

Cactus Heart



Issue #3



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Gone to Seed | Sheri L. Wright

EDITOR'S NOTE

Issue #3. Three is an important number to me. Of the many tattoos I have inked onto my body, my two favorites embrace the concept of three: the triple goddess and the Ing rune. Both carry within them the idea of connection.

Likewise, putting together an issue of *Cactus Heart* reminds me of the inherent connectedness of everything. Call me pagan, or call me pantheist (the latter is more appropriate); I can't help but see the tendrils and bars that bind everything in this world. The pieces included here are a bunch of literary wildflowers: it isn't so much that they look anything alike, but that they look so marvelous gathered together.

It's February. One full turn of the earth since I dreamed up and brought forth *Cactus Heart*. Like any birth, the birth of *Cactus Heart* brought more than I could have expected into my life—connections with other writers and artists, some as far away as Brazil and Berlin; big ideas about print issues and book publishing; the throwing of myself into both the MFA world and the writing world; a new appreciation for the enormously hard and exciting work that writers everywhere are doing—and as I move into this second year of *Cactus Heart's* existence, I can only hope that this love affair continues.

May Issue #3, like a bouquet of wildflowers, bring the bright and wild and unusual into your spirit this winter. And here's to many more seasons—of connection and gathering and the space for creation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.



Punkutura | Sarah Katharina Kayß



Intro.

M. E. Gallucci

(this is a thing of
movement.)

A brook ballooning to a
stream ballooning to a
river
ranging, roving, roaring,
raveling and unraveling only to be
wound again—
let the world try to startle this
body!
blast granite at the surface,
stare stupid as the stones transmute to
seaglass!

Once, there was a secret
corked beneath the
ball of the foot of the
riverbed;
a message buried in the body,
beneath organ, tissue and
cell, a specified key
no enzyme nor DNA aligned could
unwind,
a memory so startling it'd render
each function functionless.

The combination was decoded by the
wheel of the car on a late
summer's morning
the sun pregnant with an
iridescent sneer.

At what was found,
I spit at that disease!
I laugh with victory!
I've slammed those salty slaps into the
stew of strong glue that
solders this ship together,
keeps it afloat
a vessel of
blue iris,
a river of
christened blood.
A wily wave can wage a
rare war
always lost to the nights when
spine supine on the deck
new constellations can be
counted—all
auspicious.

Latitude and longitude have been
located.
Necking the Hudson,
the Atlantic is straight ahead.
I've never been so overjoyed.



alright .

Shannon Shuster

in the realm of midnight
with the coffee pot draining
and consciousness faltering between reality
and the real world
there lies me and you sitting on the floor
with a bucket of strawberries, whipped cream and a crowbar
tell me your philosophies and bewilder me with your shadow
please paint me the beauty you see . . .
my eyes were sewed shut a long time ago
but i still crave decadence through the unknown
so let's create ourselves up, obliterate consciousness
and reincarnate into makeshift demigods
you know, i get scared sometimes but i've made my peace with vulnerability
and as you take hold of my hand
i feel as though wholeness isn't so out of reach then you propose we do something
radical something drastic, something real
standing up, i reach into my pockets but my smile is met with a sigh
we're about thirty-seven cents short of taking over the world . . .



Ox

(From *Hard Times Galore*)

Patrick Vincent Welsh

Ox, as she named it, was Margaret's third oxygen tank in two years, and the final one covered by insurance. Her doctor said, "There won't be a fourth. After this you'll have to go down to the gas station and use the air pumps."

Her grandson had stolen her first oxygen tank because he thought he could use it to breathe underwater. He nearly drowned in the Erie River and they never found the tank. Roaches nested in the second oxygen tank. So Margaret was very careful with the third tank, with Ox.

She took such good care of the tank that it outlived her. Her son found her sitting in her recliner, dead but breathing deeply, clutching the tank beneath a wall of framed pictures from her last trip to Atlantic City. There was one of Ox and her on the boardwalk, one of her clutching Ox by the oceanside, and one of Ox strapped into the seat beside her on the Ferris wheel.



Twilight for the Tinderbox

Amaris Ketcham

Behind smoky blue clouds the neon sunset disappeared, leaving the crowd standing in the dusk of a September day that started with cool mountain air blowing in the trace aroma of pines and juniper that helps Santa Fe feel so rustic. A shout went up from the crowd, “Burn him!”

They woke today also with the new harvest of green chiles roasting at corner markets and parking lots throughout town and anticipation for the coming twilight. Today felt like the first true autumn day; finally the heat would subside and maybe New Mexico would see some rain fall on the dry, cracked earth baked open over summer. Members of the crowd gathered around Fort Macy Park answered the call: “Burn him!”

Zozobra was tied to a tall pole. Twenty-three thousand people had come here for one thing: to see the monster burned in ritualistic sacrifice. Tonight was the beginning of the Fiestas de Santa Fe, a weeklong program of events that celebrates De Vargas defeating the Pueblo Indian Revolt and re-conquering the land in the name of the Spanish Crown. To kick off the festival, they burn Zozobra near the Old Town Plaza, down the road from all of the tourist shops selling turquoise, flutes, and Zuni fetishes.

The effigy’s name is taken from the Spanish for “the anguished one,” meaning a combination of anxiety and fear, but in English he is known as “Old Man Gloom.”

But gloom hasn’t always been a celebrated part of the Fiesta. In 1924, local artist Will Shuster created the first Zozobra as a reaction against how commercialized the Santa Fe celebrations had become. Several artists helped create the monster and

burned him behind the fire station at the end of the weeklong celebrations. This first incarnation stood eighteen feet tall and was made to resemble a conquistador. According to Shuster, “Kiwanians in black robes circled slowly about Zozobra carrying green torches and chanting a dirge. On cue, [the poet] Witter Bynner leading a large group of Fiesta merry-makers, all in gay costumes and waving bright colored whips, dashed out of concealment and drove off the glooms. The effigy was lighted, roman candles and red fires were set off, and with much hilarious shooting the merriment was under way.”

Two years later, the effigy was officially incorporated into the Fiesta and has been annually ignited ever since. For a while in the 1940s, he took on features of the Axis leaders and was called Hirohitlomus. In the 1970s, he scowled like Nixon.

Now, Zozobra stood almost fifty feet tall and in his white tuxedo gown, he looked more like a ghoulish clown. He had a bow tie, curly hair, full lips, and giant flashing red eyes. Made of furniture-grade wood, poultry wire, unbleached muslin, nails and screws, pulleys and plywood, and shredded pieces of paper—divorce decrees, eviction notices, photos—he tipped the scales at sixteen hundred pounds. Through a loud speaker he moaned.

“Oh my God, he’s moving,” said one man in the crowd, when he realized that the gentle sway of Zozobra’s hands was not from the wind, but an intentional, menacing clawing “bring it on” motion. The man had lived in New Mexico for sixteen years and this was the first time he had come to Zozobra. “It’s like we’ve captured Godzilla. I keep thinking that any minute now, he’ll break out of those restraints and terrorize the crowd.”

Which was exactly the kind of monster that Zozobra resembled. When Dana Johnson was the editor of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the paper ran articles about Zozobra sightings leading up to the event:

“Following reports by Cyrus McCormick, Jr. that a 25-foot tall grotesque giant with rolling eyes and tongue tore across the McCormick place near Nambe before last, leaving a trail of sparks and embers and uprooting a large cottonwood as he passed, and another report of his presence near Arroyo Hondo. Miss Luisa Pugh of De Vargas Street, reported today that she heard a noise at her window last night, that an enormous clutching hand with 12-inch claws on the end came through the window and she seized an old cavalry saber belonging to her grand-uncle, the Duke of Wellington, and cut off one of the claws, whereupon the frightful nocturnal visitor, leaving several washtubs full of blood around the place, disappeared. The claw is on exhibition in a case in the second story of the Old Palace. . . .”

Another article from the same time announced that Zozobra had been found near the Pecos River. The local authorities anesthetized him with sixty-six gallons of ether and would, of course, bring him to Santa Fe to be burned alive.

Dusk came, and hours passed, and Zozobra should have been ignited. The little white-sheeted children dancers, the Gloomies, should have danced about the monster’s feet and the Fire Spirit dancer, dressed in red, performing a ballet choreographed by Jacques Cartier, should have tossed a torch at the monster’s feet already, but word moved through the crowd that his incineration was delayed by the fourteen mile-per-hour winds. Given the hot, dry week just passed and a summer marred by the largest forest fire in New Mexico’s recorded history, the city and the Kiwanis Club, who now host and perform the ritual, did not want to catch the nearby adobe neighborhood, Old Town shops, or the Santa Fe National Forest on fire.

Likewise due to safety concerns, strollers had been banned from the park, as they could obstruct an evacuation in the event of an emergency. Many people held their babies in their arms. Standing pressed against the legs of strangers, unable to see Zozobra or the wind in the cottonwood trees or stars in the night sky, toddlers wailed, cranky and inconsolable.

“We’ve been here for three hours already,” said a thirteen-year-old boy as he lifted his younger brother and positioned the child on his shoulders. The toddler slumped, trying to lay his head on his brother’s as a pillow.

Thousands of people shifted from leg to leg, having stood already for hours waiting. Police drove past, packing the crowd tighter as they parted to the sides of the highway. Red and blue lights illuminated dozens of impatient faces. Everyone booed.

The event’s staff lit off a firework either to test the wind or tease the crowd. For a few minutes, the crowd fell silent in anticipation. None of the dancers came. Nothing more exploded in the sky. One man started singing, “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that Zozobra’s still there.”

Again the police through the crowd, bathing the people in red and blue light. They met with boos and more vulgar language as the uncomfortable and increasingly volatile crowd packed tighter to let them pass.

“In Ojo Caliente, they’d know how to burn him,” said a young man on his cell phone whose conversation up to that point had been about drinking, stabbing, toking, shooting, and pissing.

Several people spoke of leaving only to be talked into staying—they’d already waited this long, and it would be a shame to miss it now.

Hours had passed. The crowd shifted on tired legs. Children wailed. When someone shouted, “Burn him,” exhausted, maternal voices took up the call, saying, “Just burn him already.” Patience wore thin; tension thickened. In years past, fights would have broken out. Red and blue light washed over the people.

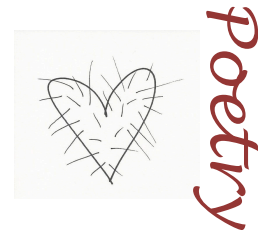
Finally the Fire Spirit dressed in red began his ballet. Gloomies with torches followed him as he danced about the feet of the roaring effigy. Torches appeared and the crowd cheered. Zozobra struggled against his restraints. The Fire Spirit seemed to be negotiating with him.

In an interview with a Smithsonian oral historian, Shuster described one of his influences for Zozobra, saying, “I remember that Yaqui Village out of Tucson. They carry a—of course, this came up from Mexico—a figure, it’s just like a scarecrow actually, stuffed with straw and fireworks and it represents Judas. They put him on a burro and lead him around the Stations of the Cross and then bring him back to the center of the plaza and ignite him. They throw up their only skyrockets, have a big to-do, you know. So, there is that too, you see. But, this idea of destroying some unpleasant thing is. . .”

In the recording, Shuster trails off before defining this need for destruction, but Octavio Paz has described the fiesta as a pressured valve, a release that occurs annually to relieve people of the year’s tensions. It is a time, he says, when people can take off the masks they wear for various social situations and dissolve contemplation through incarnation. One can expect cathartic moments to erupt: a fight over a girl while the mariachis play or a slashed tire for no apparent reason. Fiestas stop the flow of time, transform it into a mythical past or a total present, a moment when the past and future are reconciled, and pure life is experience through re-creation and participation.

Flames encircled Zozobra’s flashing red eyes. Soon his whole head was ablaze. In less than a minute, the crowd saw nothing but vaguely human structural wood on fire. Zozobra moaned, bones exposed. They heard Paz’s “howl that ends all songs and possesses the same ambiguous resonance: an angry joy, a destructive affirmation ripping open the breast and consuming itself.” Ephemeral. Cathartic. He collapsed in a pile of flames. The crowd yelled, “¡Que viva!” More fireworks burst in the sky; dazzling explosions hung in the air for a mesmerizing moment that sliced through all notions of time. After this finale, the stadium lights came on blinding. A low bluish smoke hung in the air. The people seemed illuminated by the smoke more than the

lights. They stood in shock, in a total present, renewed as man overcame elemental forces yet again, cleansed by a simple sacrifice.



Desert Ecology Lesson 1: Landforms

Diana Woodcock

Let's begin with the rocky
conglomerate hamadas, *the unfruitable*
in Arabic: hazm and mistah.
One very gently sloping,
the other perfectly flat, covered
with fragments from *in situ**—

stones and gravel too heavy for the wind
to disperse. Vegetation very poor,
yet lichens on the hazm's stones;
in the fissures between them:
Zygophyllum quatarense, that shrublet
with solitary flowers at each node,

satisfied in its rocky habitat with the thinnest
veneer of surface deposits (I would need so little);
Acacia tortilis, small umbrella-shaped shrub
completely unarmed, pale yellow heads;
Lycium shawii, thorny rigid with its red berry,
affably flowering year-round.

Each of these three thriving
in the rocky hamadas, ruthlessly authentic,
growing vigorously like a densely textured
lyric—unflinching, each one an explosion
in the hazms and mistahs as elating
as a comet shooting across the night sky,

*weathering that forms the desert's pavement

each one representing what is most
exalted in desert ecology, performing
their acts of bravery as loyally as any
patriotic citizen for the land of her birth.
Hardy, yes, and yet a tenderness
cracking the desert's pavement

where humans prove too fragile to survive.
Each one a quiet protest against the idiocy
of environmental rape. I would be
their advocate—do all I can to hold back
progress, which in both English and Arabic
translates into trespassing on their paradise.



Desert Ecology Lesson 2: Rocky Ridges

Diana Woodcock

Rocky mushroom-shaped outcroppings
grace the plant-poor Dukhan—Umm Bab Ridge.
Yet where sand accumulates in depressions
(eight hundred and fifty stippling the landscape),
Thumam* and Harm** abound:

like talismans, they ward off fear,
announcing the grandeur and nobility
of rocky ridges, the purposefulness
of the desert's deceptive simplicity,
the depth of each plant's quest
for what will sustain it, each one

a model of botanic integrity as it confronts
the elements and gleans from the parched
soil enough sustenance to thrive, each one
offering hope for redemption, a reason
for wonder, reverence, gratitude.

Rocky ridges summon ancient stones,
advise the pilgrim to remember who
journeyed here before her, remind her
the desert merits affection—each plant
that's dug in its heels a simple yet complex
marvel, a radiant moment of awe.

*Arabic name for *Panicum turgidum*

**Arabic name *Zygophyllum quatarense*



Harvest | Peggy Acott



The Peak of the Night

Joe Baumann

“I’m sorry, Father,” Mrs. Dobt said. “I’m not sure I understand. What is it?”

Father Boundia crossed his arms and nodded toward the paper airplane that appeared to be hovering in midair, supported by nothing, inching across the grassy lawn in front of the church.

“It’s a miracle, Mrs. Dobt,” he said.

She looked up at him, eyes squinting behind thick glasses. The priest’s thinning brown hair fluttered in the breeze. “But what *is* it, Father?”

“George discovered it this morning while he was cutting the grass,” Father Boundia said, stepping toward the airplane, which had moved a foot or so further away from them, descending as though being lowered by a slow-moving puppet master. “Watch.”

Mrs. Dobt stood still on the sidewalk leading to the church’s front door and watched as Father Boundia took a few steps forward. As soon as he was only a foot or two from the airplane his stride slowed down, the pendulum swing of his arms halted and moving sluggishly. Father Boundia’s head turned in slow motion toward Mrs. Dobt, and even the flutter of his hair as his face shifted toward hers slowed down, each hair rising as it normally would whenever the priest whipped his head around, but sluggishly, like it was bobbing up in water.

She held her breath and watched as Father Boundia reached out toward the paper airplane that was still engaged in its slow flight toward the ground. His hand moved as if someone had reduced the speed on a DVD to a near stand-still, and before Father

Boundia could grab the airplane, it suddenly shot forward, returned to normal speed, and looped down, crashing into the grass. A moment later, Father Boundia reached the spot where the plane had sped up, and his pace returned to normal. He plucked the airplane from the grass, dimpling the paper in his hand, and turned back toward Mrs. Dobt.

“I still don’t understand, Father,” she said, hands on her hips. “What’s happened?”

Father Boundia smiled a wide smile and looked at Mrs. Dobt. The afternoon sun was setting behind her, and on the hedgerows along the church the four o’clocks had started to bloom. He could smell their bright odor already, even though darkness had yet to fall.

“That’s just it, Mrs. Dobt,” he said, plucking one of the four o’clocks from the nearest bush. The curl of it was odd: it was doubly bent, the edges of the petals turned back inward, as though the flower was starting to retreat into a little ball. He shrugged and lifted it to his nose, the smell of jasmine filling his nostrils. “It’s inexplicable. Like I said, we have a miracle on our hands.”



When George Agnos discovered the miracle, the first person he went to was Father Boundia. The second person was his wife, so George couldn’t be too surprised when only a few hours after he told her, a small crowd had already formed outside the church, a bystander stepping forward every now and then, one arm outstretched, reaching into the spot, then immediately pulling away, frowning.

George and Father Boundia watched the crowd grow from inside the empty church. The priest was tapping his hard-soled shoe against the floor, the sound echoing off the tiles and the wall.

“Sorry, Father.”

“For what, George?”

“For this. Creating this spectacle out of nothing.”

Father Boundia pursed his lips and thought for a moment. “It’s not nothing, George. People need to know about it.”

They watched the crowd in silence for a moment. A news van had just pulled up, a reporter and cameraman emerging from the back. Father Boundia stepped forward, pushing open the door.

“Come on George. They’ll want to speak with the man who discovered the miracle.”

“I don’t know, Father. I don’t know if I should talk to them. I wouldn’t know what to say. What to call it.”

“You just tell them the truth, George,” Father Boundia said, patting George on the back as they emerged from the church. Night had fallen, the last ebbing rays of the sun struggling to stay afloat on the horizon.

“But I’m not sure what the truth is, Father.”

Father Boundia glanced around. The smell of jasmine had grown stronger, but there was an unusual tinge in the air, like the hint of sourness milk gets just before it’s spoiled. He looked at the four o’clocks, fully in bloom with the growing darkness, stretching out toward the rising moon. The inward curl was less noticeable in the dark.

The crowd turned to look at the priest and George as they came out of the church, and the reporter and her cameraman ran forward toward them. She was already yelling questions. Father Boundia looked down at George, whose hands were tied together, fingers clenched and interwoven.

“I’ll take care of it, George. Don’t you worry.” His voice was distant, absent-minded.

“Thanks, Father.”

“If you would, George, tomorrow make sure you water the flowers. They were looking a bit droopy earlier.”

“No problem, Father.”

On the news that night, the story of the strange occurrence in front of Our Lady of Sorrows Church ran. The man who discovered the spot where time appeared to slow down gave only a short sound bite, shrugging his shoulders and saying that he’d stumbled upon it by accident, just walking along while he cut the grass, doing his job.

When asked what it was, George said, “I don’t know. Haven’t a clue.”

Father Boundia, in his only comment, stood tall, stared into the camera, and said, “It’s a miracle. Of course it’s a miracle.” He was smiling a wide, sure smile. Behind him, framed by the priest’s wide shoulder and the edge of the shot, was a hunched George Agnos, an unsure grimace on his face.



Father Boundia couldn’t sleep, so he was spending the night pacing the rows of empty pews in the small church. He’d lit a few candles, just enough that he could see where he was going as he walked from the altar to the door and back. The click of his shoes against the floor distracted him from thinking about the miracle outside, and it wasn’t until he heard the muffled sound of laughter as he neared the glass doors at the rear of the church that he stopped pacing and looked up from his feet.

The crowd had dispersed for the night, but three boys, teenagers, floated in the darkness. When the moonlight caught just right, Father Boundia could see a baseball rotating slowly from one boy to the next, and the priest stood in the doorway, watching their bodies rise and fall as if they were bobbing in a pool of molasses, the boys’ arms wheeling like slow windmills, their laughter stretched out and distorted. When one of them would land on the grass, he would immediately crouch, dipping down with leaden speed, then push back up as if he were hopping on the moon.

When one of the other two boys started his throwing motion, the boy closest to Father Boundia, to whom the ball was being thrown, spun his body as he jumped up. Father Boundia watched with a frown on his face that gradually became a grimace, then a look of pain, as the boy spun around in the air like a ballerina in a music box that is running out of energy. Though the ball was moving with minute enough speed that someone watching would have been able to see the seams as it flew toward its target, the boy was also completing his circle in the air with similar slowness, and Father Boundia could tell that the boy wouldn't be turned around enough to catch the ball before it hit him.

Father Boundia imagined what must be going through the boy's head. When he'd walked through the miracle that afternoon, Father Boundia had experienced the bizarre sensation of having his whole body slow down—his arms and legs, his breathing, even his heartbeat—while his thoughts moved as normal. He had felt an uncontrollable numbness, hadn't been sure what to think. It had been as though his limbs were halfway asleep and he could do nothing to wake them up.

So when he saw the baseball thud against the boy's ribcage, he tried to imagine the sharp pain of contact stretched out, the initial smack lasting longer, the sting coursing through the boy's nervous system. The thought of being trapped with that pain, unable to move as normal, forced to watch one's body start to writhe and not be able to do anything to soothe that feeling, caused Father Boundia to shudder.

When the boy fell to the ground and didn't move, Father Boundia pushed open the door, and the other boys snapped their heads—as fast as they could snap in the miracle—toward him. As they landed, they started walking toward the fallen boy and dragged him up. Father Boundia didn't move toward them. He just watched as they slouched out of the miracle and took off, two of the boys holding up their injured friend.

Father Boundia walked over to the miracle and reached in, picking up the baseball. It was old, graying, the ball's seams faded and fraying. For a moment Father Boundia thought about throwing it straight up into the dark night sky just to see how high the miracle went. Instead, he dropped it back onto the grass, shaking his head as it spun down, a calm mass in a tiny orbit falling toward earth.

As he walked back toward the church, Father Boundia frowned. Some of the flowers were shut. On the bush nearest the entrance, not a single four o'clock was in bloom.



In the open water of the Indian Ocean off Perth, a small fishing ship hit a patch of water and suddenly sped forward. The men on board each experienced a moment of dizziness and loss of balance, but as none of them were near one another, none of them mentioned it. The moment passed, unnoticed and unspoken, and the ship continued on its way, unfettered and uncaring about the phenomenon, leaving the mysterious spot behind, unidentified.



The crowd watched as the scientist, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, a film of sweat smeared across his forehead, reached toward the miracle, which had been roped off with yellow caution tape. The tape was tied to stakes loosely enough that it could billow in the breeze, and one could tell when it entered the miracle because it suddenly halted, waving as if in a reverse time-lapse video.

As the scientist's hand crossed into the miracle, he tipped over the beaker he held in his hand, and the water, tinged with blue food coloring, started to fall out. Stationed up close, two television cameras captured the image of the water sloshing

out in slow motion, the individual drops separating from one another and being reabsorbed into the singular flow. As the water fell, it created a thin, wobbly line in the air, stretching out like taffy as it descended to the ground.

When it hit the grass, the cameras were able to capture the individual blades bending under the impact of the liquid's weight, then the disintegration of the flowing water as it sprayed out into the air and through the grass. Had the cameras been able to focus in enough, they would have seen the individual droplets of water sink into the earth.

"Fascinating," the scientist said later to Father Boundia as the two whispered in the church, trying not to disturb the few people who had come inside to pray. "And it just happened?"

"Two days ago. Our maintenance man found it."

The scientist nodded and let out a murmur, rubbing his chin with one hand, the other tucked between his arm and side. "I would like to isolate it, keep it from the public for further study."

"No," Father Boundia said, shaking his head.

"You wouldn't need to close the church, Father. Just keep people away from it."

"No. I can't do that."

"We don't know what it is, Father, why it's here, or what it could do to people. It could be dangerous, you know."

Father Boundia shook his head again and raised his arms, palms facing the scientist. "No, sir. I don't believe that. People deserve to see it. They deserve to understand that this is a miraculous thing." He looked toward the pews, counting in his head the number of people scattered around, kneeling and sitting in silent prayer. The number was higher than it had been in some time on a weekday.

"With all due respect, Father, it's a mystery, not a miracle."

Father Boundia crossed his arms. “With all due respect, I fail to see the difference in this case.”

“Mysteries have answers, Father.”

“And how do you know this has an answer?”

“Because everything has an answer, Father. Even this. There is an explanation. We just haven’t found it yet.”

Father Boundia glanced back at the church, the pews, the altar, the crucifix nailed to the wall.

“Why,” he whispered, “must there always be an answer?”



Standing at the lectern, about to begin the Sunday homily, Father Boundia looked out at the pews of his church. Though people were far from stuffed into their seats, were hardly jammed in like sardines, and no shoulders brushed and grinded against one another, he could tell that the church was filling. What had once been a sparse gathering of one or two people scattered in each pew was now a meatier congregation, a family here and there, whispering women filling out the front few rows of pews, a few lonely-looking men glancing around at the wood carvings of the Stations of the Cross mounted along the walls.

He saw Mrs. Dobt sitting in the back row, arms crossed, staring at him. Father Boundia swallowed and met her gaze, letting a small smile flicker across his face, which went unreturned and apparently unnoticed by his secretary.

She was thinking as she stared at Father Boundia as he began speaking, talking of the miracles of Christ and the Bible. Their mysteriousness, their lack of explanation. The fact that we ought not seek answers, that we must accept the actions and choices of God.

Mrs. Dobt looked around the congregation, noting the many unfamiliar faces. She rarely came to church, but she knew the shoulders and postures of those who did attend regularly, the few remaining patrons in a community losing its way. She wondered what, exactly, was drawing these people here. A space in front of their church had stalled, time had slowed itself there, and no one could explain why. She let her shoulders shrug a bit as Father Boundia grew quiet, meditative, and stepped away from the pulpit and walked to his chair, seating himself next to the altar boy, the only altar boy the church had left.

When she looked back at the priest, he was staring at her, and when their eyes met, he let his hands wave open slightly. She nodded at him.

Amid the silence of the church, the squeak of the door opening rang out as someone snuck in. Despite the brevity of the door's opening, the odor of the four o'clocks seeped into the church. For days, the acrid scent of the flowers had hung in the air outside the church, the off-putting stench of dying flowers infiltrating the church, especially pungent at night when the flowers bloomed, their petals stretching toward the dark sky. The only thing able to push the smell from the church was Father Boundia constantly using the censer to burn incense, the smoke shoving the stench out so that the priest could welcome his growing congregation in.



After days of scientific poking and prodding at the miracle, the men and women who had come to study the spot where time slowed down had all but given up for the moment. Fieldwork, one of them told Father Boundia as they were packing up their materials into vans and trucks, wasn't doing it anymore. Some theoretical science was going to be necessary, so it might take a while for them to be able to tell him what was happening.

Father Boundia shrugged. "I'm not concerned about explanations."

People came every day to see the miracle, but by the evening most of them had disappeared, put off by the horrid smell the four o'clocks released when they bloomed as the sun set. George told Father Boundia that they needed to uproot the flowers in place of new ones, but the priest just shook his head.

"No. The people who truly care will come, despite the smell."

Agnos had just shrugged and said, "Whatever you say, Father."

And they did come. The church's daily morning mass attracted more and more people as word of the miracle spread, and on Sundays, the pews finally were bursting with people. Eventually, people were forced to stand in the back of the church, every now and then waving their hands in front of their faces to dispel the growing stench of the four o'clocks.



"It's wonderful, isn't it, Mrs. Dobt?" Father Boundia said, pacing in front of her desk.

"What is, Father?"

"You were there last week. So many people. This church has been suffering, and this is what we needed."

"We certainly got more collection money than usual." Mrs. Dobt held up a small stack of checks and assorted bills, then dropped them back on her desk.

Father Boundia waved his hand at the money.

"It's not that. It's that they're here."

"And why are they here, do you think, Father?"

Father Boundia stopped pacing and stared down at Mrs. Dobt. Her arms were draped on the table, fingers knotted together.

"Clearly the miracle has reawakened peoples' faith, Mrs. Dobt."

Mrs. Dobt bit her cheek. "Are you sure, Father?"

Father Boundia narrowed his eyes.

“Look, Father,” Mrs. Dobt said, standing. “I’m glad the church is recovering. But should it take something like this, this...this spectacle, to bring them back?”

Father Boundia didn’t speak for a moment. He tapped his shoe and ran a hand over his jaw, massaging his chin. “If not a miracle, then what?”

“Not what, Father,” Mrs. Dobt said, glancing down at the money, then back at him. “But why?”



Father Boundia was snuffing out the few candles still burning after the last few people who had come to pray had left. As he stanchd the final flame, leaving the church basking only in the bare illumination from the light near the back of the church, Father Boundia heard a loud boom, a sharp elongated crack. The sound reminded him of a gunshot, as if the noise of the firing bullet had been extended.

A knot formed in Father Boundia’s throat as he ran outside, and he was hit with the overpowering, rotting smell of the four o’clocks. Another two bushes of them had apparently died, but they still released a profuse, almost sulfurous, smell.

He saw the back of a figure running off through the dark, a metal object in his hand glinting in the light of a soft street lamp.

Father Boundia looked at the miracle and gasped.

A teenage boy, a few years older than the ones who had been jumping and throwing the baseball weeks before, was crumpled over on the grass, his head lying atop one of the lengths of caution tape still strung up around the miracle.

When Father Boundia reached the boy, he knelt down at his head. The boy was gasping and crying, his throat pulsing, his tongue rolling around his lips. His body was still in the miracle, and Father Boundia could see a dark red hole through the left side of the boy’s chest, from which blood was starting to erupt slowly, dribbling out like

the final drops of water from a faucet not quite turned off all the way. Father Boundia knew it would keep dripping.

“Oh, son.”

He could only imagine the pain as he stroked the boy’s hair. As the bullet, the one the boy had excitedly thought he could twist away from like some character in a movie, had entered his chest, the pain must have been slow and immense. The burning, ripping feeling, the air being vacuumed out of the lung that must have been punctured, the bursting, tearing muscle and crushed rib bones: the boy must have felt it all, the pain spreading through his body, the nauseating, dizzying hurt throbbing up and down his spine.

Father Boundia knew he should run into the church, find the telephone and call for help. He knew he ought to at least move the boy from the miracle, ease his suffering, speed up the death that was coming inevitably.

It was that inevitability that kept Father Boundia there, holding the boy’s head in his hands, watching the twisting, pained look on his face as death crept over him. He said nothing to the boy and the boy, his mouth opening and closing like a fish with nothing but air around it, said nothing back. Father Boundia knew he was watching death, and he looked down at the boy’s body, and wondered if it, death, that mystery that required no faith, was creeping up from the boy’s feet, toward his heart and brain. He wondered what it felt like to have that permanence creep over one’s body, a dark cloak that spread around, never to be lifted.

After a few minutes, the boy stopped breathing, his mouth stopped writhing, his eyes stopped blinking. The blood continued to dribble down the curve of his ribs, staining the white t-shirt he was wearing.

Father Boundia realized he was crying when his tears began dripping from his cheeks and fell onto the boy’s face, where they mixed with the boy’s own, leaving a

greasy shine across his skin. He looked up into the miracle, still cradling the boy's head in his hands, unable to let go, unsure of whether he ever could let go.

Staring into the space where time had slowed down, Father Boundia again found himself wondering where it stopped. How far did it go? How high could this inexplicable thing climb? Where did it lead?

Father Boundia took a deep breath, and realized the air was clean of the smell of the four o'clocks, despite the night being at its peak. He looked along the church: they were dead, all of them withered, hanging like limp bodies on a gallows, drooping against their green bushes. He wondered what had happened to them.

Shaking his head and looking down at the dead boy, Father Boundia decided it did not matter. For the moment, it was one mystery that did not need solving.



There had been little objection to Father Boundia's decision. After the boy's death was made public, fewer people came to stare at the miracle. For a while, attendance at the church remained high, but slowly, as more and more bricks appeared in the grass, the congregation began to disappear.

The bricklayers had taken longer than projected to finish the monument that would seal the miracle up, due to the need to enter the miracle to set the interior bricks so the structure wasn't hollow. This had, of course, slowed them down. After a few weeks, the project that should have taken only a few days was finished, and a large brick dome some ten feet high—high enough that no one would be stupid enough to try to climb it—stood surrounding the miracle.

"One of the men was concerned, Father," Mrs. Dobt said as she, the priest, and George Agnos stood gazing at the structure.

"About what, Mrs. Dobt?" Father Boundia said.

“He was sure that, when they were done and he was gathering his tools, he brushed his hand against the structure and felt his fingers slow down.”

“Could have been in his head,” George said.

Father Boundia said nothing. He bit his lip and took a deep breath. The air was clean. George had ripped the bushes out the morning after the priest had found them all dead.

“I just don’t get it, Father,” George had said, holding up one of the root bulbs. “The roots are fine. I watered them every day.”

Father Boundia had shrugged and walked away.

Looking away from the miracle, he frowned toward the wall of the church. The beige exterior seemed barren, lifeless without the four o’clocks.

“We need some new flowers, George.”

“I know, Father. I’m going to pick some bulbs up today. It’s a shame. I’ve been thinking about it since I pulled them out, and I still have no idea what could’ve happened to them.”

Father Boundia sighed. “The world is full of mysteries, George.”

“And miracles, Father?” Mrs. Dobt said softly.

The priest looked at her, nodding slowly. Their eyes met, and he looked away, toward the brick dome. He’d hoped it would match the brick exterior of the church, but it looked like a blemish, a stain, something set down out of place.

“I’m not so sure there’s a difference, Mrs. Dobt.”

That night, as Father Boundia was throwing the church into darkness, he stopped at the glass doors when movement caught his eye. He watched as someone stepped toward the brick structure and produced a small bouquet of flowers. Father Boundia squinted as the figure stooped and set them down, and he couldn’t tell if the person’s arm slowed down as it reached the base of the structure. Perhaps it did. Perhaps the miracle was spreading, readying to swallow up the world and slow everything down.

Or perhaps the person had simply hesitated, trying to take care not to smash any of the flowers.

Father Boundia watched the figure slink away into the darkness, then shut his eyes. He stood there, breathing deep, tapping his foot, wondering if time might slow down as the night grew older.



Emotions of Alwilda

N. T. Brown

Astonishment

Sixteen years old, flaming red hair down to her waist. Alwilda, draped in a glittering dress only a princess could wear, hides behind a screen and watches her father. The old man makes deals in back rooms. He meets with generals, chieftains. He demands people's heads. He is a burly disgusting drunkard with an abundance of velvet robes, who wears his crown haphazardly like an old hunting hat. Alwilda has spied on him for years. Sometimes he meets with whores. Alwilda long ago learned how the process worked, and long ago decided she would never take part in it. Watching her father flop and groan on top of those women was like watching someone use a chamber pot. She would never.

Today Brun the amphibian watches with her. They peer through the screen together, princess and maid, as the old king guzzles from a goblet. The sun has scarcely risen and he is already drunk. The girls elbow each other and giggle. Sometimes the old man speaks to himself, gives soliloquies, picks his nose. What would it be today?

A younger man enters. Alwilda's father embraces him, offers him mead, which he refuses. "Prince Alf," the old man says. "You saved Scandinavia from the warriors of the east. You have come to collect your prize. Well, sir, I stand by my word. Alwilda is not yet awake—she's an idle girl, I admit—but when she rises, you will be stunned by your new bride's beauty. She will bear you many sons, I'm sure."

Alwilda doesn't wait to hear any more. With Brun at her side, she slips away from the screen, through the labyrinth of her father's secret chambers, out of the castle and into a grey, blustery morning. Chickens squawk beneath her feet as she runs across the courtyard. She bursts into her servants' quarters, where her maids, none of them older than she, sit combing each other's hair.

"I am to be given away," she cries.

Determination

They flatten their breasts under tightly wound strips of cloth. They step into pants, cloaks. One of the maids creeps down to the stables and clips horsehair, which they glue to their faces using wax. Someone else procures a pipe, and they all smoke heavily to make their voices deep and cracked. They will become men, the six of them. Alwilda stands before the transformed group and inspects each one. Then she leads them quietly down to the harbor, where they slip aboard an anchored ship and drift into the Baltic with the noon sun shining down on them for all to see. None of these girls are sailors, but with the help of Brun, who is at home in the water, the ship clears the harbor safely and catches a friendly trade wind. Alwilda stands on deck with her flaming hair flowing behind her like a fire on the sea. She imagines Prince Alf's body covering hers the way her father covered those whores. "I would rather die," she says.

Opportunism

Further north, beyond Stockholm, into the Gulf of Bothnia. The girls' white skins brown under the Scandinavian sun. They furl and unfurl the sails, scamper up to the crow's nest, unwind coils of rope, discover the workings of the ship whose name they do not know. Each morning Brun dives into the frigid water and returns an hour later with armfuls of fish, which she flings onboard before heaving herself back up. By

night they clap hands and sing songs, the same things they did back home. Alwilda studies each girl's face for signs of homesickness or rebelliousness. But they seem content. They were brought up to be her ladies-in-waiting, a task they cannot abandon even though Alwilda herself has, with her escape, forsaken her royal status.

Late one evening, with the sun lingering red along the Western horizon, another ship appears. Fear shoots through Alwilda like a toxin. This must be one of her father's dispatches, finally caught up with the wayward princess, and now she will be dragged back to the castle and forced to marry Prince Alf—or worse. Perhaps she will be punished for stealing the ship. The girls scramble to affix their false beards to their faces. They have no weapons, but they have Brun, who stands beside Alwilda squinting at the approaching vessel. Brun is special.

“Look,” she whispers. “They’re raising a white flag.”

As the two ships glide alongside each other, Alwilda pulls a black mask over her head. She has anticipated this moment. No one must recognize her.

But there is no danger of that. The other crew speaks a tongue almost unrecognizable. They come from a land to the north and east: gruff, tattooed men whose language is some distant cousin of Alwilda's—just similar enough to understand each other. They congregate on deck and the men share their sad story.

They are a fishing vessel, hunting sturgeon in these icy waters, and have been without food for nearly two weeks. An unexpected summer gale not only set them off course, but cost them several men, including their captain. They've been unable to catch anything since. Their current spokesman, a swarthy, sad-eyed man, looks as though he would be more at home in a forest than on the sea. “We are cursed,” he says. “We have no direction.”

Alwilda steps forward. Her appearance gives the fishermen some trepidation—people who wear masks are dangerous. In her gruffest voice she says, “We were fated to meet. You need a captain, we need a crew. Let us join forces.”

“But how will we eat?” the swarthy man says. “We can’t feed ourselves, let alone six new men.”

Alwilda looks at Brun.

Bloodlust, Remorse, Hardening

They capture their first ship in early fall, during a meteor shower. At dusk Alwilda spots the bloated craft moving slowly over the water. Soon after, the stars begin falling. “They’ve been falling all day,” Brun says at her side. “Only now, with darkness, can we see.” Streaking light consumes the night sky, bounces off the black waves, draws strange silver fishes to the surface. To Alwilda, it’s as good a sign as any to plunder. Her ship overtakes the fat merchant vessel easily, and she expects the looting to be equally effortless. But the merchants fight back. When Alwilda and her companions swoop aboard, they are met with axes and knives. “Fishermen, use your nets!” she shouts. The easterners fling their nets forward and then gouge the entangled merchants with spears and hooks. Eyeballs are skewered, throats slashed. The sky’s strange colors bathe the deck in orange and blue. Alwilda’s flaming hair slips from the back of her mask and whips around her shoulders as she fights.

One of the merchants yanks her hair from behind and she emits a high, squealing yelp. The man freezes. “You’re a woman,” he breathes in her ear, still holding his grip. Before he can react further, Alwilda reaches back and chops her own hair off, so that he is left clutching a handful of red straw. She whirls around and pushes him into the dark water.

The last merchant is on his knees, forehead bloody, surrounded by Alwilda’s crew. Alwilda holds a sword to his throat. His eyes plead with her.

“Where was this ship headed?” she says.

“To Denmark. To Prince Alf. To pay him for services rendered.”

Alwilda gasps. This ship was sent by her father, to compensate Prince Alf for the bride he was promised, the bride who ran away. As though chests of gold could replace a princess.

The merchant keeps talking. “The Prince will dispatch of you, too. Don’t worry. He wipes out lawless cowards like you. He keeps our lands safe. He—”

Alwilda swings the sword so hard that the merchant’s head flies over the deck and lands with a plop in the water. She raises the sword and shrieks into the night air. No one questions her authority.

Back in her quarters, alone, with dawn approaching, she mashes her face into her pillow and sobs. The men sit out front counting their newfound treasure, but Alwilda can only picture the faces of the men she killed: some shocked, some raging, some, like that last merchant, pleading. Her pillow becomes soaked, her body weak and trembling. Brun slips into the cabin and lays beside her, strokes her hair—Brun who hadn’t taken part in the battle, Brun who had instead dived into the ocean and stayed gone throughout the night, only to return at daybreak with dozens of silver fish, the ones so inexplicably drawn to the surface by the shooting stars. Brun consoles her and rocks her.

“Don’t cry,” she says. “Come, eat what I caught. You won’t see fish like this again soon.”

Still in her mask, Alwilda shuffles on deck to find that her maids have revealed themselves to the fishermen and a general revelry is commencing. Two weeks later, when they attack their next ship, she finds herself able to kill easily and without regret.

Unrest

Eighteen years old, hair cut short like a boy’s. Alwilda sits around a fire on a northern beach, a clear summer night, blue paint smeared across her face. Her mask lies folded in a secret pocket. She drinks thick, purple liquid from a wooden cup. Filthy men and

women—her crew, which has grown considerably—laugh and chant tales of Odin and Thor and Loki and the terrifying Fenrir. Their songs are lost over the booming surf. They pass bottles and pipes around the circle. Down shore, anchored in a safe cove, the ship rocks patiently. Alwilda smiles. Patrols across the Baltic hunt for her, but here, at her secret hiding spot, she can shout into the night, shout as loud as she wants, and no one but her crew will ever hear. She has buried enough treasure to retire from the sea for good.

The purple drink goes down smooth and easy. Alwilda's head becomes so light that she fears it will float away from her body. Shapes rise from the fire: scary creatures with horns and tails that fly away into the night. A storyteller begins to talk of Ragnarok, the end of the world, of serpents and giants and wolves, and when Alwilda can't take any more she stomps away down the dark beach.

She finds Brun, naked, white under the moonlight, sitting in the freezing surf letting the waves wash over her. Alwilda stands beside her. "What are you doing out here?"

Brun stares into the ocean. "Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

But Brun does not answer. She stands up, pale and slender, and walks into the water until she disappears. Alwilda doesn't know what to do. Something within her has become unmoored. She stumbles up the rocks, back to the longhouse where the crew sleeps on pallets on the hard dirt floor. The walls pulsate around her. Bits of songs and conversation drift in from outside. She curls into a corner and waits for the purple drink to wear off. Finally it does, and she dreams of a vast desert, scorched dry, a thing she has seen only in her mind.

?

A cold autumn day, windy, and an ominous feeling sits coiled in Alwilda's belly. She paces the ship from deck to cabins, bow to stern, trying to pinpoint the source of her agitation. Whitecaps rise and fall on the choppy ocean. The sun comes and goes, a pale disc behind fast-moving clouds. In the distance, something rises from the water: a great tail, larger than anything Alwilda has ever seen, which flaps against the surface before disappearing again. She summons Brun, who knows about such things. They scan the horizon for signs of the monster.

"The Baltic is an inland sea," Alwilda says. "Too small for such a leviathan. How did it get here? What does it mean?"

"There are passages," Brun says. "Through the isles of Denmark, which connect to the ocean. As for why, I cannot say. But I too am disturbed by it."

When the other ship appears, Alwilda is not surprised. This new vessel is smaller and sleeker than hers; the wind carries it like a rock skipping over the water. She pulls down her mask, draws her sword. The other ship raises no flag, but slides alongside, close enough for its sailors to board. A tall, lean man stands forward and shouts: "Black Mask! Scourge of the northern seas! Surrender now, and you shall receive full pardons. Fight, and you will be slaughtered, to the last man."

This man looks familiar, but Alwilda cannot place him. A purple cloak hangs from his shoulders. Polished black boots cover his feet. His long brown hair whips in the wind. His eyes are those of a seasoned warrior, yet something aristocratic emanates from him. "Prince Alf," Alwilda whispers. Then someone lets forth a shriek, and the men leap aboard.

During the battle, Alwilda spends more time watching than fighting. Something sharp, some emotion she can't name, passes through her, from her fingertips to her loins. Seeing the prince in a shadowy back chamber is one thing—seeing him here, like this, on the open sea, is quite another. Alf swings his sword efficiently, almost

elegantly, and administers death blows like a man who wants to exterminate rather than torture. Blood and limbs litter the deck, but he remains unscathed, unfazed, not even breaking a sweat. He fends off three men at once, while simultaneously shouting orders to his crew. Eventually he faces Alwilda, no one between them, and a smile crosses his face.

“Black Mask,” he says, and gives the slightest of bows. “You have eluded me far longer than anyone else ever has. We shall see now what you are made of.”

Alwilda doesn’t respond. Their swords clang together. Around her, the rest of the skirmish fades away and she knows only the prince, swinging, thrusting, feinting, blocking. He is so close that she can smell his breath, hot and sweet like cider. He hisses into her face, “Only cowards wear masks,” and with quick fingers rips the black cloth away to reveal fiery hair, a woman’s face. He freezes. Everyone else does too.

“I am Alwilda,” she gasps, suddenly fragile and tiny. “Your betrothed.”

The prince stares at her. Before he can respond, one of his men drags Brun over by the hair and says, “Your highness, this one’s a woman.”

Alf turns to Alwilda. “Your entire crew is female, then?”

“We are mixed.”

The prince wipes blood from his chin. Around him, the fighting has stopped and the combatants watch the quiet scene unfolding on deck.

“These are your maids, then, who ran away with you,” the prince says. “No longer maids, I’m sure.”

“Some are, some aren’t,” Alwilda says. “I saw you through a screen, years ago. When you came for me.”

“And my countenance was enough to make you run away.”

“I was a young girl.”

The prince steps forward and grins with teeth whiter than any Alwilda has ever seen, far whiter than her own. He has aged since she last glimpsed him, thinner now

and with lines around his eyes, grey stubble on his chin. His eyes gleam. “You’re a young girl yet, I’d say.”

Awakening

On the journey home, Alwilda demands that her crew be left unshackled. “They are simple fishermen, after all,” she tells the prince, and he obliges. The swarthy men sit quietly and do not try to rebel. The spell is broken. Their heyday is over. They will return to their homes in the east, to the wives they left behind. They will disappear.

The night of the capture, with the course plotted and the ship skimming lightly toward its destination, Prince Alf leads Alwilda into his private quarters. It is a small candlelit room with a bed and table and a few leather-bound books. The prince sits on his mattress and lights a pipe. Alwilda stands in the center of the room, knowing what will happen, but unsure of what to do.

“I will force you into nothing,” Alf says. “For that would be dishonorable. But I ask one thing. I have seen you unmasked—now let me see all of you.”

Trembling, Alwilda steps out of the men’s clothes she has worn these past years and stands naked before him. He puffs his pipe in silence. Alwilda expects to feel cold, but instead a growing heat creeps over her body. Her breasts tingle. The flesh between her legs twitches. She approaches the bed and straddles the prone prince, who wraps her in his arms.

“I never imagined I would be with a woman whose hair is shorter than mine,” he says. “Why now? Why not before?”

“Because it is my choice,” she says. “Because I have chosen.”

Sadness

The morning before they arrive home, Brun embraces Alwilda on deck. Grey land shimmers in the distance. Prince Alf has agreed to pardon the entire crew, but Brun

shakes her head. “I can’t go back to land, to the castle, to the everyday,” she says. Her eyes are large and glassy, her face gloomy as the sky.

“But you must, Brun, my sweet,” Alwilda says. “You can’t leave me.”

Brun strokes her red hair. “You are fire,” she says, “and I am water. We cannot coexist any longer. Our childhood has ended. You will be queen now.”

“And you?” Alwilda asks—almost afraid to hear the answer.

“The leviathan came for me. He is my destiny. I go with him.”

Brun steps overboard like a ghost, making only the softest splash. Her white form knifes across the water. Out to sea, dark clouds gather. Towards land, a shy sun peeks its face tentatively around the mountains. Alwilda watches Brun for as long as she can, the slender figure slicing the waves, until a low mist rolls in, covering her, and when it passes nothing is left on the sea but thin foamy caps which roll and morph into one another, until everything looks the same.



An Ordinary Evening

Gregory Luce

I've washed my hands
about six times tonight
and brushed my teeth,
not rituals, just ordinary
ablutions on an ordinary night.
Now time to read before
sleep: a little poetry,
Henry James on the novel.
When I turn the light off
the heater will hum
like the car engine,
me lying in the back seat
watching lights smear
the windows, a few stars,
barely hearing the buzz
of voices on the radio.



Lake Song

Ned Randle

standing at the water's edge
leaning against the night breeze
taut as harp strings for balance,
sighs the only sound lost,
out of phase with the pattern
of waves, heartfelt harmonics
roll toward me with a ribbon
of moon glow tossed casually
across the ripples falling
loosely at my feet; I walk
away without looking back
and reach down to pull the slack
out of the light as I go.



Independence Rainbow

Jane Liddle

Deedee drove, the Buick drifting a little to the left every time she took a sip of coffee or lit a cigarette. Ramona sat in the passenger seat, giggling to herself about a silly memory. The sky around them was turning a cold orange, and the setting sun reflected off the low cliffs like infrared. The windows were down and an endless boogie streamed from the radio. Deedee and Ramona rested their arms out the windows and imagined that they looked laissez-faire and satisfied. The traffic was unremarkable. It was the day after Easter. They were stoned.

Ramona reached into the backseat and lifted a brown shopping bag into her lap and exclaimed in a stream of giddy at the contents. Fireworks, picked up all the way back in Pennsylvania after a tour through a one-room dramatization of an Amish house. Everything in the museum was cute but not appropriate for buying—not for this trip anyway. The fireworks outlet was “intense”—Deedee’s word—and Ramona, who had little sense of practicality and time, encouraged the salesman Owen in showing her the explosions that each firework produced. This demonstration was displayed on a flat-screen television posted on the wall above a door for staff only. “What does Glitter Willow do?” And with a touch of the remote by Owen, a flickering firebug of light shot up in the high-definition sky and descended in a spiral of golden trails to an amplified crackling. So Ramona bought that one, along with an Atomic Swirl, Flaming Astronaut, Komodo Fountain, various Roman Candles, and also Independence Rainbow, a beautifully short-fused column of Chinese disregard for caution and human life.

Deedee stocked up on sparklers and enthusiastically supported her friend, since Ramona had never ever set off fireworks before. Watching Ramona roam the aisles of the store in awe, Deedee realized all her favorite memories involved fireworks. Like when she was a kid and watched the finale with neighborhood friends and everyone's parents were drunk and didn't care that they were swearing in sync with the loudest booms. Then there was the time she was at summer camp and was about to be kissed, her first, and fireworks went off at that second, a misleading promise from the sky in terms of what she should expect from earthly romance. And there was the time when she was older and there was a house party where someone set off fireworks in the living room in the middle of a dancing crowd and no one got hurt and nothing got burnt and maybe they were, despite constant authoritative reminders otherwise, invincible after all. Of course there were many nights on rooftops with beers and stars and smells of harmless burning and sounds of sneakers sprinting and the blistered blackened thumb the next morning. And there was just a few weeks ago, when she engaged in a bottle rocket war on the street she lived on, though the war was with the neighborhood teenagers, more than a decade younger than her now, and well, and she ducked behind parked cars hoping to be re-infected with the youths' immortality.

As they left the fireworks store, Owen, who looked as if he had let all his muscle go to fat not that long ago, got leaning and leery, and asked about where the girls would set them off and if there was a party they were expecting to go to.

"Some sort of keg party? You two need help lighting those things? I have some friends who could come, too," Owen said.

"No, we're road-tripping," Ramona replied. "Thanks, though!"

"Like *Thelma and Louise*? Which one of you is which?" he said, like they were girls playing dress-up with dreams of making it big.

"No, not like *Thelma and Louise*. Not like that at all," Deedee said. "Expand your assumptions."

“Yeah, man, we’re not gonna drive off any cliffs!” Ramona called back over her shoulder.

“That store was intense,” Deedee said as she shut the door and adjusted the seat.

“He was cute,” Ramona said back. “Thanks for driving. My leg cramps easily.”

They left the store more excited than when they went in, for it had surpassed every expectation they were able to develop when they saw the billboard advertising the emporium a few exits back, even more excited than when they first conceived of the trip during a night out after Deedee’s job-quitting and Ramona’s man-divorcing, both having just shirked all insurance, drunkenly declaring it a false promise while slamming tequila shots down at Lucky Lou’s on Route 84. Heartbreak cannot be paid against every month in exchange for one less worry, and happiness seemed to just befall someone and had little to do with whatever assurances a person had accumulated. Unless assurance was money and the money was buying fireworks and gas and time. These were the neo-proverbs that Deedee extemporaneously orated as her cheek became more and more friendly with the wall of the bar.

And that was the plan, a cross-country trip to reclaim their lives from the predestined mindlessness of default citizenship. “Life is a ship,” Deedee proclaimed. “And freedom is the captain!” And Ramona cheered to that and spoke of big plans of spending New Year’s Eve at Bear Mountain together and maybe even co-hosting cocktail parties with absinthe, and when they were really gone, like crying about the beauty of Patrick Swayze gone, Ramona waded so far into the future’s promise, she spoke in gibberish about fleet week and sex toy party schemes, but Deedee was still stuck exploring the ship metaphor and began singing sea shanties that she never knew she knew.

As they drove through Pennsylvania, the farmland filled the car with pleasant dirty smells and everything was yellow. “I can’t even believe I’m a free woman now. What

am I going to do with myself?” Ramona ruminated while lightly drumming the car roof.

“Anything you want, is the point,” Deedee answered. “Anything we want to do. The world is our oyster, until it’s not.”

“When I get home, the last of his stuff won’t even be in the apartment anymore. Can you believe it? I’m so proud of myself. All those years I knew the answer but I was too scared to ask the question.”

Deedee nodded with encouragement for Ramona turning philosophical, which Ramona rarely turned since she spent most of her mental energy analyzing the minutia of common interactions, leaving no time to construct thematic understandings of human existence.

“The repairman that came to fix the oven was pretty cute, too,” Ramona daydreamed.

“What was broken?”

“Oh, he said the pilot light was out. Maybe it will go out again and I can call him.”

Deedee glanced toward Ramona and hesitated, but had to ask, “Do you know how to light a pilot light?”

“No.”

“You can do it yourself. It’s easy.”

“But how would I even know if the pilot light was out?”

Deedee didn’t say anything, having been asked a question that had an answer so simple, it confused her how to respond.

“Anyway,” Ramona continued, “I like seeing the repairman. Or I could just call you when it goes out, since you know so much about it.” And Ramona playfully tapped Deedee’s shoulder. Ramona had gotten married very young.

They drove through West Virginia, where they found the landscape uninspired and it lulled them into a thoughtless silence; Tennessee, where they stopped outside of

Nashville to visit the Country Wax Museum and admired the creepy wax figures who bore uncanny resemblances to former elementary school teachers and estranged relatives, but which carried no likeness to any actual performer; Arkansas and Oklahoma, there was nothing to say about that; Texas, where they attempted and failed to consume the biggest steak in all the universe so instead they bought a lighter from the gift shop; and now they were in northern New Mexico, their arms out the windows, sneaking approving glances of themselves in the rearview mirrors.

Deedee thought about lighting another cigarette but argued herself against it with the admission that she would have to be frugal about something at some point. Instead, she focused on a continuing daydream of investing in a plot of land in a scenic derelict mountain town somewhere, building a cabin and planting a raspberry bush, learning bird calls and carving wooden puzzle boxes, and she tried to not let her mind wander to how she delayed that dream by quitting her job on a whim, a whim that had been building up in the back of her throat ever since she was assigned to write copy for a self-help series for women and the new supervisor started calling her kiddo. But a whim nonetheless. Enough of that now. She lit a cigarette.

Ramona looked out the window like she was humming a tune and thought that lighting fireworks would be the best possible thing to do at that moment, and she exclaimed, “Let’s light the fireworks out the window! While we’re driving!” Deedee said, “Don’t set the car on fire,” and Ramona said back, “Don’t set the car on fire? Is that what you said? Not to do it?” And Deedee gave Ramona a raised-eyebrow look, a recognition of one of Ramona’s standby jokes, and Deedee knew them all. They even had a few standard jokes they told together, like that they were only friends because of their names, that they didn’t even really like each other. It was a little routine they used to do at parties if they didn’t know many people.

But before Ramona could even choose which Roman Candle she would aim out the window as it went off, they heard a deep pop and then bumped along discouragingly. “Shit,” Deedee said. “A flat tire.”

“Maybe we can still use Tom’s triple-A card?”

“It’s just a flat tire. We can change it ourselves.”

They popped the trunk, emptied its contents into the backseat, and Ramona rolled the spare tire out and balanced it while Deedee proceeded to do most of the work of popping off the hubcap and jacking up the car and the actual changing of the tire. They were offered a lot of help in those seven-or-so minutes in the road’s shoulder, so many helpful men pulling over, getting out of their cars and wearing friendly grin-masks, saying, “Can I help you with that?” One would think it was some sort of helpthy-neighbor national initiative that had just gone into effect. And the men would linger a few more beats to be sure that Ramona and Deedee do in fact got this. None of them stunk of motives, though, and some offered sympathy. All of them warned the ladies to be careful.

Deedee changed the tire successfully despite the turnover audience and it was decidedly nighttime now, and the stars were full and the moon was plentiful and they figured what would be the harm in basking in their success with a one-hitter while sitting on top of the hood, admiring the now-shadowed mountain.

“Let’s set one off here,” Ramona said, but Deedee advised against it.

“Too obvious,” she pointed out. “I don’t want to attract that kind of attention when we’re not moving. Or, any attention, really. The less attention the better for us. Let’s wait until we’re driving again.”

“Okay, fireworks later”—and Ramona was well stoned now—“Fire works later. Hmm.”

“Do you hear that?”

They sat silently and waited for the next few cars to pass so they could discern more clearly a troubled whimpering. Deedee felt a pang deep in her chest and an ache in her side. They hopped off the hood and bent and crouched and whispered and kindly hissed as they did not know what baby animal they were searching for, until they came upon it, a black puppy with a pink tongue and unhealthy eyes. It was so, so cute.

“Jesus Christ, look at these paws. I want to eat them. What should we name”—Deedee turned the dog over—“her?” She held the dog up to her nose before she realized that it might have some sort of bug problem. Oh, who cares, she thought when the dog looked up at her with what she understood to be otherworldly recognition, a sign from the generous desert spirits to yield to the adorable, truly helpless creature who was meant to be given and to a good home.

Ramona scratched the dog’s neck and pitied her eyes and thought the dog’s eyebrows were too long and disregarding for such a young puppy, like a married couple who forwent certain groomings and claimed a confusion as to why anyone would bother with that, and she said so. “Are you going to keep her?” Ramona asked with a wary knowledge.

Deedee said she didn’t know if she would keep the puppy, realizing she was lying as she was saying it, as life before finding the puppy was quickly turning into a long-ago memory right before her very eyes, like the hours after learning of a spouse’s death.

The three of them settled in the car, the puppy between them, and Deedee drove much slower now. Ramona fiddled with her bag of fireworks, and Deedee said, “You can’t light those off in here. Fireworks scare dogs. They hide under beds every Fourth of July. I don’t want her to freak out and crawl under the brake pedal or something.”

Ramona suspected the dog would not be able to squeeze under the pedals, but also knew that that was not the true worry. “Well, just one. Or two? It won’t scar her forever.”

Deedee said, “No, I don’t think it will be a good idea. We’ll light them off when the dog is safe somewhere else.”

But Ramona knew that the dog wouldn’t be somewhere else. “Promise?”

And Deedee knew she could not make that promise. “Yeah, promise.”

Ramona let out a few sighs, and Deedee ignored her, hoping that Ramona would get bored of her own sighing without her having to address anything, but Ramona’s sighs became more agitated until she couldn’t take Deedee’s deliberate indifference anymore, and she cried out, “What am I going to do?”

Despite the escalation of Ramona’s sighs, Deedee was not expecting this outburst. “I don’t know, sweetie. You’ll figure it out.”

“No, tell me. Tell me what I’m going to do. Someone has to know and tell me.”

Deedee was silent, though not intentionally. She was afraid that she could not help her friend, and that maybe she shouldn’t. On the other hand, there was no getting out of it, they were stuck in a car together. “Make a list?” Deedee said, and Ramona faced further out the window, really crying now. “I know it’s not a very sexy answer, but it might help.”

“A list of what? Of all the things I gave up? Of all the things I can’t do?”

“Yes. Make a list of all the things you can’t do. Here, I’ll help you with the first one. Change a tire. That can go on your list. And then I’ll teach you how to change one and you can cross it off.”

Ramona kind of laughed. She seemed to always be teetering on regression. Deedee was at the edge of it with her, but she couldn’t jump. She realized that she didn’t want to.

“Pack a bowl?” Deedee offered.

And Ramona did and she smoked and the puppy slept. Ramona said, “Life is a ship, right? Didn’t you say that once? We can sail through the ocean freely as long as we have a good captain?”

Deedee said, “Maybe life is the anchor.”

“Sad,” Ramona said.

Deedee disagreed, but did not say so.

Ramona, limply floating in self-pity now, wondered aloud if they should go their separate ways, if she should finish the trip by herself, but she was terrible with directions, she knew, and she regretted that she even wondered it. After all, it could have been her who fell in love with the puppy, if the puppy had been a kitten, and then she wouldn’t even feel bad about not lighting the fireworks out of the car.

Instead they settled in their motel room when they arrived at it, and Ramona said to Deedee, “I’m going for a walk.”

“I’ll go with you.” Deedee put the puppy in a drawer she pulled out completely from the dresser, surrounding the puppy with an extra blanket she had found on the top shelf of the closet. She carried the bag of fireworks as they walked aimfully away from the motel, across the street, and into the dark rocky desert. “I’m sorry about this,” Deedee felt the need to say. Ramona smiled back like there was no reason to be sorry even though she thought there was, and took the bag of fireworks. Deedee watched her with slight worry since Ramona was generally logistically impaired, and was surprised when this worry turned into a disappointment in her friend. Ramona asked, “Is here good?” and Deedee said it was and handed Ramona the lighter from the Texas steakhouse. Ramona carefully set the Independence Rainbow on the ground, gave one last look up at Deedee, who smiled encouragingly, and set it off. They ran, laughing because it couldn’t be helped, looking back to see a white comet shooting up in spurts that sounded like the slow pumping of a Supersoaker, before exploding into violet, emerald, and crimson static. For a few seconds, anyway. They

had forgotten the bag of fireworks, leaving it next to a pile of pebbles and low plant life for some teenage boys to stumble upon and think they've hit the fucking jackpot. They returned to the motel panting harder than a thirsty Copilot, which was what Deedee had decided to name the puppy.



Communion

Cinthia Ritchie

You began with a glass of wine, thick and dark and rich, the night J and I camped up in the mountains, so far north we walked right up to the snow, even though it was the middle of summer. Later, when he leaned toward me, I heard a wolf howl and knew instinctively that something was about to happen, something deep and binding and unforgivable.

I could have stopped, but I didn't. I leaned forward, opened my mouth. I offered him my tongue.

You would have been a Pisces, a water child with strong, quick feet. When I swim my laps, I often imagine you beside me. We're not in a pool, we're in the ocean, in that gray, salty water, and you're ahead of me, your dark skin gleaming in the sunlight. You never stumble or waiver. Your hands remain effortlessly curved, the angle of your back strong and steady. Unlike my own body which tires and ages, yours remains timeless and perfect.

In these dreams, these imaginings, you are always the better swimmer.

He was gone before I even knew about you, taking off one morning before the sun had time to rise over the mountains. He said that he couldn't live in the desert, that the sight of so much land made him feel small, as if he could walk forever and never end up where he wanted to be.

I dreamed of you that long, hot summer as I sweated and kicked in my bed, the air conditioner clinking and clattering through the unbearable slowness of the afternoons. I dreamed of you in different stages of your life: as a toddler, pulling boxes and plates off the kitchen counter; as a schoolgirl, socks sagging down around your ankles; as a young woman, your face beautiful and secretive and uncertain.

I found myself waiting for these dreams, longing for them in that intense, almost shameful way that we always long for the things we cannot keep.

I went alone. I didn't want anyone to see my face, I didn't want to have to meet anyone's eyes. I lay down on that table, my feet in the stirrups, the bleached whiteness of the sheet flowing around me like something fallen from grace, and there was no one to hold my hand but a nurse who didn't know my real name.

Afterward, I asked to see it. They refused. But I stood there, in that small room, the blood running down my thighs, and demanded to see what was left of you.

There wasn't much, clots of blood and a few meaty-looking pieces of membrane. I told the nurse I was thirsty, that I needed a glass of water. While she was gone, I picked up those bloody remains, wrapped them in tissue, hid them in my jacket pocket and rushed toward the door.

"Are you okay?" one of the nurses yelled after me.

I kept on going. When the sunlight hit my face, I felt branded and exposed. I felt suddenly ugly.

You would have been old enough to bleed by now. To know the thrill and embarrassment of your own body. To have your own child. To make your own terrible choices.

I almost died, they told me later. An infection, my temperature climbing higher and higher as I lay in bed, tossing against the damp sheets and dreaming of my Polish grandmother, who used to tell me stories of relatives caught in the war, caught in the camps; gone forever. By the time my sister finally found me, the whole apartment smelled of blood, and heat, and when I tried to walk toward her, I collapsed in the middle of the rug. I stayed like that for a moment, in that sucking, whirling heat, in the comfort of that black wall rising up to meet me.

For a moment, I didn't see the point of getting up.

This is what I've never told anyone, what you need to know. That before the fever climbed high enough to blur my mind, before the blood got so heavy I had to pack towels between my legs, before all that I stood in the bathroom and stared at my face in the mirror. I looked old and ghostly, as if I had used up all the years of my life. Suddenly I wanted you back, I wanted to know you were still in my belly, I wanted the luxury of being able to change my mind.

Maybe the fever had already crept into my head because I unpacked that Kleenex and folded those tough pieces of membrane, those small, blackish clots of blood, into my hands and held them up to my nose. They smelled of blood and earth and the secret, sullen smells of my own body. Before I knew it, my tongue reached out and pulled a small piece of what was left of you into my mouth. You tasted slippery and warm.

I swallowed without thinking.



Chelsey | Mickey Darr Shea



Queering: to spoil the effect or success of one's plans

Cindy Carlson

It's not just a baby she really does insert herself in disruption
carves the picture right into her skin the tradition she can't share
she perversely assuredly will have she: vignette in the moon
sex scenes statementized love isn't the same
at 38 it isn't the same after the fucking beauty comes in
categories: butch or queen, pretty or cute vouching in
the wrong context what really matters
borrowed shades of shared overlookment the meaning
of life comes from clothes left out of the closet
the goodwill bag overstuffed with luscious green fabric and calla lilies.



You Told Me the Story of Your Bones

J. Adam Collins

Your bones—they started off light
and hollow. You said they had been dusty,
like forgotten on the top shelf for
safe keeping, that they never saw
the day outside for fear that those
shallow dents would show from too
many people squeezing you for your ripeness,
trying to pluck you before you were ready.
You said you weren't sure if you'd ever
be ready, because you couldn't shake that
feeling that you were on display
in front of a biology class, where
students, they labeled your bones. They circled
fractures with red marker and at the end
of the day you always stayed,
because the weight on those shoulders
just wouldn't let your light and
hollow bones float away.

So you tried painting them blue.
You had hoped the hue would skew
the true reflection of you,
that others would just see
through you, not a new you
who couldn't stop screwing furniture
to the floor or gluing your toothbrush
to a bathroom sink. Your bones—
they could no longer think on their own.
They only waited for the next drink from

the next wink of an eye. But you always
wound up shrink-wrapped in a freezer,
buried in a back yard, or thrown
to the river, until someone picked
you up again, polished you pink,
and bound you in a new skin.

And after each excavation, your bones,
they wrapped up in the arms of another,
they gave away piece after piece of yourself;
and before too long, you couldn't even sell
your bones. There wasn't anything left
to give. Scattered on the streets, they
had nowhere to call a home, became petrified,
black as coal, hard as stone.

I think I was silent all my life
until you told me the story of
your bones. And now I want to
claim them. I want to call them
mine. I want to find each and every one,
pull them from those spaces where
their endless cacophony of grief never
reaches other faces. I want to place them
in a row, tie them together with lace
and bows, and then strip down to
my bare bones, to show you that I
have found a bright enough hue
of blue that erases all traces
of those shallow dents from lost races,
hopeless cases; that I can embrace
you just as tightly as those new skins
others place on you again and again;
that you no longer have to chase
a home. It is here with my bones.



There Is No Firmament

Jacob Michael King

INCIDENT REPORT, WATER'S EDGE CONDOMINIUMS

6/18, 8:24 AM

MS. YALDA BOTH IN UNIT 5116 CAME TO ME THIS MORNING AND WAS BESIDE HERSELF. SHE WAS IN TEARS AND SHE WAS YELLING. SHE ASKED ME IF GOD HAD APPEARED HERE LAST NIGHT. I SAID THAT I WASN'T WORKING LAST NIGHT BUT IF GOD HAD APPEARED SOMEONE WOULD DEFINITELY HAVE WRITTEN A REPORT ON IT.

Jessie:

The cigarette is giving me a headache but I keep smoking because I like the way it looks. Look at that, it curls (I still can't blow a smoke ring) like a ribbon and I love to see it break. It seems really impermanent, like life and love. I can see you looking at me smoking and I know I look mysterious to you though you don't say that.

What are you doing.

I'm sitting here smoking. You're staring at me like a creep.

Fuck you.

You get up and you grin and you tackle me and I giggle because I like it and drop the cigarette in the can. I can feel your face warm and I love the weed on your breath and the way you're hungry as you grab at my body.

Now I'm high again and I'm staring at my neon pink shoes and the neon green laces. They look like they're snakes or worms moving across the pink shoes but only

for a second when I don't concentrate. I look again and stop tripping. You look stupid staring at your own hand but I like it. You have a cute little belly and a happy trail that moves down to your crotch. You smell a little like b.o. but not too much. I hope I don't 'cause it's not cute for a girl.

My mother is not home and if she is I don't give a shit. That bitch needs to do the dishes.

We need like three more bucks and we're good so we go down into the garages of the complex and start grabbing bottles from the recycle bin. We go from garage to garage and put the bottles in two big plastic bags and take them across the street to the grocery store to get cash from the machine. I light another cigarette while I walk even though I have a headache from the last one and you say I look serious.

So I feel weird and I'm thinking about myself now and the way I look and I don't like it (I feel stupid) and now I can't seem to walk right. I don't even know how to walk and I feel like stumbling but it's just the weed and it's making me paranoid. I thought I looked cool but I don't look cool and I wonder how often I think I look cool but I look like a dumb bitch.

We put all the bottles and the plastic in the machine but we still need fifty cents because Spinner is a dickhead to me now. We broke up and now his girlfriend is a fat whore and he's pissed about it but that's what you get. You smile at me.

Why don't you talk to that old guy over there.

I see the one you mean. I go over and smile at him and say hi and try to look embarrassed though I'm stoned and I hope he doesn't notice or if he does I hope he thinks it's cute. He looks like he just popped a boner and his teeth are all brown and nasty. I get all pouty and act little-girly and cute and ask him if he has fifty cents and he gives me seventy-five.

We're walking back talking about that creep and I wonder if you just get fat when you're old or if you have to choose it. Like if you really have to let yourself go because

you don't care about getting laid anymore and you just sit on your sofa and smell your own farts till you die and you laugh and put your arm around me and I light another cigarette and lean into you and smell you.

I guess my mom is here and she's been sitting watching tv all along and we didn't notice because she never moves and it's like she's grown on that fucking couch like a fungus. She never does anything.

Then Spinner and his fat whore girlfriend are in the room with us and he's weighing the weed on the scales. I tell her her hair looks really pretty and you look at me and grin because telling a fat bitch she has nice hair is like telling a fat bitch she has nice nails. You can put a wig on a cow and you can paint its nails and you can put lipstick on it but you still look like a fat whore. If I was in a plane crash in the mountains I'd want this bitch to come along because she'd feed everyone for a month until the rescue team got there.

She asks where the bathroom is in a soft voice but you know she's just gonna crap it up with a gigantic Taco Bell shit. I bet she carries air freshener in her purse to hide the tracks. She probably shits everywhere she lands like a fly. She's gone and Spinner is stoned out of his mind (probably on bars too) and he leans back on the bed and I see his bag open. There's a fucking ounce just sitting there and his eyes are closed and you look at me and I take it and throw it under the bed.

Yalda:

There was a presence; it was going to be an awful day. The emptiness of the room—an emptiness I cultivated with a fastidiousness, I grant, bordering on the obsessive; an emptiness that served as palliative, as salve when I felt its contrast to the thoughts that choked and crowded; an emptiness, ethereal, whose borders were familiar and intimate and loved like limbs; an emptiness expansive and frail, not merely mine but *myself*, glowing and sacred, a living spirit extending forth as a nimbus, blessing window

and bare wall and marble countertop equally; an emptiness, a friend who echoed my howls to a God I once thought (O grace in innocence) indifferent and whose malice I now felt pulsing through the whole of the afterbirth that was earthly existence—it was no longer empty; there was a presence in it.

The bird was a yellow-crested cockatoo, a raucous and jittery thing I acquired in fearful submission to a dream. I am a reluctant augur.

In the dream I am sprawled on an onyx surface—frigid, flat, reflective—that stretches boundlessly in all directions. A viscous cloud, onyx black—but it bears a wilderness of moving legs (tiny, sticky, beetle-clawed; they scrape against my naked body, scrawling glyphs with their inky residue) and so it is a *living thing*, a wretched aberration or branched from some primeval genus—scrolls with a torturous languor above me. It, too, is boundless; ambling from nowhere to nowhere.

In darkness upon darkness I tremble, gasping. A screaming urgency without object, the absolute knowledge that all is lost.

But then a sudden rush of hope that spreads a warmth from my chest to my extremities. I weep for joy. A yellow-crested cockatoo parts the demon cloud, lighting on my chest. Its eyes shine—celestial gold soon transmuted to a summer-sky blue to a sunset rose, and my rapture swells at each metamorphosis—with such a furious and noble brilliance that the black realm is conquered.

At once I was alone, awake, facing the silent walls of my home. All creation in the wretched image of a wretched God, the suggestion of even the feeblest of His spawn here, present while I slept, filled me with dread. But I could not ignore the dream; I bought my bird the next day. It remains the sole ornament of my solitude. I haven't even a mattress; I sleep on the floor.

I consulted no text, for my dreams informed me of the bird's rhythms and their meanings. I found its predictive ability to be unparalleled. Its movements—a waffling from side-to-side on its perch, repeated three times in the space of under forty-five

seconds, and it will rain and I will become ill and have no rest for a week; a bob of its head *immediately followed* by a kicking out of its right claw leaves no doubt that my bowels will soon grow so inflamed as to impede all thought—or its calls—it issues a mournful whine, the like of which I have never heard from any animal, and I resign myself that a relative will soon call; it clucks, and *in either eleven, thirteen, or nineteen seconds* grabs the cage with its beak, and a package will be mistakenly delivered to my house and I will have to face the postman—or its smells—its diet is impeccably consistent, and if the manure smells sickly sweet I know that heat and hideous daylight will bleed like smoke through the blinds and scold me though I hide; I bite a rubber mouth guard when its droppings waft sour and tannic, so as not to chew through my own tongue in the coming hours, for traffic will wail with a fury and reduce me to a convulsing mass—portend, in their subtle oscillations, the will of the Divine Sadist who sustains my life.

I awoke to the bird's black eyes. It stared at me, silent and unmoving. I have never seen it quiet. It did not blink. It had not died standing up, for it breathed.

And the *presence* (invisible, mingling with the emptiness like cyanide) left me gasping. It seemed ubiquitous and without origin. *I had to get out.* But then I saw a glimmer seeping through the crack in my front door and I knew the 19 from which this evil emanated lay directly beyond.

I wanted to die—what else could account for my rush to the door? The morning light was an affront and I squinted in panic, but the twinkling malignancy of the monstrous Thing on my porch brought all to a ringing clarity.

At my door was a pile of shit. It shone with a brightness to rival the sun, and looked for all the world to be made of pure gold. It was not the handiwork of some juvenile sculptor; the stench proved that.

My conclusion—for though I was choked with horror, though in my eyes the bitterest moisture burned, and though my heart throbbed beseechments to loose me

from this loathsome corpse, there welled a reserve of inner courage to stay these phantoms and I reasoned lucidly—was the only one to be drawn: God in His infinite boredom had sharpened His vile and omniscient gaze on me once more, and, amused at the pain of my struggle, contrived the novel mockery of emptying His Divine bowels at my door. Who but He could pass a golden stool?

INCIDENT REPORT, WATER'S EDGE CONDOMINIUMS

6/17, 7:31 PM

JESSIE CANTER AND HER BOYFRIEND CAME TO MY BOOTH AND TOLD ME TO CALL THE COPS IF HER EX-BOYFRIEND SPINNER EVER COMES HERE AGAIN. SHE SAYS HE HAS BEEN STALKING HER AND HE WON'T LEAVE HER ALONE. SHE SAYS SHE'S GOING TO FILE A RESTRAINING ORDER AND SHE LEFT HIS DESCRIPTION WITH ME AND SHOWED ME HIS PICTURE ON HER PHONE.

Spinner:

You never practice.

She's an idiot. Don't act like you know anything about rock and roll.

You don't have to fucking practice. Don't you know that? You need to clean your fuckin' eardrums out. Nobody gives a shit if you're a good musician. Prog rock tried that and they all sounded like a buncha pussies. It's all about the fucking *persona*. Rock and roll is image.

What about Guns 'n Roses?

What about fucking Guns 'n Roses? Axl couldn't play shit. He just got on stage and screamed. He was totally fuckin' atonal. He just had a big dick and everybody knew it.

Yeah, but Slash is a really good guitar player.

Fuck Slash. Nobody remembers Slash and nobody ever talked about him. Guns ‘N Roses had a bunch of shitty music. Ever heard Civil War? It’s fuckin’ retarded. But they’re one of the best bands in the history of rock and roll. Why? Because Axl would literally beat the shit out of people, like, every night. Or he’d get up there and tell everyone to go home and that he didn’t give a shit if they heard him, he wasn’t doing it for *them*. And of course it was all a fuckin’ lie (*of course he cared; he needed them*) but that was part of the show. Axl was a *brilliant showman*. Rock and roll is like stand up comedy. But instead of making them laugh you’re an asshole.

So you wanna be a professional asshole?

It’s worth it for the money. Better than working at a fuckin’ grocery store like you do.

I hate how belligerent she gets. She thinks she can walk all over me now that she’s my girlfriend.

You know that once I get a band and we get signed and everything. . . like, you and me are done. I’m outta here and I’m not taking anybody with me. I’m gonna be free as a bird.

She looks hurt but I gotta keep reminding her. This is a thing of convenience and she needs to know it. She’d liked me *for-ever* and she was dumpy and annoying but she has a cute face and I guess it was kind of a right place right time sort of thing. She’s totally a rebound from Jessie the megabitch and I think I’ve made that pretty clear so I don’t feel guilty. And to be honest I do kinda like her but my hands are tied, because the second you get signed it *is* all about image and I can’t have a fuckin’ chicken dumpling hanging on my arm when I’m singing about booze and free pussy.

It’s turned into kind of a problem, though, because now she’ll do anything so I like her more. She *is* belligerent and whiny (like I said, annoying, but that’s part of her nature) but she takes me out places all the time and gives me blowjobs whenever and

now she even pays for the weed I give her. That started to make me feel guilty but I keep telling her so she knows what's up.

Wanna smoke?

Yeah. You loaded the last bowl so let me do it.

I didn't load the last bowl, she did, but I'm always down to smoke someone else's weed. But now I get to thinking about it, and actions speak louder than words, and I figure I'd better pack it myself. If I'm constantly accepting everything she gives me she'll think she's winning me over, and I should nip that in the bud for her sake.

Nah. Lemme do it.

I reach into my bag and it takes me a second to realize that all my weed is gone.

All my weed is gone.

What.

All my fucking weed is gone. Are you deaf or are you just fuckin' retarded?

Don't blame me—

This is not about you right now. I am in a fucking tragic emotional state because I have three hundred dollars worth of weed that *I'm supposed to fucking sell (for my fucking livelihood)* that I promised to a *bunch of fucking people* and it is fucking gone.

Where was the last place you put it?

That is absolutely the most annoying thing anyone can say when you lose something. Do you know where the last place I put it was? It's where it fucking *is right now*. So I will be able to answer that question when I *find* my fucking bag of weed, at which point the question will be totally fucking useless. So thanks for the contribution, fucktard.

Someone could have moved it.

She's right. Someone could have *stolen it*, like Jessie the megabitch. I was spaced out on the bed listening to her boyfriend's sissy-ass hipster music for a while there and my bag was wide open. It would be a dumb bitch thing to do (because I'd never

sell to her again), but look up “dumb bitch” in the dictionary and you’ll find Jessie’s picture.

So now I’m furious and calling her over and over and she’s still not answering so I *know* she fuckin’ did it. I hate her fucking cheery voicemail; I can hear her fake smile in it.

She’s got this fake smile that is absolutely repulsive. It’s the kind you give to someone if you want them to think you’re a nice girl. She pulls it on her aunts and uncles and cops. She pulled it on my mom at first (until she got used to her and had nothing to prove) but everyone knows she’s a hypocrite. Never trust a bitch who smiles big at you when you hardly know her.

Now my girlfriend (hate the sound of that) is asking me what to do and I’m thinking. I’m not gonna get it back unless I break her door down, and I know her mom is fed up with us so she’ll call the cops. If I can’t get my shit back I’m gonna get revenge, and I’m never selling to that bitch again.

Hey you hate that bitch, right?

Yeah. She smiles. I know she’ll do it.

A while back I won a thousand bucks on the lottery. I bought a lot of weed with it, but the megabitch Jessie showed me these pills that would make your shit solid gold. They were like four hundred bucks but I had the money and I figured fuck it. I’ve been saving them for a rainy day.

It’d be funny if I did it, but it’d be even better if *this girl* did. She thinks it’s gross at first but I know she wants to deep down. I mean it’s the ultimate move in a passive-aggressive catfight that’s been going on *way* too long.

So she swallows the pills and it’s night and we go to a dirty-ass tacqueria and I make her get a fat old barbecue pork burrito. I order nachos and make her eat half of that too. Jessie lives in a big condo complex, so we gotta find a way to sneak in because there’s a guard.

That guy is always just jacking off in his little guard booth anyway, and there's a fence way over at the other end. He won't spot us. We wait until like three in the morning and then we sneak over and she hops the fence. It must've been a gnarly one because it takes her like twenty minutes to come back. She goes in for a kiss and I let her; she's earned it.

Fifty-one sixteen, right?

Bitch got the wrong address.

Yalda:

I had been deliberating without anxiety. My mind—formerly fissured with baleful premonitions—was now whole and still, for I knew the hour—the hour the unceasing dread of which soured every hour previous; the hour to which each antecedent minute thrust a trembling digit; *that* hour, the black hole around which the whole of my galaxy, shining with fear, was constellated—had arrived, and I was at peace.

All day the bird stood rigidly still. It kept its silence even as I strangled it. It offered itself to me without struggle. It stared, unblinking, in its stoic calm until I heard the hollow bones snap beneath my hands and felt the ghost relinquished.

God, in vandalizing my doorstep—the most recent (though hardly the most egregious) of the blows struck with metronomic regularity against my person by His Cosmic Maleficence—had succeeded at last in eroding my granite will, and had extinguished that defiance which was, for so long, the sole force animating my despairing frame.

For I rose daily and with strength, and I resigned myself to contend in this realm of outer darkness, to weep and to gnash my teeth and to be counted among the vile children of a vile God, because through the blackness there glowed the flickering hope that my endurance confounded our Father, so proud and so cruel. But now this frail flame, this hope, lay smothered under a golden pile of shit; now I saw my

rebellion for what it was: minstrelsy in the court of the Lord. I knew I was His choice fool, for in becoming embodied solely to defame my property, He had told me so. I endured not to His displeasure, but to His delight.

Obviously the show could not go on. I would die today and I would die proudly, consigned by my own hand to the hellfire for which I longed—for to be damned is to be separated from God.

Earlier I had left my house smiling. I had painted my nails and my lips; I had bathed and done my hair and I looked beautiful. I had marched with my shoulders back and my head high into a clothing store, and I had bought a fine dress.

And now I smile at myself in the bathroom mirror—running my hands along the fabric, feeling the warmth and the blood running underneath—looking through eyes that will soon be sightless.

Jessie:

We had a lot of weed so we decided to cook some but neither of us cooked so it tasted so fuckin' nasty and we laughed when we ate it but it kicked in an hour ago and now we're both so fucking high. I love the night out here (I used to live in the country and it was black) but here there's still light even when it's night and the light is pink and you can almost feel it covering you like sunlight and we walk out of the house and I smoked so many cigarettes today that I only have three left but I smoke another one.

I love the way the smoke comes out and I can see the white ribbon against the pink sky outside and it's warm outside but just cold enough to feel good when you hug me and we walk to the playground and we sit on the big toy, smoking.

I'm so fucking high and so are you because we don't say anything and you just hold me and I watch the smoke come and I smoke slowly and look up at the sky that looks like the inside of your eyelids when you shine a flashlight in your face and your

eyes are closed. I look out and I'm so fucking high that it takes me a minute to tell what I'm seeing and then I can see the other condos and the playground and everything but it doesn't connect. I'm tripping balls and I lean into you and kiss you and it feels for a second like I'm kissing the sky because your mouth is so red and so warm.



The Hermit Finds Solace

Grant Tracey

Perhaps the anti-social behavior started for Gray Davis when he was a kid, tearing up the flowers in a neighbor's yard, lofting them across the fence between the two houses, and laughing as if he were a character in a Warner Brothers cartoon. Or perhaps it was fifth grade when he wandered the halls of a hotel, dumping teammates' blankets and pillows, hockey skates and pucks, down a stairwell, shouting "he shoots, he scores!" In any case, by seventh grade, the goofy aloofness had blossomed, as during a field trip to the Royal Ontario Museum, he was the last one off the bus and commented quite awkwardly on how quickly the bus driver slid shut the door. "Man, did you smell that? He must've cut the cheese. Oh, man, he didn't want us to smell it. He cut the cheese. I'm telling, ya—limburger, baby." In high school Gray quit trying to be funny and found comfort in hanging with a couple of burnouts and listening to Doors records. When Ryan Fraser joined their group he and Gray became bodybuilding partners and slammed weights in the basement of Ryan's house, smoked dope, and read offbeat books like *Bonjour Tristesse* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. In college Gray drifted further into angst and alienation, reading for hours at the library—observing others—adopting a mood of solitude before possibly re-emerging into the world. Periodically, while riding the campus bus, he'd flip the finger to a young female student. "I didn't ask her to smile at me." Now, a college senior, he sat in Dean Flanagan's office, the Dean wondering why Gray had *yet* to pick up his mail.

"What's the idea," Finn Flanagan huffed, shirttails dipped out, a sleeve cuffed past his elbow. "I have been trying to contact you for over seven weeks now." He hadn't

seen Gray all of last semester, at none of the colloquium for Honors students. “These are all my letters.” Finn tossed them at an awkward angle in front of Gray who sat in a hard plastic chair and nodded. Six unopened letters were joined by a lava spread of seven months worth of direct mailers, campus brochures, and credit card offers. “Don’t you ever clear out your mailbox?”

“Apparently not. I don’t have a key.” Gray looked beyond the wide office window. A pine tree swayed gently on a small hill. The branches in the middle and top were much thicker than the winnowed ones near the bottom.

“You weren’t issued a key?”

“I didn’t want one.”

“You didn’t?”

“No.” He shrugged and sat back. “It’s too much hassle. I didn’t ask for a key.”

“Every student has a key.”

“Not this one.”

Dr. Flanagan huffed again sharply, his face puffed Wheaties, and propped his hands atop his walnut desk. “You deliberately don’t want to be a part of the university community.” Didn’t he realize that being an Honors student was a privilege and part of the responsibilities of the position involves attending certain functions, such as the J.M.S. Careless Lecture Series. Each monthly lecture included the work of scholars and students. This week, Careless himself was visiting Trent University, discussing his experiences in World War II.

“Attendance isn’t required,” Gray said.

“No. But it is expected.”

“Then it’s required.”

“No. Not quite.” Flanagan’s face looked soggy now, the cheeks no longer puffed but falling, pulled down by defeat. “I’m insulted that you didn’t get your mail.” He opened one of the letters that he had written and read aloud. Finn had a very

theatrical voice, scoring key turns of phrase and punching up the right words. In the letter he reminded Davis of the perks of being an Honors student, how these lectures professionalized him.

“I don’t care for the lecture series. I think it’s elitist.”

“Elitist?”

“Yeah.” Why not invite the whole university and town to the series? Why close it off to honor students in English and History? “When Margaret Laurence visited Trent it wasn’t a closed-door session. It was open to everyone: students, the community, the media.”

“Margaret Laurence is a superstar.”

“That too is an elitist position.”

“Oh, come on. Grow up.” Dr. Flanagan’s eyes looked out the window, wondering, perhaps, what in the horizon line held Gray’s attention.

“The leaves aren’t even. They’re odd-shaped. I find it striking.”

Dr. Flanagan paused and rubbed his lips—perhaps he too found the tree striking. He waited another beat or two, rubbed his lower lip once again with an index finger and gave a narrow smile. “Gray, I’m trying to help you—‘elitist?’ Look at your thin goatee, dyed red so it won’t match your natural hair color—that’s not elitist? You’re a series of contradictions.”

Gray shrugged absently. In his final film project for Professor O. S. Mitchell’s class, Gray played a hermit: the incongruity in hair gave the lead an ill-fitted appearance, a marker of the marginalized.

“Maybe you’re not cut out for university life.”

“I’m not required to come to the lectures; I’m not required to get a key. I—”

“Well, will you get your goddamn mail out of my office? That I *require* of you.”

“Certainly.” It took Gray a few minutes to slide the lumpy lava into his backpack. When he was done, he thanked Dr. Flanagan for his time, congratulated him on a

recent essay that appeared in *Modern Theatre*, and suggested next time he wanted to chat, call me at home. “I have an answering machine. I check that. I don’t do mail.”

“You read my essay?”

“Yeah. Sean O’Casey and the use of comic relief? You bet.” Flanagan’s point was that the playwright’s comic sensibility increases tension, doesn’t relieve it. “It was quite good. The language precise.” He shrugged. ““Terrible state of chassis,”” Gray mumbled gently.

“Get out,” Dr. Flanagan said quietly, a narrow smile returning to his crooked lips.

“Yes, Sir,” Gray said, even more quietly.

Gray had never been in love and he wasn’t even sure he ever loved his parents. His mom was the retreating type, reserved, and never said much in the way of the personal. She had a hard childhood—that’s all he knew. Dad, a delivery driver, yelled most of the time, or snapped off the kitchen faucet or tossed pizza at the walls when he was frustrated, which was often. He used to smack Gray around until the bodybuilding leveled the strength between them, and now Gray hasn’t seen his dad in five years. About love, Gray wasn’t sure he wanted a relationship—he was going to remain free to do and pursue what he wanted, not get mired in compromises. And yet his sense of self was undergoing revision. He liked Mary Beth, a student in Mitchell’s class. He often found himself thinking about her, the dark, almost blue-black hair, the mole near her left eyebrow, and the eyes that were sad and expressive. One time he bumped into her at a book sale in the basement of a church, and was at a loss for words. He seldom spoke to people, but he wanted to talk to her, and when she saw the William Irish book in his hands, she recommended that he pass on it—it’s sexist. Gray took her advice and got Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* instead.

Strangely distracted, he had been vaguely thinking about all this, including “mail call” with Finn, as he and Ryan, the cameraman for his experimental film “The Hermit,” were shooting scenes along Charlotte Street in Peterborough.

Gray, with a loose-fitting plastic bag over his head, recited the Lord’s Prayer and sang blips from “O Canada” and the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen.”

“What’s that all about?” Ryan asked, laughing, while taking short drags off a king-size cigarette.

Gray shrugged. “Had to recite that propaganda every day at school. All the way through junior high.” One Jewish kid always left the room, refusing to participate. Gray wished he were as cool.

“You are cool,” Ryan said.

But the film needed a moment of redemption. It had been ten days since Gray had met with Finn and maybe the Dean was right, maybe Gray needed to confront his subterranean life. Maybe if cinema is life and life is cinema, as Jean-Luc Godard had argued, then Gray needed a counterpoint. The film’s ending was too easy. “I might ask Mary Beth to be in this—”

“What?” Ryan took a long drag off his cig. Women were nothing but trouble. And Mary Beth was one of them fuddy-duddy feminists.

“She’s not a fuddy-duddy,” Gray said.

Now it was Ryan’s turn to shrug. It was like a ritual between them, a secret, private language.

That night Gray worked on the storyboards in his small apartment, searching for a redemptive moment. He changed the title to “The Hermit Finds Solace.” In the original script, the hermit swims naked in the Otonabee River. As he drifts farther and farther out, the camera cuts to an extreme wide angle, suggesting a surrender to despair. But suicide’s been done, what with Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Bruce Dern’s lone ocean float in the recent *Coming Home*. So in a re-write, the hermit crosses

to the other side and there waiting for him is Eve, naked too. They don't talk. Language has disintegrated. Instead, with exaggerated hand gestures, they show each other postcards and adverts torn from glossy magazines. These images of modernity are pulled from huge shoeboxes, until Adam and Eve eventually discard the whole lot and wistfully smile as the film ends.

An overt homage to Jean-Luc Godard without being derivative, Mary Beth Ventura said the next morning at a downtown Zellers. "I like the ending, I do. But I don't do nude scenes." She took a sip of coffee from a mug the size of a soup bowl.

"Eve didn't have a sheet." Gray hated to compromise for his art. That's why he never asked students in class to team up with him on his projects. Ryan was the cameraman, but wasn't a student. Moreover, Ryan wasn't a meddler. He followed instructions, knew his role. He even joined Gray on several daring missions, like stealing dinner trays from the cafeteria last winter and using them as sleds for midnight slides on the hills behind Champlain College.

"I know why you want me in this movie."

"What?" Gray felt the edges of his face burning, especially around the eyes.

Her Croatian and Italian ancestry gave her a very exotic, Mediterranean look, she said. "With this nose, I'm not mainstream."

She didn't look Scottish, that's for sure, but he liked her face, her smile. Sometimes—in profile—it was so ordinary. She had a chin that was too small for her fleshy cheeks, a nose with two slight bumps in it, and ears that stuck out. But when she laughed, she was full of an affectionate and appreciative light.

"So, I'm goofy and gritty? That's why you want me in this film—"

"No—I don't have the words—I—"

"Well—" She liked his movie. She tapped her chin and reached for a cold fry. Take the scene at the hotel where the father sits the family down to announce leaving Toronto for his job opportunity in Peterborough—that was brutal. "I mean, they're

kids. Of course they don't want to move, but Dad expected too much, and when they didn't live up to his romanticized ideals and said what they felt—oh, boy—”

Oh, boy is right. Dad, in the film and in Gray's actual life, had called the oldest son Captain Selfish and slapped the youngest (Gray) across the mouth. Later at the hotel restaurant Dad ordered his meal, and one for his wife and daughter, but refused to order for the boys. “I don't order for Captain Selfish and his sidekick, Me, Me, Me.” The waitress waited a beat and awkwardly asked the boys herself. They ordered hamburgers. “That's the kind of food I expect selfish people to eat,” the father said. As Mary Beth made Gray relive these moments from the screenplay, he confessed with a shrug, “That really happened. But I don't want to talk about me.”

“Why not?”

“I'll let the movies do my talking.” He held up a finger. “Like Jean-Luc Godard said, ‘the truth, twenty-four frames a second.’”

“I'll do it,” she said, her gray eyes filling with comical light. “The scene.”

“If I knew quoting Godard would get you to say yes—”

“Just don't objectify me.” And then she said something about Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, and advertising images subjugating women.

“I won't.”

“And I don't want Ryan doing the shoot. I know he's your cameraman, but the guy kind of creeps me out.”

Gray nodded, and surprisingly didn't feel guilty about tossing Ryan aside. “It'll be a closed set.” He smiled. Ryan *was* kind of creepy. Last summer Ryan re-read the *Bhagavad Gita* and all he got out of it was how cool it would be to walk around with a big sword.

Maybe Gray should have felt more kindness toward his friend. He and Ryan had been weightlifting partners since eleventh grade. The last two summers they had picked tobacco on a farm in Centreton. It was fifty miles from the city so they lived in

a tent on the farmer's field, earning enough money to upgrade their weightlifting equipment, buying additional free weights and a variety of benches. Late at night in their tent, Ryan often spoke of their traveling to California after university, opening a gym on the beach, and picking up chicks. But their wrists, their bone structure was way too small, Gray wanted to counter. All the workouts and muscle drinks weren't ever going to change that.

Mary Beth pressed her hands against her upper thighs and then absently scratched a spot on her clavicle, hair falling over shoulders. She said the script was volatile, and then stabbed a fry in a puddle of ketchup.

"Success to crime," Gray said, which made absolutely no sense, but he loved quoting offbeat lines from the movies. Mary Beth took up the toast and they held their French fries aloft and crossed them like sword tips.

Ryan wasn't too happy about being banned from the shoot and he was even less happy when a scene Mary Beth wrote was added to "The Hermit Finds Solace." They filmed it late on a Thursday, after the store closed. Gray donated \$20.00 to Goodwill to get twenty minutes of shooting time. Ryan was surly during the shoot, a long-ashed cigarette drooping from his lower lip.

But Mary Beth's new scene was highly caffeinated, flavorful, and a hoot. For the scene, Mary Beth's Eve rummaged through snake lines of slinky scarves, while Gray's Adam smiled at her, and then she gave him an abrupt finger. "I didn't ask you to smile at me. Fuck you," she said, courtesy of an inter-title card that she held aloft like a ring card girl at a heavyweight bout.

"It's just a smile," he said.

"A smile is never just a smile." It implies a connection, a sense of shared feelings, and Eve didn't appreciate Adam crowding her space. She snapped the scarf over her left shoulder.

“Sometimes words fail us.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The smile was just an involuntary gesture. There was no agenda.”

“Really? How’s this for involuntary?” She pulled the scarf off her shoulder, roped it around his hips, and danced, singing about blue skies clearing up and insisting that they put on happy faces.

Gray followed her steps—they had choreographed it at her apartment two days before while Ryan was away—tipped back Porkpie hats on their heads, painted themselves in colorful scarves, and spun about clothing racks. When the song ended they collapsed into shoulders before falling to the floor, laughing.

“I don’t get it.” Ryan tossed the hat on top of a clothes carousel. He lit another cigarette. “And the Ska fad won’t last, you know,” Ryan said.

Gray’s artistic choices had never been questioned by Ryan before—this was new. “Aw, come on. It’s killer.”

“It’s dumb,” Ryan said.

Mary Beth looked away, no doubt sensing the personal slight. “I think it adds to the film’s overall drive to mix and match apparently misaligned genres.”

Ryan threw up his arms. “I don’t even know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Gray nudged Ryan slightly, sending him stuttering forward. He almost lost his cigarette. “This from a guy who feeds beer to a dog?”

“You give beer to dogs?” Mary Beth asked.

“Sometimes,” Ryan said. “I like to watch them stagger around. It’s funny.”

“No it’s not,” she said.

“I told you it wasn’t, Dude,” Gray said.

“Whatever.”

Once Ryan had left, Mary Beth turned to Gray, a hand on her left hip. “Were you there when he fed beer to the dogs?”

“No—” Gray lied, but he wondered if she could tell.

In the parking lot, dusky under a dark sky, Mary Beth said she had a T'ai Chi class to get to. Maybe they could incorporate some of those steps into the final scene. He wasn't sure if she was inviting him to join her class. He wanted to offer to come along, but verbally stumbled. *The Apartment* was on TV tonight. He had to get home.

“Sure,” she said. “*The Apartment*. A classic.”

Gray wasn't even sure he liked Ryan the first time they met. They had been paired up to dissect a mink in Biology class and Ryan's breath was terrible, his teeth almost orange. And every now and then, he'd scrape at his back molars, look at the plaque under a fingernail, and then rub it on the sleeve of his shirt. But as they worked on the mink, they got to talking music and both liked obscure Stones' tracks: Ryan was a big fan of “Connection” off *Between the Buttons* and Gray loved “Flight 505” off *Aftermath*. Something about setting a plane down in the sea was perversely funny and cool. Not long after that they started lifting weights together.

By contrast Gray liked Mary Beth the moment he saw her, strolling out of the library, her hair in a blue bandana, a peace chain glinting around her neck. He liked her the second time too. She probably didn't remember but when she was a sophomore Gray had spent a night with her. Well, it was with her and seven other people. They holed up in Mary Beth and Lonny Wilks' Water Street flat (Lonny was a philosophy student who became brief friends with Gray over a mutual appreciation for Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*). That night they smoked weed and watched VHS tapes of *Some Like it Hot* (Lon's choice) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (Mary Beth's). Gray laughed and laughed at Jack Lemmon's Daphne voice and felt a little foolish for having so much fun. Later, just before dawn, they all walked down to the A&P. There, under bright track lights, Mary Beth danced with a chocolate cake, asking Gray

to join her. He couldn't shift his feet so she came over and nudged his legs along, as cake frosting slid against the underside of the plastic lid.

Mary Beth was no longer seeing Lon—he was in the Peace Corps now. So Gray saw her some mornings at the Pancake House, went with her to take in an Irish folk band, and once dropped in at Mother's Pizza where Ryan worked. Whenever his weightlifting pal visited Ryan usually piled Gray's pizzas with extra toppings—twice the ham and mushroom, double the cheese. But this one time there was no significant difference; if anything the toppings looked thinner, the cheese receding from the crust's edge.

Later that night, while readying to bench press 340 pounds, Gray asked about the mediocre pizza, and Ryan said something about the manager being there that day. He shrugged, absently smiled, and rubbed sweat off his wire-framed glasses. "Sorry, dude."

Sorry? Gray crushed chalk between his hands and clenched the bar, thumbs underneath, elbows in, spine loose. "You ready to spot me?"

"Yeah, yeah." Ryan hummed along to the Stones' "Rip this Joint." The edges of his mouth curled back a little. *Corporate rock dinosaurs?* The Stones? Can you believe that shit? He shrugged and exhaled sharply. "As near and dear to my heart as the CIA? That's what she said. You know, I asked her to name five Stones songs off of one of the greatest rock albums of all time, *Exile on Main Street*, and she could name only two. So how the fuck can she judge, you know? Two songs and she's an expert?"

Gray slipped his fingers from the bar and flexed them. "I think you did it on purpose—"

"What?"

"The pizza. You're mad at her, you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad." Ryan pointed at the bar and the big wheels of weight. "You going to press that or not?"

“You can be decent to her—”

“Oh, I’m decent. I don’t make fun of *her* music—fucking Blondie and the Cars.”

Gray lifted the bar off the rack and extended it over his head, and maybe it was the argument with Ryan, or general fatigue and stress over finishing his film, but his arms shook, the bar wobbled with wrong intentions and anchored him to the bench.

Ryan’s head peaked over the rack, his hair a greasy parachute. “What? Did you say something?”

“Can you give me a hand here?” Gray was buried.

“I didn’t hear you say anything. Did you say something? I didn’t hear anything. Just like you didn’t say anything in front of her, huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The beer—You fed beer to dogs too, but you made me look bad.” He shrugged and his head tilted left. Trying to impress her, but what about me?

“Get this thing off me, huh?”

Ryan turned up the music and sat on a different bench, looking at his fingers.

Gray couldn’t slide the weights off the bar because he had tightened the collars. If he were alone he wouldn’t have put on the collars. “Come on. Don’t be an ass—” He could probably roll the bar across his stomach and abs but it would smart. Ryan had made Gray feel vulnerable and embarrassed and he hated that.

“Ass? Who’s the one who never calls unless he needs a favor? Who’s the one—”

“Okay, I’m sorry about the beer thing—”

“I bet. You’ve changed, man. Two songs off *Exile*—that’s all she knew. But *boy*, has she got opinions—”

“Come on, man. I don’t want to have to roll this bar—”

“You shouldn’t have embarrassed me.” Ryan’s voice quavered slightly.

“You’re right.”

“You bet, I’m right.” Ryan waited, did a phantom Charlie Watts fill with his hands, and then helped lift the heavy bar from Gray’s chest, re-positioning it on the rack. Gray sat up, looked at his quivering arms, and felt anger pounding behind his eyes. Next time, he wouldn’t put on the collars.

Ryan flipped the record over. “‘Sweet Black Angel.’ You know that was written in honor of Angela Davis,” he said.

Besides going out to eat together and watching art films, Gray helped Mary Beth edit her film, “The Teacher?” It was about a young woman who questions her chosen occupation after a horrific field experience in which the future teacher felt like a totalitarian dictator. All of her liberal values disappeared upon being confronted with an unruly group of at-risk kids. She told them to shut-up and copy down word-for-word the opening chapter to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The film consisted of several long-takes: all focused on an empty classroom, accompanied by a meditative voiceover that speculates on how social interaction re-shapes identity.

Since the pumping-iron incident, Gray and Ryan had hardly spoken.

By contrast, Gray and Mary Beth were good friends, but just friends. He was afraid to state his feelings from fear that she didn’t feel the same.

One morning at the Pancake House, Mary Beth confessed that she added the “finger scene” to the “Hermit Finds Solace” because she had seen Gray flip a girl off who had smiled at him on the bus. It was last year, around Easter. Gray said he had been upset that day. His father sent him a birthday card in which he “disowned him.” In it his father wrote that the son had been so neglectful, so lacking in respect to the father, that the father was now denying ever having known the son. As he spoke to Mary Beth, he looked at his shoes.

“I was sitting at the back and I couldn’t understand how you could do something like that.”

“Yeah—I can’t either. I was an ass.”

And then he said he flipped the bird more than just that one time. Four, five, seventeen times. He had also given beer to dogs. He shrugged. She didn’t shrug back.

For Professor Mitchell’s final tutorial the students screened each other’s films in the basement of the library. Curiosity seekers, arty students from outside the class, were at the screening, and surprisingly so was Finn Flanagan. They sipped sodas and nibbled on crackers and pate throughout the showings.

Production on the nude scene went well. Mary Beth filmed the long shots of Gray swimming against the current, cupping hands into cutting waves, and all close-ups of him in their shot/reverse shot scene. She said that he moved like a subtle cat. Gray had filmed Mary Beth tastefully. The nudity in her scene was much more suggested by what wasn’t shown than by what was.

Although they hadn’t spoken in several days, Ryan was there at the screening. He sat in a chair broken off from Gray’s row.

The crowd had politely acknowledged each of the prior films, laughing at the appropriate moments, and waiting patiently as filmstrips stuttered in projectors or weak splices fell apart. One film even got caught in the gate and started to burn. But the response to Gray’s film, a gurgling brush fire of noise, was much more robust. Gray was pleased but slightly embarrassed.

Twenty minutes later, after the last film was screened, Professor Mitchell thanked all for their work. And then from behind his back pulled out a film canister with a gold star on the lid, and said on this special occasion he wanted to give out an award for the best film, perhaps the best he’d ever seen in ten years of teaching at Trent, and called Gray to the front of the library’s auditorium.

Initially, Gray hung back, unsure of what to do.

And then from the front of the room, he smiled, and wondered why the unusually cool fluorescent lights weren't warming his face. He sought to block the glare with a raised hand, but there really wasn't much glare. He nodded his head as if waving, and then handed the canister back to O. S. Thanks for the award, the gesture, but everyone deserves an award. This is about the creative crucible of art, about what happens when people create something out of a love for film, Gray said. Susan: your use of color and rhythmic editing was truly spectacular. Ivan: great use of claustrophobic close-ups to draw me into the drama. Wendy: admired your use of crosscutting, mixing up the timeline in a nonlinear fashion so that the love and the loss was all that more poignant. And Mary Beth. Wow. The voiceover, with no actors present, created an indelible mood of alienation and loss for the teacher. "All of the films were breathtaking." The award should be shared.

He paused, eyes wet, and his fellow students started a new brush fire of applause.

Professor Mitchell shook Gray's hand, and Dean Flanagan, now munching on a triangle-shaped cracker, smiled and said he had underestimated him.

"I'd like to try to make movies here," Gray said when asked by the Dean about his future.

Dean Flanagan tucked in one of his shirttails. "Maybe we can find some grant money. Come to my office tomorrow some time. We'll brainstorm." He smiled. "I don't leave messages on bloody answering machines."

"Okay. Sure."

"Congratulations." And with that Finn mingled with some of the other students before making an early departure. Mary Beth squeezed the side of Gray's hand. It wasn't something a friend would do, but something somebody more than a friend would venture. "Where's Ryan?" she said.

"I don't know. I thought you knew." He scanned the room, saw only clusters, but no one standing alone. Ryan would be alone.

“I think he was mad that you didn’t take the award,” she said.

“No. He was mad that—I—I should have mentioned him.” He looked at the ground. He had congratulated all of the filmmakers, but none of the actors or crews. Ryan wasn’t even a student in the class. He helped Gray with his films out of friendship. “I should have said something. Shit. A few lousy words.” Ryan always lifted weights when he was upset. And even though they hadn’t pumped iron since the regrettable to-spot-or-not-to-spot incident, maybe it was time to talk. “From here on in, I rag nobody,” Gray quietly said, quoting another film.

“You know I would have kept the award?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I’m not as nice a person as you.”

“Yes, you are.” And then he kissed her. Not on the forehead. The excitement of winning an award might have been the trigger, the emotional excuse, but he wanted to kiss her.

She smiled, and then suggested that he invite Ryan over to watch a movie at her apartment. She’ll make appetizers.

He nodded, his mind drifting to Ryan’s basement, the smell of chalk, sweat and steel, and the sounds of a distant beach that they would never walk upon, friends shifting under uneven sand and splashes of seagulls lapping at the waves.



Indian Summer, Reading Lorca

Matthew Wimberley

Not all the windfall apples
have been consumed and now
the horses are back in their stables
and the high grass drapes over the gold
green fruit left behind, What is out
in the dark to protect them? Their flesh
soft, fragile as cellophane and their
stems brittle as a candle wick burned
to the last millimeter. Insects chant
incantations, mosquitoes locked
at the abdomen and fireflies scattered
across the field illuminate the small spaces
of their own bodies. Summer never
put itself together, ragged and uneven.
When I was younger I would wait
for the first bloom of the blackberry
thickets and collect berries in a mason jar,
a tin pale, an old cigar box which
still carried a scent of Havana. And I would
go out at night and bury myself
in the same tall grass and let my skin
begin to itch as the earth cooled,
the moon overhead like a patch
of yellow gorse, rough
with imperfection.



Cactus Flower

Arah McManamna

He looks white in the sun, but he still has a shadow
The dark man, wild man, half man
So close they blend—All into one
And I can feel him through the wall.

He's the one with the cactus flower
Debonair, a charmer;
A bringer of promises
His mouth is dry with cotton sorrow.
Drowning in an inch of water.

And now, who is the villain?
As I stand robed in arid sunset
Gunslinger, sheriff, bandit
My salty coat needs brushing.

The heat pins my shirt to my skin like a silver star.
A badge of honor, 90 degrees in the shade.
I imagine my heart in my chest.
A bright red monster, pumping
An ever-healing wound.

The room was empty except for him.
And we climbed until our hands were raw.
And we touched each other with those raw hands.
Hot in the places that had been so cold.



Sequence of four, Henderson NV

Michael Kroesche

1.

Bird flight line,
the phosphor, gauze
moving straight up
and I and darling
on the porch, watching
filmy light fly
nightward, passing the
mountain horizon, the blotch
purples, oranges far below

hands hold hands
with closed lips
the only sound
a coyote shuffling through
the rocks of the empty
lots beyond the black iron fence,
snuffling up rabbit,
of the flight above

2.

Rowan, in his name in
he speaks all in awns
and ohwms, but he's
speaking to God, even when
Windy is in the kitchen,
he on the floor feigning tears
over the roast beef sandwich

2 o'clock, his
hungry, it's always his hungry,
dry crying, fists balling eyes.

And God hears him,
says ***** he looks up, the
quiet awns waning, scattering
almost like cotton in the carpet
and huge eyes looking, seeing
everything but *****
then lunch.

3.

Numbers fail, look up
the gel caps roll blue
and orange on the counter
discord as you squeeze
the beads. She
picks dog hairs out of
a sweater, leaves the laces
on the kids' shoes tied.

Walk through the construction
the home frames making H's,
lines of empty windows
the streetlights fade behind
and stars pop out among
the woolen night sky,
each step crunching gravel
visible, barely, is a black crag
mountain shapes
and the fox eyes, empty
white smoke-light
you from near
the scrub brush
locking the body in the moon.

4.

I make my animal yells
and God can hear me.
Lunar catechesis,
the lines of moonlight lap me.

My naked body, the moon,
God saying **** to me
and I look around in panic, searching
finding nothing, and find it.
'There is only the divine alphabet
of silence as the box
air-conditioning units shut down
in deafening waves.

My feral noise beats its
lizard-skin wings
against its cage, Oh!
'This land is my land this
land 'hysteria'. All creatures
eyeing me, the hollow-point
shells of their jar-eyes locked
on the moon, too.

The moon lights up every curve
of fat and muscle on me, little
shadows from the granite scatter
among my toes.
Grin a canine, make an "H"
from mouth, from bones, serrate
it; "h" becomes "saw"

Lordy there's a spirit in me!
Lordy there's a spirit in me!
Lordy there's a spirit in me!

And now, Dove, do your back scars,
nail marks, prickle now? Are you

awake and wondering where
that deep-burn is resonating?

The moon grows husky and yellow,
capsizes to the West
and my soul, my soul!

My spirit is occupied
the way the snow of footsteps
people a battlefield; some great
roll is curving me towards
the desert, pulls.

And this is also my land,
this red rock, the crunch-footfall,
I can read it, **** is
a clarity, the response;
glass fibers that fog
a quartz-body. Hear me morning.

I turn my creature inward, soothe
my heartbeat in its heat.
The moon dips and disappears
with a promise of new language,
My night lays down as
coyotes and foxes and jackrabbits
resume their silent running.
The moon-less dark is immense,
the electric light trickling in through the fence,
and all I hear, I need:
Footfall, footfall.



Sage | Gina Williams



Aus dem Tagebuch eines Kakteenjägers Milena Oda

15. März

An die Stelle ihres Bettes kommt endlich der *Acanthocalycium violaceum*. Ich war lange ratlos, wo ich den *Acanthocalycium* hinstelle, ich habe kein Gewächshaus wie die anderen Kakteenjäger. Aber jetzt habe ich wieder genug Raum für meine Gewächse. Sukkulente müssen auch ihr Domizil haben, wie Menschen.

Um die Sammlung zu erweitern, benötigte ich immer mehr Raum.

Ich konnte auch nicht den *Rauhocereus riosaniensis* abschaffen, nur weil er so lange (giftige) Stacheln hat. Sie beschwerte sich immer hysterisch, wenn sie an den langen Stacheln vorbei ging, aber gerade wegen der extrem langen Stacheln hatte ich mir den *Rauhocereus* besorgt.

Wie komme ich mit meiner Berühmtheit klar, wenn ich der größte Sammler im Land bin? Überflüssige Frage! Natürlich will ich der größte und berühmteste Kakteensammler werden ... Es gibt in meinem Dasein nur einen Wunsch, eine Liebe und eine Poesie. Mein Ruhm, meine Kakteen und Sukkulente. Und sie wollte meinen Ruhm verhindern!

Endlich bin ich allein mit allem, was ich mein nenne.

16. März

Heute habe ich ihren Toilettentisch, „den echten kaukasischen Nussbaum“, wie sie immer dumm und stolz sagte, und ihre Schränke weggeworfen. Anstelle ihres Toilettentisches habe ich endlich die neue Gattung platziert, die ich mir so lange gewünscht habe – den *Myrtillocactus geometrizans*, und anstelle ihrer Kleiderschränke den *Lobivia chrysantha*. Die Sukkulente verbreiten sich schnell in (jetzt nur noch) meiner Wohnung. Endlich habe ich genug Raum für meine Liebewesen. Ich bin ja ein passionierter Kakteensammler!

Oft sitze ich bewegungslos und betrachte die faszinierenden Erscheinungen der Natur. Ich betrachte das klare Grün der Blätter, das feste Dunkel der Kakteensäule, die Kraft ihrer Stacheln, das Milde und wundervoll Frische der Blüten. Die Blütenfülle macht mich glücklich und raubt mir beinahe den Verstand. Gesundes Wachstum, prächtige Körperfarben und ein reicher Blütenflor sind der Dank für meine Pflege.

Als Kakteensammler konnte ich nicht mit einer Frau zusammenleben, die alles Protzige, Überflüssige und Verschnörkelte liebt. Was liegt mir an einer Person, die nicht bereit ist, mir zumindest einige ihrer Wünsche zu opfern?

In unserem Wohnzimmer blähte sich ein geradezu beängstigend geschweiftes Mammut-Büffet, das Schlafzimmer wurde blockiert von einer raumfressenden Frisiertoilette samt den obligaten drei Spiegelscheiben und einem viertürigen Kleiderschrank. Einmal, als sie nach Hause kam, war alles Überflüssige weg, weil ich keinen Platz mehr für meine Lieblinge hatte. Ich baute überall Regalwände auf und stellte alle Sukkulente der Gattung *Cereus* hinein. Wie sie schrie und heulte! Sie hatte kein Verständnis für meine Leidenschaft.

18.03.

Das Schlafzimmer teile ich jetzt mit den Warzenkakteen *Mamillaria*. Sie sind hübsch und erfreuen mich täglich aufs Neue ... Ich bin Kakteenliebhaber, ihr Liebhaber. . Ich liebe sie mehr als alles andere und als jeden anderen.

19. März

Die Sonne scheint und der *Parodia maassii* steht in voller Blüte. Die rotleuchtenden Blütenblätter und die wilden, gebogenen, hornfarbenen Stacheln machen ihn zu einem Schmuckstück meiner Sammlung. Bei einem solchen Anblick ist es schwer, in die Wirklichkeit zurückzufinden. Erfreulich, dass ich nun endlich diese Naturgeschöpfe bewundern kann, glücklich allein und befreit von allem, was mich beschränkte!

Sie mochte keinen *Rauhocereus riosaniensis*, keinen *Lobivia chrysantha* und keinen *L. boliviensis* und *Morawetzia doelziana*. Dann mochte sie überhaupt keine Pflanzen, keine Sukkulente, keine Kakteen mehr in der Wohnung haben. Sie hasste sie. . sie drohte mir, sie wegzuworfen. Morgen, morgen, schrie sie hysterisch, jeden Tag.

Nach zehnjährigem Sammeln ist mir die Anomalie, die unsere Wohnung beherrschte, bewusst geworden. Meine anfänglich wirren Träume von Freiheit nahmen reale Gestalt an.

Diese meine stachelige Leidenschaft! Jeder neue Gedanke an die Freiheit offenbarte mir die mögliche Wirklichkeit: Du kannst etwas tun. . Entweder ich oder sie! Sollte ich ihretwegen auf meine Pflanzengesellschaft, meinen *jardin exotique* verzichten?

20. März.

Abends.

Ich wurde müde, erschöpft, und ich hörte auf, mich einschränken zu lassen. Sie kaufte immer neue Möbel, und ich? Immer neue Arten von Sukkulente. Wie waren unsere Interessen miteinander zu vereinbaren?

Für einen Mann ist an einer Frau nur wichtig, dass sie seine Wünsche und Leidenschaften zu wecken und zu unterstützen versteht. Das hat sie nicht geschafft.

22. März

Sie stinkt—im Gegensatz zu den verwelkenden Blüten einer Orchidee. Aus welchen Gegensätzen besteht nur die Natur!

Wenn sie gewusst hätte, dass ich anstelle ihres Bettes immer den *Acanthocalycium violaceum* vor mir sah und statt ihres Toilettentisches den *Myrtillocactus geometrizans*! Schließlich hat jeder das Recht, seine Überzeugungen und Wünsche vorzutragen, folglich hat auch jeder das Recht, ihre Verwirklichung zu betreiben.

Nachmittags, 15 Uhr

Meine Unzufriedenheit bewirkte mein zerstörerisches Handeln. Ich bin haltlos geworden. Ich lebe, und ich sehe das konkrete Bild vor mir. . . sie starb in meinen Händen. Nein! Das war nicht ich, der sie ganz schonungslos (erleichtert, brutal) auf den *Rauhocereus riosaniensis* stürzte! Ganz zufällig ist sie darauf gefallen. . . Um sie von ihrem Kummer zu erretten, musste es passieren, sage ich! Als sie schrie, fühlte ich eine Erleichterung, und zugleich dachte ich: Wer war es? Das Böse muss wiederum Böses gebären, lautet meine aufrichtige, vielleicht zu dumme Erklärung. Natürlich war ich es nicht, das weiß ich. Daraufhin fragen sie mich: Aber nur Sie waren dabei. . . ?

Abends, 19:45

Jeder erlebt irgendwann einen Moment, der ihn verrückt macht, und er läuft und läuft und will wissen, ob dieser Moment von allen erlebten Momenten der fröhlichste oder

der schrecklichste war. . . Welchen Moment erlebe ich jetzt? Ich weiß es nicht. . . Angenehme Gefühle durchmischen sich mit selbstquälerischen Gedanken.

Ich muss etwas tun. Ich muss in mir selbst etwas finden, das mein fehlendes Handeln ersetzt. In der Stille der Zurückgezogenheit scheint mir nichts furchtbarer zu sein als die Unruhe.

23.03.

Es kostet mich jetzt zu viel Mühe nachzudenken. Ich bin erschöpft. Ich widme mich nur einem Gedanken. Meine Vernunft hatte keine Macht über meinen verwirrten Geist. Der Augenblick, da ich mich entschloss, mich ganz dieser Leidenschaft hinzugeben. . . war nicht schon diese Entscheidung der letzte Schritt zu meinem Verfall? Ich flüstere mir die Lüge ein und finde Gefallen an dem, was in mir jetzt haust: Freiheit! Hätte ich meine Neigung, meine Liebe zu den Pflanzen beschränken sollen? Und meinen Ruhm? Nein. Nein. Ich überlasse mich meinen angenehmen Gefühlen.

Abend

Ich betrachte ihren leblosen Körper. Ich revidiere mein Selbstbild. Ich lebe im Bewusstsein dessen, dass ich ungerecht an ihr handelte. Aber das Gleiche tat sie mir an! Meine Rettung ist meine Flora, mein jardin exotique. . .

Ja, meine Phantasie trieb mich zu einem irrationalen Handeln. Ich möchte erklären, dass. . . Ich hatte angefangen, meinen geheimen Wünschen, meinen stillen Verpflichtungen nachzujagen. Ich wusste, dass ich nicht zurück kann.

In der Nacht: ein Lachen—ein Beweis für die Neurose, den noch drohenden Zusammenbruch. Das Lachen verbirgt den Ärger. . . und die Angst.

Zu meiner allerhöchsten Freude beruhigt mich der silbrig bestachelte Matucana
blancii mit seinen karminroten Blüten.

Ich verbringe eine angenehme Nacht mit meiner stacheligen Gesellschaft.

24.

Ich kann nicht ausgehen. Immer fragen die Leute, wie es meiner Frau geht. . . Immer
sage ich gut. Dreimal gut. Wie geht es ihr jetzt? Auch gut. . . Aber wenn ihre
Freundinnen kommen, die mich und meine Kakteen missachten, und sie besuchen
wollen, was sage ich dann? Sie ist tot. Meine Frau ist tot. Ein toter Mensch ist tot. Ein
toter Körper ist tot. Ein totes Tier ist tot. Das sage ich, damit sie wissen, wer tot ist.
Sie liegt genauso da wie die Blüten des Mamilaria. Sie ist auch genauso gestorben wie
der Cereus peruvianus, der in einer Ecke bei der Heizung versteckt war. Diesen Mord
schreibe ich natürlich ihr zu. . . sie hat ihn dort versteckt.

Nun liegt sie auch in der Ecke bei der Heizung, versteckt wie der Cereus
peruvianus.

25.03. 4:30

Es kommt mir jetzt immer öfter so vor, als wandle ich im Schlaf, als seien mein und
ihr Leben miteinander verwoben.

8:15

Ich weiß nicht, ob sie lebt oder ich. . . Wer von uns ist lebendig?, frage ich mich in der
Nacht und jeden Morgen beim Erwachen. Ich stinke noch nicht.

Ich muss meine Kräfte erhalten und stärken.

26. März

11 Tage. 11 Morgen, Nachmittage und Abende mit ihrer Leiche. . . hier inmitten meiner lebendigen stacheligen Gesellschaft. Welch ein Gegensatz! Ist es monströs oder absurd?

Ich weiß, es ist jetzt mein Schicksal, die Bürde der Manie zu tragen. Ich gestehe, der verbrecherische Plan ist mein Werk. Ich war der Täter. Ich habe sie erwürgt. Aber wenn sie kommen, sage ich: Sie ist zufällig auf die langen giftigen Stacheln gefallen.

Jeden Tag vergewissere ich mich meiner Kraft durch die Kakteen, die meine Wohnung ausfüllen.

28.

Eine schleichende Krankheit nagt an meinem Geist. Auch körperlich bin ich nicht mehr derselbe. Ich verwünsche jenen Tag, der mich zu meiner Tat rief. In den Nächten erwache ich aus unruhigen Träumen. Ängstlich suche ich nach einem Lichtschimmer, um diesem Irrgarten des Zweifels zu entkommen. Wer bin ich geworden durch den Tod meiner Frau. . . ?

Das Ende der Wahrheit und der Lüge. . . reductio ad absurdum.

29.03.

Heute habe ich mein Bett weggeworfen, um endlich Platz für den Rebutua marsoneri zu haben. Meine Liebewesen vermögen mich wieder zu heilen. . . Es genügt ja immer ein wenig Mut. . . Gestützt auf Beweisstücke, die nichts bezeugen als die Grundlosigkeit meines Erschreckens. Es war wahnwitzig, in den Schlund des eigenen Irrtums hineinzuspringen. Ich muss meine Sinne retten. Sie lacht mir ins Gesicht, ich sehe es. Erst jetzt! Ihr verachtendes Lachen! Ich höre es! So erspart sie mir die gerade erlebte schmerzliche Erfahrung.

22:30

Mein Bewusstsein hat sich gespalten. Siehe. . . der Totschlag! Sie hat ihn verdient! Ich gestehe, ich spüre jetzt Erleichterung durch ihren Tod. Ich bin befreit von allem, was sie von mir verlangte, wozu sie mich zwang. Ich habe Befriedigung erfahren und mich zugleich verändert. . . Es ist müßig zu sagen, dass ich die gesuchte Befriedigung nun wirklich empfinde. Mich zu verteidigen ist nicht mehr nötig, ihr höhnisches Lachen und ihr rücksichtsloses Handeln gegen meine Sukkulenten sind meine Rechtfertigung. Aus der Tiefe des Herzens sage ich: Sie hat es verdient!

Ich höre die Klingel läuten. Mehrmals am Tag und in der Nacht. Sie kommen! Sie kommen und besuchen meine Frau. Zeige ich ihnen ihre Leiche?

NEIN, ich zeige ihnen meine Sammlung, meinen Stolz und mein Ich. Ja, das will ich endlich zeigen. Vergesst nicht, es zählt, was man ist, und nicht, was man tut! Ich werde der größte Kakteensammler im Lande!, erkläre ich ihnen meine einzigartige Position.



From the Diary of a Cactus Hunter

Translated from the German by Daniel C. Kessel

March 15th

The *Acanthocalycium violaceum* stands at last where her bed used to be. For a long time, I was at a loss for where to put the *Acanthocalycium*; unlike other cactus hunters, I do not own a greenhouse. But now, once again, I have enough space for my plants; succulents, like humans, also need a home.

For my collection to grow, I needed more and more space.

I could not get rid of the *Rauhocereus riosaniensis* just because of its long (and poisonous) bristles. She'd get hysterical whenever she walked by those long bristles—though it was precisely because of them that I got the *Rauhocereus*.

How would I cope with my fame if I became the greatest hunter in the country? Superfluous question! Of course I want to be the greatest and most famous cactus hunter. . . There's only one wish in my being, one love and one poetry. My fame, my cactuses, my succulents. And she wanted to hinder my fame!

Finally I am alone with everything I call my own.

March 16th

Today I took her dressers and her vanity table ("genuine Caucasian walnut tree," as she liked to proclaim, proudly and stupidly) and threw them away. In place of her vanity table I was able to put the new species that I'd wanted for so long—the

Myrtillocactus geometrizans—and the *Lobivia chrysantha* in place of her dresser. Succulents spread quickly throughout the apartment, now exclusively my own. Finally there is space for the ones I love most. Yes, I am an affectionate cactus hunter!

I often sit motionless and contemplate the fascinating appearances of nature. I contemplate the pale green of the leaves, the firm dark of the cactus pillars, the power of their bristles, the tranquility and wonderful freshness of their bloom. This blooming makes me happy, nearly robs my senses; the healthy growth, the gorgeous color in the body, and their rich blossoms are signs of gratitude for my nurturing.

As a cactus hunter, I could not live with a woman who was in love with the flashy, the superfluous, the ornate. What was there for me in a person unprepared to sacrifice even the smallest part of her wishes to my own?

A downright frightening, mammoth pantry cupboard stretched through our living room, while a room-eating vanity table—complete with the obligatory three-mirrored panels and a four-door dresser—blocked our bedroom. Once, when she came back home, all her superfluous things had been removed, for I had run out of space for my little dears. I built up walls of bookshelves all around and planted every succulent of the *Cereus* species inside. How she cried and wailed! She did not appreciate my passion.

3/18

Now I share the bedroom with the *Warzenkakteen mamilaria*. They are a pretty species; I find something new to love about them every day. . . I am a cactus lover, their lover... I love them more than everything, anything else.

March 19th

The sun shines and the *Parodia maassii* stands in full bloom. The bright red blossoming leaves and the wild, crooked, horn-colored bristles make him one of my collection's crown jewels. It's hard to find your way back to reality from such a sight. Luckily, I can now admire these creatures of nature, liberated from everything that held me back and gleefully alone!

She didn't want the *Rauhocereus riosaniensis*, the *Lobivia chrysantha* or the *L. boliviensis* or the *Morawetzia doelziana*. In fact, she didn't want plants in the house at all—no succulents, no cactuses. She hated them. . . and she harassed me to get rid of them. Tomorrow, tomorrow, she'd scream hysterically, every single day.

After ten years of collecting, I had become conscious of the anomaly that dominated our household. My dreams of freedom, at first confusing, took on real shape.

This bristly passion of mine! Every new thought of freedom opened my eyes to the possibility: You can do something. . . It's me or her! Should I have renounced, for her sake, my society with plants, my *jardin exotique*?

March 20th

Evening.

I was tired, exhausted, and I stopped allowing myself to be tied down. She bought more and more new furniture, and me? More and more succulents. How were our interests supposed to intersect?

For a man's wife it is important only that she understand how to awaken, and maintain, his passion. And in this she was unsuccessful.

March 22nd

She begins to stink—unlike the withering blossoms of an orchid. Nature is entirely composed of such oppositions!

If only she had known that, where her bed used to be, I'd always envisioned the *Acanthocalycium violaceum*, the *Myrtillocactus geometrizans* in place of her vanity table! In the end, we all have the right to own our wishes and exaggerations. . . and so it follows that we have the right to bring about their realization.

Afternoon, 3 PM

My unhappiness brought with it destructive behavior. I became unstable. Now I am living and can see the concrete image before me. . . she died in my hands. No! It wasn't me that so relentlessly (brutal; relieved) threw her down upon the *Raubocereus riosaniensis*! She fell by complete accident. Let me tell you, it had to happen. . . to save her from her misery! I felt relief as she screamed, and immediately I thought: Who was it? Evil gives birth to evil, in turn; so goes my sincere, perhaps too simple explanation. Of course it wasn't me, I know that. Ask me then: But were you there alone?

Evening, 7:45

At some point, everyone experiences a moment which drives him crazy, and he runs and runs and wonders whether that moment, out of every other moment in his life, has been the happiest or the most terrifying. . . Which moment am I experiencing now? I do not know. . . feelings of comfort mix with self-torment.

I need to do something. I need to find in myself something to make up for my absentminded behavior. In the stillness of privacy, there seems to be nothing more frightening than unrest.

3/23

It takes too much energy to reflect now. I am exhausted. I am devoted to a single thought. My reason had lost power over my confused spirit. The moment I decided to abandon myself entirely to that passion. . . wasn't that first decision already the last step to my downfall? I whisper such lies to myself and find pleasure in what dwells inside me now: freedom! Was I to limit my affinity, my love for plants? And my fame? No, no. I leave myself to the feelings of comfort.

Evening

Contemplating her lifeless body. Revising my self-perception: I live aware, now, of the fact that I treated her unfairly. But she did it to me too! My salvation is my flora, my *jardin exotique*. . .

Yes, fantasy drove me to irrational behavior. I want to clarify that. . . I had begun to chase my secret wishes, my quiet obligations. And I knew that I could not go back.

In the night: laughter—evidence of my neurosis, of the still-looming breakdown. Laughter conceals anger. . . and fear.

To my utmost joy, the silver-bristled *Matucana blancii* soothes me with its carmine-red blossoms.

I spend a night comfortable with my bristly society.

24th

I can't go out. They ask how my wife is doing. . . Good, I say. Exceedingly good. And how is she now? Still good. . . but when her friends come, looking with contempt upon me and my cactuses, and they wish to visit her, what will I say then? She's dead. My wife is dead. A dead human is dead. A dead body is dead. A dead animal is dead. I will say this so they know who's dead. She lies there, just like the blossoms of the

Mamilaria. She's dead, just like the *Cereus peruvianus*, which had been hidden in the corner by the radiator. Of course, I attribute that death to her. . . she is the one who hid it there.

Now she lies in the corner by the radiator, hidden like the *Cereus peruvianus*.

3/25, 4:30

Every so often, it seems that I am morphing in my sleep—that my life and hers have been tangled up in one another. . .

8:15

I don't know if I live on, or if she does. . . Which of us is alive? I ask myself at night and in the morning when I awake. I do not yet stink.

I will save my powers and get strong.

March 26th

Eleven days. Eleven mornings, afternoons and evenings with her corpse. . . here amidst my living bristly society. What a coincidence. . . Is this monstrous or absurd?

I know that it's my destiny to carry the burden of mania. I confess that the criminal plan was my own doing. I was the culprit. I strangled her. But if they come, I will say: she fell on those long, poisonous bristles by accident.

Every day, I affirm my strength through the cactuses that fill up the apartment.

28th

A creeping sickness gnaws on my spirit. Physically, too, I am no longer the same. I curse each day that called me to my deed. At night, I awaken from uneasy dreams. In fear, I search for a shimmer of light to help me escape from this maze of doubt. Who have I become through the death of my wife. . . ?

The end of truth and lies. . . *reductio ad absurdum*.

3/29

Today I finally threw away my bed in order to have space for the *Rebutua marsoneri*. The ones I love most empower me. . . Of course a little courage is always enough. . . along with supporting evidence, revealing the senselessness of my fright. It was lunacy to jump down into the abyss of error. I must rescue my senses. She laughs in my face, I see it. There! Just now! Her contemptuous laughter! In this way she spares me from this recent painful experience.

10:30

My consciousness has disintegrated. Look—the deathblow! She deserved it! I must confess that her death brings me relief now. I am liberated from everything she asked of me, everything she required of me. I have experienced peace and changed immediately. . . It is necessary to say that I now feel the freedom I once sought. It is no longer necessary to defend myself against her derisive laughter; her ruthless behavior against my succulents is justification. From the depths of my heart, I say: she deserved it!

I hear the bells chime. Several times a day, and at night. They're coming! They're coming to visit my wife. Shall I show them her corpse?

NO, *I will show them my collection, my pride and my self. Yes, I will finally show it.* Don't forget—the thing that counts is what you are, not what you do! *I will become the greatest cactus hunter in the world! I will show everyone my unique position.*

Fall 2012

New York City



In Between Days by Andrew Porter. New York: Knopf, 2012. \$24.95

Reviewed by Jeremy Griffin.

I remember this lit theory course I took in grad school in which someone argued that John Cheever had established the private-and-more-than-likely-self-induced-problems-of-middle-class-white-Americans-living-in-the-burbs trope as its own sort of fiction subgenre. I'm not sure if this is true or not, but I think we can all agree that [this subgenre does indeed exist](#) and that a lot of writers, both excellent and terrible, have gotten a lot of economy out of it. That's not to say that this is altogether "bad" territory; it is, after all, the wheelhouse of folks like Phillip Roth and Tom Perrotta. But for a lot of emerging writers, this seems to be a kind of go-to motif, a comfort zone that, because most of their readership would likely live in these placid little worlds, isn't worth stepping out of.

Now, I am reticent to lump [Andrew Porter's](#) *In Between Days* into this category: I truly did enjoy reading it. Porter's prose is crisp and controlled, and his devotion to his characters, to giving them each their own unique presence, is admirable if not a little heavy-handed. But these aren't exactly mold-breaking characters. In a lot of ways, they are dangerously familiar. There's Elson, a forty-something architect who, having separated from his wife, is now involved in a dubious relationship with a much younger woman. His wife Cadence has also sought out new mates, though we get the sense that, like Elson, these are mostly time-killers, ways of filling some kind of void. Richard, their son, spends his days waiting tables and his nights at ad hoc poetry workshops led by a professor at Rice whose interest in his work is, well, questionable. And then there's Chloe, the youngest child, who finds herself embroiled in a potentially murderous fiasco while away at college.

The real story begins with Chloe. Accompanied by her boyfriend Raja—the supposed perpetrator of the crime in question—she returns to Houston, where Richard arranges for the two of them to be smuggled into Mexico. Upon catching wind of their daughter's return to town and her plans to flee, Elson and Cadence find themselves coming together in hopes of salvaging their family.

The real crux of the book, however, is the way that each character continuously gets in his/her own way, sabotaging his or her own plans, making unforgivably stupid choices. This is *In Between Days*' biggest problem, I think, the way it clobbers us over the head with the very notion of character fallibility. Because here's the thing: there is no reason for these people be so feckless other than the fact that there would be no story without it. That's what this particular subgenre does, it reassures us that all those outwardly happy, easily mockable suburbanite families are really just as fucked-up and miserable as the rest of us. Very few—if any—of the problems this family faces are brought about by anything other than their own naivety and/or selfishness. And after a while it gets hard to sympathize.

This is not to say that the obstacles a character faces can never be self-imposed. Hell, look at Hamlet, Willy Loman, or almost anything by Poe. [Self-destructive characters](#) can be a lot of fun—when there's a reason for them to be self-destructive, that is. In the case of *In Between Days*, however, we seem to be reusing a well-worn *Desperate Housewives*-ish template that assumes characters are only as interesting as the problems they cause for themselves. The book is a good read, maybe even great in some places (the creepy professor character is particularly fun, although this may be the disgruntled MFA grad in me talking), but there is very little to take away. And that is a real shame because it's clear from Porter's prose that he's capable of so much more.



The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World around Them by the Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell. New York: Broadway Books, 1999. \$14.99

Reviewed by Robert Kingett.

When I think of the word “choice” I think of the word “freedom.” Why? Because freedom is choice. As a blind student in college, I have the choice to either sit around and whine or make my life better with tiny, yet life-altering steps. Choosing to turn your life from bad to better is an inspiration in and of itself. I believe that’s what first drew me to *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

I positively adore people who make really good choices for themselves. After glimpsing the movie version of *The Freedom Writers Diary* while perusing my local Blockbuster, I knew I had to give the book a chance. After all, a new teacher decided to give some troubled kids a second chance so I decided to give them the courtesy of traveling through tragedy to triumph with them.

The Freedom Writers Diary is completely heartening and full of motivational real-life stories that capture the journey from failure to achievement. The book centers on minority teenagers from room 203 at a California high school as they recount their lives, hatred for school, teachers, and each other. Consisting of 150 entries collected from their journals, each from the point of view of a different student, the subtle shifts from self-doubt to genuine pride are woven between pages of tragic accounts of survival. These students deemed hopeless by the board of education because of the color of their skin and backgrounds, struggle to stay alive in an ongoing gang war and struggle to battle their own demons of drug addiction, abuse, rape, and many other hardships. Along the way, they have the help of an energetic new teacher named Erin Gruwell.

There’s no doubt that this book will pump you with inspiration. The entries, all very well written and with heart on every page, held me trapped in the attic of their darkest points, eager to read how they were going to get out. With the accuracy and raw hit of a bullet, the entries break down the thoughts of the students, the transformation from hopelessness to empowerment, and the wonderful victory that follows. The matter of fact language won’t have you flipping in the dictionary. This is a good thing.

One thing that makes it a challenge to really connect with the students is that the reader does not know their names. Each journal entry is titled only by a number. The reader is left to engage in the overall story of making it through high school, meeting new people—such as Miep Gies, the courageous Dutch woman who sheltered the Frank family—and the crash of the stereotypical view about these teenagers. While the personal connection to the writers doesn’t exist in this story, the collective enjoyment in watching these writers grow out of stereotypes about race is awesome. The collective victorious outcomes make the reader appreciate the class as a whole. While it would have been nice to connect just a bit more, the dashing storytelling and raw sentences make the journal entries worth reading.

The Freedom Writers definitely shows the power of choice, and what it can do in a hard, cruel world. It’s raw, rocking, and radical.



Recapture by Erica Olsen.

Torrey, UT: Torrey House Press, 2013. \$15.95.

Reviewed by Marla Rose Brady.

Erica Olsen's *Recapture* is an intrepid collection of short stories that will awaken anyone's heart to the desert's equanimity. The calm, zen-like descriptions of the landscape and the characters of each story, who are always searching for truth, paints a clear emotional representation of how the Southwest can sometimes feel.

The book includes mesmerizing tales about the curation of silence in empty mason jars, half-missed romances between men and women who briefly meet, and detailed accounts of what happens when one truly gets to the core of the Southwest's personality, experienced through small towns, hiking trails, road trips and blue skies. Olsen's detailed accounts include plant taxonomy, Native Americans, comets, and even aliens, all of which create an unparalleled, spiritual connection to the land.

While Olsen claims no hometown in the Southwest, these tales of identity and environment connect one to the timelessness ingrained deep within the land. In one story, a woman attempts to replace a Native American piece of pottery back to its original place in the desert, as though placing it back in time. As Olsen's characters trek across the Four Corners, a place the author knows well because it's her current stomping grounds, the stories unfold all over the landscapes of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. However, even if a reader has no knowledge of the specific towns, the lyrical calmness and thoughtful progression of each tale is a healing and enjoyable read.

Olsen's own work as an archivist emerges in her writing as she discusses and explores the precious balance between preservation and access, a theme that weaves throughout her short story collection. The theme pops up even as an abandoned housewife cheats on her husband while he is on a business trip, a young man who drives through the desert highway makes a conscious decision to find love, and a cowboy from a rural town decides to seduce the local bookmobile's librarian.

The book's lyrical brilliance and thought provoking sentences give a peek into the calm, healing presence of the desert—a necessary experience for those who have yet to visit or live here. Olsen graduated from the University of Montana's MFA program. Her works have also appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *High Desert Journal*, and other publications. The short story "Grand Canyon II," included in the collection, won the 2011 Barthelme Prize for Short Prose.



Her Expression | Suky Goodfellow

BIOS

Peggy Acott still remembers the little gray plastic Kodak camera she bought for eight dollars when she was young. That camera is long gone, but she still has the first SLR film camera she later replaced it with—a no-frills Pentax that was with her to her college art degree, to Ireland, throughout her son’s well-documented childhood. She loves the freedom and immediacy of digital photography, to be sure, but still thinks watching an image emerge on the paper in a darkroom tray is nothing short of magic.

Joe Baumann is a PhD candidate in English and Creative Writing at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette where he serves as the editor-in-chief of the *Southwestern Review* and nonfiction editor of *Rougarou: An Online Literary Journal*. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Hawai’i Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *SNReview*, and several others.

Marla Rose Brady is a librarian in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This is her first publication in a literary magazine. You can view her work at her blog: marlarosebrady.wordpress.com.

N. T. Brown lives in Orlando, FL, with his dog, Seven, and his cat, Mrs. Mia Wallace.

Cindy Carlson is a writing and literature teacher in Madison, WI, where she spends her spare time thinking, looking for things to entertain her, singing in her band Linda, and wishing she lived by something big. She’s also been published in *Shampoo poetry*, *Bloom*, *Antiphon*, and *Sentence Magazine* to name a few.

J. Adam Collins is a poet from the foothills of West Virginia. He relocated to Portland, OR, in 2010 to pursue a career in publishing and can be seen performing at events around the city like the Portland Poetry Slam and the Stone Soup reading series.

M. E. Gallucci writes somewhere northeast, preferably along waterways. Her poetry and prose have appeared in, or are forthcoming from, publications such as *Hanging Loose*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *The Monongahela Review*. She can be generally located at <http://megallucci.wordpress.com/>.

Suky Goodfellow is from a small hamlet in Cornwall, UK. She studied English at the University of St Andrews in Scotland and it was here that she started selling her work at a local coffee shop. Suky has worked as a freelance writer, actress and fishmonger, but prefers to paint. You can find more of her work at www.sukygoodfellow.com.

Jeremy Griffin is the author of a short fiction collection, *A Last Resort for Desperate People: Stories and a Novella*, from SFA Press. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in a variety of journals and has been nominated multiple times for a Pushcart Prize. He will never reveal the Wu-Tang secret.

Sarah Katharina Kayß *1985 in Koblenz (Germany), studied Comparative Religion and Modern History in Germany and Britain. Since autumn 2012 she's a PhD candidate at King's College London at the War Studies Department. Her artwork, essays and poetry have appeared in literary magazines, journals and anthologies in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Sarah edits the bilingual magazine [PostPoetry](#), A Literary Magazine. Sarah lives, studies and works in London.

Daniel C. Kessel lives in New York City, where he works as a Copywriter.

Amaris Ketcham is an honorary Kentucky Colonel and a regular contributor to the arts and literature blog, [Bark](#). Her work has appeared in *Sacred Fire*, *Rio Grande Review*, and the *Utne Reader*.

Jacob Michael King is the author of two novels and lots of short stories. His work has been rejected from such notable publications as *The New Yorker*, *The Dalkey Archive*, and, most recently, *The Threepenny Review*.

Robert Kingett is a blind writer with cerebral palsy who is very passionate about the work that he does. He's currently a hard working political writer for *Man of the Hour Magazine* and comedy reviewer and interviewer for *America's Comedy*. His work has been published in magazines such as *Teen Ink*, *Fred's Head*, *The Braille Monitor*, *Magnets and Ladders*, and *Ability Magazine*. He graduated from the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind where he started the first ever school newspaper for the blind. He's currently obtaining his English degree. Many of his reviews and editorials can be found online at places such as [americascomedy.com](#), *Fred's Head*, and various other blogs and online media where they are widely read. He happily resides in Chicago, Illinois where he's enjoying the city life. [See Robert's comedy reviews and interviews.](#)

Michael Kroesche was born in Salt Lake City, UT. He received his BA from the University of Southern California in 2008 and his MFA in Poetry from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2011. His works include a chapbook, *Summer Hymnals*, published by Elik Press in 2004, and his poems have appeared in *Interim*, *The Chiron Review*, *The Breakwater Review*, among others, and have also been incorporated into orchestral pieces. His short fiction has also appeared in *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*. He is recently returned to Salt Lake City after teaching for a year in Guangzhou, China.

Jane Liddle is a reader and writer living in Brooklyn. Her work has previously appeared in *Two Serious Ladies*. Her website is [www.walnutcabin.tumblr.com](#). Her alter-ego Daisy Lastings writes wine reviews at [www.winejourneying.tumblr.com](#).

Gregory Luce is the author of the chapbooks *Signs of Small Grace* (Pudding House Publications) and *Drinking Weather* (Finishing Line Press). His poems have appeared in numerous print and online journals, and in the anthologies *Living in Storms* (Eastern Washington University Press) and *Bigger Than They Appear* (Accents Publishing). He lives in Washington, DC, where he works as Production Specialist for the National Geographic Society. He blogs at <http://enchiladasblog.blogspot.com>.

Arah McManamna recently graduated from UCLA with a degree in English and is pursuing a career in grant writing. "Cactus Flower" is her second published work.

Milena Oda is a writer of fiction, poetry, short stories, essays and plays in German, Czech and English. Since 10 years she writes in German and lives as an author, translator of literature, video-artist, performer in Berlin and New York.

Ned Randle resides in Southern Illinois where he writes fiction and poetry. His short story “The Amazing Doctor Jones” appeared in the Summer 2012 issue of *Cigale Literary Magazine*. His short story “The Boston Tar Baby” will appear in the Spring 2013 issue of *Prism Review*. His poetry has appeared in a number of literary journals including *The Spoon River Quarterly*, *Podras Review*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Barnwood International Poetry Magazine*, *The New Poet* and *Four Ties Literary*. His chapbook, *Prairie Shoutings and Other Poems*, was published by The Spoon River Poetry Press, Bradley University. His collection, *Running at Night: Collected Poems, 1976-2012*, will be released in April 2013 and his novel, *Baxter’s Friends*, will be released in June 2013, both by [Coffeetown Press](#), Seattle.

Cinthia Ritchie writes and runs mountains in Alaska. Find her work at *New York Times Magazine*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Memoir*, *Sport Literate*, *42opus* and others. Her first book, *Dolls Behaving Badly*, was released February 5 from Hachette Book Group.

Mickey Darr Shea is a writer, graphic artist, photographer, and seminary student in Denver, CO. His writing has appeared in [The NewerYork](#) and his webcomic, [greater>than>snakes](#), is updated every Monday and Friday.

Shannon Shuster is an artist and writer out of Toronto, Canada. A riot grrrl at heart, she continually challenges societal norms and refuses to conform. Shannon loves art in all forms and appreciates humanity’s desire to create.

Grant Tracey teaches film and creative writing at the University of Northern Iowa. He’s an avid hockey fan and edits *North American Review*. Go, Leafs, Go!

Patrick Vincent Welsh grew up in Philadelphia, and now resides in Chicago. He graduated from Abraham Lincoln High, a fine and violent institution, whose famous alumni includes Sylvester Stallone. He is the author of *Hard Times Galore*, a collection of one hundred stories concerning the modern American condition. Stories have appeared in or are forthcoming from *Harpur Palate*, *Euphony*, *Juked*, *Bull*, *apt*, *Connotation*, and several other journals. One of the stories has been nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize.

Gina Williams lives and creates in the Pacific Northwest. She enjoys poetry, fiction and photography. Her work has been featured in the *Houston Literary Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Marco Polo*, *Great Weather For Media*, *40-Ounce-Bachelors*, *Fried Chicken & Coffee*, the Seattle Erotic Arts Festival, *Feather Lit*, and the upcoming *Mount Hope Literary Magazine* spring 2013 edition. Writing and art, she has found, makes it possible for her to breathe. Learn more about her at <http://tastethesky.zenfolio.com/blog/>.

Matthew Wimberley grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. He served as an assistant poetry editor at the *Raleigh Review* and currently is studying poetry in New York University's MFA program. He was a finalist for the 2012 *Narrative 30 Below* Contest and his writing has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Rattle*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Birdfeast*, *Town Creek Poetry*, *Connotation Press*, where his poems were introduced by Dorianne Laux, and various other journals. He has two dogs and spent March and April of 2012 driving across the country and back. Matthew resides in Brooklyn.

Diana Woodcock's first full-length collection, *Swaying on the Elephant's Shoulders*—nominated for a Kate Tufts Discovery Award—won the 2010 Vernice Quebodeaux International Poetry Prize for Women and was published by Little Red Tree Publishing in 2011. Her chapbooks are *In the Shade of the Sidra Tree* (Finishing Line Press), *Mandala* (Foothills Publishing), and *Travels of a Gwai Lo*—the title poem of which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She has been teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar since 2004. Prior to that, she lived and worked in Tibet, Macau and Thailand.

Pushcart Prize and Kentucky Poet Laureate nominee, **Sheri L. Wright** is the author of six books of poetry, including the most recent, *The Feast of Erasure*. Wright's visual work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Blood Orange Review*, *The Single Hound*, *THIS Literary Magazine*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Blood Lotus Journal* and *Subliminal Interiors*. In 2012, Ms. Wright was a contributor to the Sister Cities Project Lvlds: Creatively Linking Leeds and Louisville. Her photography has been shown in the Ohio Valley region. More examples of her work can be seen at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/sherilwright/> and www.scribblingsandsuch.com.

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