ground or four miles up—
I will not forget this lesson. This training.

He reared upward, cutting the dust cloud with his hooves.
Plunging, he kicked at her legs and felt the thin whip bite
at his quarters, time after time, until they glowed with
pain.

It's a matter of who is master
 I of myself, I
 of my horse
 my spear
 my plane, my life. Of tea time at two, petticoats and curt-
 sies, I have no sighs
 not even a gale of breath to scatter pretention. Dust on my
 palm.
 I smack my hands against my pants
 mounting
 again.

I am
 flying once more, raising my spear, mapping
 my ground, my own water. But who can make the world?

"Come Beryl be one of us wear the dress go ahead
 write your little book then bathe
 a husband a ghost man a ghost-writer who can only mock
 you your solo style. Forget
 Africa forget forget horses come down to earth be
 one of us."

It was as if the mapmakers had said, "We are aware that
 between this spot and that one, there are several hundred
 thousands of acres, but until you make a forced landing
 there, we won't know whether it is mud, desert, or jungle
 —and the chances are we won't know then!

Lost then? I never was
 not even when I spun disoriented the wind
 roaring.
 But now
 in the uncharted land of America I am
 between two points.
 I am looking for my horse he is stabled.
 I search out my plane she is mute
 she lies tipped on a broken strut.

Even so, my husband is such a tiny lion,
 I cannot bring myself to fear, even so I still wear pants,

and how he tugs at them
how he jerks and sweats
how he gasps and grunts and roars.

I still have the scars of his teeth and claws, but they are very
small now and almost forgotten, and I cannot begrudge
him his moment.

I am alone now fast on a horse the wind still tugging at my
eyes
but no tears come. I feel my own breath sweet in my own
mouth. The taste of me
is greater than blood. Riding I raise my hand, my chal-
lenge, my princess wave,
my salute—no,
none of those—

this is only my hand,
the flag of me riding.
I who know animals.
I who know who am I.

M. Doretta Cornell, a Sister of the Divine Compassion engaged in work for social justice and nonviolence, is a member of the Poetry Caravan. Recent poems appear in *West Wind*, *Earth's Daughters*, *Inkwell*, *Commonweal*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and the Poetry Caravan anthology, *(en)compass*.

SOWETO

M. Doretta Cornell

"We see ourselves most clearly in unfamiliar settings."

David St. John

At home the refrigerator is normal,
the packed freezer casting out packets
like boats from an overpopulated island
But here abundance seems obscene,
the pure African sky and the wind
blow away desire for all but simplicity:

food for all the children,
work for their mothers, selling
morsels of lunch under the scant trees
to feed their children.

The Superintendent shows us his best
new school, a clean brick shell,
walls papered with alphabets in three languages,
no electricity, which he does not mention.
A feast is spread for us, supermarket cookies
and Hi-C, a treat the children do not share.

One school has a room of computers
donated by Pepsi. The children climb
their first stairway to reach it.
In third grade, they learn what a stairway is,

living as they do, close to Earth,
their drought-scarred grandmother.
Their feet gently massage her
as they lift their many-harmonied voices
into the unpolluted sky.

None of them think of death, of anger
at being refused new toys.
None of them know what other
things they might acquire.

One boy shyly asks if there are banks
in America, so he could send home
money to his mother,
if he left to be famous.

The children stand proudly
in their phalanxes of uniforms,
each school bearing the proud band of its color,
sure it is their shield and passport
to some world they imagine is ours,
so different that we cannot imagine theirs.

EXAMEN:*September 11, 2001*

M. Doretta Cornell

I know that instinct, know that
 in me lies coiled a sinuous limb
 eager to hug until the loved cat
 oozes from its fur, know the triumphant
 jolt as the rake sinks its iron teeth
 into my brother's skull. No matter
 that I was five; he four, a tormentor;
 I remember only the joyous competence
 of raising the wooden shaft.

So I know that rage could drive me
 through steel and glass, know that
 even as the smoke rises with its ash,
 — so little blood for so much loss —
 a fist clenches in me, waits thrilled
 for the next strike, for bridge cables to writhe
 and snap, hurling trucks and cars
 like popcorn before the awful splash,
 longs to be rendered pure in the dying.

But I know too the blue chain
 of bridge lights holds back my arms,
 the tall ginkgo roots me
 deep in Earth with the tenderness
 of young leaves and of birds murmuring
 in the first bruise of dawn. I know
 in the center of all this hurt and loss
 the Cross anchors me, sorrow beyond
 my own fills me with the ache of creation.

Cherri Randall is currently completing a PhD in gender studies at the University of Arkansas where she also holds an MFA in creative writing. Her work has appeared in *Mid-America Poetry Review*, *the rectangle*, *Lake Effects*, *Hogtown Creek Review*, *Paper Street Press*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Permafrost Review*, *Paddlefish*, *The Potomac Review*, *Literary Chaos*, *Main Channel Voices*, *storySouth* and *Sojourn*. She has green eyes, fiery red hair, and arms spattered with freckles. She lives with two teenaged daughters, a panda bear hamster named Rocco Jafar, and has high hopes for the future.

MY DAUGHTER'S BEDROOM

Cherri Randall

Posters of rock stars,
Tie-dyed hair, a studded face,
Eyes of the disenfranchised.
Rock collection: quartz and agate,
Tiger's eye and crazy lace.
Anne of Green Gables,
Dice earrings colored neon green,
Closeted dolls and telephone calls.
Jewelry box: overwound ballerina,
Music beyond hearing.
Dreams of peach-fuzzy boys
And fumbled kisses,
Independence and heavy lip gloss.
Mother's advice
She so easily dismisses.
Sunrise each morning,
Locks of gold pillow-strewn.
Hint of child and desires wild.
Awakening daughter at fourteen:
My baby gargoyle turns to stone.

Nancy Simpson is Resident Writer at John Campbell Folk School. She is the author of *Across Water* and *Night Student* and had poems published in *Georgia Review* and *Prairie Schooner*. “Night Student” was included in *Word and Wisdom, 100 Years of NC Poetry*. She edited *Lights in the Mountains, Stories, Essays and Poems by Writers Living in and Inspired by the Southern Appalachian Mountains*.

GHOST OF CANDIDE

for Bettie M. Sellers

Nancy Simpson

It was the wrong time to meet
a lost relative by marriage
but we met. We walked
on a red dirt road
in the forest, her best world.

I am not married to your cousin any more,
she said. The divorce is final.
I thought I saw the end in lines
across her face. It was the sun
playing artist, using the twig

of a sapling for a brush, painting
random shadows on her cheek.
White petals fell, dropped
by the change of a season.
She never noticed petals falling,

instead, turned and pointed
to pink buds on laurel. Even now
when I walk there, I feel
the presence of a persistent spirit.
I won't die from it, she said.

Allan Peterson is the author of two books: *All the Lavish in Common* (2005 Juniper Prize) and *Anonymous Or* (Defined Providence Press) and four chapbooks. Recent print and online appearances include *Blackbird*, *Bellingham Review*, *Perihelion*, *Stickman Review*, *Marlboro Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Press 1*. His work is forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Northwest Review*, and *Swink*.

BONE GAME

Allan Peterson

After the first crack this morning's thunder continued in the pans and the doctor at Chiropractic Life said backbones out of whack are the true roots of discomfort. He offered half off as an intro. This year record strains will be received from sandbags in a stretch from lower Wisconsin to St. Louis. So much of this was stars and saw blades from last year's big snows. Now nothing for miles but roofs and stoplights. Little snaps as the weary helpers stand. It happens in every disaster. Hurts. A populace that wouldn't bother in a good year goes reflective weighing loss in floods. Gambling vs. God's will. Another bone game. No therapy keen as survival.

ILLUSION OF SPIRIT

Allan Peterson

Reaching to prune the buckeye he sees how it is harder on the back of the hand to keep the illusion of spirit we'll call it, what with those game bones, tree roots, flesh colored candles in plain sight, to say the clouds come and go without our involvement.

But in the back of the book, the unintentional poem in the index of first lines, makes sense as do rivers between words, and the appendix and contents page, and the "clock" of barometer whose time goes both ways in its two unpredictable hands: the set screw hand, the spring-loaded hand, really a finger, really an arrow, really a silver point of metal having nothing to do with time passing water or blood, from Rain to Change to Fair & Dry.



Beauty
Amanda Dishman

Jordan Ferguson is a 21-year-old student from Lawton, Oklahoma. He is currently working on his first book of poetry.

WHEN WHITE SPACE MEANS MORE THAN THE PAINT

Jordan Ferguson

the only thing
keeping
our voices from touching
is silence.

our tongues
that used to entertain
and keep each other company,
now lie dormant in our mouths.
unused.

we don't have a chance to stand on.

our one hope
is only inches away,
but i don't feel like getting up.

we had one hero left
and he died.
after all these miles,
i'm giving up.

Naomi Feigelson Chase's poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Harvard Review*, among others. Her most recent book of poetry is *Gittel, The Would-Be Messiah, A Novel in Verse*, which won a Turning Point Award.

GARGANTUA REDUCED TO ANECDOTE

Naomi Feigelson Chase

The whale's lost legs, Attila's excrement,
The dirt my dog excavates,

It's history, a Gobi in the making.
Even Gargantua reduced to anecdote.

Who knows if dividing bulbs multiply,
Why the jut of a woman's hip rattles earth's axle,

How Helen's mouth
Ignites a Trojan matter.

We might as well set ourselves on fire
To find what love consumes.

While earth's stuff aggregates
Mine abates, leaches bone.

What begat me?
Go back to hardpan, fundament.

COLD COMFORT

Naomi Feigelson Chase

If that's a river snaking through,
It's frozen for miles.

If that's a road below,
It comforts me like Aretemis' hundred breasts.

Those precise peaks, nature's scary darlings
Dangle a rope I don't dare climb.

Their jagged triangles
Like pressed wax imprint on my eyes.

*In Pittsburgh winters, Zadi pulled my
sled up Pocusset Street.*

Later, he spooned eggs into a blue cup,

The furred pelf of trees
Bristling with what?

Stark successes now,
Black matter in a thousand years.

MARROW

Naomi Feigelson Chase

I unwrap myself.
When I lift
The bright skein of veins
I am white as eggshell.
Next I place
Fingers and toes
In an old silk box.
Lighter than lymph,
I cool,
Float,
Shocked,
An absolute zero.

Aubrey Hill is 20 years old and a sophomore at Rogers State University. Her major is English and she is unsure what she wants to pursue. She has only lived in the U.S. for about 3 years because she has lived overseas most of her life. She was born in Mountain Home, Idaho, on July 20, 1987. She has lived in Idaho, Mississippi, Italy, Turkey, Japan and Oklahoma because her father serves in the military. She has also visited Greece, Germany, Thailand, Philippines, and Austria. She thinks she has been blessed because of the amount of culture she has experienced and she is thankful for it because it has made her who she is today.

CONDONE

Aubrey Hill

You could have helped—
Instead, fell silent.

Ignored begging eyes
You insignificant cur.

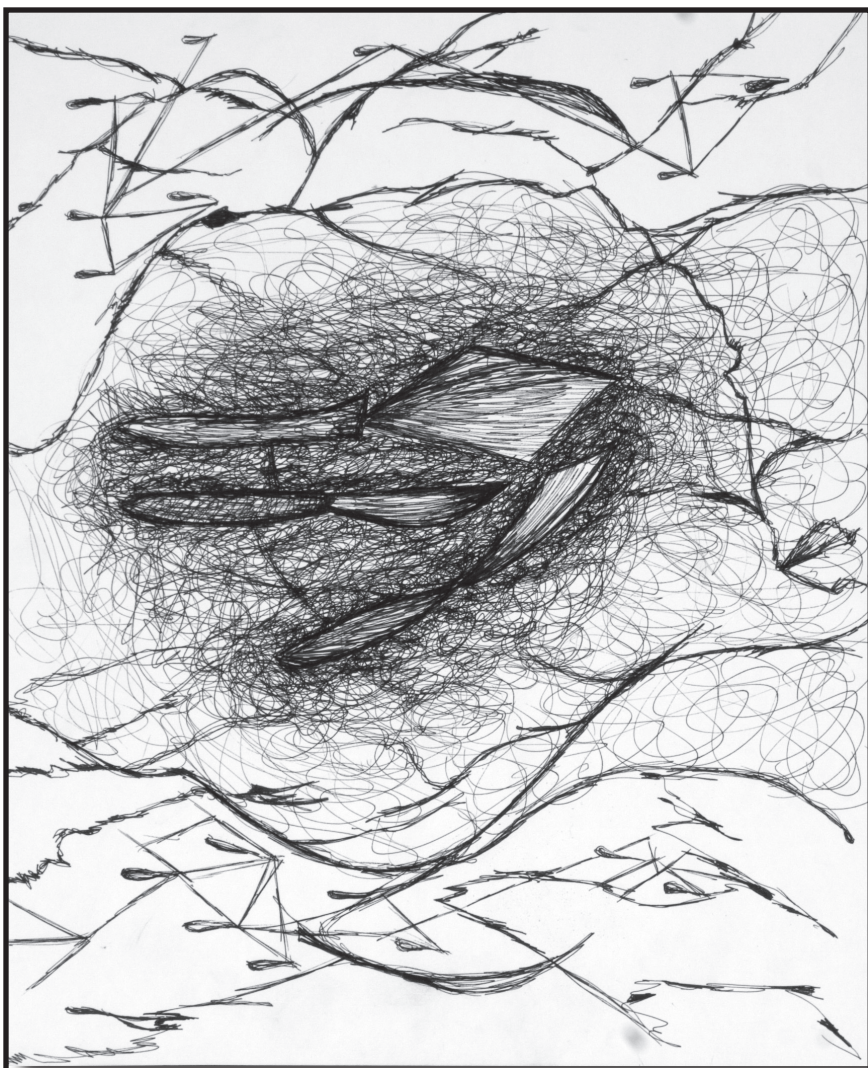
Undeserving detriment
Stainless children endure

Delicate youth tormented
Degradation is what you wear.

CANVAS

Aubrey Hill

How can they hate it?
Criticism pours over the oil-caked work.
They know nothing of this art, this isn't their masterpiece.
Beg them to chew their jealous tongues off —
When they think they understand the misunderstood artist.
Love is meant to be blood-written on permanent parchment —
Not as ink spilling out of their false teeth.
Rip them out along with their words —
Until all that is left are bloody gums.
The medium they try to use is poor and broken
Paint that pretty portrait with their green tears.
Let them know it's surrealism they felt and feared.
A blank canvas and an empty palette, is all they have.
Throw turpentine on their pretend art,
Pick their lovely brushes of sable hair.
And yet, it's not the lonesome critics fault.
They only loathe the artist's ability to love their creation.



Untitled

Kaci Scott

Andrew Brasier is an undergraduate student at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. He has been writing poetry ever since he was in high school.

LORD OF THE BOWL

Andrew Brasier

You watch me,
as I thoughtfully dig
my way to the bottom
of this neon green bowl of Ramen,
sometimes pausing my conquest
for noodle domination
with the occasional air guitar solo
alongside Coheed and Cambria.

You watch me, and you think,
“How the hell do I sleep with this?”

Debbie Hendryx is a non-traditional, late-life student, and a senior working on her Bachelors of Arts in Liberal Arts degree at Rogers State University with emphasis on English and art, and inducted into Alpha Chi Honor Society. An award winning and published poet and essay writer, Hendryx suffered the loss of her oldest of 3 children in March 2007, and hopes to make a difference through her writing. She is raising 3 of her 9 grandchildren, does wolf rescue and falconry, is an active Renaissance performer and vendor of her own Ceramic arts, paints, and writes poetry.

DARK SOUL

Debbie Hendryx

Black pitch
engulfs life,
drowning
a tortured soul.

Confused chaos
driving mad,
the man
now lost within.

Addict
loses self,
fighting
for one last hope.

Children
cry to sleep,
agonize
the father lost.

THE STORM

Debbie Hendryx

Dark tempest roars
Electric fingers

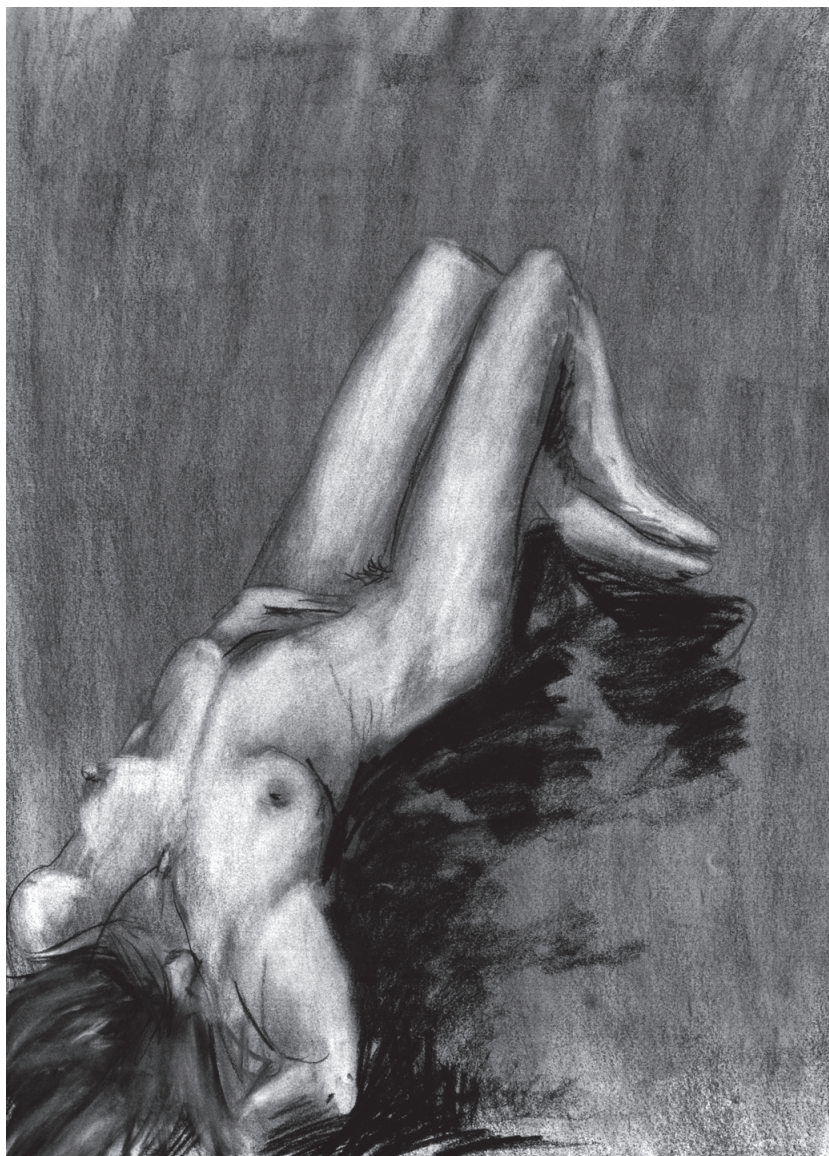
Torrent of water
heightens fear

Screeching winds
a menacing dance

Vortex of death.

Destruction
without concern

Cower in fear
nightmare alive.



The Nude

Ashley Etter

Cooweescoowee 2007

Joanne Lowery's poems have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *5 AM*, *Passages North*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Poetry East*. She lives in Michigan.

FALLING THROUGH WATER

Joanne Lowery

Fish do it all the time,
even those who pole vault upwards
for a flash of sunlight and air,
a brief respite for their gills.

Ships, submarines and sailors
lose their buoyancy, slowly filling
and gracefully exchanging
blue for black, blacker.
In the bottom darkness
a puff of golden sand greets them.

It is a short trip as the water
parts for their leisurely journeys.
By the shore you can feel small stones
exchanged for larger ones, ankles to knees,
as you walk towards the ledge

where gradation drops off:
you have the choice, or sometimes not.
One step and you'll descend like a silk balloon.
Lying there, limbs splayed, you share
the indifference of fish staring in unison
at the new sediment.

Rebecca Lilly has two collections of poems, *You Want to Sell Me a Small Antique* (Gibbs Smith), which won the Peregrine Smith Poetry Prize, and *Shadwell Hills* (Birch Brook Press), a book of haiku. She has also published a book on spiritual philosophy and practice, *The Insights of Higher Awareness*.

HAIKU

Rebecca Lilly

1.

Abandoned freight cars

Overrun with ivy; sun

Sparks on dusty rocks

2.

Husks left from harvest

On the scarecrow's hat; on his

Torn shirt, blackbirds stir

3.

Coyote scat steams...

Some bleached bones poke through the field's

Frozen clumps of weeds

4.

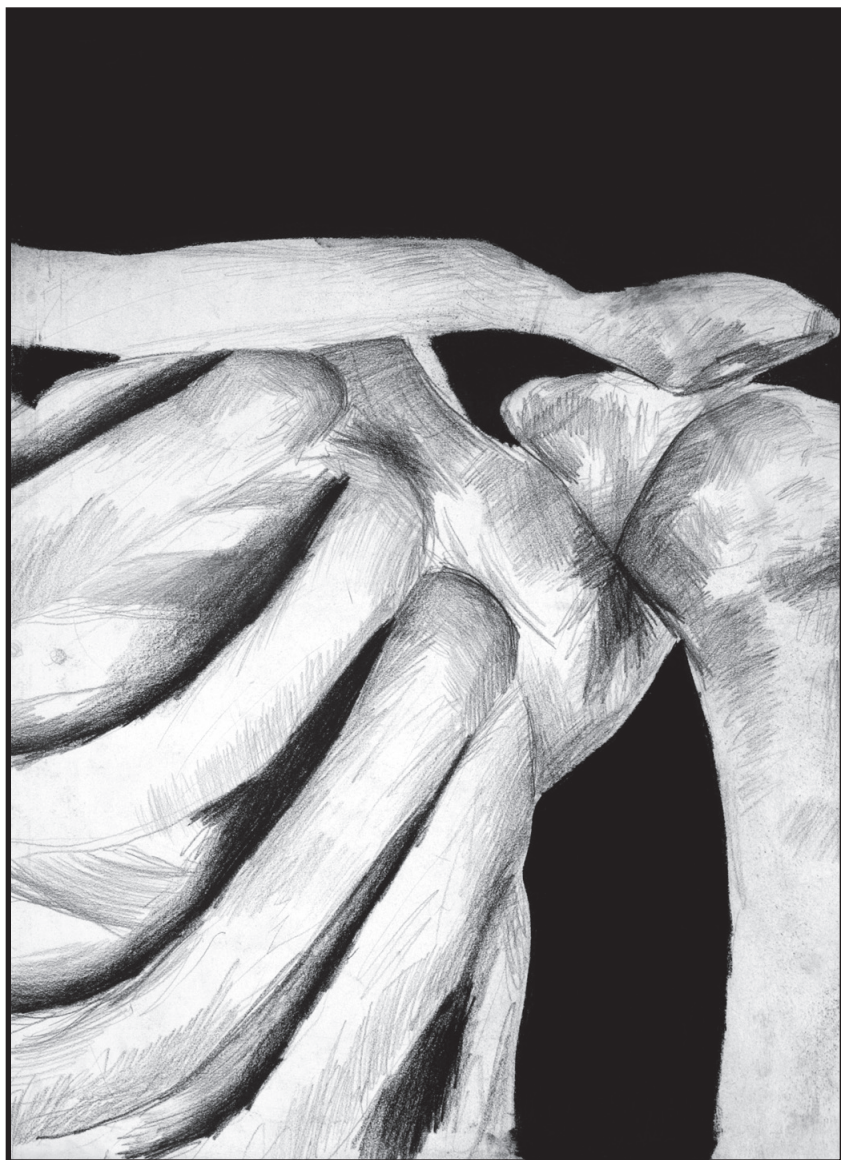
The deepening dusk—
Along rusted wire fence
Pigs knee-deep in mud

5.

The cold increasing...
Wind scissoring the waters
From boulders toward leaves

6.

More dog days! In dust
From the tractor: scarecrow straw
Blushed with sundown haze



Bones

Ashley Etter

Kyle Aylward is twenty-seven years of age and going to school at Rogers State University for a degree in liberal arts. After graduating from Rogers State, he plans to go to NSU to pursue a BA in journalism. Before he was a student, he was a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne in the U.S. Army. He fought in Afghanistan and that is what the poem is about: his thoughts on the war after he was back home on the 4th of July.

4TH OF JULY

Kyle Aylward

The fire works explode
in the star lit sky
alone in my mind
on the 4th of July

Thinking back on my ungodly war, bloodshed,
broken families, death on a foreign shore.

My mind races, thoughts of fellow men,
shot and killed for what they trust in.

The horror of war for what we believe,
others' lives can't be retrieved.

This holiday I shouldn't be alone,
back to the bloodshed my mind is thrown.

Can't escape these thoughts myself,
alcohol brings forgetfulness to help.

People here love me, if they only knew,
the hell that I put fellow humans through.

Would they feel the same, would their minds change,
if they saw me in action in those days.

Is it right, is it wrong,
to take a life saving your own.

These images torment my mind,
when I'm asleep when I'm alone.

Where will I go when I die,

the sins I've committed taking others' lives.

Is this a secret I take to my grave,
my broken mind, will it be saved.

Not knowing what my supernatural future holds,
my past sins is my spirit sold.

Can I fix something so stained or,
tarry through life dealing with the pain.

Soldiers die on both sides,
some in life, others inside.

Families torn apart, others tears of joy,
getting to see a living soldier boy.

I'll be alone in my mind,
untold secrets of my sinful crimes.

To take a life is to destroy a soul,
I want to go back and reverse the role.

These thoughts crush my mind day by day,
if it was switched would they feel the same way.

Fire works explode,
in the star lit sky,
alone in my mind,
on the 4th of July.



Kathleena
Brandon Jones

Laura Smith is a graduate of Rogers State University, earning her bachelor's degree in liberal arts. She has won awards for her poetry, and authored an original play produced and preformed by RSU. Laura is a gypsy who plans to travel the world and put it down on paper.

SUBJECTIVITY

Laura Smith

Were poetry merely pretty words,
 how many would be poets?

Or simply complex thoughts required,
how long would we spend in contemplation?

Sketch our hearts to paper
or let the world see in our eyes.

Chant the spiritus mundi
 in barefooted wander.

To communicate an utterance of ourselves...
 create an art that speaks
 between the emotions and mind.

Indulgence to one side finds either mawkishness or barren-
ness,

Subjective veracity is
all we have.

TIP

Laura Smith

T
i
p
of
my
life
yet to come,
the spinning
gale around me,
flowing through time
rolling to each side. Its blistered edge
sliding out from under the slipping
pendulum. Arrogant zenith
horizon taunts relief.