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Fiction Fix 16

April Gray Wilder

Jayshiro Tashiro

Christopher Stephen

Cathleen Calbert

Amanda Paulger

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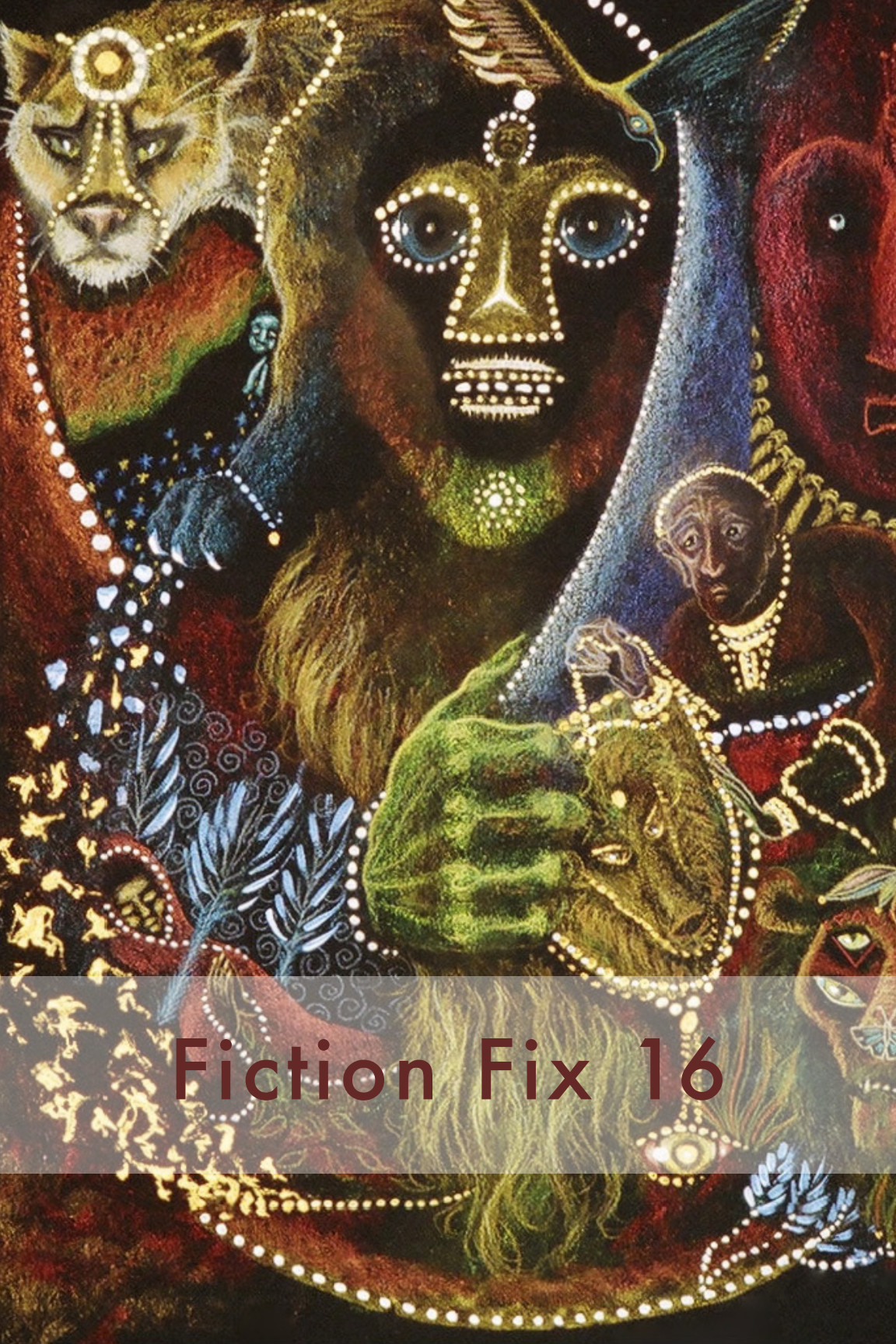
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Authors

April Gray Wilder, Jayshiro Tashiro, Christopher Stephen, Cathleen Calbert, Amanda Paulger, Van G. Garrett, Jane Zich, Di Jayawickrema, Josh Lamstein, Liz Dolan, Denise Mostacci Sklar, Holly Day, Erica W. Jamieson, Jack King, Meeah Williams, Glenn Erick Miller, and Edward Hagelstein



Fiction Fix 16



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Typesetting and design by April Gray Wilder

Editorial Advisor	Mark Ari
Editor-in-Chief	April Gray Wilder
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Associate Editor	Blair Romain
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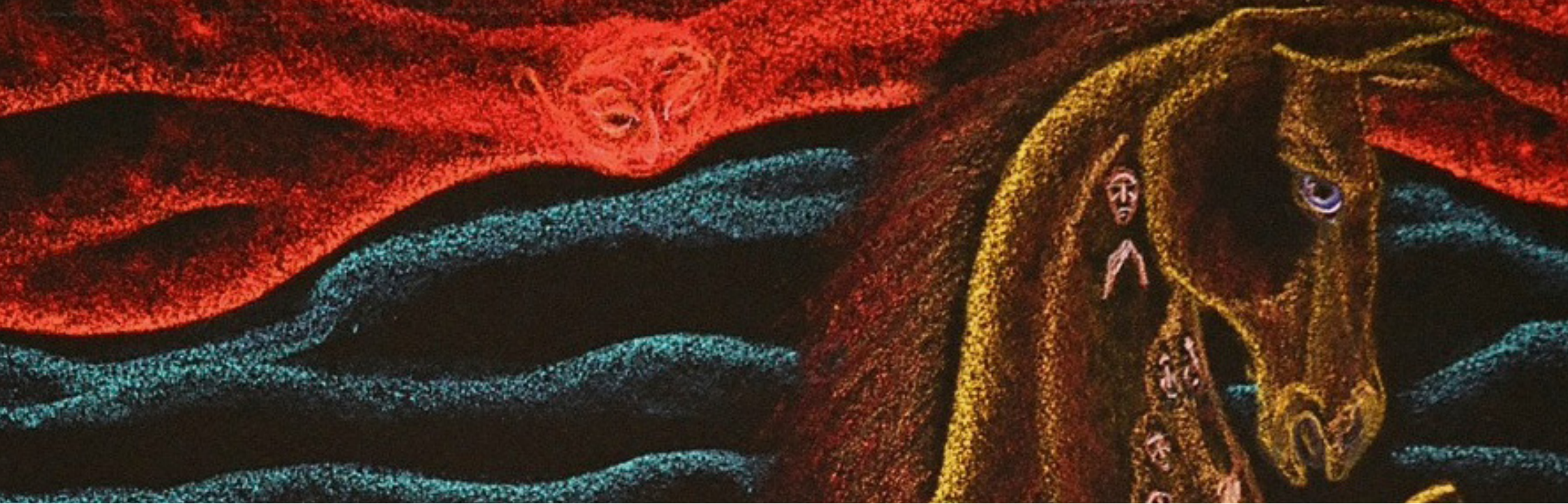
editor@fictionfix.net

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Dear Readers,

While the human race has not traveled past our moon (10 to the negative eight light years away) and Voyager 1 has just broken out of our solar system into interstellar space (some .002 ly's from home), early radio transmissions extend out from earth, bubble-like, reaching some 200 light years in every direction¹. How appropriate that the first seeds we plant back in the belly of

deep space are of the *story* kind. Herewithin are transmissions of that type. Stories—which bring us joy and heartache, that have soul, and remind us what it is to be human—smudged into this strange ether, for who knows what sensitive instruments to find now and ever-more, planted in the world as well as within us. May they open blooms inside of you, too.

¹ “This is how far human radio broadcasts have reached into the galaxy,” by Emily Lakdawalla.

April



Jayshiro Tashiro

Birds in the City

A very old and crooked man sings in Hakka dialect as he carries a large cage full of finches up the steps from Prince Edward Station. The Saturday Hong Kong subway crowd is already thinning, so he can hold the bamboo cage along his left side, clinging to the central handrail with a thin right arm. Limping up the exit stairway, left foot up, grimacing as he drags up a dead-weight right leg. The birdcage held so delicately, the finches harmonize to his song within the rhythm of the cage swaying slightly to and fro. Hakka not so common in Hong Kong, not in Mong Kok, but his whistling interwoven with lyrics is soothing to me, to the birds.

Stroke, maybe, or broken hip from a fall, the Bird Man balances, teetering for a moment with most of his weight on the left foot, his flock worrying when the cage lurches. I pause, watching, transfixed and blocking people from rushing down to the subway platforms for a late start on their Saturday shopping. Then he is even with me, and he pauses to look, wondering why I have stopped in a stairway to a subway station, then nods, smiling, whistling that soft secret language from lips almost slack in a sunken mouth. He moves on, the birds knowing a fool when they see one, sing past me, release me to head on down into Prince Edward Station.

I make my way through a morning ritual of stopping at the 7-Eleven to buy a piece of fluffy, sweet pound cake for breakfast. But the memory of the Hakka man's lilting tune turns me around, pulling me from the trains. I want to find the Bird Man, see where he is taking the finches, so I run back to the B1 exit, up the stairs, taking a few bites of cake and finally tossing the rest in the garbage can as I hit the street. I look west then east along Prince Edward Road, see a man carrying a bird cage. But it is not the same cage, not my Bird Man. Could the birds simply have gotten so excited they flew to the top of the cage and carried my man away, one hop, one burst of being tired of being caged? So I take a chance and head toward the man I can see with a bird cage, but looking beyond him, and not far along, I see yet another man and another cage, and then another. I follow the birdcages now, and there are a surprising number, something I never noticed on Saturday

mornings roaming through Mong Kok.

The flower market on Yuen Po Street makes it difficult to move quickly with a birdcage: clusters of people, obstacles jutting out from the many stalls of tulips, orchids, pitcher plants, slap dashes of color bobbing and moving this way and that as vendors and customers pick up, put down, move about flowers and plants and vases of so many kinds. I just close off the possibilities and focus on things resembling birdcages. Soon, I find and follow a tall man, not crooked, but also old. His knuckles swollen and fingers bent every which way. He has a good grip on the birdcage and walks briskly, going somewhere, although his birds are absolutely still. And, suddenly, the crowd thins, and I am following the gnarled hands of a bird man who is following other bird men, and among them I see my crooked Bird Man at last, still bent over, still left leg first in a big step and right leg not dragging but only barely able to keep up. Now all the caged birds are starting to sing, anticipating something, coming home to somewhere, or maybe just frantic that they are getting farther and farther from nest and young and other flock members.

I slow down to the rhythm of the crooked man walking, he and his birds all a-singing Hakka, Hakka in light whistling, all going somewhere in a hurry, as hurry goes for an old and crippled man carrying a bird cage as big as his torso. Then we are surrounded by stacked cages and birds aplenty, large birds, small ones—none of which I can name except as blackbirds, bluebirds, white-masked agile birds, big birds, small birds. I see some people bargaining for birds, carefully watching each one's behavior, offering a maggot or meal worm to see what a bird will do with food. I walk past the many stalls and around the myriad cages, birds mostly fidgeting, eyeing me cautiously as I move past them. Some tilt their heads this way and that way and keep one eye on me, wings tensed, ready to fly until they remember the cages are a bit small for bursting takeoffs. In an instant, I have lost the crooked Bird Man once again, so I just give in and stroll amongst the birds, the boxes of squirming maggots, caterpillars, beetles, bird paraphernalia with uses I would rather not imagine.

A stream of people meanders around islands of stacked cages, hundreds and hundreds of birds, some caged individually, many in pairs, small flocks, then the big bunches of tiny finch-like hip-hop singing birds madly dashing around in larger cages. Jostling among annoyed looks, I step out of the flow into the scant shade of a tree, but at least off to the side where I can stand quietly and look at all these caged creatures hopping about their very small rooms that seem so tantalizingly open to the outside but binding them so close that many birds cannot stretch their wings, shake a tail feather. The crooked Bird Man comes up to me smiling, recognizing me.

"Do you want to buy a bird?" His English is English-English, maybe at one time a government worker under the British, and I obviously am not Chinese, just a half-Jap-American boy growing old, working his way through Hong Kong. My clothes must con-

vince him that English is a good bet.

Not quite sure what to say, I want to buy all the birds and set them free. “Are the birds’ wings clipped?”

He looks at me, tilting his head, starting to say something, but not sure what I mean.

“To keep them from flying, do you have to clip the birds’ wings?”

He laughs, waves his hands, brushes off what must seem like a silly question. “Oh no, no, the birds can fly.”

I look at his finches and, nearby, see two black birds hunkering down in a tight cage. They are all really so beautiful, the finches grey, dappled in black with yellow wings streaked in red, bright orange beaks, slashes of shifting colors as they dash, hop, skip, jump around their cage. The black birds quietly shrug white-tinged wings, tiny delicate white feathers wrinkling around their eyes, a small Mardi Gras mask on each bird’s face. I look at the man, his face so hopeful, maybe. I wonder why he sells birds because he loves to be around them, but then why sell them? Maybe because he needs to eat. I realize I have spent time with him and his birds, and there are now some expectations. Maybe just a “no” would be fine, but is there something more being asked by the shifting wrinkles of my crooked man’s darkly tanned face?

“My apartment is too small, I think,” I say as I reach into my pocket, fumbling for the change from the pound cake but then pull out the small wad of bills I carry on Saturdays. I give the Bird Man a 500 Hong Kong note. “Here, please. These are beautiful birds, and I wish I could buy them, but take this and buy some food for them, a gift from me, for them.”

He looks very surprised and, for a moment, confused. I realize that bill probably would buy several, maybe all the finches with a little haggling. Maybe both the black Mardi Gras birds. The Bird Man smiles, bows, bows again, and I bow and turn, walking quickly away from all these cages, struggling through the close-packed crowds of Mong Kok, my claustrophobia eased only by the constant motion and changing skyline.

Monday, I tell my Mandarin teacher about my inadvertent weekend walk along the wild side of Yuen Po Street. We are speaking in Putonghua; at least she is. I can see the faintest smiles coming and going across her face as she tries not to burst out laughing and fall off her chair when I speak in what must sound like the agonizingly odd rhythms of a second grader’s hesitant, poorly-intoned words. But she suddenly becomes very animated as I describe how I spent time Saturday morning walking among cages of birds, how I wanted to open each cage, watch bird after bird after bird fly away.

She switches to English. “The Yuen Po Bird Market, how I love that place. All of the beautiful birds and their keepers singing to them, feeding them, wishing them well in a new home when someone buys one.”

Sally is my primary teacher. She is very focused and attentive this afternoon. Almost as tall as I am, unusual among Hong Kong women, long black hair pulled back in a scrunchy, bright eyes teasing out a smile that fills up the space between us. We have worked together for two months, Sally valiantly helping me study basic language skills for Mainland China while I become increasingly dedicated to learning at least enough to get more smiles than pursed-lip frowns. Today, I notice she has taken off her glasses as we talk. She leans in and out of our conversation, and I can see she has delicate touches of makeup, her blouse open two buttons at the neck.

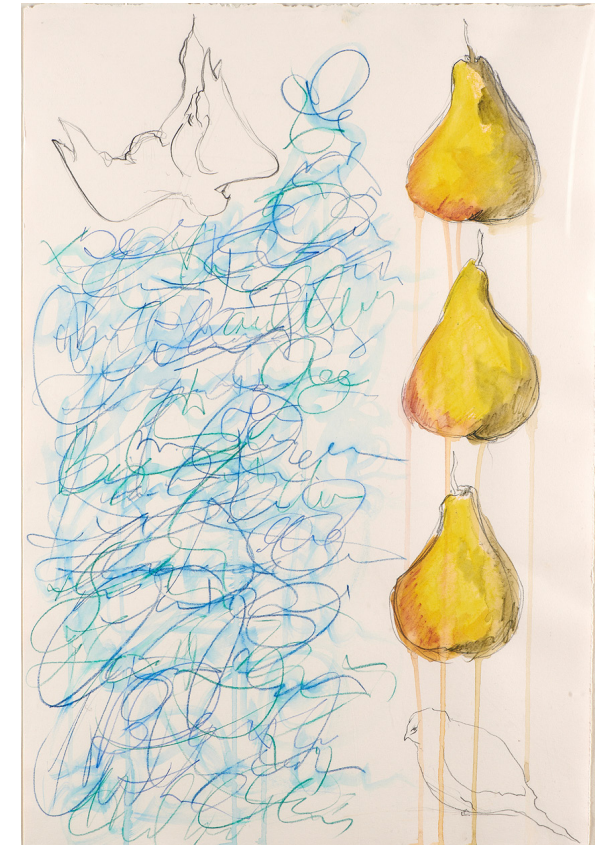
Her hand comes to rest lightly on my arm, pulls me into a tale about the Bird Market and how five years ago her father asked her to come to the Bird Market with him each weekend. “This went on for several months,” she says. “He would speak to the keepers every Saturday morning, switching to their dialect. He is a linguist,” she tells me. “He studies variations in language.”

I jump in: “There was a man with a Hakka accent there, at least I think Hakka.” I only know the hint of Hakka because she has sounded me through the differences in tones between Mandarin, Cantonese, and a Hakka dialect.

“Oh yes, there would be Hakka people at the Bird Market, even though they are a small percentage of the Hong Kong population. Still, quite a few live in Tai Po, where you used to live. Right?”

“Yes, yes, I can pick out Hakka dialect whenever I go to the Tai Po Center Market.” I smile; she smiles. “But, please, go on with your story about the Bird Market.”

Christopher Stephen, *Three Pears*



Birds in the City

She tells me about walking among the birdcages and singing with the birds, how the keepers loved her father, honored by his appreciation for each of their dialects. They would let Sally hold the birds, give her creepy crawly things to feed the birds, and many told the birds to whisper secrets into her ear.

Her hand slides down my arm to my wrist, brushes my fingers ever so lightly, and then floats in the air as she talks on about one bird man who was a fortune teller. A very old man, he had a large metal cage of bluebirds but also kept an empty, varnished bamboo cage with small paper scrolls all over the bottom. He chatted with her father for a long time while Sally fed mealworms to the bluebirds. But the fortune teller excused him-

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self from her father, came over, asked her to write down a question on a piece of paper. Then, he took Sally's paper, reached into the bluebird cage, brushed past two large birds, snatched out a raucous singer. He whispered to the bird and brushed its head with the paper on which Sally had written her question. He eased the bird into the other cage, the one with scrolls, sang to the bird. Sally traced with her hands how the bluebird hopped here, there, jabbering back at the fortune teller's singing, nudging scrolls with its beak. Then picking up a scroll, the bird jump-flew up to the perch in the cage. The old man reached in and gently scooped out the messenger. He took the scroll and gave the bird a maggot in exchange, replaced the messenger in the cage with the other bluebirds. The fortune teller turned, bowed, and with both hands presented the tiny, tiny scroll to Sally. "Here is the answer to your question," he said.

"Did the scroll have the answer to your question?"

"Well, I had asked if I would meet someone who loved the birds like I did. The scroll said, 'Yes, be patient. And for a long time, there was never anyone like that who came into my life. I thought the bird had been wrong, but I guess I was just not sufficiently patient.'"

She smiles, eases long strands of loose hair over her ears as she turns her head ever so slightly, puts on her glasses, looking down, settling both hands on our Mandarin textbook. I whisper her Chinese name in my mind.

Cathleen Calbert

Man Loves Woman Loves Dog

Eve tipped back a glass to let an ice cube slip between her lips. Then she got down on her knees before me and slid the square of ice to one side of her mouth in order to mumble, “Check this out.” The ice emerged between her lips, which I’d not yet kissed. Petey, also known as “the Peanut,” leaped up, pressed his flat face to hers, his flat black lips to hers, and took the ice from her mouth. After a triumphant glance at me, the Shih Tzu ran off, crunching his prize, and Eve smiled as if it were my turn to say something.

“Cute,” I tried, shaking my head as if I couldn’t get over the cuteness.

“He loves ice,” she told me.

“Well, sure,” I said.

We’d met a few hours earlier at a party thrown by mutual friends. Lee and Marty had invited more people than could fit into their pink-walled house; that and a cauldron of sangria on their patio helped to turn the gathering into one of those sweaty get-togethers that ends with arguments or sex. Eve and I hadn’t argued yet, so I was hoping for the sex.

Now her face rose to meet mine. She wanted to . . . press those dog-flavored lips against my own. There are decisions one has to make in life. Are you going to be the kind of man who tells a woman she should brush her teeth before you’ll kiss her or the kind who gets laid? I held my breath and went where the Peanut had gone before me.

And so I was not only laid but soon in love. Here’s what I loved about Eve: her lips, her laugh, her wit, her ass, her easiness, her earlobes, her smell, her skin, her sense, her friends, her kindness, her clitoris, and her love of me. Here’s what I didn’t love: the Peanut.

There are other major dividing lines: between the dead and the living, the rich and the poor, people who are crazy about their pets and those who are in their right mind. My new love, sadly, stood on the wrong side of that last line. Personally, I’d never thought we were meant to share our domestic space with other species. Why live with animals when we could just keep them in the barn until we eat them?

And Eve did more than just cohabit with that dog of hers. She carried, cuddled, and nuzzled Petey as if he were her baby. She cut roast beef into Shih Tzu-sized bits, which she mixed into his kibbles. She let him “do his business” on newspaper laid on the kitchen floor, which I stepped around in order to make coffee in the morning.

“Petey can’t just hold it until you take him out?” I asked.

“You don’t have to wait, do you?” replied Eve.

“I’m not a dog,” I said after she’d closed herself in the bathroom.

Eve explained that Petey “got lonely” if she “abandoned” him for too long. I discovered that “lonely” meant “bent on destruction.” We returned to a pile of feathers from a gutted pillow, to a chewed purse strap, and to heels neatly split from their soles as if the Peanut wanted to make sure that his owner never left again.

“Sweetie-Honey,” Eve cooed when she saw the aftermath of another act of carnage. “Were you scared Mommy would leave you forever? Don’t you know Mommy loves you more than anything? Come on, poor baby, let’s get ready for bed.”

The poor baby was Petey, not me. And bed was . . . her bed. Yes, Petey did not sleep in the kitchen. Not even on the soft carpet of the bedroom. When I brought over a seventy-five-dollar dog bed with a red ribbon draped over it, Eve thanked me but said

Now her face rose to meet mine. She wanted to . . . press those dog-flavored lips against my own. There are decisions one has to make in life. Are you going to be the kind of man who tells a woman she should brush her teeth before you’ll kiss her or the kind who gets laid? I held my breath and went where the Peanut had gone before me.

that the Peanut “didn’t really need” it. “Perhaps the shelter?” she suggested in a manner reminiscent of Marie Antoinette. *Let the mongrels sleep on satin.* Petey continued to mount the pet-steps she had placed next to her bed and to curl up on the pillow above Eve’s head, as if she wore an elaborate wig at night that let out soft growls of sleep.

The first night we spent together, Eve pulled up her creamy top, freeing breasts the size of oranges, and unzipped my pants. Intent on the golden body laid out before me, I hadn’t given old Petey another thought. Eve arched her back and I slid in. *Slow, careful, my god, wait, hold it, hold it,* I told myself as she quivered beneath me. Her entire body shook. *My God, she’s coming like a jackhammer,* I thought, *I love this girl.* Then I reared up: the Peanut was at my left ankle, worrying it as though it were a beef-bone.

“Petey, no,” Eve said. “No no no no no oh . . .”

I held still, letting the Shih Tzu sink his needle-teeth into my skin. Eve was coming beneath me, coming with her dog’s name on her lips, coming as she told him no.

Eve laughed afterwards, and I made a sound like laughing, too.

“He gets a little jealous,” Eve said, her head tucked happily under my chin.

“Cute,” I tried again, though the word seemed to fit even less well that time. “Do you have any Neosporin?”

She laughed at that, too, as though I were joking, but I was dead serious, if a bit dazed. I’d never asked for an antibiotic after sex before.

You might think I should have high-tailed it home and thrown away this woman’s phone number, but Eve was beautiful in that healthy, wealthy, and wise way of successful California girls: gold skin, sparkling eyes, wide smile. It undid me. Plus, she thought I was the greatest thing since sliced bread.

To tell you the truth, for once, I was.

I don’t think I’d been better than average, in and out of bed, with earlier girlfriends. *Eager but hurried*, my latest complained. But the Peanut’s bloodlust for my flesh turned me into a knockout lover. I froze whenever the dog grabbed hold of my ankle, which allowed Eve to thrust against me until she *no-no-noed* into what sounded like a monumental orgasm. His nips prevented my own climax, another first for me, but I took pride in my new prowess: I had pleased Eve. She’d have me back again, and I’d get mine in the end.

But I didn’t get mine.

For a month, I’d been giving a woman orgasms in a way I apparently never had before, yet I seemed to have turned into a woman myself: my partner came on a dime every time, while I was left both discontented and pleased. I tried suggesting that I was *still up for something*, but Eve curled her head against my shoulder, and within seconds her exhales were the breath of sleep, the breath of every man, except me, after sex.

“I’m so in love with you,” I murmured into her dark gold hair, though I was thinking, *I could shoot my wad to the moon right now, straight to the moon.*

It became clear to me that I would have to kill the Peanut. Or have him killed. Or arrange it so “death resulted.” I’m not the kind of man who could strangle a dog, not even a five-pound froo-froo. But I could do something: set up an electric jolt? a dropped anvil? I began eyeing the glass doors that led to Eve’s bamboo-lined backyard. She never wanted Petey to go there “unattended” because the rickety fence behind the bamboo rose high enough from the ground that a tiny dog with a mind to could slip underneath and beat it out of town. Of course, I couldn’t imagine the Peanut doing such a thing. He didn’t seem like the roaming sort of canine, his fluffy butt always sealed against Eve’s hip or sunken into her sun-kissed arms. But I thought, maybe, why not.

I left the sliding glass door open an inch when Eve showered, then two, three, four inches until I finally slid the whole thing back all the way as soon as she closed herself behind the plastic curtain to shower and began to sing. “Our house is a very, very fine

house,” she twittered. “With two cats in the yard . . .” Two cats in the yard I could deal with. As long as that dog wasn’t in the house.

“Go ahead, Petey,” I whispered, gesturing towards the three feet of open air.

In response, he flattened himself on a cushion, his insignificant feet hidden beneath locks of hair.

“Come on, Petey,” I chirruped. In an effort to match Eve’s voice, I squeaked at the dog in a falsetto that sounded, even to me, like a parody of his mistress. “Time to run away now, Petey. Time to find a new home.”

Because who knew what would happen?

Yes, he could get hit. The driver might not even know what he’d done. He could think he’d squished a furry squirrel. Boom. End of the Peanut. Or Petey could toddle along in that Cousin-It walk of his until he found a nice old lady, someone who’d dote on him all day, someone without a boyfriend she might try to please.

Then I threw a small chunk of roast beef into the backyard. Petey leapt from the couch and was through the breach, onto the grass, where he gobbled the meat and looked back at me before diving under the fence as if we were in cahoots or this had been his breakout plan all along. My armpits and forehead dampened, my throat closed, my heart beat like a madman’s. My first thought was to grab the wet songbird, fling her onto the bed, and howl loudly as I came before she could wonder where her own orgasm and little dog had gone. But I had second thoughts, too.

“Petey, no, no, no,” I croaked. The words jumped of their own accord from my lips, propelling me into action. I ran into the backyard, opened the gate, then circled to the front of the house, where I craned my neck back and forth, back and forth. A truck roared past. Petey was dead, crushed, just as I’d wished. No, nothing. An SUV. A BMW. Nothing, nothing. Then Petey tore out from underneath the hibiscus, intent on racing across the street, where a Rottweiler stood at the ready. On the other side: Rottweiler. From the left: minivan. I sprang onto the asphalt, snatched the Shih Tzu, who yipped in frustration, and pulled myself back before the soccer mom could mow me down.

“Petey, Petey, Petey,” I said. “What a bad dog,” I added though that didn’t especially make sense. I marched up the driveway, trying to think as quickly as my thudding heart would allow. It seemed to me that I could still win in this scenario. Petey Boy ran out! Eve must have left the door open . . . I hesitated to implicate her in this way, but guilt needed to be laid somewhere—better on her slender back than mine. What had I done? Why, I’d saved the little guy. Risked my own life to do so. The minivan transformed into a Hummer, the feet into inches. What wouldn’t a dog-loving woman do for a man who’d braved that? Hand job at the movies? Blow job in the backseat? Dog-free sex in the afternoon, with the saved pooch safely stowed away behind a newly installed baby-gate in the kitchen?

I opened the front door. No water running.

“Eve,” I called out.

“Coming,” she said from the bedroom.

I closed the sliding glass door.

Eve came up to us, smiling, bare-lipped. She leaned in and kissed the Peanut on the mouth. Afterwards, she kissed me.

“Petey ran out,” I blurted, then shook my head: concerned, helpful, manly. “Across the street. Another dog. Rottweiler. Maybe she’s in heat. Maybe you . . .” I scanned the room.

“Ha ha,” Eve responded. “Very funny.” She adjusted the towel over her breasts. “Do you want to have breakfast here? So we don’t need to leave the Peanut?”

I didn’t know if I should insist on my story, which had the merit of including some truth, or if doing so would make Eve wonder over the narrative, if she would suspect my heroism. Silently, I grated cheddar and chopped chives as I pondered my next move. Rat poison in Petey’s food sounded right but also somehow wrong. Theoretically, I could break up with Eve; in actuality, I couldn’t, enraptured as I was.

Unsure what else to do, I went on sending chills of pleasure up and down my girlfriend’s golden skin and gathering a collection of sores around both of my ankles as if I were undergoing a primitive initiation ritual. One night I kept my socks on, but Eve said they tickled, so I offered up my flesh again. Another time, I unrolled my socks to reveal the ankle braces I’d picked up at Rite-Aid.

“Sports injury?” Eve asked.

“Kind of,” I told her. “Petey gets a little . . . wound up sometimes.”

“Ah, come on. He’s too tiny to hurt a big guy like you,” Eve said as she stripped to her thong: lilac with a pink rose. What could I do? I removed my protective gear.

I was a great boyfriend. I was the best boyfriend in the world. That’s what Eve told me, and by God, she got that right. In bed, I bit my lip to avoid whimpering. I walked the Peanut and didn’t let go of the leash even though every man I passed commented on Petey’s ridiculous littleness. “Quite a killer you’ve got there,” said one. “Attack dog?” asked another. I offered to pick up more kibble at Safeway, but Eve informed me that Petey only ate a particular kind of dog food found at pet stores, not at a supermarket, where it seemed only lesser forms of life could find sustenance. I told her I would go where she wished.

Outside The Precious Pooch, an over-baked woman twenty years my senior sat in a deckchair with a lidless box in her lap. I nodded, then opened the door to the shop.

“Don’t buy one inside,” the woman told me, one conspiracy theorist to another.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“They cost an arm and a leg, that’s why.” She scowled into the sun. “This one’s only fifty bucks.”

I peered into the box. On strips of newspaper sat a mongrel no bigger than the Shih Tzu but a hundred times uglier: a body too lengthy for its squat legs, fur a brighter red than auburn, and on its rat-like snout absurdly long, black whiskers.

“Quite a find you’ve got there,” I told the woman. Thinking of that urban legend about a family mistaking a rat for a dog until it eats the baby, I strode into the Pampered Pooch, forked out thirty dollars for something more precious than steak, then stepped back outside.

“Forty,” the woman told me, adjusting her haunches. “I have to get rid of him today. My landlord says I can’t have a dog. That asshole. Some people don’t know what it means to love.”

“It’s a he then?” I asked.

She squinted up at me. “I said ‘she.’”

“What’s her name?”

The woman paused. “Brandy?”

“You’ve got a deal,” I said and fished out my wallet again.

I hurried to the car, a small bag of dog food under one arm, the rat-faced mutt under the other. I dumped the food in the front and Brandy in the back. Her whiskers twitched as she lifted her thin nose in the air. Then she devoted herself to chewing the tips of her black-nailed paws as I drove.

I was a man with a plan.

Eve adored dogs so much, she’d have to take this one in. I guess there was an element of meanness on my part, a bit of payback: *you love dogs; here, love this one if you can*. But I also pictured the two of us deliciously screwing all over the white expanse of her bed while Brandy and the Peanut went for it elsewhere in the house. After all, something had to give if this relationship were going to continue. I couldn’t be the perfect boyfriend forever.

“Look what I found at the store!” I sang out as I walked through Eve’s front door.

“Oh my God,” Eve said, her eyes bluer than usual as she gazed at the horrible Brandy.

“I got her for you,” I told her. “Well, for Petey, too. A little girlfriend of his own. So everybody will have somebody.” *Our house, it’s a very, very fine house...* As Eve took in the hideousness of my present, I cooled in fear: maybe Petey already had a girlfriend. Maybe in our three-ways, I was the guest player, he the main man. I remembered Eve’s boyfriend-summary: Keith was a jerk, Steve insensitive, Jerry not very understanding. *What the hell had that dog done to them?*

“You are the most thoughtful man.” Eve blinked back a quick splash of tears, and her mouth stretched into a smile. “And she’s the . . . she’s the cutest little thing.”

I put the mutt on the floor in front of Petey. *Fuck him or kill him*, I thought. I figured either way I was free of the Peanut.

Petey trotted past Brandy as if she didn't exist. I'd seen humans cut other humans, but I'd never witnessed another species do that before to its own kind. The rat-faced dog didn't seem to care. Brandy skittered into the kitchen, devoured what was left in Petey's bowl, then attacked the new bag of dog food, ripping away at it as if I really had given Eve a plague-ridden rodent.

"She is too funny," Eve said, though there was nothing funny about Brandy unless one finds the combination of rat and dog amusing.

Brandy's new dog-mother wouldn't look at her for the rest of the afternoon. She found a hundred towels to fold and pillows to fluff.

Meanwhile, I tried to get the Peanut interested in Brandy, tossing his red ball in front of her, picking her up to make him jealous, lavishing undeserved compliments on the little bitch. *Good girl. Pretty girl. Who's the best girl in the world?* Still, Petey couldn't see her. She was invisible. She didn't even exist. And all Brandy thought of was food. She sniffed the ball. Not food. My shoe. Not food. My turkey sandwich. Food.

That night I said to Eve, "Do you think we should keep the pups in the kitchen tonight? Brandy's first day and all."

Eve frowned. "Maybe Brandy," she said. "Not the Peanut."

Oh ho, I thought. I saw Brandy's fate: a second-class citizen, the lesser dog, the ugly mixed-breed Eve's old boyfriend – another insensitive jerk who wasn't very understanding – had brought into the house. Petey would dine on roast beef; Brandy, canned crap from the supermarket. Petey would snuggle up on the couch; Brandy be tied to a post in the backyard. Just because a dog didn't have a pedigree or good looks or a settled stomach (Brandy had vomited in three different spots on the carpet then gone back into the kitchen to wolf down more food) was no reason to dismiss the cur.

"I think you're right," I told Eve, which had become the way I disagreed with her. "Everybody should stay together. So we can keep an eye on the new addition."

Eve nodded slowly.

The four of us padded into the bedroom, where Eve threw towels and sheets into a makeshift dog-nest on the floor. "There," she said vaguely. "Come on, Petey Sweetie," she added, patting the bed. The Shih Tzu ran up his steps, then yawned at me as if he'd soon be in the market for a new man to bite.

"I think everybody might like to sleep together, don't you?" I asked Eve, my expression sensitive and concerned.

She sighed again. I had her all right.

We undressed and got into bed, where I went to work on her. She tried to respond, but Brandy was where Eve wanted to fling her arm, where she wanted to thrash her leg. I lapped up Eve's body, but I could tell for her it was like making love when you've got a headache, a sore back, or a small dog tearing at your ankle. *How do you like it?* I thought.

"Oh," Eve gasped. "Ow."

For once, I wasn't the one in pain. I felt nothing at my heel: no teeth, no claws. But I didn't think Eve should be in pain either. I turned my head to see what was happening. Brandy (not a girl at all, of course) happily humped Eve's left ankle, rat-whiskers twitching and tiny black claws scratching her golden skin. I couldn't help it: I snickered. Turning to the right, I saw Petey, who'd taken control of Eve's other ankle and found a rhythm to match Brandy's.

"Jesus," Eve said and tried to lift herself up, a small dog glued to each leg, a tall man on top of her. *Enough's enough*, I said to myself. I had to put a stop to this. As I started to pull away, Eve's hips rose below mine. "No no no" floated from her lips. I hurried to meet her, and the two of us—the four?—went to the moon together.

Amanda Paulger

In the Hands of God

I looked out into the morning, the snow misting across the horizon, blowing up in lines across the sky, whirling like the skirts of my mother and my grandmother at my wedding. They danced to every song, fell over each other or their dance partners at the end. But they never wavered.

Each gravestone stood, monumental in the grass. They were never buried. They both gave their wishes with whispers, handed them off to us like crumbling notes as they lay looking death in the face. *Let me fly into the wind*, they both said. One after another they died, trapped in the hands of cancer like some nightmare, but they just smiled and walked through those veils.

We brought them up to the top of Spruce Mountain, where that old fire tower swung in the gusts that ripped across the bare mountain face. We climbed the steps, creaking beneath our weight; even my grandfather, who outlived both my grandmother and my mother. He climbed the mountain with his patient, slow gait, which we all followed.

None of us said a word, either time. Grief ripped our tongues from our throats, choked us into silence; it is devious that way. We stood facing west, where the sun set; we all knew that to let them fly where the sun set would mean they could cross into twilight, when the veil was thinnest.

Each time, we stood gripping the edge of the fire tower, looking out over the valleys, as the sun set. The only one who could let the ashes go was Grandpa, who had steady hands in the face of grief and death. He was prepared, ready to go. He said so to us, once: *My wife and my daughter taken before me. I think it's about time I caught the last train home.*

Each time he would wait for the wind to pick up, a steady gust that could carry them west. He would pose at the edge of the tower, eyes closed, hands steady, holding their open urns. He would feel the wind coming, breathe it in a moment to taste it, assure us of its steadfast grace. *The hands of God*, he said. *I've got to make sure God's hands are there to carry them, or else they won't make it.*

The morning here and now rushes back, a cool breeze headed west. I can hear laugh-

ter caught up in the swirls of snow. They both died in the summer, but they both loved the winter. I was born in the winter; Mom called me her snow baby, the only one who enjoyed the cold as much as she and her mother did. On the first snow, my grandmother would drive out to our house. She'd knock loudly, and when my mother answered, she'd holler for me, and we'd run outside and whirl around in it. It was tradition.

I can feel the hands of God carrying their voices down out of the snow, and I realize what Grandpa felt each time he released them. There is this taste of grace in the air, a mixture of wood smoke and cinnamon, apples and lilacs, cigars and French-pressed coffee. They all circled upwards into a nostalgic reminder of what it meant to have them there, and I can hear them, singing, laughing.

They're still dancing, whirling around. Their spirits tear up the snow, little eddies pulling up from underneath the trees. They're still falling all over each other, laughing. As much as they try to pull me in to dance with them, too, I can't. They're part of the air, the snow; they're as much a part of God's hands as the wind. I'm too solidly founded in the world to dance with them.

Each gravestone stood, monumental in the grass. They were never buried. They both gave their wishes with whispers, handed them off to us like crumbling notes, as they lay looking death in the face. Let me fly into the wind, they both said.

I run inside, leaving the front door wide open. My daughter sits at the table, crayons in hand and looks at me with wide eyes. *What's the matter, Mommy?* she asks.

I think we should go dance in the snow, I say to her. She smiles, a big toothy smile in a tiny round face.

I only waited for you to ask, Mommy, she says to me, pulling her little red coat off the chair.

She carefully pushes each little arm into the red arms of her coat, which smells like vanilla and lavender. She smiles again as I take her hand and lead her out the door.

We twirl around in the falling snow, and the wind twirls around us, and they're both there, the laughter rising in gusts around us. My daughter giggles.

Mommy, we should do this every year, she says.

I laugh. *Yes, we should.*

Van G. Garrett

Piss and Vinegar

Crisp as a check on payday, his clothes were always ironed. Wore wingtip Bluchers. Never had a ravel undone; his moustache never went untrimmed; his '49 Ford F-1 pickup never unwashed. Talked with his hands. Bigger than my dad's or Joe Louis's. A booming voice that rattled windows as he unpeeled eggs in the kitchen.

He shared stories about women who catered to him like he was a king. One woman only drank out of fine china, put rice in the bottom of her expensive teacups before pouring coffee so she didn't leave black stains like rings in a bathtub. One day they didn't see eye to eye. He asked her to fix some coffee to help him relax before his cool turned hot. It was obvious there was more to the memory. I saw it in his eyes. He loved her.

"Sometimes these women will make you climb trees chasin' 'em. Make you go stark-ass crazy, worry the dog shit out of you. They have a power unmatched, but you have to be the man. You have to remember they're the fish, and we're the fishermen. We hunt, they fall, but sometimes we still get trapped."

She was fine as all outdoors, but she said something that didn't sit quite right. Her favorite blue-lined piece of serving china found its face staring up at a *johnson* that relieved itself, some sprinkles on her Persian rug.

"Man, I pissed like a racehorse, a stuck pig, and a busted well. I willed myself to piss. Damn near pissed myself silly," he said on more than one occasion with a smile.

They stayed together for years after that. Memories rounded the laugh lines of their faces.



JANE ZICH
Mixed Media Paintings

Lion's Drum

Chivalry's Shadow



Fountain of Life

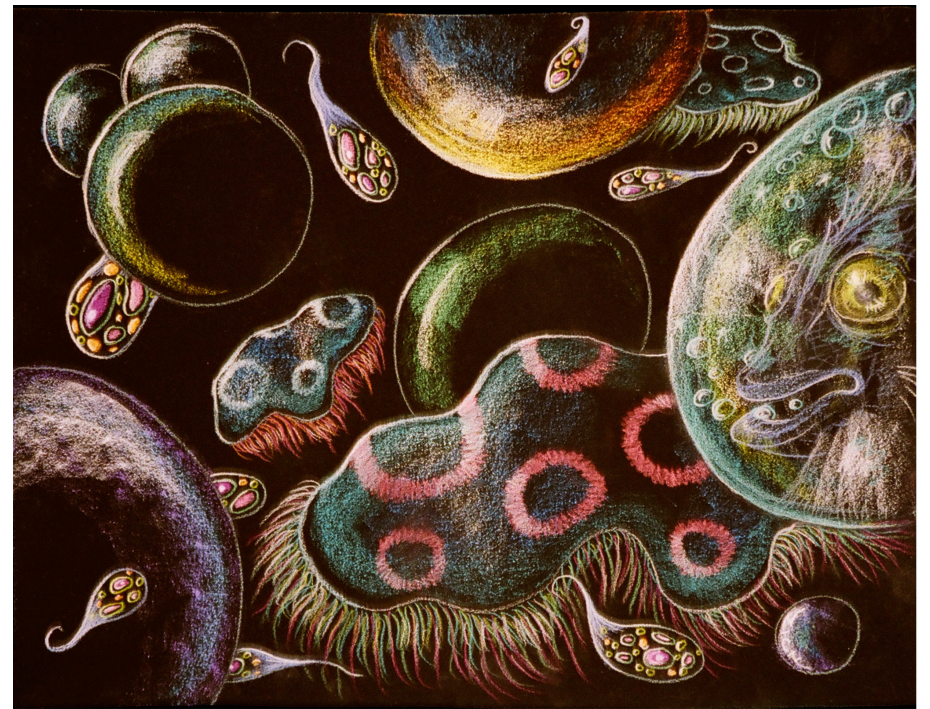
The War To End All Wars Lives Inside Each One Of Us





*Left: Vanishing Zebras. Top: Prisoners of War
Bottom: Poisons*





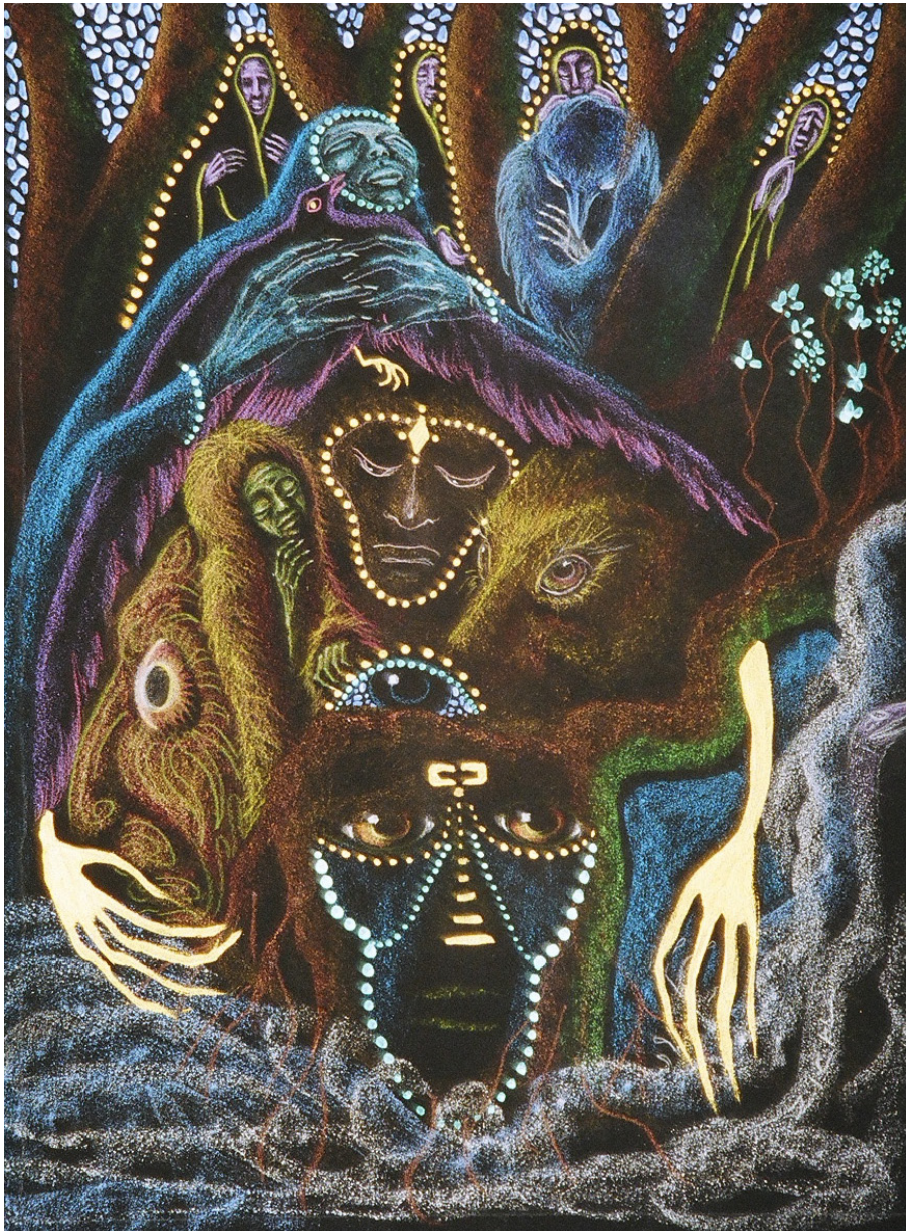
Left: Phoenix Descending. Top: Birth of a New Order. Bottom: The End of All Forms.



Ecology



Next Step



Global Warming



Lion's Gold

The Mask You Wear May Not Be Your Own



Kirkenes, Norway

“Would you like to sit down?”

“No, no, no,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

He had been brusque; a bad habit of old. He shuffled around in the crowded bus to face her. She was younger than him, but not by much. Lately, he weighed every new person he met this way – older or younger, younger or older, who’s playing death’s end game – a new bad habit. A neat, white bob framed her round face, small flecks of mascara in the heavy creases around her alert blue eyes, an uneven smear of pale red lipstick on her large mouth. Why did women his age wear makeup like they were wearing ghosts? She was looking up at him, her smile half-apologetic, half-defiant. He knew she was afraid he might be offended but didn’t see why he should be; he was old, after all. Women, at least, had the courage of their convictions. She gave him a small, encouraging nod. She was kind. Or perhaps she just wanted to talk.

“No, thank you,” he said, gentler. “It’s very nice of you, though.”

“I always stumble,” she said quickly. “My body can’t handle the jerking around anymore. And with these buses, you can never tell when you’re going to topple right over...”

Evidently, she wanted to talk. He took a breath and tensed his body as in the old days before a long plunge into the fjord. This woman would talk until one of them got off the bus.

“Me too,” he lied. He rarely stumbled. He had learned how to balance under the weight of diving gear, move against quick currents. New York City public transportation proved no major challenge. His body remembered so much of what he’d forgotten.

“These days you can’t count on the young ones to give you a seat,” she continued. “They’re so busy looking down at their phones and their little computers.”

“Praying,” he said absently. He thought of Marit, when he first saw her in Kirkenes Church, her smooth blonde head bent low over a Bible. In her younger days, this woman would have looked something like Marit, a little.

The woman laughed – a rough, happy bark with no resentment in it. He moved a

little closer to her, rocking on the balls of his feet to avoid cramping.

“Praying to the god of technology,” she said.

He smiled. It was true. People were always praying to something.

“Being preyed upon,” he said.

She laughed again. “Yes,” she said, “so we are, so we are ... but it was always like that. Before, it was something else.”

“That’s true,” he said. “That’s very true ... Are you Norwegian, by any chance?”

“Norwegian? No, I’m Irish, mostly. Celtic.”

“Oh,” he said flatly. “Me too.” He felt an old, dull ache in his chest.

“Why? Do I look Norwegian?” She didn’t sound too curious, her voice still pleasant and dry. They had reached that point in the conversation where they would have to plunge deeper or paddle back to shore. He remembered that moment of choice in the dive. There was always so little time to decide. He remembered the midnight sun on the water in Kirkenes, the skin suit clinging to his body, Marit watching from the shore.

“Oh ... no. I don’t know,” he said. “I thought you maybe looked Norwegian.”

“Irish all the way!” she said.

There was the lull.

He had snapped the cord of their conversation and felt guilty. He cast about his mind for a safe subject, but she was quicker.

“Are we near Allen, do you know? I can’t see a thing. I usually try to be up front,” she said.

He tried to peer past the crush of bodies to the streets racing past. He couldn’t catch a sign for long enough to read it, but he knew the buildings. He had always navigated by big markers: a half-submerged prow in a lake, St. Mark’s Hotel in the Village.

“We’re on about 7th. Not too far now.”

“Allen’s my stop,” she said.

“Mine too, mine too.”

“It’s true, we’re all being preyed on,” she said, a smooth backstroke to their earlier thread. “They say machines are going to be smarter than us one day. We made the machines to work for us, and we’re going to be working for them!”

“What goes around comes around, as the French say,” he responded, gone again. He was thinking of the day he left Kirkenes, Marit’s face hard and burning, his chest heavy, as if large stones were lining the bottom of his heart.

“Is that a French saying? I thought everybody says that.”

“Do they?” he asked, genuinely surprised. He remembered getting roaring drunk one night by the Seine with another frogman who clapped him hard on the back and said, “*Ce qui se passe autour de revient.*” He had laughed and asked what that meant. The frogman laughed, tried to explain in haphazard English, and passed him the flask. They drank

Christopher Stephen, *A Bird and His Pear*



and laughed and swaggered all night. They didn't talk about the war. In the morning, they carefully wrote each other's names and addresses down on little pieces of paper but he never spoke to the French diver again. It had never occurred to him that other people said that.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "I think every culture has a saying like that."

"I'm sure you're right," he said quickly. "Of course. I just heard it in France, so I always thought it was French. It's funny..."

"Well, so it was a French saying," she said. She was very kind. "When were you in France?"

He thought about what to say. Should he tell her how his eyes honed in on that French frogman's name a scant year later in a long list of dead combat di-

vers and could only think, with a sick swoop, "What goes around comes around"? Should he tell her about Norway, about the sunken village he swam through beneath the icy valley of Lygnstolvatnet, how Kirkenes is one of the only places in the world where the time zone moves forward instead of backward? Should he tell her how he once walked six miles through Kirkenes to the border point of three different countries with three different time zones and stood there with Marit, boundless?

He craned his head away from her as if to peer out of the window again.

"Almost at Allen now," he said. "Turning the corner."

"Oh," she said.

The bus lurched to its usual grinding halt, exhausts sighing, the heavy weight of the vehicle settling down on the wheels, doors opening. People began scrambling for the exits as if they were afraid the bus would whisk them away. He held the strap tightly with one hand and pressed his back hard against the pushing crowd, trying to clear a space for

her to stand up and walk ahead of him.

"Mademoiselle?" he said, gesturing with exaggerated gallantry in front of him. How Marit had laughed whenever he had done that.

The woman laughed, too, and nodded her thanks, shoving her way through to the front.

In the open air, they faced each other. It was still light out, the evening sun glinting off brownstone windows above the propelling city. People jostled past them.

"Well, I go that way," she said, pointing south on Allen Street.

"Have a good day," he finally said.

"Good day," she said, after a pause. She turned away, a backward wave of her hand.

He turned and walked in the opposite direction, eyes straight and forward.

Josh Lamstein

Cooties

He loved her the moment he saw her in the playroom. She had a red bow in her hair and wore a sunflower yellow dress that he completely ignored as he stared at her always-happy smile, which he didn't understand. He really wanted to understand. She played with the blocks like she was having the time of her life, and all of a sudden he felt crazy—he had never felt this way before. He was woozy, hungry, thirsty, numb, blinded, weak, nervous, and excited. Certain he was sick, he told his teacher he felt bad and went home.

At home, he quickly recovered and, putting together the not-so-far dots, realized he had cooties. Jenny, the super happy Jenny, made him sick. There was no denying it. He just remembered her, and his breathing stopped.

Was he going to die? Terrified, he tried to not think of Jenny, and her face burst into his mind. Lying on his bed with Batman sheets, he wrung his hands and looked desperately for a distraction. Even his German shepherd, Moody, who happily jumped on his bed and licked Billy's face, could not distract him. Billy thought of Jenny so much he could barely breathe. Moody whined and curled into a ball beside Billy's chest.

He could hear his heart beat. No! No! he shouted to himself. He thought of her stupid smiling face and felt angry. He felt so angry he kicked Moody off his bed. Moody yelped and ran from the room, making Billy feel like the worst kid alive.

During recess the next day, Billy strode to the sandbox where Jenny slid down the yellow slide. As she landed in the sand, laughing brightly and throwing her hands in front of her to break her speedy fall, he rushed up to her. Giddy and breathless, he grasped a clump of cool sand and smooshed it against her red bow. Her smile faded and she looked at him with great, brown, teary eyes, making a broken noise.

Laughing wildly, he ran away. His heart felt light, and his soul was mush. Near the shady picnic tables, he remembered the sand, her smile, her frown, her hair, the ribbon—oh, it was beautiful! He looked at her more easily: she was now as bright as a star instead of the sun. He could breathe freely, and he knew he was going to get better. His cooties were cured.

Fists on his hips, he gazed over the big kids on the field who argued over whose turn, whose ball, and whose fault it was. If he were arguing with them, he bet he would win the argument! Glancing casually over his shoulder, he saw Jenny wiping her eyes while talking to their teacher Mrs. Berg.

Billy bit his lip. Jenny had squealed on him. He cured his cooties—and now Jenny wanted revenge! What would Mrs. Berg do? He imagined Mrs. Berg staring at him, drumming her fingers on her desk. Tap. Tap. Tap. Billy would stare at his shoes while Mrs. Berg—oh! Billy couldn't bear to think of the terrible things she would do!

Mrs. Berg walked over to Billy, her wrinkled face bent down, and she whispered, "Billy, can you come with me please?"

Billy walked inside with Mrs. Berg. Billy was never in big trouble at school, and he felt like he was falling from the sky. What would Mrs. Berg do? Would she call his parents? What would his parents say? As he passed Jenny on the blacktop, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Billy, inside the funny-smelling classroom, stared over the edge of the high desk at the teacher's face. His heart beat at light speed.

"Billy," said Mrs. Berg, "did you put sand in Jenny's hair?"

Near the shady picnic tables, he remembered the sand, her smile, her frown, her hair, the ribbon—oh, it was beautiful! He looked at her more easily: she was now as bright as a star instead of the sun. He could breathe freely, and he knew he was going to get better. His cooties were cured.

Billy looked to the right as if he were suddenly interested in the alphabet poster. Of course he put sand in Jenny's hair! Why did she ask him such a stupid question? Didn't she already know that?

"Billy?" she said in a long tone.

Billy felt even more frightened than he did before. He nodded.

"Billy," said Mrs. Berg, "that's mean. I need you to stay in the classroom for the rest of recess."

Billy nodded.

"Please sit down."

Billy sat down in his desk and looked out the four-panel window. Jenny slid down the yellow slide again, laughing like before. Billy ground his teeth. As she ran up the ladder, Billy felt like hot chains were weighing down his shoulders. Underneath the girl's smiley, beautiful exterior, she was evil. Jenny, laughing and laughing, had already forgotten how she stole his recess.

That night, Billy lay in bed for two hours staring at the ceiling; he was so angry with Jenny. He imagined sweet vengeance: after he pushed Jenny down, Mrs. Berg would show up saying, “Good, I’m glad Billy pushed you down, Jenny.”

The next day, Jenny wore a red dress and the red bow in her hair. He wanted to push her down, but he didn’t predict catching cooties again. He felt near death, heart beating so fast it was sure to burst from his chest. He tried to walk toward her, but he couldn’t. Eventually, he decided he didn’t actually want to go over there; she was stupid, and he didn’t deal with stupid people, and so he sat down in the circle and stared longingly at her radiant smile.

She looked out the window toward the slide and the morning light grazing her face. Did she look at the slide because she missed the slide, or did she angle herself in the gentle sunlight to make Billy suffer as much as possible? Could she make him suffer without even noticing? The thought made him skip a breath.

At 9:00, they played with Play-Doh. Jenny smashed red with blue and pounded it with her fist. Intensely, she looked for the green Play-Doh tub. When she found it, she carefully pressed it into a green pancake. Then, she plopped it on top of the red and blue concoction. Billy suddenly felt inspired by what he thought was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make all that was wrong in the world right. He walked over to her, feeling lightheaded and seeing spots. He heard his inspired words as if they belonged to another person.

“That’s ugly.”

“What?” she said.

“That’s ugly,” said Billy, furious that he had to repeat himself.

“You’re ugly!” she shouted, but she shouted very loudly, and Billy grinned uncontrollably.

“Mrs. Berg!” cried Billy, still smiling.

“Yes, Billy?” said Mrs. Berg, walking over slowly.

“She called me ugly! Take her recess away.” Still, he was grinning like a pup with a bone.

“Did she?”

“Yes! She screamed it!”

“He said my Play-Doh was ugly!” cried Jenny. “Why is he so mean?”

The teacher nodded and nodded and somehow vanished to the other side of the room. Billy continued to scream back, but when he saw the teacher had left his side, he shut up. Jenny seemed equally disturbed. They both glared at each other. Billy noticed that as he glared at Jenny, hoping she would drop dead, he no longer felt woozy. The cooties had been cured!

But Billy couldn’t walk away. Cooties felt like falling from the sky with bricks in his

stomach, and curing his cooties felt like flying. Billy knew the terror of cooties, but he wanted to keep flying.

“You should lose your recess,” said Billy.

“You should lose your recess,” said Jenny.

“You made me lose my recess yesterday.”

“You’re mean, and you deserved it.”

“I’m not mean—you’re stupid!”

“I’m not stupid. How am I stupid?”

Billy thought fast. He had no idea why she was stupid, but he wasn’t going to say that now.

“You’re stupid because...”

“You don’t even know!”

“You’re stupid because I’m an alien, and you don’t know!”

“What?” Jenny blinked.

“I’m an alien!”

“No you’re not!”

“See, you’re stupid!” said Billy, and he stomped away to play with Legos. He felt like the stupidest person in the world. Of course he wasn’t an alien! He grinded his Legos against each other and felt furious that they didn’t just fit together.

For the rest of the week, Jenny kept her distance from Billy. She looked at him from the corner of her eyes with tight lips. Billy was ecstatic. Whenever he caught her eye in circle time, he pulled on his hair, threw his leg behind his head, or trilled with his tongue. This was more thrilling than watching TV or talking about himself.

On Friday morning during story time, Billy sat quietly, listening to the adventures of a goat, until he turned blue and fell on his back. The class gasped, and the teacher rushed over to him, throwing her book on the ground. When she knelt by his side, he gasped.

“Sorry, Mrs. Berg, I forgot to breathe.”

The whole class laughed, except for Jenny.

Billy ignored the lessons on the alphabet while thinking of new ways to seem like an extraterrestrial. During recess, he walked next to Jenny, reveling as she tightened her cheeks while looking at him with such curiosity. He sat in the sand at her feet and said, “Glorp.”

He picked up a pinch of sand and placed it on his tongue like sugar. He said, “Ahh.”

Jenny sprinted from the sandbox.

Billy was full of great ideas. On Monday, he walked to school with a packet of ketchup and big plans. In class, all he could think of were his big plans. He stared out the window while twirling between his fingers the ketchup packet in his pocket.

When it was finally recess, Billy ran out of the class and waited at the benches. See-

ing Jenny at the slide, he walked right up to her with a big grin on his face. But she saw him and ran away. Annoyed, he chased her. They ran to the bench by the big tree and around the basketball courts. She screamed at him over and over again, “Leave me alone, or I’ll tell Mrs. Berg!”

Out of breath and miserable, Billy trudged to the benches. He wanted to cough up blood in front of her—he had such big plans! He felt like he was flying when he acted the alien in front of her, but now he felt he was plummeting to the ground. But when someone crashes into the earth at a million miles per hour, the plummeting lasts for a very short time. This plummeting feeling never ended.

The next day, Billy went to school after drawing squiggles on his face with a blue marker. He was going to tell Jenny he was sick, but she ran away from him again. She didn’t even look at him when he wheezed in the circle. Billy felt he was falling so fast he didn’t even know which way was the ground.

While eating a granola bar during snack, Billy glared at Jenny, who ate applesauce. He felt as miserable as an eagle that keeps leaping into the air and flapping his wings as hard as he can but doesn’t understand his wings have been clipped. He tried to walk around Jenny so she would at least look at him, but when she saw him, she turned around.

If that’s what she wanted, that’s what she’d get, thought Billy angrily. He stomped to the benches and sat with his back to her. Staring at birds, he was furiously bored, and so he stared at big kids playing soccer. He didn’t like watching soccer, and he wished he were with Jenny, but Jenny didn’t want to play. Billy felt an overwhelming urge to cry. Moving behind the tree beside the bench, he sat on a big dirty root with his half-eaten granola bar and sobbed.

The next day, he sat miserably in the circle, trying to feel as little as possible. He listened to directions perfectly, never spoke out of turn, and did all of his work—trying to stop thinking about Jenny. Accidentally during math time, he glanced at Jenny as she walked by his table. She had her great big smile. Her face looked like pure happiness.

Beginning on Thursday, Billy pretended to be sick to avoid going to kindergarten. On Friday morning, he moaned to his mother that he felt even worse. When his mom wanted to take him to the doctor, Billy got scared and said stubbornly into his pillow that he didn’t want to go to the doctor, and he didn’t want to go to school. He expected his mom to tell him to go to school this instant, but she didn’t. She looked at him strangely for a moment and then made him tea, which tasted delicious after he added lots of honey.

That weekend Billy actually got sick. Mucus oozed out of his orifices, and he stared up at his bedroom ceiling with red, watery eyes. His German shepherd, Moody, rested his head on Billy’s chest and slept with his tongue hanging out. Billy’s mom put more tea beside his Superman clock, and Billy asked for lunch in bed, a new video game, and a television in his room. His mom answered if he felt good enough to play video games, then

he felt good enough to clean his room.

Billy had a miserable weekend. His skin tingled as if poked by a thousand tiny needles. Getting out of bed to go to the bathroom took as much effort as running a marathon. He felt clever when he faked being sick. Every well-placed cough and high-pitched whine, he thought, was genius. He thought he was exceptionally talented for being able to cut class. But now that Billy was really sick, he didn’t feel so proud.

Billy wondered if he was sick because of Jenny. He didn’t think he was sick from chance. He lied about being sick to his mom, wasn’t punished, and now he was paying for it. Before, he thought he was clever, but now he thought he was a coward. He could just stay in bed all of his life, he thought to himself. That way people would never have any effect on him.

Billy also, to his surprise, missed Jenny. Even though she wouldn’t even look at him, he missed her not looking at him. He missed the red bow in her hair and her ecstatic laugh. Despite Jenny infecting him with viral cooties, Billy longed to see her.

On Monday, Billy sat next to Jenny during circle time. She edged away from him, touching the leg of the boy next to her. Jenny looked at gaps in the circle, and Billy thought she would actually stand up and move. Billy had to act quickly:

“I’m going home to Mars.”

Jenny froze and looked straight ahead at the wall as if it were profoundly interesting, but there wasn’t even a poster.

“I’m going home to Mars. Do you want to come?”

Jenny looked at him with big eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but her tongue didn’t work. Billy turned his eyes to the teacher, as if what he said were no big deal. It took all the effort in the world to hold back his smile.

“Jenny,” said Mrs. Berg, “please look at me when I am speaking.”

Jenny jumped as if poked while sleeping. Her eyes shot from Billy to Mrs. Berg. Mrs. Berg continued to read *The Little Prince*.

During recess, Billy walked directly to his bench. Trying to look casual, he stood very stiffly by the big tree, repeatedly glancing over his shoulder at Jenny. She slid fast down the yellow slide, but she wasn’t smiling. Every once in a while, she looked at him. Seeing he was looking at her, she looked at something else. Then she looked at him again. Billy had the sudden urge to show off and as quickly as possible climbed the tree.

Perched in the big tree and looking at the sky, Billy waited. He knew—he just knew—that Jenny would walk over to him.

All of a sudden, he heard a voice call from the ground:

“All right, I’ll go to Mars, but I have to be back by dinner.”

“You’re not scared?” asked Billy, looking at the ground and seeing Jenny standing with arms crossed beside the bench.

“Course I’m not scared!”

“All right then, first you got to climb the tree.”

“Why?”

“Why? Can’t go to Mars when you’re so close to the ground. You have to get a bit closer to the sky.”

“Oh,” said Jenny. She started to climb the tree, but it was hard.

“C’mon,” said Billy.

“Come down,” she said as she grabbed the bark of the tree.

“C’mon!” said Billy, “you can do it.”

Jenny jumped and, holding the high branch, walked up the trunk, and she wrapped her legs around the branch. She righted herself and then climbed a bit higher. The higher branches were so close it was like walking up stairs.

“I did it!” said Jenny, sitting next to Billy on the high branch.

“Course you did.”

“All right, Billy,” she said, “let’s go to Mars.”

This was the first time Billy heard her say his name, and it gave him chills.

“Right.” Billy swallowed. “To get to Mars, we’re going to have to jump.”

“Jump?”

“Jump. Then we’ll go to Mars.”

“But Billy—Mars is up!”

“I have a tool that will bring us to Mars.”

“Let’s see it.”

“It’s invisible.”

“Oh.”

“But it’s right here.”

Billy held up his hand, and Jenny quickly touched his hand.

“Where is it?”

“It’s really small,” said Billy.

Billy opened his hand, and Jenny poked his palm.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Trust me. It’s there. Ready to jump?”

“Yeah.”

“So when we jump, we have to hold hands, or we might go to different places. I don’t want you to go to Pluto or something.”

“Me neither.”

“So we have to hold hands.”

“Okay,” said Jenny, taking his hand.

“Ready to jump?”

“It’s really far down.”

“It’s not easy to go to Mars.”

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Billy smiled, and together they bent their legs. Like clumsy birds, they fell out of the tree, and when they hit the ground, they were still holding hands.

“Here’s Mars!” said Billy triumphantly. “Over there by the rocks is where we have our alien dance parties, and over there near the alien playground is where we play alien tag—”

“This isn’t Mars! You’re a liar! You’re not actually from Mars, Billy! You’re just a mean liar!”

Jenny pulled her hand away and stomped toward the playground.

Argh! thought Billy as she walked away. He felt like he was trying to fly through a rock! The bell rang, and the students went to their lesson, but Billy stayed back, feeling furious. What’s the matter with her! Why is she so stupid? He couldn’t go back to class; he was too furious. He headed past the school fence, which was out of bounds. He left school and crossed the street.

His parents drove him to school, and he didn’t know the area. He looked at a bunch of white and brown houses with well-kept lawns and trimmed hedges. He walked down the street without even thinking about where he was going. Why didn’t she just do what he wanted? He ground his teeth hard enough to break a rock.

Of course he wasn’t a Martian! he thought. What a stupid girl! He crossed his arms on the third or fourth block from the school and sat next to a storm drain. He felt so bad that he couldn’t imagine feeling any worse, like a train that crashed into a mountain and all the boxcars were destroyed, but still the engine was running. The engine was sputtering and wondering, What now?

Billy didn’t know what to do. In a daze, he walked back to school, and when he got to class Mrs. Berg thought he had been in the bathroom. She even asked if he was feeling okay. Billy nodded and finished the day at school. At home, he watched TV. When he went to bed, he couldn’t remember what he ate for dinner. Waking the next morning, Billy did not realize it was the next morning. He thought it was only seconds after lying down the previous night.

When Billy went to school, he felt furious, like lightning lost in fog. He knew he would strike, but he didn’t know where. He tried to imagine what he would do and when, but he felt too dazed to daydream.

During circle time, Billy sat crossed-legged next to Jenny. Now was the time. He was going to do something crazy. He didn’t feel mad. He didn’t feel sad. He didn’t feel anything. He numbly looked at Jenny’s red ribbon in her hair. She wasn’t smiling, but even when she didn’t smile, she looked happy. Billy noticed the way the morning light colored

Cooties

her cheeks. A feeling stirred him out of his daze. Back and forth, his eyes flicked from Jenny to other spots in the room, and when he looked at her, he felt considerably happier than when he looked away. He breathed.

“Jenny, I love you.”

Jenny looked at him. “What?”

“I love you, and I know you don’t like me and you think I’m a liar because I’m not an alien, but I don’t care. I love you.”

His heart beat as hard as a sledgehammer. He stared at the cheap, grey carpet while the teacher talked and talked.

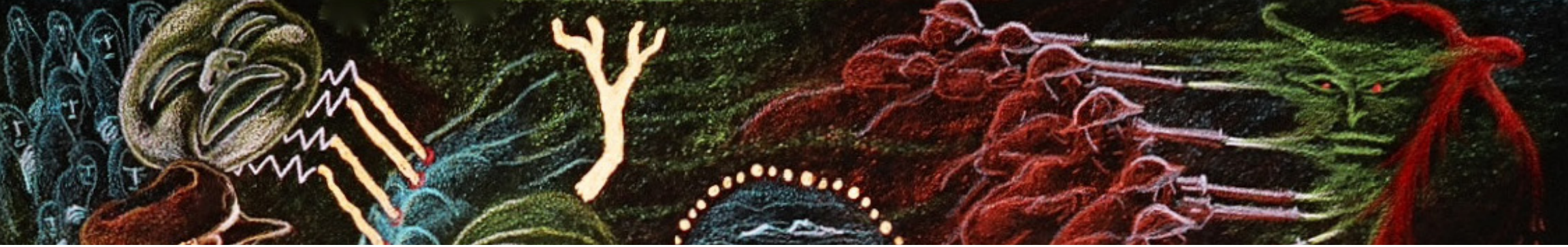
Jenny sat straighter and turned her eyes, ears, and nose to him.

“Jenny,” said Mrs. Berg.

Jenny didn’t hear her. She just looked at Billy. Billy’s heart thundered. Jenny had never looked at him for so long.

“Jenny, please pay attention,” said Mrs. Berg.

As Jenny turned her head to the teacher, she held Billy’s hand. Billy’s heart stopped beating, as if he were flying.



Gypsy Sachet Awards in Letters and Biography

Liz Dolan

Letters

In Tullaree, my mother's birthplace, it is believed the wail of the banshee is the cry of a soul trapped between the here and the hereafter. My mother often heard their cry. I hear their cry, too, and, like them I am trapped between the here and the hereafter, the now and the then, the here and the there, with those who have gone before, those who will go soon and those who have just arrived. And I am the chronicler of all those voices, places and events; all of those things have become one: Tullaree, Kilcoo, Castlewellan, Saint Luke's, Sister Antoinine, Tantum Ergo, 138street, ring-a leavio, "Get your posse and bring them to the Ossie," my father who never shut up, my mother who never said enough, my siblings, my daughters and my grandchildren.

There are times when the here rolls over you like a tsunami, when all the losses come at once. Then, it was my mother losing three infants and her only son; now, it is the loss of my mother, sister, and my daughter's child born dead, all in a four month period.

For me, writing is springing the trap, setting the lost souls free and hushing the storm. In the midst of my struggle, the letters of Flannery O'Connor tell me that the acceptance of the diminution she experienced through her illness led to increase. Perhaps through my writing I am approaching acceptance, I am not sure; but I do know my writing is giving me increase. I write every day because every line I compose triggers the idea for the next story. I do not have to chase my words; every night the wail of the banshee chases me.

Denise Mostacci Sklar

Biography

Denise Mostacci Sklar grew up exploring the stormy mystery, rocky ruggedness of her North Shore, New England coast. As a young woman, she took off to be a modern dancer in Manhattan, apartment overlooking the Hudson River. She has had the good fortune to discover writing as another way to move through life and particularly enjoys the stillness... waiting for words to make an entrance. She currently lives in Hamilton, MA and occasionally travels to far away lands when waters call.

Holly Day

Letters

It's just starting to get cold enough outside that I have to keep a pair of gloves handy by my desk in order to write. They're nice gloves, though, fingerless gloves made out of yak wool that I spun and crocheted myself in the warm part of the house. I honestly can't say enough about how pleasant it is to feel yak fur against one's skin, especially when working in a 40-degree basement office—these gloves always make me want to run away to Mongolia, where I can spend all day petting yaks and camels and those adorable little wild horses I always see in movies about Mongolia.

Erica W. Jamieson

Letters

My story, “Angels in the Wind,” won the December 2011 Switchback Flash Fiction Contest. I only accepted the award after determining that mine was not the only entry. My other published short fiction was so powerful in its prose that both journals, Mindscapes and Verve are now defunct having shut down operations shortly after my work appeared in their pages back in the early 1990’s. Later nonfiction work appeared in Lilith and Self Magazine. I am happy to report that both enterprises are healthy, and perhaps made even more vigorous by the inclusion of my words.

Graduating the University of Michigan with a degree in Philosophy, I sought out the only job compatible with that level of deep thought. I went to work as a bar tender while bumming around ski towns. The combination of cold, alcohol and Maurice Merleau Ponty made me miss warmer weather. In a moment of sobriety, I accepted admissions to the only school I had applied to where the winters would remain mild. At Pepperdine Law School I was initiated during my first year to Malibu living: evacuations due to fire (September, 1985) and flooding due to mudslides (winter 1986). Still, I stayed and took the first startling blue eyes, I mean job, at which I interviewed. My husband, who was once my boss, likes to say: when we first met, I worked for him and now, he works for me. Not bad for ten years’ work. I got the promotion, a raise and then I retired. Turned out I preferred writing where I could voice an opinion without having to suffer an immediate opposing viewpoint. Who knew the law could be so, well, so adversarial? In between fleeting fits of genius and all too familiar lapses of inspiration (and/or diligence), I managed to raise two children, seemingly, so far anyway, unharmed by my keyboard confessions. I attended Breadloaf summer of 2011 and was told that there were more cows in Vermont than people. I think the same can be said for where I live only substitute the word cars for cow. Which is to say, we live in Los Angeles and spend a lot of quality time driving. My

love of skiing gave way to a passion for hiking. Hiking to hunger. Hunger to bread. Bread to the craft of artisan bread baking. Bread baking to Rose Levy Berenbaum’s Bread Bible. I hike to eat. In whatever free time emerges after all of that, I volunteer for WriteGirl, a diverse creative writing and mentoring nonprofit, affectionately, and incorrectly, greeted by the inmates of an all girls probation camp with “Here come the White Girls!”

I realize you cannot accept bribes (unless you do) but I do make a killer ciabatti loaf and out of this world croissants. Not that bread, really good home made hot out of the oven (is your mouth watering yet?) bread could influence your reading of my work, which, by the way, I am so grateful for.

Jack King

Biography

An MFA graduate of Queens University, I’ve worked for over fifteen years in the IT industry and I still remember when floppy drives were new and cool. While building data centers and server farms, I discovered the beauty of well-crafted fiction by practicing the underappreciated art of business proposals. When not fixing my wife’s laptop, I serve as a cloud computing engineer for a large Baltimore/Washington area firm. I’ve studied with Pinckney Benedict, Fred Leebron, and Naeem Murr, who taught me that nothing is more powerful than the written word, except maybe cat fur because that stuff just doesn’t go away.



The Taste of Strawberries Today

The strawberries lay on the cutting board, side by side, like a row of little hearts. She sliced them lengthwise, hesitated, and then decided to slice them lengthwise once again. Behind her, at the kitchen table, Walt was reading the morning headlines off the internet.

The president was declaring the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, just not yet. Another shocking bank scandal of the kind that had happened so many times already it had lost the power to shock anyone. Shock, in this case, was just a figure of speech used in headlines to get your attention. Unemployment was down, not counting, of course, all the people who'd yielded to the hopelessness of ever again finding a job, others who'd fallen off the unemployment rolls altogether.

Sarah turned the strawberries on their little hunched backs. They revealed, like so many severed fruits reveal inside, a pattern suggestive of female genitalia. Why is that? It's not a surprise, but then it is. In this case, with their tiny seeds embedded in the outer red flesh, they even bore resemblance to female genitalia, in this case the plump shaved mons veneris of current pubic fashion.

Some mornings, this being one of them, Sarah was struck with such a rising-out-of-nowhere sorrow she could almost feel her knees buckle against the sheer weight of it. An immense, heavy-bellied gray wave of sadness rose above her in the face of which she stood paralyzed. She could almost feel the sand slipping away beneath her feet. She could imagine herself gratefully surrendering to the inevitability of it and letting herself be dragged out to the sea of oblivion.

Peaceful oblivion.

Walt, used to the look that came over her at times like these, would ask what the matter was, usually knowing full well. She found herself speechless, unable to account for it; she imagined it to be akin to the emotion that overcomes one standing before one of those great Easter Island heads or an Aztec pyramid. Something too big for human comprehension.

"It's the girl again, isn't it?"

She nodded, unable to speak, unable to meet his eyes.

*

Only moments earlier, Walt had scrolled down the screen, reading randomly from the first paragraph or two about another missing woman. It seemed women were vanishing into thin air all the time lately. This particular woman had disappeared in some hardly imaginable state, one of those places that existed in one's mind only as a vague shape on maps that she'd seen. Idaho, maybe?

Someday, if things got desperate enough, Sarah comforted herself (this is "comfort"?) with the idea that she could escape to a place like that. She could replace the woman who'd vanished. Maybe she'd get a job in one of those windblown diners always depicted in films, the ones built at the side of an interstate cutting through the middle of miles of nowhere. The kind of place where they didn't ask you questions about your past.

Did places exist like that anymore?

"Listen to this," Walt said from the table, looking to change the subject in as outlandish a way as possible, "the cops shot this naked guy to death on a bridge in Miami. He was eating the face off another man."

"Oh Christ," Sarah said, taking extra care that she didn't slice her thumb open while dealing with a mutated-looking strawberry, a kind of double hunchberry with another whole strawberry growing out of its back. "I don't want to listen to that."

One problem about the internet, she decided, was that they brought the worst news from every corner of the world together in one place. It was all there on your computer screen, stuff you would have never heard of before, not even twenty-five years ago, because it would have only been reported in the local papers where it happened. Now everything happened everywhere at once.

As a result, the world seemed a lot nastier a place than ever before, since there was always something nasty happening somewhere, and now you heard about it instantly and ad nauseum.

"How is it that it could have come to this?"

She started out that way, and she ended right there, too. She couldn't say any more because all the rest was too big; it stuck in her throat. She had the best of intentions. She tried hard, and repeatedly, to make things work out. She was intelligent, compassionate, always ready and willing to make amends, offer apology, reconcile, compromise, forgive, start again.

Walt took her head in his hands and told her to look him in the eyes. He told her what a wonderful and special person she is. He ordered her to believe him, made her repeat the words he was saying to her, literally verbatim, but they felt like a foreign language on her lips and all wrong to her ears. She could hardly understand them. She certainly

didn't believe them.

It was not her fault, he tried to assure her, that her daughter abandoned her, chose to break off all relations, virtually disappear. But how could it not be her fault? That's what Sarah wanted to cry out, but if she did the words would rip her apart right down the middle, like a knife slicing into a strawberry. So she didn't say them, but they ripped her anyway, but silently, invisibly. That's what it was like: like she was bleeding away inside.

What was it with strawberries nowadays? She and Walt discussed it often. They used to seem a lot sweeter. Was it a result of the way they farmed, force-growing crops for maximum yield, spraying them with poisons, and harvesting them before their time to speed them to markets thousands of miles away from where they were grown? Was it that the soil that was growing depleted, the planet exhausted, running out of sweetness? Or was it memory that was at fault, making the strawberries of yesteryear bigger, redder, and sweeter than they actually were? Were strawberries ever that good? Had Sarah ever really tasted the strawberries she remembered?

There is a Tarot card that describes the way she's feeling. It depicts a heart floating in empty space among the clouds, and it's run through with three swords.

Come to think of it, did she ever remember strawberries being sweet, or was it really someone else's memory that she repeated, even took to be her own? Maybe that was just another thing people said to explain why they felt so disappointed and dissatisfied with their lives. It was the kind of thing you expected older people to say. She was growing

She took a little nibble but couldn't taste anything sweet about the strawberry no matter what part of her tongue she put it on. Could it be that we were sold a bill of goods, that we were told that strawberries were sweet so many times that we came to believe it?

older, surely, but was she really that old? It seemed to her that people were growing older sooner nowadays, even as they hung on to their youth longer than ever.

What did it mean, then, to have a daughter here, an ex there, another ex somewhere else... to have a past populated with people to whom you were an ex, an ex-person, who never wanted to speak to you again?

X marks the spot.

X's marking off days on the calendar.

Where is the buried treasure?

What did it mean except that you'd made quite a few mistakes in life? You could

keep on making them the way you could keep on eating when you've already blown your diet, figuring what more harm can an extra piece of pie do anyway?

But it does do more harm, no matter how much harm has already been done.

It was time, she figured, to stop doing harm. Even if she couldn't make anything better, she could stop making them worse. That was something, after all.

Sometimes it hurts so badly you simply want to die. You want to admit that everything bad they've said about you is true, that their reasons for wanting to hurt you are justified. Whether it is or not isn't the point.

Not when your heart is impaled in three places. You just want the pain of it to be finished. You want them to stop hating you for whatever reasons they've given themselves to hate you.

She wouldn't kill herself, though. That much she knew by now. She couldn't even convince herself she was as bad as they said. She felt stupid and melodramatic even trying.

And then there was Walt. He loved her. And he was the only thing she'd ever done right in her entire life. Finding him, that is, or allowing him to find her. Recognizing that he loved her, that he wasn't just blowing smoke up her ass, believing him instead of arguing with him, until she convinced him that she was right, that he didn't really love her, after all.

She gave up.

She surrendered to the idea of it.

Sarah picked up one strawberry half and placed it against the tip of her tongue before biting. What part of the tongue was it that detected sweetness, anyway? It's startling to realize how many things you don't know, or sometimes even worse, only half-know. If you confined yourself to saying only the things you really knew, you'd hardly say anything at all. That might not be such a bad thing, after all. That might keep the mistakes from coming, slow them down at least.

She took a little nibble but couldn't taste anything sweet about the strawberry no matter what part of her tongue she put it on. Could it be that we were sold a bill of goods, that we were told that strawberries were sweet so many times that we came to believe it? They certainly looked like they should be sweet. Was that what made it so easy to believe?

For her part, Sarah wanted to believe they were sweet. Why else did she keep buying them even after being disappointed so many times? Even after all those discussions with Walt about how the strawberries nowadays were never sweet, not like they remembered them, she still bought them. What was that all about, anyway?

They say that if the Three of Swords comes up in a reading reversed, it can mean the end of what is troubling you, the swords falling away seemingly of their own accord,

drawn out by gravity. The heart healing itself.

She was in the shower a month ago and thought about cutting her wrists. They were in a hotel in Florida. Walt was in the next room, reading. And the urge to kill herself passed over her the way it sometimes did, like a sudden chill in an otherwise comfortable room, as if a ghost had walked through her. And it surprised her the reason she couldn't do it: the problems it would cause Walt, the overall hassle, the embarrassment with the hotel management, the explanations at the hospital, and the police – can you imagine, the police? – not to mention ruining his whole vacation.

She shuddered to imagine it, even standing there under a caul of steam and scalding water. She couldn't do that to him, especially because all the problems it caused Walt wouldn't be the important thing to him, wouldn't matter to him at all. What would matter would be the grief she knew she'd cause him by killing herself. She could all too vividly imagine him weeping over her broken body, calling her back in vain, blaming himself, shocked and uncomprehending because he was so certain that he'd made her happy.

It would be hell, literally hell, in those last few minutes of life as her blood drained away, to imagine that Walt would think her ungrateful, that he would think he'd failed, that he hadn't made her happy after all.

She'd clamp her hand over her wrist, stop the blood herself, stagger to the phone to call the ambulance.

Because he loved her – that was indisputable, as badly as she felt, as badly as her heart was damaged, as much as she wanted to surrender and plead guilty even to crimes of which she knew she was perfectly innocent, as skillfully and eloquently as she might argue herself into believing that she was guilty in order to make an end of it all – not even she could convince herself that Walt didn't love her.

* * *

She set the little parfait glass of cut-up fruit in front of Walt. He pushed the laptop aside, closed the cover, and leaned up to give her a kiss. He placed a big, warm hand on her ass; it felt good through the thin material of her nightie.

"Thanks, baby. This looks fantastic." He picked up his spoon. "How are the strawberries?"

Sarah shrugged. "I don't know. It's hard to say." She plucked a paper packet from the hollowed out back of the ceramic cow where they kept the artificial sweetener and placed it by Walt's cup. "Just in case," she said.

Essence

“You really have to go there sometime,” she said. “You just take your shoes off and walk around.” Desirée closed her eyes and paced the sparse, white kitchen, as if they were there, standing in the middle of the cemetery. Gil pictured her walking in circles around him, shoes off and toes sinking into the grass while he stared at the headstones, reading the names of the people she was dancing on.

“Yeah, maybe,” Gil mumbled, turning to look at the snapshot taped to the fridge. The picture showed Desirée and him, smiling at the stranger who had snapped the photo. They had driven seven hours to the Atlantic one day. It was Desirée’s idea. “Today, we get you to the ocean,” she said, pulling on her boots. “You’re 24 and have never seen the ocean, and that’s just not right. Get your coat, baby!” She laughed and prodded him out the back door, down the wobbly back steps of their apartment, and into the car.

As the miles passed, Gil grew more comfortable with the idea. They had each called in sick to work, and while he hated to lie, Desirée had convinced him that it was, in fact, a true sick day. “A mental health day,” she said.

It was mid-afternoon when they found a sandy road that led to the ocean. Desirée ran from the car, dragging Gil across the wet sand, and they stood looking at the gray sky and the raging waves that seemed hungry to swallow them whole. Then Desirée skipped over to an old man. She skipped like an eight-year-old. Gil smiled. The man took their picture without saying a word, then walked away. Desirée shouted after him, “Thanks, man!”

That was October. This was May.

Gil stared at the picture on the fridge in the white kitchen, at the bosom of Desirée’s red blouse, which poured out from within her leather jacket. It was her heart, and it had been oversized and pulsing madly that day at the Atlantic. And he remembered how difficult it had been for him to feel the immensity of it all – calling in sick, driving all day, finding the beach, standing on the edge of the earth.

In the kitchen, he could still feel Desirée’s heart pounding while his own heart stumbled forward, weak and unsure. He wanted so badly to feel what she felt. He pictured

himself walking in the cemetery. “Maybe,” he mumbled.

“No,” Desirée said, stopping her barefoot dance. “No, not ‘maybe.’ Yes. Yes, yes, yes! You have to do it, baby. You just have to. It’s so amazing! Remember that day?” She tapped the photo on the fridge. “You were freaked out at first. Then we got there, and you felt it? Remember? You could feel that way again.” Desirée opened the fridge. “To be surrounded by all that death and to be standing there... so alive! You’ll feel the whole world. I know it’s in you. You just have to let it out, baby.” She took a slice of cheese from the fridge. “Want some?”

It was Jacob, the Irish ex-pat “corporate mystic,” who suggested Desirée walk through cemeteries barefoot. He started this whole thing. Desirée mentioned him one night as she and Gil sat on their front porch enjoying the warmer weather.

“We’ve got this new guy at work, Jacob,” Desirée said as she stood and threw her arms wide. “Yeah, the bosses brought him in from Ireland – can you imagine? Ireland. Huh. Anyway, he’s some sort of motivational guru who does these workshops on how to be more spiritual at work. Crazy, isn’t it?”

Gil laughed and watched his girlfriend reach her arms up toward the porch ceiling. She was on her tiptoes but was still too short to touch. She wobbled there for a long time.

“I mean, it just seems weird because a company doesn’t seem like the type of place where spirituality should matter. Now, you know me – I’m all about spirit and emotion.” Desirée turned back toward Gil, a strand of her hair curling around her softening eyes. “And passion. Yeah, you know about that, huh?” She laughed and shook her head. Gil raised an eyebrow, blushed, and watched as she shook, twirled, then shook again.

Desirée sat next to him, throwing her leg over Gil’s lap. He enjoyed the warmth of her thigh. “Jacob had us take our shoes off today. Can you believe it? Right there in the office – in the big conference room. I’m always kicking my shoes off under my desk anyway, so it was no big deal to me, but the others – you should have seen their faces!”

“What did he have you do then?”

“Oh, man, it was wild! He had us stand there with our shoes off, and then he says, ‘Close your eyes now’ with that Irish accent, you know?” Gil did not know, hadn’t met Jacob, but Desirée’s attempt at an Irish accent was cute. Awful, but cute.

“‘Relax your eyes,’ he told us. ‘Let your breathing slow down. Pay attention to your body. Your brow. Relax it. Let it fall. Now your fingers. Relax them. Now your feet. Pay attention to the here and now. Pay attention to what your feet are telling you. They are your most direct connection to the world.’”

Gil studied Desirée’s face. She had closed her eyes. Her Irish accent was already getting better. “And, damn, if I didn’t feel it,” she whispered.

Gil passed St. Joseph's Cemetery every day on the way to his job at the community center and again on the way home. The cemetery settled onto the rolling hills beside Canal Street. Gil imagined the expansive plot of headstones as a quilt tossed over the landscape, its gray bumps like nubs of fabric pulled from the ground.

A few days after Desirée mentioned Jacob, Gil drove through the cemetery, staying on the outermost dirt road. Where would he walk when it came time? Where exactly had

Gil stared at the picture on the fridge in the white kitchen, at the bosom of Desirée's red blouse, which poured out from within her leather jacket. It was her heart, and it had been oversized and pulsing madly that day at the Atlantic.

Desirée walked? Had she met Jacob there? Had they walked together? Had they snuck behind a storage building to feel the earth on their backs?

Gil shook the thought away. Where would he walk? He could stick to this path on the edge of the cemetery, slowly working his way toward the center, covering every inch even if it took all night.

Desirée would be proud, wouldn't she? Would she look at him with soft eyes and caress his hips when he returned to her?

But what would everyone else think? Would old women weeding flower beds see his bare feet and think Gil disrespectful for walking among the dead? Would they glare at him? Would they call to the groundskeepers to chase him off?

If he walked close to Canal Street, what would drivers think? Would they say, "Look at the hippy-freak with no shoes on"? Or would they say, "Now there's a spiritual young man. There's a young man who feels the world and is unafraid of it"?

Would anyone even notice?

He wanted not to care about all that. He told himself not to. But it wasn't as easy as flipping off some switch in his brain.

Desirée had once said his anxiety was probably because of something in his childhood – some embarrassing moment. He told her about the time he had leaned against the chalkboard during a third grade spelling bee, leaving behind a damp oval of sweat when he misspelled "enough." And the time when he wore green khakis in seventh grade and was called "Goon" from then on. "There are so many times," he told Desirée, and they laughed and drank.

She smiled at him when he spilled wine on his shirt. "To hell with them, baby. Who cares what anyone else thinks? Just live."

On his way home from work the next afternoon, he slowed down behind a funeral procession. The cars inched toward the entrance of St. Joseph's, then turned and crawled

beneath its heavy, black arch – compact cars and limos breaking from the line, like a Morse code of dots and dashes.

He arrived at the post office at 4:45, 15 minutes before the lobby window closed. An electric bill, a credit card bill, and a yellow package notice sat inside box #512. Gil pocketed the bills, then slid the softened paper of the notice under his fingernails as he waited in line to claim his package.

The post office smelled sweet, as if someone had just received flowers. Gil realized it was the woman in front of him. She was about his age, mid-20s. He looked at her brown hair, impressed by the uniform color. No streaks of blonde like Desirée's hair. It hung straight but full. He pictured Desirée, at work for another 10 minutes, her hair busy with carefully placed highlights and pushed around just so as to seem carefree.

The line moved forward. Gil stepped ahead, enjoying the subtle burst of smell from the young woman with plain brown hair. A thin gray scarf draped over her shoulders. It was nothing that Desirée would ever wear. Desirée's favorite scarf was so long that she needed to wrap it around her neck several times. Bright yellow mixed with sky blue in a pattern that reminded Gil of Native Americans. "Southwestern," Desirée had explained.

He tried to imagine the young woman drinking Merlot and making love on a mattress on the floor. Was she the type of girl who would peer out the window and talk about stars and galaxies, comfortable letting the moonlight fall upon her naked breasts? Was she the girl who would press her mouth toward the window and make it steam up, then write "True" inside the cloudy circle?

Gil couldn't imagine it. Not this girl. Not this girl with plain brown hair and a light, muted scarf. She would drink milk before bedtime and cover herself up after making quiet love, maybe not even taking off her flannel pajama top.

When it was the young woman's turn at the lobby window, the clerk handed her a small package. When she turned, Gil realized he hadn't yet seen her face. She had eyes the color of hot chocolate. Her nose was small, and faint freckles seemed to spill over it onto her cheeks. She glanced at Gil and smiled. She was turning her package over in her hands. It was covered in white paper and decorated with pictures in crayon and markers. "From my niece," she explained, and then she exited the lobby, leaving one last whiff of flowers in her wake. Gil imagined her far into the future, silver streaks intertwined through her plain, brown hair, wearing flannel pajamas around the house on a Sunday morning.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked with a sigh. Gil slid his yellow notice toward the older man and glanced at the clock on the lobby wall: 4:58.

His head began to feel heavy, a thick, slippery mixture of motor oil and doubt. When the clerk returned with the package, Gil turned toward the exit, glancing down at the brown box in his hand. It was addressed to Desirée. Printed along the edge of the box was the name of a cosmetics company: Essence. It was her monthly supply of eyeliner and

blush and cover-up. Something small broke inside him— just one tiny shell on an infinite beach, but it was large enough to get his attention.

He hurried through the post office door and scanned the sidewalk and parking lot for a plain, brown girl carrying a brilliant white box. But he did not see her.

She had disappeared among the traffic which had grown dense as people rushed home or to the market or toward the now-closed post office lobby – a place that was now dark and that held the smell of flowers behind a locked door.

When Gil walked barefoot among the graves the next day, he felt nothing coming up through his feet. He stamped the ground. Nothing. He could feel the grass between his toes. He could feel the afternoon wind on his forehead. He fumbled with the items in his pockets: keys, two five-dollar bills, a tube of unflavored lip balm, his folded paycheck envelope, its plastic address window crinkling. He could feel all these things clearly.

But he felt nothing coming up through his feet. No “trembling with the movement of the Earth,” as Desirée had described. Why am I here? he wondered. This is so stupid. I bet she never felt a thing out here – she just says that. The only thing she wants to feel is superior. She wants to impress Jacob. Gil stopped walking when his toes touched loose dirt. A new grave. Elias Stanley. Gil took a step back and said a short prayer his grandmother had taught him: “Grant him light, happiness, and peace.”

Moments later, as he leaned against a tree to wipe his soles clean, he laughed at how ridiculous he must look. But the thought of others looking his way didn’t bother him as much as before. What did they see? Guy in his twenties. Barefoot in the cemetery. Guy in his eighties. Dead in the ground. Was there much of a difference?

He drove home slowly and imagined Desirée and Jacob sitting on the porch. He imagined Jacob’s arm touching Desirée’s. They might be fixed there, as if they had always belonged together. Meant to be.

He imagined parking the car on the street, then noticing the small pile of boxes on the sidewalk. His clothes, his sneakers, his magazines. So few things, he imagined himself thinking. There should be more. I should have more.

In the kitchen, Gil stared at the plate of raw vegetables. Desirée was in the bedroom.

“Jacob’s coming over!” she called to him. “For dinner. Cool, huh? But he only eats raw food. You don’t mind, do you? Oh, of course you don’t, baby. You understand, right?” Gil poked at the row of baby carrots, upsetting what seemed to be the careful balance it had had with the celery stalks.

He walked to the porch and sat on the top step. He could not picture Jacob. How does someone who eats only raw food and speaks with a real Irish accent look? What kind of car would he drive? Or would he walk to their place, barefoot and wearing a thick, tartan scarf against the darkening sky?

Gil held his breath as Desirée stepped onto the porch and walked past him. He felt the air being pulled away from him. A bitter perfume trailed behind her. When she reached the sidewalk, she turned. She had applied the new makeup. Essence, Gil thought. Desirée had smeared the makeup on so thick that there was a clear line on her neck where the mask ended. Even in the dwindling light, Gil could see this. He imagined slipping a fingernail underneath the line, loosening it just a bit and allowing the new edge to make a slight shadow on her uncovered skin.

He looked down the street in the direction of the cemetery. A figure appeared there, rising up from the road. Then he looked at Desirée. She took a step backward, craning her painted neck toward the figure.

Now, just outside the cone of light from the porch’s yellow bulb, Desirée looked as if she was falling from some great height, growing smaller and smaller. Gil watched her move away, and he felt nothing.

Edward Hagelstein

The Peespot Players

The setting is this: a damp, cold evening in an alley behind the Pequot Players Community Theater, housed in a strip mall. The theater, in suburban Central Florida, takes its name from the community in which it is located, simply called Pequot. Six thousand single-family homes, townhouses, and condominiums. Mean elevation forty-six feet. There is no known connection to the Pequot Indian Tribe of Connecticut.

C.C. Charnell, the developer of Pequot – for that’s what it is, a development rather than an incorporated town or city – saw the name somewhere and liked the way it rolled off the tongue. Pequot.

C.C. had never ventured north of Nashville, however, and the name rolled off his southern tongue almost as something unseemly. C.C. overemphasized the *pee* in *Pequot*, leaving little room for the *quot* before he was ready to move on in his sales pitch. “*Peeeeeeeeee-kwot is a master-planned community rivaled by none in the area. Step right over here, and take a gander at the colorful scale model of our golf course.*”

Little could C.C. foresee that some thirty years later – long after he had retired to a wheelchair and Bahamian nursemaid in Hot Springs, Arkansas – the community would be most often referred to by residents under the age of twenty-five (and a few older folks) as *Peespot*.

It’s not that Pequot has fallen into disrepair. There are no visible pee-spots, with exception of where some residents covertly allow their dogs to defile their neighbors’ groomed yards under cover of dark. The community is well-kept and secure, as secure as any place is these days. Foreclosures are at a minimum.

The point in time is a Friday evening in mid-December. The temperature is hovering in the high forties, and a number of the Pequot Players are gathered around a portable fire pit in the alley – courtesy of Scrooge’s nephew, who brings it in the bed of his ostentatious Cadillac truck.

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, as adapted by two founding members of the Players, Fred Neville and Elmore Streit, is being staged inside to a capacity crowd of ninety-six.

Cast members – of whom there are twenty-two – not on stage at any given moment tend to step outside between scenes and gather around the fire. As an unintended consequence, the smoke attaches to their costumes, lending a semi-authentic wood-smoke smell, reminiscent of Victorian England, when they return to the stage for a scene.

Scrooge’s nephew is played by Hunter Liston, local foreclosure attorney, who in addition to supplying the fire pit, brings several folding chairs bearing the logo of the local university Division I football team, of which he’s a booster. Hunter, a fan of college football and excess in general, is now on his third wife – the former Paloma Gibble, an energetic and ambitious real estate broker. Paloma works wicked hours, and rather than spend any waking time alone, Hunter is always on the make, preferably with girls half his age, or more sinisterly, younger.

His hair is a problem in this production. It looks too good to belong in Victorian England, blow-dried and tinted blond. The director makes him wear his hat the entire time he’s onstage, even during indoor scenes, because Hunter won’t let his hair go natural.

Carla Boyette, mother of Hannah Boyette (who is playing Fan, young Scrooge’s sister), is also present. Carla is not a cast member, though she badly wants to be. Her extreme overacting in the audition resulted in a rapid relegation to backstage mom. Carla is supposed to be in the children’s dressing room helping the kids change between scenes and generally keeping order. She spends most of the show by the fire, resulting in a few minor costume errors and nearly missed scenes, not to mention some childish noise leakage to the stage that has the Assistant Director/Stage Manager constantly distracted.

Carla is more friend than mother to fifteen-year-old Hannah, evidenced by her cavalier reaction when Hannah and the much older and married Hunter Liston are discovered between scenes, sitting together in his truck in the dark alley. Although both are fully costumed, it is obviously not the ideal situation. Hunter is known to keep a nip bottle in the truck. It isn’t known if he would stoop to sharing with an underage girl.

The single Carla, herself, has some designs on Hunter Liston, who in turn only appears to have eyes for her daughter. The three of them are gathered around the fire with other cast members. Carla is somewhat desperately attempting to catch Hunter’s eye.

“You nasty thing,” she says proudly as Hannah juts her budding chest and pouts her way into a photo with Hunter. He wraps his arm a little too snugly around the girl, and Carla pretends not to notice.

Others notice. “It’s warm inside, Hannah,” one of the motherly cast members says, futilely attempting to get the teenager away from Hunter while throwing eye darts at Carla, imploring her to be less ignorant and more of a mother.

“Stay out here,” Hunter says to Hannah, his eyes slightly red, his breath Chivas-sweet. “I know if I had my druthers, I’d take the fire.”

“Druthers,” says Hannah, huddling close to him as the motherly lady gives up and goes inside for a scene. “Are they like long johns or something?”

Hunter gazes at her. “What?”

“I don’t know what druthers are. I’ve never been up north.”

“It’s a saying. If I had a choice is what it means.” Hunter’s voice, dripping with condescension, sounds like someone’s cross father at that moment. Not like a man that sits in dark luxury trucks with teenage girls.

Hannah, overly perceptive as only a teenage girl can be, is crushed at his dismissive tone and her own ignorance. “Then why didn’t you say that?” She breaks away from him and flounces in the back door of the theatre. Their first spat.

Hannah doesn’t return to the fire that night. She spends the time between scenes sitting in the children’s dressing room playing an acting game called “Kill” that she really doesn’t understand. But it’s fun anyway, and it keeps the kids mostly quiet, for which the Assistant Director/Stage Manager is temporarily grateful.

Young Hannah, having been raised by Carla, is consequently ignorant in many subjects, but certainly in matters of human sexuality. Her youthful dalliance with Hunter Liston may be, in Hannah’s case, an inappropriate attempt to attach herself to a father figure, a totem she has been denied by not knowing her father, who is apparently incarcerated somewhere in Texas.

Also in the cast, as a towns person, is a fourteen year-old boy known as T.D., slightly chubby with a Beatle-ish haircut. From the mop-top days, not their later shaggy period. He is rumored to be the illegitimate great-great-grandson of a somewhat famous southern writer. T.D. has taken to discussing his bisexual fantasies in the teenagers’ dressing room. Hannah has no idea what he’s talking about. She kisses her girlfriends all the time, so what’s the big deal? She wishes he would stop describing the shape of his friend Ralph’s butt in yoga pants.

Dressing rooms have been assigned by age group, so fortunately the younger children haven’t been subject to T.D.’s desires, which some of the teenagers, especially Hannah, find gross and incomprehensible anyway.

*

Scrooge is played by a car salesman named Miles Marion, who has been capably bouncing around local theater for years. Miles doesn’t try to sell cars to the cast but will make former and present cast mates a good deal. He turns out to be an excellent Scrooge, whose only apparent peculiarity is a tendency to continue to speak in his British Scrooge accent between scenes.

Miles has noted the inappropriate flirtation between Hunter Liston and young Hannah. A divorced former philanderer and reformed problem drinker, Miles has attended the mega-church up the road for almost a decade, regularly after his divorce and intermittently the past few years, and feels proprietary toward the illicit activities which he once greatly enjoyed. When appropriate, he tries to discourage others from traveling down the same crooked path, now that he’s abandoned it.

Miles seems more concerned about the ramifications of Hannah and Hunter’s behavior than Carla, who is after all Hannah’s mother, but perhaps not of the soundest mind.

Miles worries about intangibles and unpredictable occurrences more than most nervous grandmothers, a trait not normally attributed to car salesmen. His other current concern centers around a vehicle break-in in the alley during a show last weekend, in an interval when all cast members were in the theater and the alley was unattended. Cast members have been requested to park their cars in the alley to save the parking spaces in front for the audience. In the incident, Mrs. Fezziwig parked at the darker end of the alley and ill-advisedly left her notebook computer on the passenger seat to find herself stepping on crunchy bits of window after the show and subsequently registering her notebook as no longer present.

As for culprits, Miles suspects denizens of the billiards parlor, also a tenant in the strip mall. He hasn’t trusted pool players since an incident in the early eighties when he was car-jacked in a rental while on business in Miami. A thug forced him from the car at a red light by weakly thrashing Miles about the head and shoulders with the heavy end of a collapsible billiards cue, and drove off with the car.

He also doesn’t trust Hunter Liston’s intentions toward young Hannah. Miles has brought his Glock 17 to the theater this evening, without making it known to anyone else. In fact, Miles has the pistol in the pocket of his Scrooge coat, and despite the cold weather has been making patrols of the alley between scenes, checking vehicles for either an inappropriate Hunter/Hannah liaison or a pool-cue-wielding B&E artist. If anyone gathered around the fire pit notices Miles occasionally wandering down the darkened alley, nothing is said. Marshmallows continued to be toasted without comment. They may assume Miles is mentally preparing for his next scene.

*

On his third patrol down the alley that night, midway through the second act, Miles approaches Hunter Liston's imposing black Cadillac Escalade EXT truck, and seeing it vacant of fancy-haired lawyers and naive teenage girls, prepares to execute an about-face and return to the theater.

He notices the car behind Liston's has its trunk open, and instead of assuming that the owner, who is undoubtedly in the theater, left it open in a rush to get inside where it's warm, Miles suspects wrongdoing and removes the Glock from Scrooge's overcoat. He can barely see at this end of the dark alley but now hears a noise coming from the trunk.

"You there," Miles says, still using his Scrooge voice.

A head pops up over the trunk lid. Miles can't tell how old, but not far out of his teens.

"Is that your vehicle?" Miles asks.

"Who you supposed to be in that shit?"

"Scrooge," Miles says, despite himself. He's still not sure if this is someone in the cast or a boyfriend or what. The head comes from around the trunk lid, followed by a body. He is nobody that Miles has seen around the theater previously.

"You from that theater place?"

"That's correct."

"Why you talkin' funny. You from Canada or something?"

"I asked you if that's your vehicle." Miles gestures toward the car, and as he does so the thief sees the pistol in his hand.

"Yo," he says and starts to put his hands in the air. "No need for that, old dude."

Miles has forgotten he's holding the pistol, but decides to use it to his advantage. As an amateur stage actor and salesman, Miles is adept at thinking on his feet and adapting to unforeseen circumstances.

"I asked you a question, young man," he says in his best imperious Scrooge manner.

The thief looks Miles over and comes to the clever conclusion that the pistol is a prop. He drops his hands.

"You usin' that in a play."

Miles doesn't immediately understand. He thinks the thief means his clothes, which are undoubtedly not from this time. He realizes the thief is looking at the Glock.

"No, this is genuine," he says.

"Boo-shit. You in a play. That shit ain't real."

"It's a Christmas play," Miles says, thrown by this quick power transference.

"So what? They got guns at Christmas."

He turns away from Miles and goes to the trunk, where he sifts through the contents of a purse he had dumped before being interrupted. He picks up a wallet and tucks a computer bag under his arm, glances at Miles, and starts to walk down the alley away

from him.

"It's real," Miles says.

"Later, Old Scrooge dude," the thief says without looking back.

Miles raises the pistol until it's sighted at the trunk of a palm tree about five feet to the left of the thief's head and pulls the trigger. The crashing sound is deafening in the alley, which is lit bright by the muzzle flash for an instant. Palm pith spatters from the tree as it absorbs the slug. The thief stops dead, releases the wallet and computer bag, and sprints down the alley without looking back, faster than Miles can remember ever seeing anyone run before. He notes with shocked satisfaction that there appears to be a rapidly spreading stain on the seat of the young ruffian's baggy jeans.

Miles picks the bag and wallet up, tosses them in the trunk, and closes the lid just as an anonymous townsman runs up from the direction of the fire pit. Miles can see the others standing by the fire and looking their way down the darkened alley, some still holding marshmallows on sticks.

"What the hell was that? It sounded like a gunshot."

"I think a tree branch snapped in the cold," Miles says. Realizing more explanation is needed, he adds: "It happens during the winter."

"In Florida?"

Miles shrugs in Scrooge's overcoat and walks briskly toward the theater to make his next scene. The others continue to peer down the alley, without leaving the safety of the fire.

Bob Crachit is talking to Sarah Welk, a townspeople, when Miles walks into the hallway outside the men's dressing room, ears still ringing. He doesn't know Crachit's real name. He and Sarah appear to have children attending the same school.

"I picked Seth up from school yesterday, and some lady in a sombrero handed me a greasy bag of chips."

"They were nachos," Sarah says.

A teenage girl unknown to Miles, except for her near-constant talk about being vegan, makes a face. "Ewwwww. Cooked in animal fat."

"That's not the worst part," Crachit says. "She handed me the bag, said 'Nacho Average School,' and gave me a demented stare with that sombrero hanging over her eyes."

"They're fund-raising," Sarah says.

"It's trite," the vegan says. "Nacho average school." She snorts with derision.

Crachit ignores Vegan Girl and stares intently at Sarah. Stay-at-home mother of two, half-marathon runner, she performs in a couple of shows a season to get out of the house some evenings. She's a fairly good amateur actress. Miles can tell Crachit is putting the make on Sarah. She doesn't seem interested, but Crachit is oblivious. Miles half-follows

the conversation while pondering the fact that he hasn't shot his Glock outside of the range in at least fifteen years, since the time he did a drunken drive-by on the trailer of his ex-lover's ex-husband. He only hit a tree that time, too, although he wasn't aiming for it. He needs to calm himself and refocus now and does so by silently going over his lines.

"I think I'm going to audition for a new reality show in Orlando," Bob Crachit tells Sarah, still staring.

Miles will admit Sarah is attractive. Maybe thirty-five, she favors tight jeans and clingy blouses. He'd bet Crachit hasn't a chance.

"What's it called?" she asks, while examining her stage make-up in a mirror.

"*Noises in a Dark Room*," Crachit says. "It has a neat premise. They send you into a totally dark room and film you with infrared cameras. Then they either introduce something threatening like a wild dog, or they pipe in wild dog noises through the speakers. Then they film your reaction. You can go for the exit any time, and you never know if the sounds are real or not."

"That's totally demeaning," says Vegan Girl. "You're cringing in the dark in total fear while people are watching you? No thanks."

"So they would have the sound of say, someone cocking a shotgun, and you'd have to decide whether you wanted to ride that out or go for the exit?" Sarah says to Crachit in the mirror.

"Something like that," Crachit says. "Would that be scary, though? I mean, no one's really going to shoot you on a set."

"My husband says it's the single most frightening sound you can hear in the dark," Sarah says to the mirror. "He keeps a shotgun under the bed."

"A shotgun?" Crachit takes his eyes off of Sarah for the first time.

"It's not loaded, because of the kids," she says. "He says the sound alone would do the trick if someone broke into the house."

"Good to know," Crachit says with relief. "I'm thinking about using a stage name to audition," he adds.

Sarah waits. As a mother, she's used to open-ended stories.

"Sigfried Kashmir," Crachit says.

Sarah looks at him without expression.

"That sounds like a gay Turkish oil-wrestler," Vegan Girl says.

Crachit turns on her. "Turkish oil wrestlers aren't gay," he says with some vehemence. "It just seems that way."

Vegan Girl raises her hands in mock supplication. "Okay, big guy. If you say so." She glances at Miles for support.

"What do you think?" Crachit asks Sarah.

"I don't know if they're gay or not."

"No. About the name? Sigfried Kashmir."

"It's a little over the top," Sarah says.

Miles tears himself away from the tableau because he's due on stage in thirty seconds. He's been following the show's progress on the dressing room monitor.

Miles encounters Hunter Liston alone in the alley after his scene. There appears to have been no response by law enforcement to the gunshot, Miles notes with some relief. Hunter glances at him and looks away. Miles decides it's time to issue Hunter a warning. Outlining the possible consequences of his behavior.

"I want you to know something," Miles says.

Hunter looks around and sees he's alone with Miles in the alley. Miles hasn't spoken to him off stage before. Hunter's expression is slightly vacant. He appears to have been sampling the Chivas between scenes.

Hunter stares after him, realizing Miles just threatened him entirely in his Scrooge voice.

"What's that?" Hunter asks.

"If the world goes to hell, and total anarchy ensues—"

"Like chaos—"

"Just like that," Miles says. "If that happens, the breakdown of society and its laws—"

"Like New Orleans after the hurricane?" Hunter's enjoying this conversation. Something fresh and amusing. He grins at Miles.

"If it happens, I want you to know, I'm coming for you."

"Me? You're coming for me?" Hunter stops grinning. "Why?"

"Hannah," Miles says. "She's just a girl. Still in high school."

"Oh? But she's having a good time."

"She's a child."

"Come on," Hunter says. "We're just having some fun. Her mother hasn't said anything."

"Her mother's a moron," Miles says. "I heard they're predicting something like eleven possible hurricanes next year. Chances are one blows through here. I know where you live. Trees down everywhere, the power goes out, the police are busy for a few days after the big one hits." Miles points his finger at Hunter. "I'll be coming to visit you in the dead of the night." He walks inside.

Hunter stares after him, realizing Miles just threatened him entirely in his Scrooge voice.

*

The Assistant Director/Stage Manager stalks into the hallway where Bob Crachit, Sarah Welk, and Vegan Girl are still waiting for their next scene. He is angry, which isn't unusual. The Assistant Director/Stage Manager is universally disliked in this production – his first participation as anything other than a mediocre actor – mainly because he has taken on the persona of a strict disciplinarian. He refers to himself, in writing and in speech, as the AD/SM. He gathers all cast members, 'and that means EVERYONE, people!' in the alley prior to each show and makes unnecessary and uninformative announcements and speeches while standing on a chair. He has instituted the issuance of something called the Ha'penny Award that he seems to present only to those who expend the most energy kissing his ass and to the few cast members who pay attention to his speeches about the rudeness of eating french fries while others are on stage.

"But we're in the dressing room," someone responded to that one.

"Yes, but the other actors on stage can smell them," the AD/SM replied.

"So you can't eat food if someone else can smell it?"

"It's a rule. Just don't do it!"

He has threatened to fine cast members for being late, failing to sign in, and other indiscretions. Until it was pointed out that no one is being paid, and it is therefore impossible to institute fines, which no one will pay in any case.

"Last night someone threw a greasy bag of chips in my vintage Jaguar," the AD/SM tells the three in the hallway.

"They were nachos," Vegan Girl says.

The AD/SM doesn't seem to register the foreknowledge in her comment. Bob Crachit studies his costume in the mirror.

"Whatever. I want to know who did it."

The vegan takes offense. "It's stupid to have the top down on your luxury car in winter anyway, just to impress people."

"It's Florida. There is no winter."

"Tell that to everyone huddled around the fire."

"The driver's seat is stained," the AD/SM says to no one in particular. "It's Connolly Leather. I don't think the grease will come out. I'll have to have it replaced with inferior, domestic leather at some exorbitant cost I can't afford."

He wanders away, a broken man.

"He should be nicer to us," Vegan Girl says, looking at Crachit, who glances away. "Then people wouldn't throw nachos in his bourgeois car."

Sarah Welk raises her eyebrows at Crachit. He believes she's impressed by his act of defiance.

"Nacho average car," he says.

*

Paloma Liston, Hunter's third wife, storms into the hallway where Miles stands. He saw Hunter take Hannah outside several minutes earlier – not long after he threatened Hunter – hopefully to break the news to her that they wouldn't be alone together in the future.

"Where's Hunter?" Paloma demands.

Miles looks her over. He knows who she is, although they've never been introduced. At least ten years younger than Hunter, well-coifed, put together, pretty in a way that says she's trying too hard.

"Outside with a teenage girl," Miles says in his Scrooge voice. He nods toward the door leading to the alley.

She looks at him appraisingly. "Thank you."

Miles follows discreetly as she strides out, looks around until she spots the truck and stalks off into the dark. Miles stands by the door and waits as she pounds on the driver's window.

"You fucking asshole! Liar! Shit-talker! Lie-talking asshole! Child molester!"

What a mouth she has, and behind such a pretty face. Miles slips back inside. In this matter, his work is done.

When Miles comes off stage near the end of the second act, Paloma Liston is waiting in the hallway by the stage door and starts speaking as if continuing a conversation they'd started earlier. She assumes a familiarity that takes him aback for a moment but is not necessarily unwelcome. Her perfume smells exclusive.

"Do you know that part in *The Sound of Music* when Liesl asks Maria how you know when you're really in love?"

"Not really," Miles says. He thinks she must trust him because he's older and therefore harmless in a sexual way, and because he gave Hunter up with no qualms earlier. She's upset, and Miles lets her vent.

"And Maria says she knows she's in love with Captain Von Trapp because she doesn't think about herself first anymore, she thinks about both of them?"

"I'm not much for musicals."

"Well, Hunter's never gotten beyond that part of thinking about *himself* first. There is no *us*."

She crosses her arms, leans back against the wall, and looks at Miles. "What do you think of that?"

Miles gazes into her bluish-green eyes and considers what he thinks of that and if he's come across this particular scenario in his mega-church mentoring classes. He doesn't, and he hasn't.

"I think it's sad."

"Damn right, it's sad," Paloma says. "I should have known better. Second wives may have it good, but third wives get boned."

"How long have you been married?" he asks.

"Too many fucking years." She doesn't seem too broken up, mainly angry.

"Pre-nup?"

"Are you a lawyer?" she asks, tilting her head at him.

"Not on your life," Miles says. "Auto sales."

"What make?"

"Subaru. For the past twenty years."

"I drive a Lexus."

"Give us a try sometime."

They move to two tattered chairs in the darkened hallway. Miles has at least seven minutes before he's due back on stage for his final scene. He feels a strange affinity with Paloma, two people who have circled each other for years but never seem to have spoken.

"They tell you to make yourself invaluable in the work place if you want to get anywhere. Being married is the same. You've got to make yourself invaluable in a marriage," Paloma says. "Hunter hasn't done that. That's on top of all the other shit. I don't need him for anything. I can live perfectly without him."

Miles talks with plenty of people but hasn't really spoken *with* anyone in years, since his divorce. He has no idea why, but he wants to open up to her, with her.

"I didn't do that either," Miles says. "I was a mediocre husband."

Paloma places a soft hand on his. "None of us really do it right. There are always second chances."

"Not at my age."

"At any age. Some real assholes even get third chances," Paloma says. "I know a bit about you. A guy like you deserves even more."

"I'd probably blow those, too." Miles stares at nothing for a minute. "You ever think enough is enough?" he asks her.

"All the time."

"I mean enough of everything?" he says. "When you become older, things don't seem to matter as much...oh not you. You're young; you still have people that depend on you."

"Not really," she says. "I don't have kids. Hunter has kids. They're kind of bratty to me. I'm not their mother." She looks at him. "What do you mean, anyway?"

"My children are grown, out of college, on their own. My ex-wife is perfectly happy living in our old house without me, scrapbooking and volunteering at the cultural center.

I can sell cars in my sleep; it's no challenge. Selling cars is easy when you stop trying to bullshit people. Just like this acting stuff – people want the truth. Give them that, and they'll eat out of your hand." Miles realizes he is on the edge of rambling. "No one really needs me anymore."

Paloma seems to ponder this while watching him. "You carry on, and try to find some meaning or someone," she says. "What's the alternative?"

Miles hesitates, then pantomimes putting a pistol in his mouth, a pistol he has that moment in his overcoat pocket, which the shocked Paloma doesn't know. She's used to Hunter, a man who grasps everything he can, including things he doesn't need and shouldn't have. She knows for a fact he would never contemplate taking his own life – there are too many things left to take from others first. She also feels Miles isn't acting at this moment.

Miles is slightly shocked himself that he has admitted this thought to Paloma, a woman he has just met with problems of her own.

Paloma places a hand on his arm. "I think it would be a mistake," she says calmly, "to underestimate the need your loved ones have for you. Your grandkids and even adult children still need you. Other people need you." She knows this sounds lame; it's the best she can come up with.

Miles looks at her. "Maybe you're right." He stands heavily and walks toward the stage door. "Maybe you're right."

Vegan Girl has been watching from the far end of the hallway.

"They're going to do it," she says to nobody in particular.

"Do what?" says Sarah Welk.

"Have sex."

Bob Crachit and Sarah Welk watch the end of the conversation between Miles and Paloma.

"That's Hunter's wife," Sarah says.

"Miles is ancient," Crachit says.

"They're going to do it," Vegan Girl repeats, still gazing down the hall. "I know what I know."

The other two look at each other and shrug.

At the curtain call, Hunter Liston topples drunkenly onto the stage floor when he attempts to bow. His hat falls off, and his puffy, dyed, unhealthy modern hair is revealed. Hannah stifles a giggle behind her gloved hand. The AD/SM quickly closes the curtain. While pretending to help Hunter to his feet, Miles puts the toe of his Scrooge boot in Hunter's kidney and twists enough to make him yelp.

*

The next afternoon, Paloma Liston strides unannounced into Miles's shared office at the dealer and trades her two-year-old Lexus for a Subaru Outback, sight unseen. She's dressed casually and appears less real estate agent and more leisurely suburbanite with time to kill before she has to pick the kids up from a private school. A couple of salesmen cruise by Miles's office, eyeing Paloma, having noted her expensive purse and the car she drove up in.

Miles is surprised by Paloma's unexpected appearance. He feels more refreshed than he has in years after speaking with her last evening and getting a good night's sleep for a change.

"Pick a car for me," she says. "I trust you. As one sales professional to another."

Miles sits back in his chair in his blue Subaru logo golf shirt and looks at Paloma. "You don't strike me as the Subaru type."

"I'm about to rescue a yellow lab and take up kayaking." There's a coolly defiant look on her face. Miles has seen it before, when a woman has made up her mind about something important to her.

"What does Hunter think?"

"He'll find out when I get home in my new car."

"Can I get you a bottle of water while they bring something in off the lot?"

"I'm not thirsty. How about an early dinner after we're done?"

"Financing might take a couple of hours."

"I'm not financing." She pulls a black card from her wallet and slides it onto his desk. "They tell me I can buy a car with this."

Miles watches her. His office-mate, a chubby twenty-five-year-old car nerd who already worships Miles as the most natural salesman he's ever met, comes in with a clipboard, sees the card on the desk between Miles and Paloma, looks at them both, and walks out.

"I'm at least twenty years older and a lot less richer than you," Miles says after a moment.

"That's what they all say."

"If you want to have dinner, we can do that without you buying a car."

"I want the car, and I want you to pick it," she says. "Hunter buys my cars without telling me. I don't even know where he gets them."

"And you want me to do the same thing?"

"Just this once."

"Will you be trading the Lexus?"

"I hate the Lexus. Give me a fair price for it. Again, I'll trust you."

"How long have you and Hunter been married?"

"Ten years."

"Divorce?"

"I'm against it," Paloma says. "I'm waiting for him to die. I want him to be gone while I can still enjoy it. He's dragging his heels."

"I suppose the thing with young Hannah could make you mad enough..."

"It's not just the young girls," Paloma says. "It's everything. He's a turd."

"But wishing him dead?"

"It's not so much a wish as a foregone conclusion. All the factors are there." She ticks off Hunter's bad habits on her fingers. "He smokes, drinks too much, drinks and drives, doesn't exercise, lives on steak and hamburgers. Why should I care if he doesn't?"

Miles concentrates on her slender fingers. "You'd do well in a divorce. It might be quicker, too."

"I don't care about the money. That's my secret," she says. "I can make money."

"That's refreshing."

"So what kind of car am I getting?"

"I'm having them bring an Outback up. Not the top-of-the-line, somewhere in the middle," he says. "Nicely accessorized. Good mileage. You'll want to drive it first, to be sure."

"I'm going to love it."

"It's blue – deep indigo pearl."

"Sounds divine," she says. "When's your next show?"

"Friday," Miles says. "It's our last weekend."

"I'm coming to every show. I'm going to really pay attention to your acting. I've been watching you for years, but peripherally, not as the main topic of interest."

Miles ponders this.

"And after the final show, I'd like us to go out to dinner, and if you ply me with enough Pinot Noir, I want to come back to your place and see how you live."

"It's a divorced man's apartment. It's not pretty."

"I understand you're kind of straight-laced and moral these days, but maybe you'll loosen up a little for me."

"You're not joking, are you?" Miles asks.

"I'm not joking," Paloma says.

Miles eases his chair even further back and watches her as his office-mate returns with the keys to Paloma's new car.

Miles nods at Paloma, and the already smitten salesman hands the keys to her with a flourish and a grin.

Paloma stands with the keys in her elegant hand and smiles widely at Miles. "Let's take a test drive," she says.

Miles and the salesman look at each other. After a moment, Miles gets up and follows Paloma outside into the parking lot.

Biographies

Cathleen Calbert's writing has appeared in many publications, including *Ms. Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, and *The Paris Review*. She is the author of three books of poetry: *Lessons in Space*, *Bad Judgment*, and *Sleeping with a Famous Poet*. She has been awarded The Nation Discovery Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the Mary Tucker Thorp Award from Rhode Island College, where she professes.

Van G. Garrett appreciates boxing, photographing hummingbirds in Tuscany, and the trumpeted sounds of Miles Davis. A watch aficionado, Van is the author of *Songs in Blue Negritude* (poetry), *ZURI: Selected Love Songs* (poetry), and *The Iron Legs in the Trees* (fiction). His updates and appearances can be found at: www.vanggarrettpoet.com.

Edward Hagelstein's short fiction has appeared in *Thuglit*, *The Harbinger*, *The Fat City Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Sundog Lit*, *The Whistling Fire*, *Phoebe*, *Drunken Boat* and other places. He lives in Tampa, Florida.

Di Jayawickrema was born in India to Sri Lankan parents who eventually brought her to New York City where she currently lives and writes. She has had her fiction published in *The Albion Review*, and was the recipient of the The Albion Review Fiction Prize and the Portia Dunham Award.

Josh Lamstein studied English at Oberlin College. Soon after, he volunteered for the Peace Corps and worked in rural Panama. He currently attends graduate school in San Francisco. This is his first published story.

Glenn Erick Miller lives in northern New York. His writing has appeared most recently in *The Citron Review*, *Agave Magazine*, and *Red Earth Review*. He is a recent winner in the Adirondack Writing Center's annual awards. He has worked as a youth counselor, photographer, and a college professor, and he is currently working on a novel for young adults.

Amanda Paulger is a writer and photographer from Montpelier, Vermont. She spends her free time wandering on adventures to encourage her writing. She is currently working on a novel.

Christopher Stephen was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. He had a fondness for the arts early on and in 2004 was accepted into Douglas Anderson School of the Arts for creative writing. Writing became a passion, and in 2008, after being accepted into the University of North Florida, he pursued a degree in English with a minor in writing. He felt called to the visual arts, so in 2010 transferred to UNF's art and design program. Throughout his artistic endeavors writing never truly left him, and so he began to incorporate stories, poems and journal entries into his images. In 2012 he graduated with a BFA in Fine Art with a focus on drawing and painting.

Stephen's work is a contemporary illuminated manuscript, blurring the lines of literature and art to create a hybrid that lives and breathes in the space between the two art forms. He uses art as an autobiographical visual journal, writing personal insecurities and secrets onto the page. The visual style of his scrawling language allows the words to preserve their clandestinity while simultaneously permitting the viewer to openly interpret their meaning. The viewer then becomes a part of that story as s/he tries to assimilate and understand the philosophies of someone else's life, and reflect upon her/his own.

Currently, Stephen teaches art at Duncan U. Fletcher Middle School. As an art educator he hopes to inspire his students to be excited about art. He teaches them to think like creatives and to incorporate that mindset into not only their artwork but also their daily lives.

You can see more at the artist's website: www.christopherstephen.com

Jayshiro Tashiro is a fiction writer living in Tucson, Arizona. During his wayward youth, Tashiro was an academic researcher and faculty member serving time in several American and Canadian universities. His principal research focused on developing methods for delineating cognitive processes during formation of misconceptions as individuals learn and then express behaviors based on what was learned. Recently, his work has turned to studying the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on an individual's world view. Tashiro's fiction explores the edgy ground of believing we understand what is happening around us but are all too often wrong.

Meeah Williams is a writer and graphic artist. Her most recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Milo Review*, *Vagabond City*, *Petrichor Review*, *Meat for Tea*, *Per Contra*, and *Phantom Drift*. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her artist husband, Hank.

Jane Zich, MFA, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who earned her fine arts degree through the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, but discovered her preferred narrative mode was visual rather than verbal. Both as a self-taught artist and as a depth psychotherapist, she uses imagery from the unconscious as an essential ingredient in her work.

Zich's award-winning paintings and drawings have been juried into international, national, and San Francisco Bay Area art shows, featured in solo art exhibits, and published in *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, *Dream Time*, *Gambling the Aisle*, *Artists' Dialogue*, and *Shadow: Touching the Darkness Within*, a book of art and literature exploring the Shadow archetype [Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Press, 2003]. More of her work can be found at www.zichpaintings.com.