

MULESKINNER JOURNAL



Journal Six - May 2023



MIRRORS

What we saw

What was reflected

MULESKINNER JOURNAL

JOURNAL SIX: MIRRORS

PUBLISHED MAY 1, 2023

COPYRIGHT © 2023 MULESKINNER JOURNAL

ISSN 2771-7232

EDITORS:

GARY CAMPANELLA

PETER ANDREWS

THOMAS PHALEN

JEREMY PROEHL

JOHN ROMAGNA

JUNE STODDARD

CONTACT:

MULESKINNERJOURNAL@GMAIL.COM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5 CHARLOTTE M. FRIEDMAN, UNPACKING CHARLOTTE
- 7 BOB ZASLOW, THE PHOTOGRAPH
- 9 ANGELA HOFFMAN, ALL FOLDED
- 11 ROBERT NISBET, A MIRROR
- 13 ALISON AUCH, DRIVING BACK
- 17 MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON, PRISCILLA LET'S DANCE
- 19 STUART WATSON, PARTY OF ONE
- 31 PATRICK PARKS, STICK-UP MAN
- 37 STEVE BRISENDINE, CONFESSION, FREHLEY OFFERED
- 39 RYAN WESTMORELAND, TACTILE
- 41 DAN LAWRENCE, THE SECRET ROOM
- 45 EDWARD MILLER, BROTHER THEOBALD
- 47 SAM MOE, WHAT IF I WANT WHAT I WANT
- 51 ALICE G. WALDERT, UNDRESSED
- 53 ROGER PATULNY, MIRANDA
- 55 GARY DUEHR, THE ZIPPER
- 59 PAUL HOSTOVSKY, STRIPTEASE AT THE ARS POETICA
- 63 ROBERTA SPIVEK, A DRINK IN A BERKELEY BAR ON INT'L WOMEN'S DAY
- 67 SARAH DAS GUPTA, LEGACIES
- 69 HARI KITAR KHALSA, THEY SAY HE WAS A BITER
- 73 D. E. LEE, CRAWFISH
- 85 DON NOEL, LIKENESSES
- 97 MARK KEANE, A TRAGIC STORY
- 105 RENEE WILLIAMS, A NORMAL POEM





CHARLOTTE M. FRIEDMAN

UNPACKING CHARLOTTE

Click click, I spring the latches, open
the box filled with spirits—
Bronte, Rampling, Perkins Gilman,
Gainsborough and all of those of's—

Monaco, Savoy, Luxembourg
& Charlotte of Mecklenberg-Strelitz, a mouthful
but prolific in her own way, (the queen
birthed fifteen). Her mark left

on -town and -ville, even an archipelago
later renamed. But my favorite namesake
is much smaller, not a ruse but a Russe,
boozy and molded from lady fingers

& custard, a fancy French concoction.
Perhaps fed up with patricians
and patisseries, that Charlotte fled
the Continent and took to the streets

of another city, reinvented herself
as a handheld treat. A little cake,
lotta whipped cream, crowned
with a cherry. New Yorkers loved her.



BOB ZASLOW

**THE PHOTOGRAPH
A HAIBURN**

My father is a young man again looking through his wire-rimmed glasses
at some driftwood near where we sit, his arms around my waist
his face more serene than I remember.
He may have been telling me how cormorants will pose with
outstretched wings on a half-sunken tree stump for up to an hour.
Or how beech trees share rainwater with each other through their roots.
Or asking me what bird's song I hear. His chin tilts slightly down
so perhaps he's still. Not thinking. Rather, his mind is letting it be.
Trusting in the quiet joy of loving this spot and his son and his young wife,
who crouches five feet away. She smiles as she snaps the photograph.

the elm as it grows
must delight in its branches
each one like a poem



ANGELA HOFFMAN

ALL FOLDED

I can't unsee me on my knees
shouting obscenities
wanting to strike you.
Who is this woman all crazy?
You knew exactly what would undo me
and I slid like a dress off its hanger
onto a pile of rage, shame, blame.

To keep myself from folding in
I practiced careful control
of every little detail, seam, crease
but this vigilance and perfection
offered no substance to the grief
draped under the guise of anger.

I had no choice but to let this messy self
be tucked in the bottom of a drawer.
There I was held in the dark, trans-formed.
I've slipped into something lovely.
I stand before the mirror, unabashed
about wearing my dress, full of wrinkles.



ROBERT NISBET

A MIRROR

*The mirror was a large oval, with a vulgar
Victorian frame, scrolled round with flourishes
and foliations. As we streamed through
the hallway, it caught our youth.*

*Our limbs shining in swimming gear,
the glow of chestnuts, the linseed gloss
on cricket bats, the flurry of our sister's
spring flowers, the pink of winter walking.
Our thirties front door's coloured glass was
in the mirror's ken, and the oval caught
its and the time's multi-coloured gauds.*

*When our mother died, the mirror was moved
to an upper landing, in very little light,
as if in a perpetual evening.*

*And when Maria came, the mirror was moved
to lie, for years, in the dark of the attic.*

*Today the mirror stands alongside Maria's Volvo
at a car boot sale. But at least we can be glad that now
it is in the light, and more than light,
that it stands, this sunny Sunday morning, facing East
from a Powys hillside, before streams and hedges,
here to be bought, to reflect again maybe
the sun and the opening, happening years.*



ALISON AUCH

DRIVING BACK

In the back seat,
windows down,
air rushing,
hair beating moth wings.

Cornfields punctuate,
rows of leaves are signals,
guardians that
slip away.

The worn road stretches,
car thudding over
cracked blacktop
mixes stomach into grind.
Smoke snakes your silence.

No rhapsodies on weeds,
stems to sky,
no eulogies for road-kill.
Follow the lines, ignore
the safety of plants.

At the wheel,
keep your hands,
excuse your attention.
A boy, even now,
in Bexley.

Into the back seat
you funnel emptiness,
leave nothing to cinch.
For now, stooped houses,
cracked siding,
gears tick.

CONTINUED...

The spite of some
silences.
Sky crackles, so storm deep,
windows roll up—
the soft road pocked
by bruising downpour.

A car shapes
my body,
my face
does not reflect. You

drive. Steer into
past spaces, reverse,
the future folds in.
Swerve, now
oblique.



MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

PRISCILLA, LET'S DANCE

Priscilla, Puerto Rican songbird,
an island jungle dancer, Cuban heritage,
rare parrot, a singer survivor near extinction.
She sounds off on notes, music her
vocals hearing background bongos,
piano keys, Cuban horns.
Quote the verse patterns,
quilt the pieces skirt bleeds,
then blend colors to light a tropical prism.
Steamy Salsa, a little twist, cha-cha-cha
dancing rhythms of passions, sacred these islands.
Everything she has is movement
tucked nice and tight but explosive.
She mimics these ancient sounds
showing her ribs, her naked body.
Her ex-lovers remain nightmares
pointed daggers, so criminal, so stereotyped.
Priscilla purifies her dreams with repentance.
She pours her heart out, everything
condensed to the bone, petite boobies,
cheap bras, flamboyant Gi strings.
Her vocabulary is that of sin and Catholicism.
Island hurricanes form her own Jesus
slants of hail, detonate thunder,
the collapse of hell in her hands after midnight.
Priscilla remains a background rabble-rouser,
almost remorseful, no apologies
to the counsel of Judas
wherever he hangs.



STUART WATSON

PARTY OF ONE

Rita stood on the deck of her winter home, her cupped but empty hands in front of her. She looked down into an imagined pool of warring insects, all the emotions competing for control of her soul. She was to attend a party next door that night, in the company of “the Ptarmigans,” migratory winterfowl, like her and unlike her, all keenly aware that other people, elsewhere, were struggling mightily, while they pondered which brand of non-dairy milk to purchase.

Years earlier, at one of the Taos ski colony’s serial cocktail rallies, Rita referred to her winter neighbors as Taotians.

Aghast, the women of undisclosed age stopped and stared.

“Like Laotians, only different,” Rita said, by way of explanation.

No, they got it. They just didn’t want a mirror held up to it.

No one laughed. In short order, Rita slunk out and took her embarrassment home. Undressing for bed, she told Wayne, who suggested that maybe nobody in ski pants wanted to be associated with villagers from a war-racked southeast Asian country. “Or colony?” he corrected himself. “Whatever.”

Now they were back. In Taos again, at the third of their colonial homes. Rita reminded Wayne that she would be attending the Bye-bye Baggage Party that night.

“Odious,” she sniffed. “So, now you’ve got two hours by yourself. Heat up one of your box pizzas.”

She held his culinary taste in the lowest regard. She wondered how much disapproval he harbored for her own tastes, her BMI yo-yo, mood monitored only by the needle of her bathroom scale.

She would join “the Ptarmigans,” seasonal birds of a frosty feather. They needed her to help celebrate a decade of their myriad rejections, reversals, reappraisals.

Some had jettisoned husbands.

Some had jettisoned drink.

Some had jettisoned workplace lovers and were eluding the gropes of new employers.

Others had tossed a fuckable fitness instructor or moved out an underachieving child or cleaned out the garage to the point that it could actually absorb a parked car.

Rita would go, and she would hate it. Idle chat with the seasonal neighbor and the seasonal friends who all knew that she loved icing more than cake and cake more than the husband who administered gas to people someone else would cut. Yet she did so love the husband, when he brought her frosting.

Before she left, while pushing crusted snow from the deck, Rita asked Wayne to "move that footstool."

Wayne couldn't figure out why. She put it on the deck. After she used it, she left it there.

It wasn't bothering anyone, least of all Wayne. Apparently, it bothered Rita. Not enough for her to put it back. Just enough for her to ask him.

"I thought that was its new place," Wayne said.

He had sidestepped it several times with little thought. Rita had her ways. Maybe she had intended to hang a basket of flowers directly above where the stool now sat.

"That's not a place," she said.

"I beg to differ. That is so a place. Every place is a place. As places go, that is about as place-worthy as anywhere one could choose to situate a step stool."

"That is not its place."

"Maybe it was in its place before it got up and moved itself to this place."

"Is this that place?" she said, lifting her skirt.

He stared for a second. Then he moved the stool.

It had come to this: jousting over nonsense. In the wake of their volley, she realized her request had come from a need to control something in her life.

Wayne could have persisted in his obstruction, but he was her minion. On top of which, he knew that she expected him to mix a pitcher of martinis before the party. Balancing their power over the footstool fulcrum would delay that chore.

Fortified with gin, she would go and eat salad. With people who had known her when she was a size six and, after she launched into the 20-plus size strato and then plunged through re-entry to something more in the ground fog BMI state of things. Not exactly her original body weight, but proximate. Some of the weight came off when she had her surgeon remove the overly large boob bags. The rest was her doing.

At no time during those years of self-deprivation had Rita consumed a single Safeway sheet cake as she had, often, in the front seat of her car on a 95-degree day in Anaheim. She never spoke of her excesses, although a casual observer might have inferred as much.

The last time she ate sheet cake, she sat becalmed after the frenzy, staring at the store. Was it the heat, or the carbo coma that left her inert? She glanced in the rearview mirror. Icing outlined her mouth, like clown makeup.

She hid her food thing from her seasonal friends, some of whom sold her houses, others of whom set a table for her and her anesthesiologist. Crash weight loss preceded her annual return to Taos.

A long-ago Rita, a pre-Wayne Rita of the single sort, knew she was born to bait a hook. Two decades younger, she was aggressively starving herself, limiting herself to a jelly donut in the morning and a mid-afternoon pear. The rest of the day, she gagged down carrots and celery sticks, minus the peanut butter.

It was all too horrid, especially the torture of going at lunch into the French patisserie across from the hospital. She recalled one such visit, staring into the display case, tasting every item with her eyes, sliding past it all.

"May I help you?" the clerk asked.

"How could you help me?" Rita snapped. "Do I look like I need help? I'm not the one who needs help here. Look at yourself. You're fat."

She walked out, disgusted with herself. The clerk was a stir stick.

Denial was not in her toolkit. Not of pastries, not of sex. For too long before Wayne, her love life was all *comme ci comme ça*. She tired of self-gratification. She craved someone who wanted her as badly as she wanted him.

A year out of nursing school and eager to recreate some echo of life inside the lux bubble of her father's Cuban medical career, she prowled St. Eustace Medical Center with an eager eye and selective smile.

Not him: Too much the unmade bed.

Nor him: Had he never heard of shaving?

And most definitely not him: No saddle worth the straddle.

Male nurses approached. She declined, and realized in the wake of those rebuffs a regrettable brusqueness. Girlfriends scolded her for it. She chose not to see it as a character flaw. More like strategic selectivity. Why waste time on the unworthy? "I need to focus," she told Sheila, who worked the same shift. "Doctors have the best assets."

"True, I like a good doctor ass," Sheila said.

Wayne saw her first, locked on as she passed. They shared a smile. He asked around, learned enough to address her by name when he asked her to dinner.

Later, she asked, "Do you like this?"

Or, "How about this?"

Or, "Does it feel good when I stick my finger ... here?"

He would nod, or grin widely, or tremble, or purse his lips in equivocation. She logged every note. Before a week was up -- time not at work, they spent in bed -- she knew enough about Wayne to own him.

Wayne knew somewhat less about her. He registered the sound of retching from the bathroom. He noticed how little she ordered and ate when they dined out. It moved him to ask her more often to join him for meals so he could feed her. She let him. Salads. "I want to look nice for you," she said once.

She carried him to the altar like a Louis Vuitton Bandouliere.

She became just the latest of his addictions. He liked vodka and pot and blowjobs. He became her gateway to consumptive lust. Mutually assured destruction, he called it. She got the joke, giggled.

He could afford her favors. She liked buying haute, if not clothing, then houses, if not travel, then ... mille-feuille, St. Honore, Tart Tatin. Sex was just a metaphor for her greater hunger -- flour and butter and cream and chocolate and a dusting of nuts.

At first, Wayne just thought himself blessed to have collided with the horniest women on the

planet. Of course, he hadn't met or experienced them all. If not Rita, then who?

Through her post-coital guidance, Wayne and she came to own three houses, one in the south of North America, one in the north of South America, and one in the middle of Middle America. They spent the year flying from one to another, from the ski slopes of Taos to their bungalow in the Hollywood hills to a hilltop overlooking the Pacific just north of Puerto Escondido.

At each, she would cook and he would play.

He craved Mexican point breaks. Or New Mexican chutes full of frozen dander. Or the cliffs east of L.A., raked with thermal updrafts, into which he would step beneath a large fabric sail. Big drop. Big lift. He dreamed of soaring with hawks, looking for gerbils, eating entrails. He was an aging child, addicted to adrenaline. The billings more than covered his and Rita's extended time away. They didn't want children, but they did want each other, often, with sound effects and lubricious extravagance. To supplant her cravings for food, she adopted dogs.

She shared none of Wayne's cravings for risk. She fed him, and she fed herself. She planned their shuttles, from house to house, and he tagged along, leashed to her agenda as much as to the dog.

She stocked her kitchen with commercial-grade equipment. He applauded her enthusiasm. Who was he to complain that she loved cooking? In truth, she needed something to do while Wayne was risking his life. She was an artiste of the edible. It happened so naturally, the short sweet step from avoiding the pastry aisle to creating her own.

She always had a nibble to keep her company as she worked. It added up, and on. She started to gain weight, then more, in billowing folds.

Wayne seemed unaware. He said nothing, but Rita wondered if he was just being polite. A year or so into her growth curve, fearing that he might find her less than desirable, she bought and dressed for the first time in a negligee. It both hid and revealed.

Wayne saw her with one knee on the bed, dusk filtering through the window and lace. She tried on a little coy. He went berserk, ripping away the fabric, kissing and licking her from neck to the clefts of her back and belly and thighs.

Afterward, stroking his head, she asked if he still loved her.

"What just happened?" he said.

"I know I've put on weight."

"Is that what happened?"

"It happened to me."

"It happens to us all."

He hasn't put on an ounce.

He didn't want to tell her that he had found her previous self a bit emaciated. When she spoke admiringly of Hollywood waifs, he listened politely.

"No interest in sleeping with a stick," he said.

She loved his reassurances, but doubted his sincerity. Surely this body isn't what men want?

She felt in his sustained ardor an implicit critique of her as she had been when they married.

Staring at herself after her shower, she thought of how she and Wayne were squandering her investment. So many years, so much work, such extreme denial ... and he wants to feed me? More and more? Doesn't he see what he is doing? How can I be what he wants, who he married, when his every gesture contradicts? How can he be happy with who I am now, if he was happy with who I was then?

His other addictions left her feeling wholly inadequate. The waves. The sky. The fallen, unpacked snow. All his. All like lovers, flouted as he openly kissed her goodbye and ran to their arms. How could she compete?

All she could do was fuck him and feed him. And herself. All she could do was wrap him in her arms when he came home, alive, to what she had cooked. And join him in bite after delicious bite. And listen to the voice inside, casting doubt on every languid after-moment, inferring disgust where nary a word or glance or reluctant advance suggested anything of the sort.

She was a mess. Wayne was clueless. When she started to put on pounds, Wayne felt a huge relief. He said nothing, but secretly celebrated the way she seemed to relax into their life.

He found himself unable to pull his eyes away. More of Rita, to him, was a good thing.

Between adrenalin shots, he enjoyed shopping with her. As she tried on garments, capacious things, caftans and mu'umu'us in vibrant colors, he would appraise like an art buyer. Gentle nods. Creeping smiles. Arms thrown wide.

"My queen," he exclaimed.

She looked in the fitting room mirror and felt her meal rise.

Grotesque. How can he stand me? What about this is attractive?

Tears welled. She held back the sobs, the rising gorge. There, faced with the shocking reality, she resolved to unwind it all, to take herself back to her wedding night.

She faked consumption. When he wasn't looking, she spat food into her hand, then tucked it into her napkin. With her mouth full, she excused herself to attend a kitchen chore, and spat into the disposal.

Temptation again became her most powerful foe. She wanted to sweep from her mind the addresses and hours of her favorite pâtissiers. She avoided buying gas. Her car sat in the garage. She had no way to shop her druggists of choice.

She learned to avoid the mirror. When she did, after a month, she was less of her former self. Encouraged, she redoubled her efforts. She declined casual get-togethers with friends, who loved to nibble. She hired kitchen help, to prepare low-carb meals.

It was an exhaustive retreat. The day she fit comfortably into a size 8, she told Wayne she had been ... "cheating." He looked shocked, until she explained.

"It wasn't fair, to keep getting larger and larger," she said. "I don't know how you put up with it."

He protested his continued affection.

"You were so sweet," she said. "And terrifying."

"Terrifying? How?"

"I couldn't believe that you would find me attractive. Nobody does. The world is not a welcoming place for ... what do they call us? Plumpers?"

"You didn't marry the world."

"That may be. I just couldn't go there. I'm back."

"You never left. But it's nice to have you home, from wherever you went."

A week later, they headed north from Mexico to New Mexico. Her winter neighbor was raking leaves when they parked. Annette looked up, smiled, waved. As Rita's dog bounded from his kennel and started sniffing for squirrels, she strolled into Annette's embrace.

"Ready for skiing, I see," Annette said. "Mexico suits you well."

Rita hadn't skied in years, not since the weight went on.

"Yes. It's been a good fall."

Annette waved at Wayne, unloading bags. "Who's the hottie?" she called.

There it was, Rita thought. Circumspect in the Age of Largesse, celebratory at the reclamation of lost allure.

"I've lost a little weight," Rita said.

"You look fantastic," Annette said. "I bet you feel better, too. Doesn't she, Wayne?"

Wayne smiled, lugged their luggage inside. Rita busied herself with unloading, her back aimed at the busy body of Annette.

After they settled in, Rita called Annette to ask if her favorite local market was open.

Annette mentioned wanting to have "a few of the girls" over to celebrate everyone's return to Taos. In a couple of days, if that was alright, hors d'oeuvres and cocktails.

"Nothing heavy."

Really? They were inviting her. Rita gave it little thought, agreed to come. She wondered how she would navigate re-entry as a curiosity.

On party day, she helped Wayne maneuver the stepstool, swallowed the double martini, grabbed some chardonnay and stepped out.

Inside Annette's, the Ptarmigans greeted her warmly.

"So tan," Maris Deaver said. "You wear it well."

That was elliptical. Rita felt like one part of herself was standing to the side, listening for pokes directed at her former self. The Ptarmigans all embraced her, holding the hugs with hands overlapping behind her back. It had been years.

"Has Wayne not been feeding you?" Gen Pettit asked. "I hope everything's OK."

"Jet lag, I think," Rita said. "We had to fly coach."

"Ouch. Still, it must be easier now."

"Coach is never easy."

"I meant, since ... you're ... "

"Not as fat? You're right. But now I've got three bags full of stuff I can't wear."

Gen laughed. Touché.

Rita propped her drink hand with the other arm. How to send Gen on her way?

"What are you going to do with all that stuff?" Gen asked. "Those mu'umu'us, those harem pants? I can't imagine much interest around here. It's not like real estate. Not everyone wants the really big houses."

Rita felt the blood and heat rising to her face. She turned and strode from the room.

Swimming with sharks. Flotation lay ahead, on a buffet, a life ring in a sea of circling fins. She reached for the small china plate, which she piled high with crudite, gougères, profiteroles, foie gras mousse and, spoken to herself, a huge fucking slice of blackberry pie. Plenty of appetite, but no room for ice cream. On the next pass.

She drifted to the side, forking in bite after bite, as one after another Ptarmigan approached and invited her to get involved. Scholarship program. Homeless shelter. Elementary school reading group. Rummage sale for the library.

To each offer, she mumbled incoherent excuses.

She didn't like asking for money.

She didn't like meetings.

She didn't like reading out loud.

She drifted closer to the door, caught Annette's eye, held her hands in "sleepy" prayer beside her head and slipped out.

The next day, she rose to raging hunger. She drove to her favorite Santa Fe mall. On her way to Cinnabon and Winchell's and Cocoa Loco and the Pie Spy, she added some turquoise and silver. She spent the afternoon furiously sweeping clothes from racks and charging their purchase and stuffing them over and over into the belly of her car until there was room enough for no more than her behind the wheel.

Exhausted, she headed home. As she approached, she slowed. Wayne was waiting, she knew. She hadn't called. Nor had he. He couldn't know how she had attacked the buffet last night. How she had binged sweets and clothing she didn't need, couldn't wear if she returned to the weight from which she had come.

What did Wayne really want? Could he ever be completely honest with her? Would he see her reversion as weakness? He'll say he just wants me to be happy. But how can I be happy if I don't know what the word even means?

She couldn't stand the thought of him lying to her. Hiding his disgust would be worse than if he admitted it, castigated her for such a supreme lack of resolve. If he had the willpower to lie to her, she would surely need to make a statement of her own.

A fatigued sun sat on the horizon. With questions buzzing her brain, Rita aimed her car back toward the highway.

She stopped.

She looked both ways.

She pulled slowly into traffic.

In her rearview mirror, she saw the smoke and heard the screaming tires of the semi-truck and trailer, the trailer swinging into the oncoming lane, a mini-van caroming off it and spinning into the desert, and the truck coming to a stop, angled across both lanes.

Up the road lay Colorado. A thought of something never done. A thought of somewhere never seen. A thought of someone never been.

As she accelerated, Rita wondered if anything more - or anything less - would ever be enough.



PATRICK PARKS

STICK-UP MAN

When the man came in, he seemed nervous until he took a gun from his pocket and pointed it at Bruce. That seemed to calm him down.

"I need whatever money you've got," the man said.

Bruce knew that this day would come. His wife had warned him not to take the job because convenience stores were always robbed and the clerks frequently shot, especially on the overnight shift. So even though Bruce was not surprised, it was not what he expected. When he imagined the inevitable, based on movies, it was always one or two Black men who barreled into the store, their pistols turned sideways, screaming at him that if he didn't empty the cash register they were going to blow his motherfucking head off. But the man standing next to the counter, except for the gun, did not look that much different from himself. He was, like Bruce, balding and droopy-eyed, a little soft, and dressed, as Bruce used to dress before his current occupation required him to wear a uniform: khaki pants, a button-down shirt, and a dark navy zip-up jacket. In the hand not holding the gun, he had a ski mask that he must have forgotten to put on. Bruce felt sorry for him and decided he would help him out by raising his hands.

"No, don't do that," the man said. "If someone driving by sees you, they'll call the police. I'm not going to shoot you, but I do want you to give me whatever money is in the till and whatever else there might be back in the office."

"There's nothing in the office," Bruce said. "Well, there is, but it's in the safe, and I have no idea what the combination is. Only the manager has that. And the assistant manager, too, I think. I'm not one hundred percent."

"Okay," the man said, nodding. "I'll take what's in the register."

After the man had left and Bruce had called the police, he decided he was not going to tell them anything about the robber. He was not sure why he had come to that conclusion. Maybe it was the ski mask. When he was questioned, he said he was so frightened that he could not recall a thing.

"Was he a young man?"

"Maybe," Bruce said, rubbing his forehead. He thought the gesture would reflect bewilderment. "Not twenties-young, if that's what you mean. And he wasn't black. I do know that. Probably white, guessing from his voice. The mask made it hard to tell for sure. And the gloves. He wore leather gloves."

"Was he tall?"

"I would say not tall. Medium, maybe."

"Did you notice if he drove away in a car? Was anyone waiting for him?"

The officer asking the questions was patient but persistent. At some point, Bruce realized the conversation had looped back and he was being asked the same things again. Finally, the policeman thanked him and left. By then, the store manager had arrived. He was upset, but he was mainly concerned about Bruce's well-being. He wrapped an arm around Bruce and gave him a hug.

"You did the right thing," he said. "Don't argue. Give them the money. It's that simple."

The manager's name was Phil Wilton, and he was two years younger than Bruce. He had worked at the convenience store for a long time, and he had once told Bruce that he was hoping to move up in the company, be a regional manager or go even higher.

"I'm calling corporate today and telling them that we need closed-circuit TV cameras. I've asked for them for years, but they always tell me we're not in a crime zone. I'll be curious to find out what they say now."

Phil told Bruce to go home.

"You've had enough excitement for one night. I'll call Dennis and have him come in early. I can cover until then."

Bruce thanked him, then went to the back room to get his jacket and the paper bag with his uneaten sandwich and apple. His car was in the shop with a muffler problem, and he thought for a minute about calling his wife to pick him up, but it was very late, she was a heavy sleeper, and he knew she would use the opportunity to remind him once again of the danger he had put himself into despite her warning him not to. He would catch a bus. The stop was just a few blocks away, and it was a pleasant enough night.

The convenience store and the bus stop were both on a main thoroughfare, which meant plenty of streetlights. Given the evening's earlier event, the illumination might have made Bruce feel safer, but he had not really felt unsafe, even with a gun pointed at him. He

wondered if he was in shock and if later, when he got home, he would start to shake and hyperventilate and need to sit down. Now, he felt just fine.

Because it was so late, there was very little traffic, and the businesses on this stretch—a handful of car dealerships, an appliance store, and other establishments whose purpose he could not ascertain—were closed. On the next block, though, there was a restaurant with a neon sign that reported “Pancakes 24 Hours.” Judging from the single car in the parking lot, not many people were hungry. As he passed the front window and looked in, Bruce could see that the place was empty except for one booth where the man who had robbed him not an hour ago speared a fork into a sausage and took a bite.

Bruce stopped and watched as the man continued to eat, pouring syrup over a stack of pancakes, cutting off a mouthful with the side of his fork, washing it all down with coffee. At one point, he paused and seemed to take a deep breath. Then he looked out the window and saw Bruce. He set his fork down, smiled—sheepishly, Bruce thought—and waved him inside.

A waitress and a cook were sitting at a table near the kitchen when Bruce entered. Neither seemed to notice him. He walked to the man’s booth.

“Sit down,” the man said, still smiling. He gestured at the seat across from him, and Bruce slid in, unzipped his jacket and put his paper bag on the table. The man took another drink of coffee.

“You want a cup?” he asked. “My treat.”

“No, it’ll just keep me awake.”

“Well, I’m going to finish my meal before it gets cold, if that’s all right. I feel self-conscious eating in front of people as a rule, but...” With a couple of bites and a thorough sopping up of syrup with the last hunk of pancake, the man cleared his plate. Another swallow of coffee, a dabbing of his mouth with a napkin, and he was through.

“There,” he said. “I haven’t had good pancakes in ages. I’m glad this place was so close. You must come here quite a bit, I’m guessing.”

“No,” Bruce said. “I never have.”

“Well, I recommend it next time you get hungry for pancakes. I suppose their waffles have to be pretty good, too.” He pushed his plate to the side and leaned forward. “Sorry about the gun,” he said.

“Was it loaded?”

"Yep. If it's not loaded, I lose my nerve."

"Get you something?" Without Bruce's noticing, the waitress had made her way to their booth.

"Coffee," Bruce said. He took his jacket off and laid it next to him on the seat.

"Oddly enough," the man said, pointing at Bruce's nametag, "my name's Bruce, too." Bruce nodded. "That is odd."

"So, is this a coincidence or fate? Our meeting at the store and then again here?"

"No idea."

The waitress returned and put a white mug in front of Bruce. Coffee sloshed over the rim and made a puddle on the table. When the waitress left again, Bruce took a napkin from the holder and set the cup on it. The man, the other Bruce, leaned even farther forward.

"What did you say to the police? You did call them, didn't you?"

"I had to. I was robbed."

"What did you say?"

Bruce shrugged. "Not much. I didn't tell them what you look like."

The other Bruce leaned back and smiled.

"Nobody ever does," he said.

"Why is that?"

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know for sure. You didn't seem threatening. Kind of pathetic, actually."

"That's the key. I'm pathetic."

"No, I didn't mean pathetic." Bruce held up his hands. "I meant—"

"Don't apologize. It's what I am. It's why I'm good at this." He grinned. "Who wants to be the one to get a pitiful guy like me arrested?"

Bruce bumped his cup and spilled more coffee. He took another napkin and wiped the

tabletop.

"So, is this how you make a living?"

"Not entirely. I was a draftsman at an engineering firm before it folded. Now I stock shelves at a grocery store. Me and a bunch of kids my son's age. Now that's pathetic."

"Well, I used to be an accountant for a company that was shut down because of fraud. It was on the news." Bruce finished his coffee, wadded the napkins and shoved them into his cup.

The other Bruce signaled to the waitress that he was ready for the check. She brought it and then cleared away the dirty dishes.

"I'll get this," the other Bruce said. He smiled, took a handful of bills from his jacket pocket, counted out three and dropped them on the table. "I'm a generous tipper."

Bruce slid out of the booth, put his coat on, picked up his paper sack. The other Bruce put a hand on his shoulder and turned him toward the door.

"Want a lift?" he said.

"I was going to take the bus."

"No, don't do that. I've got time. My car's in the lot."

Bruce followed him out. A semi rumbled past, its cab outlined with yellow lights. He watched it roll down the street and pass the convenience store. He thought of Phil Wilton standing behind the counter watching the same truck, and then he saw himself standing there, too, the pair of them, wondering where the truck was headed.

"This is a beautiful night," the other Bruce said.

"It is," Bruce said, reaching for the handle on the car's passenger side. "Where'd you get your gun?"



STEVE BRISENDINE

CONFESSION, FREHLEY OFFERED

Forty-whatever years on from when
he owned a quarter-share of the world's
spiked metal throne, I can dig the goofy

streetwise genius, the way slop and flash
danced and stumbled and danced again
up and down that Les Paul fretboard

in boozy pentatonic abandon, Chuck Berry
via the Bronx by way of a fifth of cold gin.
Now I hear those bends and divebombs

for what they were: manic, whacked-out,
Ain't life a party, man? cackles electrified
and howled out through Marshall stacks.

But when I was fourteen, I only tacked
his concert poster on my headboard
as a small safe act of good-Baptist-kid

rebellion, one to raise eyebrows - or at
least one eyebrow, but not too high.
You know the image, if you're my age:

Ace leaned back into a sustain, right hand
off the strings, dummy Humbucker pumping
out stage smoke, the comet-cool apotheosis

of the Spaceman - but deep down I really
wanted to be Gene, to spit fire and blood
and baritone gravel, to flash finger-horns

at the God seats in some weed-fogged
hockey arena, flick a freakish tongue
over black snarling lips and get all the girls.



RYAN WESTMORELAND

TACTILE

Treat my tainted

Try to buckle my broken
Bend my body to beg and

But this is what we
As good Christians do, no?

Sorry, it's just the trauma
It lingers in the forefront
No matter how much I

Teach me to be good
Wait, no

Teach me to be
Gentle on myself
For
I am just a man
Who loves his

I am just a man
Who loves his God

thoughts
&
prayers
Spirit
forgive
the unforgivable

pray
for healing

Lord?

God
dammit



DAN LAWRENCE

THE SECRET ROOM (AN OBITUARY)

1979 – Mary Hamilton was the most beautiful woman in the world. The proof was everywhere: in the headlines (Most Beautiful Woman Mounts Tallest Building); the movies (her close-up as Helen of Troy nearly won an Oscar, until it was revealed that her single line of dialogue had been dubbed); endorsements (Hamilton’s Emollient: When Silky Is Not Soft Enough); society (where her appearance at parties commanded fees in the six figures). Wherever she went, she was mobbed by paparazzi. Famous painters begged her to sit for them. Novelists vied to affix her beauty to the page in the guise of thinly veiled, often inert characters. Powerful men behaved recklessly for the opportunity to see her, and anyone who did see her marveled at how woefully short the various depictions of her fell.

Mary assumed the same was true of mirrors. Every time she looked in one, she expected to be bowled over. Though she never admitted it to anyone, she invariably was not. She was fully prepared to agree that her nose was delicate and exquisitely formed; that her eyes – which despite being green and almond-shaped were often compared to moons – were captivating; that her mouth, neither thin nor full, expressed every emotion without effort or constraint and never disfigured with tension. She could sense her microscopic pores faultlessly breathing and cleansing her smooth, pliant, oil-less skin. And her hair, which she liked to wear loose and full and draped around her neck like a scarf, truly was the colored of spun gold. Yet reflected back at her, the whole never quite seemed to coalesce into anything more than a collection of incomparable parts. This may have been the key to her beauty, since beauty, to be complete, must lack vanity, which is why a wildflower is so much more beautiful than a work of art.

Though Mary hated to be likened to either, as she so often was, she was herself a great lover of beauty. She surrounded herself with beautiful artwork, music, pets, houses, gardens. She sought out the most beautiful and pleasing companions as others sought her. She was humbled by the beauty of nature. Since she was universally acclaimed to be the most beautiful woman in the world, it pained her not to be able to see herself as others saw her. Her only hope came from her observation that although her features in the mirror always looked more or less the same, their overall effect was always somewhat different. Perhaps someday she would surprise a mirror into revealing herself as others saw her. In the meantime she was, like many beautiful people, obsessed with mirrors.

In fact her villa on the Amalfi Coast, given to her by an early admirer, contained a secret room. The ceiling, floor and all four walls were mirrors. Even the door, which shut seamlessly,

was a mirror. After bathing and combing out her hair, she would lie for hours naked on the sheet of glass suspended in the middle of the room by transparent cables, waiting to see how beautiful she was. For years, the irony of being unable to do so made her smile the wry, though never bitter, smile that had changed the course of so many lives and perhaps even of world events, if the claims of a certain prime minister are to be believed.

One night in her late-20s, though, while lying alone on her glass bed, she suddenly and without warning felt an angry, choking bile rise in her throat that, had she not swallowed it down, might have disfigured her expression. She realized with a start that she felt cheated. It didn't matter that she had pretty much everything a person could possibly want: fame, money, a full and interesting life, friends, and, yes, even a steadfast and forgiving lover. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that she was on the downward slope of her youthful prime; unless she saw herself soon as others did, she never would. Whatever the reason, after that night, advancing slowly in receding waves like the tide, came the society doctors, the addictions, the contemptible scenes, the alienations of affection.

Her inability to see herself became an angry self-loathing, which, as it grew, engendered contempt for others. Her friends' self-deceptions, always affectionately obvious to Mary, began to seem detestable to her, and she began to view them as hypocrites. At first she avoid their parties, but as her anger simmered and her inhibitions crumbled, she began to seek them out and take advantage of every opportunity to, as she saw it, prod them out of their complacency. They began to avoid her and, when they could not, treated her with a condescending detachment that made her even more angry. A few stalwarts stuck by her, including her faithful lover, who hoped that his love could help tide her over this rough spot. It didn't help that, for fear of seeming shallow, Mary gave them no insight into the possible cause of the change that had come over her. She lashed out when they got too close, and after the drunken, public scene, reported in all the tabloids, in which she impugned his manhood, the great love of her life finally turned his back on her, too. Given fewer opportunities for disrupting the lives of those who cared about her, she turned with a vengeance to wrecking her own.

The outward dissipation was painful in its utter predictability. At first she remained beautiful, desirable, and in demand; the public loves the spectacle of a star going down in flames. What for anyone else would be a humiliating debacle can, for a valuable commodity, become a public relations coup – but only so long they remain valuable. As her looks and behavior became increasing less marketable, she was taken up and then dropped by a series of progressively lesser agents and publicists until she was represented only by those for whom no recognizable name could be an embarrassment. She spent her last years largely in seclusion, propped up in her erratic public appearances by a shifting cast of libertines, parasites, and sycophants. During that time, she repeatedly sealed, and then unsealed, the secret room.

As everyone with a passing familiarity with popular culture knows, Mary Hamilton died alone

in the fire that destroyed her Amalfi Coast home just days before her 35th birthday. The young Italian firefighter photographed recovering her body from the flaming ruins enjoyed a small fame of his own, including a spread in *Playgirl*, after the photo appeared on the cover of *People* magazine, but Mary was already dead from smoke inhalation by the time he got to her. The autopsy revealed a cornucopia of drugs in her bloodstream, cocaine and heroin most prominent among them. Her erstwhile friends publically shook their heads and regretted that they had been unable to do more for her, and most of them were genuinely puzzled and distressed by her precipitous decline and shocked by her death. Safely dead, though, it became easier to admire and honor her beauty anew. In fact many who knew her came to believe that even in the depths of her self-loathing, she never entirely lost that exquisite pairing of modesty and radiance, of élan and reserve that prompted Sir Cyril Meadmore, on hearing of her tragic death, to comment: "Even when Mary was ugly, she was beautiful."



EDWARD MILLER

A LETTER TO HIS BROTHER THEOBALD IN ALBUQUERQUE

So yesterday we went looking for furniture. Something for an upstairs bedroom. You know me, Theo. How can a good husband refuse? Around and around we go, one vast showroom after another. Late in the day we arrive at a Maxwell Design Gallery, last stop on the tour—a concrete and glass structure marrying brutalist style with Kardashian flair. Inside, we idle our way along aisles reminiscent of the upside-down sketches of MC Escher and are soon joined by our guide, Marie, a compact, bustling orb of a woman in kitten heels and canasta glasses. Such fast friends we become. She wants to know all about us. Our needs, our desires. Leather or fabric. Soft or firm. To recline or not to recline. That's the question, really. Although ending it all does cross my mind. A lone report behind the arras. Marie's very understanding. She and the missus are getting on. Chatting away like old times. The blood's in the water. I check my watch again. We're looking for a convertible sofa, Nan says. Maybe a futon. Something for overnight guests. I fix Marie with an affable smile, and then explain. Normally, I say, we just ask them to sleep in their cars . . . Remember Apollo 13? When the ship went behind the moon and lost radio contact? That's what follows. That's what it's like. Radio silence. Marie stares at me like an owl and then swivels her attention to Nan. Oh my, she says. He's f u n n y, isn't he. They resume their earnest conversation.

—

Drop me a line sometime. We're not going anywhere.

Walter



SAM MOE

WHAT IF I WANT WHAT I WANT

You arrive late, turning on the lamps one by one like
ceremony means more to you than the days we worshipped
the old gods, on our knees in front of fires and photographs
you told me you liked when I was sad for you, captivated
by my tears which you keep in bright blue vials, being

on the outskirts of town, you lurk in your New Yorker
coat, buttons falling off, you're tall when the sun sets,
crumpled cigarette between chapped lips, a wad of cash
in your breast pocket, you try to pick up our friend after
the wake, asking baby-baby why are you mad, telling me

to watch my mouth, we're in a sacred place, the kitchen
where so many of my mothers have risen from their beds
in the middle of the night, when the city is only just shaking
things up, spreading dozens of different jams on apple toast,
heating tea on the stove, hear their ghosts whispering, stuck

in tin pipes, see my love reappear for you in soap bubbles
my arms are half in warm water, scrubbing the blood out
of your dress shirt, my hands are mad for you, want to
toss you out of the apartment, want you to be by my side
before midnight but you're lying on the dining room

table with an apple in your mouth, your arm dangling
between someone's shoulders, you twists to look at me
my little haunted thing, you call me a dream, tell me if I
wake at witching hour I'll be able to see your faded shape
in the bathroom mirror but have I tried summoning our

CONTINUED...

past with gold coins and yellow ribbons, no, you've got your fingers beneath her bra strap, she's got her moss-hued eyes laughing as if I don't know you all wish I was dead, but no one else compares to the way you treat wolves and dogs the same, do you remember the days we crouched in ice

and Central Park was a distant memory, we were lost in pines and sticky honey cones, frost flowers began to bloom around my feet, you called me the name of another goddess, told me you would never leave my head or my soul, all yours, your past lovers live deeply, sleepily, tucked away inside your

heart, this isn't a ghost thing, you're the hunter and the trap, you're getting your dress pants dirty on Heaven Mountain letting wolves with navy-blue muzzles eat out of the palm of your hand, laughing as their tongues tickle your flesh I don't feel relief, and the mourners stay overnight, telling

me it's better this way, to have a sleepover as the deceased are passing the threshold, wouldn't want to leave you alone when my heart is so easily devoured, when my journals and letters are filled with blood and love, where the poison cabinet hangs open and you hangs in the archway between

life and death, your eyes so bright and grey like a monster or a sun, and no one comes to find me when I hide in the tub my knees pulled up to my chest, I toss my mind back there with the peeling paint and my mother's voice, a weapon, her oil paintings hanging sharp and bronze in the hall, tell me

to get over myself, once I screamed so loud I threw my soul told you to never come back, I tried to borrow wings to escape but you're always here, the woman of my past, quickly dragging me down with your red lacquered nails and perfectly arched eyebrows, your squeeze my cheeks, tell me I'm beautiful

CONTINUED...

please don't get me wrong, I'm obsessed with the medicine
that comes with falling in love slowly, you and I don't get along
but we've stitched our souls together with the last of the string
and I've hushed the buttons, tossed my awful body against amber
walls, begged the angels to open the pathway to everlasting, that

sweet please, the way the trees fall on their own bodies' leaves,
adoration that tastes similar to old fruit, is this what I really want
or am I lost again in the memory of your protection, would you
wrap your wing around me darling-darling or should I duck and
cover, would you help me do my makeup or am I stuck in this

life alone, you once told me I could eat my heart if I wanted to,
did you mean it, do you truly believe that after all this time I'm
saved, that I'm safe now the crown is gone, but what if you come
for me in my sleep, but what if I don't want you to leave again
and God, you know I'm selfish but you don't mind when I shine.



ALICE G. WALDERT

UNDRESSED

*Preening
before the mirror,
down to my underpants
and training bra
with its white flowers,
my long-stemmed
legs
give me height.
My mother
tries on
the eyes of a man.
She leers and says,
Men will want you.
I shudder
at her reflection,
goosebumps appear.
In seconds
I'm reduced
from a young Venus
to a naked chicken,
cellophane wrapped
in the fridge
of a local grocery store.*

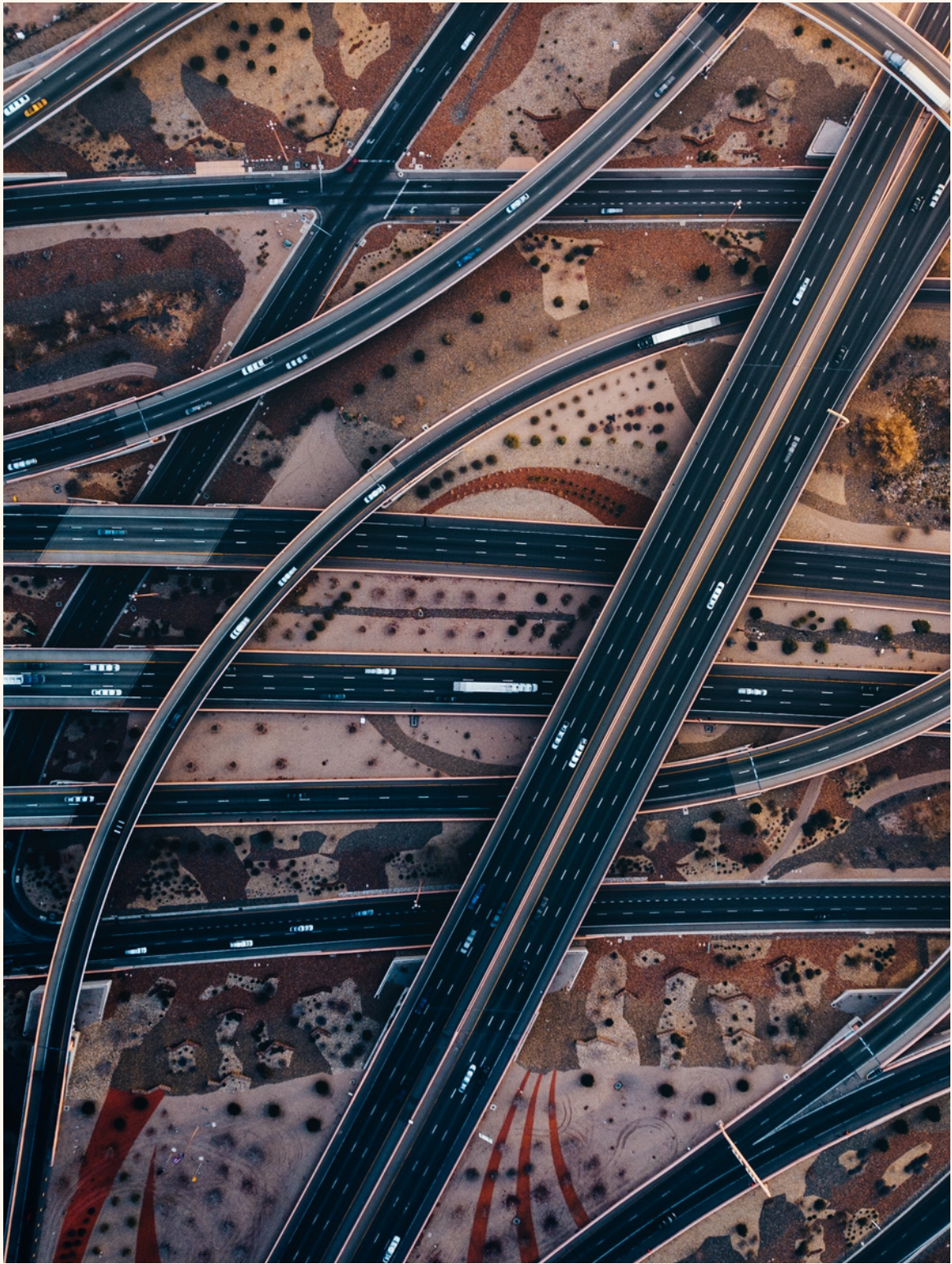


ROGER PATULNY

MIRANDA

You open an album
peel plastic off a memory of her spring dress
brocaded with precious elements there's an
anklet aglitter as we two walked the fields
and wandered fingertips across the blue-red grapeshot of the merlot
glowing, young and ever thirsty

All that wine was not enough to save her
from the savagery of gardening
of afternoons where topiary gave way to
topped trees and leaves stirred like tea
darkened teal and a brown thickening
of felled roses mulched underfoot unshared



GARY DUEHR

THE ZIPPER

I'm trying to merge into the right lane to exit onto 83 South, but a white Dodge Charger speeds up to block me. I lay onto the horn for a good 10-15 seconds, longer than I should, to let them know I know what they've done.

"The zipper, asshole!" I mutter under my breath. The zipper: how two lines of cars take turns and merge effortlessly into one. The Charger broke the zipper, and I am determined to make it pay.

The blue pickup behind the Charger lets me in, and I give it a thanks wave. I tailgate the Charger around the curl of the interchange onto 83 South, making a mental note of the first three digits of the license plate, BY8, before it accelerates into the fast lane and vanishes. My Camry is boxed in the middle lane behind a Civic noodling along at 45 mph. I honk at it then veer into the slow lane to pass. The stretch of highway is thick with cars headed for the Bayview Mall or fast food chains on either side, Roy Rogers and MickeyD's and Dave's Hot Chicken. The competition, I think, even though the Domino's I manage is in the town center.

I take no pride in my job, but the paycheck nibbles away at my college debt. My expenses are meager, crashing in the basement of my old man's house, buying groceries and shoveling the sidewalk to help out. I do what I can, even if I feel stretched thin with 60-plus hours a week wrangling pimply teens while I fist shredded mozzarella over swirls of tomato sauce. Sometimes I hide in the storage closet that's my office, surrounded by packs of paper towels and buckets of catsup and bbq sauce, just to catch my breath. I put my head down on the Dell keyboard and let the random clicks clear my mind.

I'm picking up speed in the right lane, but I can't make out the Charger. Too many white sports cars jockeying for position. What I want to do is cut right in front of it then slow down to a crawl to let it know how it feels. I have time. I'm just on my way to the mall to find a sweater I don't really need. My old sweater got big bites taken out of it by moths, but it's almost April and getting warmer.

I pass the mall exit and spot it half a dozen cars ahead. I'm doing 80, way over the 65 mph speed limit, but not enough to get a ticket. The Charger is gaining on me, probably pushing 90. Asshole. I feel my adrenaline boil. I press down on the gas, and I can feel the Camry

vibrate as the rpms hit 4000. I start weaving in and out of traffic to surge through any blank spots. Other drivers beep at me, but I don't care. By now I'm not using any turn signals, just darting in and out like Dirt Rally on my Xbox, timing my moves perfectly. I'm in the zone.

I hit a wall of traffic. No way through. A couple semis loom up and block my view. Dammit! I check my rear view and see that the Charger has got caught in the jam too and drifted far behind.

My left rear tire blows out, and I clutch the wheel to keep steady. I can hear the tread flapping on the pavement. I slow down and ease into the breakdown lane. The rim is starting to rattle. I make it to Exit 51 and hobble off into a Sunoco. Just gas pumps and a convenience store, no garage, so I park beside the air compressor. The hose on the ground is still hissing from the last car. I get out and look at the flat, it's half collapsed. I unlock my cell and call triple A.

A white Charger pulls up to get gas. I check the plate: BY8. I watch as a young mom gets out, leaving the door open. She's wearing a dressy coat, a pillbox hat on top of her ashy swoop of hair. She says a few words to someone in the front seat, then takes out her credit card and inserts it in the pump. I have no idea what to do. I'm sure she doesn't recognize me or my car. I feel my anger start to evaporate, but I can't quite let go. I decide I have to say something to her.

I walk up closer. I can see a boy of 5 or 6 buckled up in front.

"Excuse me, could I borrow some quarters for the air?" I gesture back at the flat.

She smiles and digs into her purse. "Sure." She counts out four into my palm.

"Thanks." I hesitate. "I don't know if you know it, but you cut me off back there at the exit."

"I did?" Her face tenses. She grasps the nozzle a little tighter; the gas is gushing into the tank as the dollars and gallons spin past, clacking.

"Yeah, I'm sure you didn't mean anything, but we were both trying to exit and you didn't, you know, do the zipper thing."

"The zipper?"

I give her an easy grin, trying to ease things. "How one car goes, then the other, like a zipper being pulled."

"Oh."

"That's ok, I just wanted to mention it in case you didn't realize."

The pump clanks to a stop and she removes the nozzle, hangs it back up, and taps the gas hatch shut. "Thanks," she says. "There's someone I want you to meet."

"Oh yeah?"

"My little boy, Ryan. You and I weren't supposed to have any contact back at the exit, that's why I pulled in front of you. I hoped you'd understand."

She goes around and opens the passenger door, unbuckles Ryan, and helps him out. He's dressed in a nice blue suit, as if for church, and his blond hair is gelled down. He's got a scrubbed face like a boy in a TV ad for cereal.

She leads him over. "Ryan, this is Jerry."

Ryan extends his right hand formally, and I shake it.

"How'd you—"

"That's not important." Her voice has lowered, and I watch as she puts on a pair of white linen gloves. She lowers her hat's veil over her eyes. "What's important is right now. Our appointment is at this Sunoco. Ryan is here to help you move on."

"Who are you, what are you talking about?" I can feel my irritation bubbling up.

"I know you're troubled, that you have difficulties that can feel overwhelming. When your tire blew out, your car skidded under the semi in the next lane, crushing you instantly. This gas station is merely a temporary pause."

I'm stunned, short of breath, like I've been punched in the gut. I sit down on the curb by the pumps.

"Ryan," she says, "could you assist him now, please?"

Ryan walks over with a serious expression and touches his fingertips to my forehead. They scorch my skin. A brightness sears through me like the sun glaring off the windshield. All the air gets sucked from my lungs, and everything goes quiet. The last thing I remember is the rear left tire inflating on its own, the lug nuts falling out with a clink onto the cement, as it wobbles down into an icy ditch and goes still.

HORACE:

OF THE *11388, add 15*

ART of POETRY:

Rationalis Horaceus (De)

POEM.



BY THE

Earl of ROSCOMMON.

LONDON:

Printed and Sold by *H. Hills*, in *Black-Fryars* near the Water-side. 1709.

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

STRIPTEASE AT THE ARS POETICA

First I took off my coat
because I was hot
and then I took off my hat
because forty percent of your body heat is lost through your head
which is a myth
but I like certain mythologies
and I like certain hat hair
which is perverse I know but I'm kind of a perv
so I took off my scarf because it was itchy
and then I took off my gloves
because it's hard to unbutton your shirt when you're wearing gloves
and I wanted to unbutton my shirt
so I unbuttoned my shirt
and I took it off and twirled it around over my head
and tossed it through the air
the way they do in strip joints and in movies
and at weddings
okay maybe they don't do that at weddings
they toss bouquets at weddings
and they twirl napkins at weddings
but you get the idea
and when I got the idea I took off my pants
because when a man gets aroused
he has this inexorable compulsion
to show his erection to someone who appreciates it
the way he appreciates it
as though it were something he had made
with his own hands
which some erections are
so then I stood there steeply rocking
in a sea of aloneness
because I was utterly alone in the Ars Poetica

CONTINUED...

with no one to appreciate what I had made
so I took off my shoes and my socks
and I hung my left sock on my erection
like a windsock
that shows the direction and strength of the wind
I didn't make the wind but I made a windsock
or the likeness or the image of a windsock
and I stood there naked in the wind for a brief moment
admiring what I had made
because it was beautiful and true and it slanted a little
due to the diminishing strength of my erection
and all of a sudden I felt very foolish
all of a sudden I felt very cold
and alone and with no direction
so I removed the sock and I put it back on my foot
and I put my other sock on my other foot
and I dressed quickly and self-consciously
and stuffed my hat and scarf and gloves back inside my coat pockets
and then with my coat in one hand and my shoes in the other
I tiptoed out of there in my stockinged feet
and I only am escaped alone to tell thee



ROBERTA SPIVEK

A DRINK AT A BERKELEY BAR ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

You stand there naked in the bar,
your flesh like silk,
your flesh like summer wheat,
sun shining on a wheat field
in the south of France,
the grain suffused with light
and paper-thin red poppies
someone should bring you,
to lay against your cheek.

Your buttocks flare behind you
like a hill, or fields erupting into hills,
or flanks of horses moving through the wheat.

An oval mirror gives us your face.
We find it pale and puzzled,
as if the artist couldn't find you
or you wouldn't let him in,
or maybe you were tired.
A wooden chair just waits
for you to rest your weight.
It anchors down the mirror
circling your breasts.
They say you've nursed.
Your hair is thick and dark.

For seventeen years you've endured this,
naked in a bar,
one arm lifted to your head,
the fire dancing on your thighs
and legs bent thickly at the knee
like the statues of Greek women.

And still our liquor softens up your flesh
until the paint begins to swim,

CONTINUED...

till women must avert their eyes
and men can barely keep
from reaching out and touching you
and I, a woman, can barely keep
from reaching out and touching you.



SARAH DAS GUPTA

LEGACIES

she's the darkest student in my class
the most beautiful
light looks for the curve of her cheeks
the fathomless pool of her eyes
black hair swirls shades of blue
in the sunlight of a dusty street
my colleagues say she's too dark
more Kali than Lakshmi they say
and praise the fairest of girls
pale ghosts of dead memsahibs



HARI MITAR KHALSA

THEY SAY HE WAS A BITER

The office was dark except for the bluish glow of two monitors which illuminated Hari Deva Singh's wrinkled face and long scraggly white beard, like a twenty-first century wizard coding his newest spell. He sat back and scrolled to the top of this night's Facebook post, furrowing his brow as he read through what he had written.

He had listed the accusers' questionable reputations and numerous character flaws, following this with a list of the inconsistencies and improbabilities in their stories. Though there were many of these, he could not quite shake a particular detail repeated by all eleven women.

They said Ram Ji was a biter.

They claimed he not only bit their necks, arms, and butts, but that he gnawed on their lips, the face ones, and most disturbingly, the other ones.

These details were unsettling, but women lied about these things, not most of the time Hari Deva Singh knew, but sometimes they lied, and God knows this was not the first-time people had tried to ruin his spiritual teacher with defamations. In fact, when Ram Ji was alive, Hari Deva Singh had twice defended him as his attorney. He had systematically picked apart the accuser's stories and laid bare their less-than-polished characters, and, in both cases, the women had withdrawn their accusations rather than suffer further humiliation.

Ram Ji could not have done what he was accused of because he explicitly taught against such behavior and gave dire warnings for its karmic consequences.

"It is known in India, that if a teacher abuses the sacred trust of a student, he will be reborn in the next life as a cockroach." Hari Deva Singh leaned forward in his chair and added this quote to the top of his post.

He read through it again, but something was still not right, and he hesitated before clicking "publish". The screen began to blur in front of him; perhaps he needed a break.

Hari Deva Singh descended the stairs to make his third cup of tea that night. He flipped on the kitchen light and opened the tea cabinet, finding a box of Ram Tea Kava Relaxation. He paused and looked at Ram Ji's picture which grinned back at him from a space next to the box's nutritional information.

As Hari Deva Singh lifted the box out, he felt something move inside and dropped it to the countertop in surprise. He heard a scratching sound, and then the box tore open. A small, wet, glossy cockroach peeked through the forehead of Ram Ji's picture, its antennae feeling about independently.

Hari Deva Singh took a startled step backwards. The cockroach stopped its frenzied movement suddenly and turned its head to look directly up at Hari Deva Singh who was overcome by Three Revelations.

The First.

He knew that this cockroach was his spiritual teacher reborn. It was unquestionable; he felt it to be true in every cell of his body.

The Second.

His spiritual teacher had been a genuine holy man, who was right about the cycle of rebirth, and thus about everything he had taught.

This was confirmation Hari Deva Singh had not known he needed. He had, after all, devoted his entire adult life to this man, raised a family in The Community, and dedicated his legal career to the service of Ram Ji and his various businesses. He had always felt that he had lived a terrific life, a meaningful life, and was overcome with renewed love for the man he called his teacher.

Then the cockroach bent its head and began to gnaw on the cardboard lips of its previous incarnation, and the final revelation dawned on him.

The Third.

His spiritual teacher had abused his students; the accusers were telling the truth. The deep feeling of love that had washed over him a moment before was suddenly overrun by a wave of repulsion for this disgusting creature.

Hari Deva Singh reached forward, shook the cockroach from the box and grabbed a large cookbook from the countertop. He raised the book high and slammed it down, crushing the cockroach onto the white marble. He slammed the book down violently three more times, grunting with each hit, white spittle spraying from his mouth.

Hari Deva Singh stood still, panting heavily. He stared blankly at the smeared body of his spiritual teacher. A boiling panic started to rise, what had he done? What were the karmic ramifications of killing the reincarnation of your spiritual teacher? He felt nauseous and suddenly dizzy, his heartbeat pounding fiercely behind his temples. He reached out a shaky hand to grab the countertop's edge, steadying himself.

He closed his eyes and focused on controlling his breathing, in through the nose out through the mouth, just like Ram Ji had taught him. Gradually the panic began to subside, and he realized that he had been mistaken. He must have suffered a minor lapse of sanity, likely brought on by his insomnia.

No, this was not his spiritual teacher reborn; it was simply a cockroach.

He coughed twice, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and set the heavy book down on the marble. He tore off a paper towel and wiped the sweat from his brow, then reached under the sink for cleaning supplies.

He wiped away the insect, just an insect, of course just an insect. He then threw out the torn Ram Tea box, unopened tea bags and all, filled up a glass of water, and made his way up the stairs where he returned to his office to finish his Facebook post.



D.E. LEE

CRAWFISH

*Never were we freer than under the German occupation.
We had lost all our rights, and first of all our right to speak. . . .
And because of all this we were free.*
Jean Paul Sartre

Tomorrow will be better, but at the moment the disgrace of being fired remains a sting with no precise location. The questions arrive now that I am gone from the shop, foremost: What did I do wrong? Mr. Pinchier, my boss, said I was worthless. A slick aphid of a man, Mr. Pinchier scolded me sharply on the rug showroom floor in front of everyone, and I fled, tears stealing my sight, out the door and crashed into a man not unlike the man sitting across from me on the R5 bus.

This man, at least fifty, wears a wrinkled yellow shirt and a loose dotted tie, and the rapt penetration of his look tells me he is stubbornly inquisitive, but I also note, in spite of the avuncular shape of his head, a trace of brutality in his mouth as he stares at a photograph. Ordinarily, I say nothing to anyone. But I feel like raw meat, and the imposing presence of this man, simply because he sits across from me, conjures images of a mallet and a good pounding is what I deserve, and he seems stern enough to deliver it. He's leaning a little, eyes on the photograph, and shades of annoyance or bewilderment ripple over his face. My trip is long, so I venture a guess.

Relatives?

The man inspects me a moment. And then, wiggling the photo, catches my meaning. Oh, no, he says, not mine. His smile feels oily. His nomadic stare finds the bend in my leg, and I stretch the edge of my skirt to my knees and look away.

The R5 pulls to the curb. A somnolent man in a black jacket, bag slung across the back, taps his card on the fare-box scanner and camps in the rear.

Castro, Miss, the old man, drawing me back, says. This picture. He turns the photo toward me. I was trying to decide if it's important.

Two men, both in caps, squint from the glossy finish. Plucky simplicity or brutal dedication lights the spirit of their faces. Castro's grin comes into focus over the edge of the photo. Cousins, he says. Mr. Arden Brasher and Mr. Zeno Whitman. They sent me an email. Badly written. Nothing to take seriously. Certainly, not important. And I had much to do. You know how it is with deadlines. But an erratic zeal in the prose grabbed my attention. It was bad, Miss, but you could torch a building with it. It was that fiery.

He cradles the photo in his palm, fixes upon it that solemn silence saved for funerals, school shootings, and the end of eras.

They were gentlemen, Miss. Not by the looks of them. You might call them crude cavaliers. Proxies of something gentle. Not the sort at first glance you'd consider inviting into your home. But the sort who unselfishly keep the peace with you. They are—now, how do I make this clear to you, Miss?

He pulls at his uneven sideburns, examines the gray harvest between his fingers. Dropping the tufts seems to inspire him.

Their lineage goes back to the colonies, he says. Oh, it goes much further than that! But they aren't concerned with royalty. And I don't mean to imply such blood's in their veins. No, Miss, they proudly chime the song of the mongrel and, laugh if you want, but I tell you they spoke without qualm. How did they put it? Yes. They said their hearts beat patriot blood and banners of liberty—something to that effect. Amusing. Perhaps sad. But a reflective moment, a bit of imagination, sets you on their course. The collective memory—our collective memory—evokes the ideal. The community where the town sheriff and the town miscreant are your relatives, the one living next to you, the other across the street. Where a person strides of an evening imbued with the confidence fairness brings. Don't you see it, Miss? What they proposed was what we all imagine. That we take up a position. Fervently. On the cusp of—what would you call it, liberty, justice, happiness? The words are embarrassing, aren't they? Like someone dressed in outdated clothing, but can you imagine it, Miss, the hostile journey through untamed land, unpaved, unsettled, disturbed only by the violence of nature? Can you imagine being the first person to set foot through that bramble? If you did not have courage when you entered that wilderness, you would have it soon. Or you would be dead, lying in a heap, ready for consumption by things having no time for your economy, society, or feelings. Sentiment, Miss, is the first casualty of raw experience. And what should we do about that? Mr. Brasher and Mr. Whitman argued for rebellion. Flat-out violence, if necessary. Edgy words, Miss.

I've made a mistake; this is not a man I can talk to.

I'm certain it's this light, Castro says, but you seem a little pale. If you're uncomfortable, I can stop. The thing is this: the pair was not merely yahoos spittin' and cussin' but anglers reaching back to clearer beginnings. Liberty, Mr. Brasher wrote, sucks at the nipple of

rebellion. Mr. Whitman added, Conformity medicates it. Oh, those droll fellows! Yet they were sincere, Miss. Completely sincere.

A small laugh shakes from his lips as he considers the photograph.

No, Miss, he says. Neither you nor I nor the man in the moon would willingly go into a thing that far. We just wouldn't. And then he looks at me, a grin on his lips. But they did, Miss. Yes, they did. And who wouldn't want to know something about that?

Well, he says, it's easy enough for me to get away and since the gentlemen invited me for a short trip, I thought, Why not?

The R5 slows to the curb like a clattering beetle. A doughy woman with two children finds seats near the front. She reprimands in a voice like a hammer beating tin. A tall boy in khakis and hoodie sprawls near a window. The R5 lurches back into traffic, and relief within the rectangular shell of the bus returns with its rolling motion.

I've gone on too long, Castro says. You must have a stop soon.

It's okay, I say, same as I said that afternoon a few months ago to Mr. Pinchier who asked me to help with storage bins. The room was tight, and the back of his hand grazed the back of my skirt, and maybe I made a noise because he apologized immediately, and I said, It's okay. And the next time I kept quiet, not out of fear, but the space was cramped, and I was certain nothing was meant by it.

Well, I'm no boor, Castro says, to conscript your ear to my story, to their story. Stop me at any time.

The thick intonation of his voice spreads over me, spreads over the images of the past few months like the narration of a bleak documentary. I want to stop him, but I already know that he will not stop. I whisper, stop, but the word does not stand on its own. A source of extreme anguish, this word, stop. It should rise with power, but instead wilts on my tongue. And for how long, I didn't know, but the first time I noticed was when Mr. Pinchier's wife, Clara, stopped by the showroom one rainy afternoon and said that her husband had spoken of me and in her eye was a look that said her husband had spoken to her about many other women and perhaps because I was so delighted that I had drawn the attention of Mr. Pinchier it took me a moment to notice that Clara, as she insisted I call her, was completely indifferent toward the wonderful array of rugs in the showroom, and I sensed that she regarded me as a threat to her relationship with Mr. Pinchier, who interrupted our conversation with a sharp voice, and I followed him to his office. He could not go into the details, he said, but I was to refrain from speaking to his wife—and then he noticed a stain on my blouse, and I said it was from the soup I'd had at lunch. He insisted on cleaning it, and he came at me with a licked tissue, and I saw my left hand go up when his fingers slipped beneath the blouse placket,

and I told him the stain was insignificant, but he insisted that it wasn't, and his fingers settled on the skin between my breasts, and the left hand that had risen dangled like a dead limb against my hip and the power of that wafer-thin word, stop, melted on my tongue, while the urgency of his hands and the ambitious tone of his voice convinced me to swallow the fact that his reason for wanting my shirt clean was more important than my shame, but as I later lay in pieces in bed that night, I promised myself that it would never happen again.

I have a long ride, I say, and Castro reaches for me. His fingers hook like bronze scythes over my hand.

The woman upbraiding her children stares at me, as I cross the aisle, and the driver catches it in the rearview mirror. The tall boy, beating a rhythm on his khakis, slips me a jazzed look. But what can I do, now that I've taken the hand, but accept it? Only the black jacket in the rear slumbers through it all.

This won't be so difficult, Miss, Castro says, helping me to the inside near the window. He takes up the remaining space amply.

I stayed at a motel, he says, and the next morning took a cab to a crossroads and sat on a wooden bench beneath a covered roof at one of those country stores that can never quite enter the twenty-first century. July, Miss. Sultry and humid. Sweat crawled buggy down the back and it was only eight o'clock. Shortly a truck pulled up and Mr. Brasher and Mr. Whitman climbed out. A few formalities. We settled on what we should call each other and so on. The roads progressively degraded from rolled to rocky asphalt and then to clay the farther we drove into the country. Finally we arrived on a sandy lane bordered by mulberry and pine.

A large white clapboard house on cement blocks stood in a clearing. A fir shaded the eastern side and on the western a buckling tin smokehouse, its shades of ochre and gray punctuated by trumpet creeper and wild grape.

A three-step climb led onto a screened porch. Dozens of shoes in various states of decay littered the floor. A history of familial shoeing laid out like museum pieces.

Find you a pair that works, Arden said. In the back rooms you'll find old clothes.

The house was dark. Two long tables cluttered with hooks, lures, string, dominos, caps, broken reels, boxes, and beans stood before a small kitchen. Cast off furniture in the main room. A narrow passage to the back. Slacks and shirts, plaids, bellbottoms, banana jeans, frill tops, and dolphin shorts hung from wires on walls. It was obvious that no one in any generation had ever heard of Goodwill. I picked up a black wool toque resting on a shelf and smelled it and wondered what luscious head had once worn the hat and how the evening had gone. I found dark slacks frayed at the bottom and a pullover dress shirt and returned to the porch and rummaged through the shoes.

When I lifted a pair of cracked Adidas, Arden warned me about spiders. I hooked the heels with two fingers and banged the shoes together like bags of sugar. The grass turned white. Zeno, leaning against the truck, made fine adjustments to a reel. Then he shouted. The reel wobbled like a football. He lurched madly to contain it. But the reel exploded. Plastic pieces hurtled in magnificent arcs and scattered across the yard. A fatty disgusted grin swelled on his face. Arden looked on from the steps and shook his head then rose to join Zeno.

Like hyenas scavenging a carcass, the pair combed through the turf for the reel fragments. Arden sheltered recoveries in a cupped hand. At last Zeno rose in disgust. Cheap crap, he said. Everything's disposable. Never mind. I got another inside. Something else'll go wrong, Arden said. I've seen it before.

We stranded one vehicle at the exit bridge and drove to the entrance. Zeno threw on a vest and shoved a box of lures into a pocket. He patted himself and said to Arden, You bring a stringer?

Arden shook his head, then rummaged in the cab. Zeno flipped over trash in the bed. Well, shit, Arden said. No stringer. He grinned. Hope we don't catch too many. He opened a pocketknife and cut a vine. We'll use this. He rolled it into a ball and stuffed it into his pocket.

Recent floods had cut gullies that were still glistening beneath high banks topped with scrawny pine. We picked our way past briarberry down red clay paths. Humid air abated with our descent into the water. Zeno, taking another path, got his leg entangled in a thorny vine. He finally worked through the understory and slipped into the stream. Anger crossed his face, but not because he'd been caught by the vine. Look there, Castro, he said, pointing where the water lapped over a cut below the bank. There. That's what we're talking about. And it was nasty, Miss, a blight and a shame, these several soiled diapers heedlessly cast off at this otherwise pristine spot on the river.

Castro's hands tap my knee from time to time, and I recoil, but his movements are so quick I'm convinced the touches are incidental. Mr. Pinchier—could anyone be more incidental? He said I was too sensitive, told me to lighten up. It's part of the job, he said, brushing off my resistance in the same cavalier manner that he brushed the hair from the back of my neck. As Mr. Pinchier wished, I no longer spoke to Clara, but I still noticed, in her eye, reptilian indifference and, in an odd twist, found that the less she cared about me the more inspired Mr. Pinchier became and, because he was well-known from those cheesy television ads, he made me handle the check-ins and always gave me more cash than was needed, and I guess he meant for me to keep the change but, eventually, this made me feel cheap.

Damn trashy people, Zeno said, Castro says, but that ain't the worst of it. See up along the banks and all along? Pastures and farms. Fertilizer runoff dumps mercury in the creek. Wildlife Agency says to limit the consumption of fish. Why? Tell me why? Did we do this? Not

us. Some other greedy bastard did it.

Mercury exists naturally in all environments, I offered, Castro says.

Zeno and Arden cocked their heads. Bullshit, bullshit, they shot in rapid succession. Consider it a possibility, I said. But they wouldn't hear of it, Miss. A long memory germ infected every thought they had. Never been a problem, Arden said, until government got involved and since they lie there's never been a consideration worth pondering. Don't matter what you say, Castro. We've known things since the beginning that was crystal clear. By what right except some law that someone who ain't never been here wrote can one person tell another what to do? Tell me that.

You take those diapers there, Zeno said, picking up the thread. Ignorant people left them. And that ain't no different from agents coming along posting signs and making matters worse and then coming back along and trying to regulate mistakes they made in the first place. Them that left the diapers knew what they was doing. They just don't give a damn. But that's honest. We can pick a fight with that one. Worse to be fawned over for your own sake.

We were walking upstream, Miss. Tea-colored water gently tugged submerged limbs and whirled darkly beneath tupelo. Their lures plunked softly and disappeared into darkness to arrive once more magically at the tips of their rods and I observed a certain contradiction, Miss, between the vehemence of these two and the slender peaceful space we occupied. As Arden predicted, Zeno's reel fell apart again, and, shoving the broken reel into his pocket, he went on about it, as if he'd found the culprit for his dissatisfaction: This is what all that Made in China crap does for a country, he said. Some asshole's getting rich and some Chinese is eating well but the quality of my life is going to hell. It's what I'm trying to tell you, Castro. God damn cheap plastic. Ain't nothing good no more.

His rant was interrupted by a sputtering motor. A pale-green John boat floated around the bend. Arden's and Zeno's jaws dropped as if they were seeing fire for the first time. Perched atop, a man in camouflage tossed his line into a hole. Another man, bearded, glanced at us. Nods exchanged. Camo said, Fishin' ain't none too good.

But they had caught seven. We were empty-handed. The boat glided past and then vanished, the sound of the motor fading like the dying call of an ancient bird.

How long you and me been fishing here? Arden said to Zeno.

Nineteen and sixty-three, Zeno said.

You ever see anything like that?

Never did. Never seen nobody here before. Always thought this river belonged to us.

They were gloomy after that, Miss. Both continued to fish, but they were chewing on the notion that their river had been invaded. Their memory could trace generations of fishers who simply walked upstream to catch food. It never occurred to either of them that a modern contrivance might one day surpass them as that boat had just done. They were genuinely perplexed. The river, their river, Miss, had never before been molested by modernity with such brutality, and they were dumbfounded.

When the first of our family made its way here, Arden said, they came from Virginia through Georgia and crossed the Conecuh. Cut through this forest long before there was any roads or anything. Holed up in caves and starved a good bit of the time. Can't really imagine how it was back then. How difficult and hostile.

Zeno laughed and shook his head. And then we all laughed. But I realized that they were laughing like someone whose guts had been spilled and had just now grasped the hopelessness of it.

The R5 lunges through a changing yellow, and I'm distracted by a deep sense of melancholy and then by an insect crawling inside my blouse along my belly and when I look up, trying to ignore the invasion, I see that the driver is staring at me in the mirror, as if somehow it's my fault, and then the R5 veers to the curb, and the woman and her children stand. She glowers at me and huddles her brood close to her legs and turns their heads away. It's all these insects, I say, looking at her. The woman speaks to the driver but I know she's talking to me. I ain't never seen such a sight, she says, and then she thumps down the steps into the pale afternoon.

The mosquitoes were bad, Castro says. They came at us from every direction. Terrible. Terrible insects. And nothing to do about it. You spray a bit, but to a pesky creature like that, you submit. That's what you do. That's all you can do. The best we could figure, Arden had gone under a drooping fetterbush to retrieve a snagged lure and stirred them up.

The creek was mid-calf and red. Zeno pointed at a row of orderly stumps and said, That trestle's what's left of a rail that run through here in the thirties. Then he directed my inspection to the jutting bank. You can see it goes on back that way. But there's nothing left of it. This forest used to be filled with huge yellow pine, Arden said. Bigger than anything you and I will ever see. Logged, Zeno said. Every bit of it, Arden said. Daddy says they hitched the timber together and rode it downstream to the small towns for milling.

Another creek merged into our river. Water, black as molasses, Miss. Thick and swirling with golden leaves. We crossed a log jam and came up to wide beach. Arden directed my attention to a placard nailed to a tree. The writing was red and small. These No Trespassing signs belong to a man that lives up yonder, he said. Our family's been here long before he ever heard of this place. Don't a prior footstep do for a claim? Don't it? Tell me. But then he answered his own question. No, it don't.

They went on with their 'plaint for several minutes, unaware or ignorant of the settling darkness. When you're in the creek, Miss, you're already in a dark place. The understory is thick. Menacing at times. Trees on the bank are twice as high as when you're trekking along some path in the woods. You feel at once uneasy trudging in this damp gully and at the same time awed by the quiet splendor. And that's what I was relishing when I saw the wet corpulent darkness rising above the pines. It was upon us quick and we scrambled up the bank to escape the downpour beneath the shelter of the forest.

Afterward, I often escaped into the shower and there, feeling uneasy, I listened to Mr. Pinchier criticize the shabby carpeting of the motel rooms—he knew carpets, that was his love, whether they would hold up or wear thin, lose color or remain vibrant, resist stains or ruin easily—and I swore I would never do it again. This went on for some time until someone—a newly hired brunette named Sophia—came along and reduced my value like last year's rugs. And then, today, like the storeroom inventory, I was purged, and I ran out crying.

Hunkered down, soaking wet, watching silvery streams of rainwater, I reflected a moment on these two throwbacks. They felt invaded, Miss. They had no possession of this land. And it was unclear to me whether they wanted possession of it. Nonetheless, they sensed that they had been assaulted. If not to body, then to memory. To that memory meandering back to their parents and to the parents of their parents all the way back to the first footstep. How dare anyone molest them while their memory stood prior to any deed of land? They were incensed, all right, but utterly unable to defend themselves, and I had no use for that.

Have a heart, you say? No offense, Miss, but they'd said as much, and their sappy poopings about the loss of their idyllic, pristine land and noble way of life, the skewed imaginings they held of their forebears' journey, did little to stir me—and in fact I found their naïveté tedious. They'd succumbed, don't you see, and still had the gall to complain that their lives were falling apart.

The R5 stumbles over potholes. The tall boy in khakis rides it, his boney fingers drumming callously over his legs, while the rest of him thrashes with cannibalistic desire. Something about him alarms me, the devouring expression of his body, though I am nothing to him, but that is the point, I realize, and I'm cowed by his presence, which, like Mr. Pinchier's, strikes me with its impudence.

Lightning, Castro says, startling me, crashed all about us. At first the rain fell musically like plunked harp strings, but then pounded like drums. We crouched beneath the shelter of a magnolia bower, and the intensity of the thunder grew and echoed against the bark of the trees, and at some point, whether caused by the chill of the rain or by some unspoken fear, both men were shivering, and I turned away, leaving them alone with their thoughts. When the rain ceased, we stepped back into the river, a tad colder than when we'd started.

At last we arrived at the object that had so mortified these men and spurred them to write to me. Initially, I didn't see it, Miss, because I was taken by a view of huge bay limbs

stretching over a halcyon region where a gentle spring trickled down the bank. The sun dispersed the clouds and the creek narrowed. Juniper and blueberry jostled for space. Up there, Zeno said, as we approached a small building perched on stilts on the eastern bank.

Anyone live there?

More likely a party house, Arden said. Some fishing and drinking. Who knows what else? But here's what we want you to see.

In the middle of the creek, a table built of rotted wood stood about four feet up. Wet splinters jutted from its ends. Rusty nails held one-by-fours in sloppy rows across the top. It was an unexpected sight, Miss, but stranger still was the assortment of fountains, rockets, Roman candles, spinners, mortars, and wheels littering the top. A sharp gunpowder smell lingered. We circled the table like vultures awaiting a thing to die. After a while, Zeno said, This ain't right. This just ain't right. When I said nothing, they finally grasped that I did not see in it the horror that they saw, and the two men became sullen. It was a table, Miss, and no big thing, and we could have, right then and there, lifted it out of the water; or couldn't I have given them advice on how they might protest the misuse of the river? Certainly, and easily. But they were content to hold hard to the fact that they ought to have been treated better, that respect was owed to them, to the memory of their ancestors, and to the simple, plain beauty of the river.

At the exit we shook sand from our shoes. Arden dipped his hand into the shallows by some driftwood and pulled out a discarded beer can. He poured water from it and then shook it until a small creature dropped onto his palm. Its feelers twitched nervously. Plates of red and black shell worked as if run by hydraulic pumps. See, Arden said, this little fella is all wrapped up in his shell. But that ain't enough. So he finds a beer can to settle into. Now ain't that something?

Castro stares at the photograph. Arden didn't know what he was talking about. But that's clear, isn't it, Miss? Then Castro's expression settles slowly like sediment.

While they cleaned the gear, I discovered a table on the side of the house with fish scales, like fallen socks, piled around its legs, and I was amused by an idle notion that, had I dug around in those scales, I might have found the first scale from the first fish cleaned by the first ancestor who set foot in these woods. Idle thoughts, yes, but one wonders . . .

And he then presses the signal strip and the bus comes to a halt near a five-story brickwork apartment building.

The photograph falls into my hand, or it's given to me, as he rises, and I look up at him and see in his face something other than the brutal features I'd seen when I'd first looked at him; they are not soft but practical, and then his hand comes toward me, inviting me.

I shake my head.

It's the end of the line, Miss. Won't you come with me?

No. The word lacks volume.

He looks at the boy in khakis, he looks at the man dozing in the back. If you stay on, you'll go back.

I need to go back. This time I hear it; the voice isn't strong, but it's believable.

Will you ride all day?

If I have to.



DON NOEL

LIKENESSES

Allison Borders – Allie to her friends – found her high school yearbook in one of the boxes she had stowed in the basement storeroom that came with her new Harmony Acres apartment. “You’ll love that locker,” Gwen Simmons had said. Gwen was a neighbor assigned to help her settle into the new experience of a senior retirement community. “We all arrive with too much stuff. Had you been living in a big old house?”

Allie just nodded, unsure where this was going.

“Me, too,” Gwen had prattled on. “Gave furniture to the kids, sold it, gave it to charity. Threw away tons of stuff; thought I was bringing only what mattered. I got here and had to put half of it into my storeroom. I’ve hardly looked at any of it since. I’ll bet you’ll be the same.”

Allie had agreed that would probably be true, and went with Gwen on an introductory tour of the place. There were almost 300 apartments, plus formal and informal dining rooms, meeting rooms, game rooms, exercise rooms and a pool; it was exhausting. Finally, Gwen led her back to her new apartment and left her to continue settling in.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Gwen said. “Here’s the latest copy of our directory, photos and mini bios of everyone. Brand new, just out yesterday. They even got you in it, at least your photo. They’ll want you to give ‘em a short bio for the next printing. And you’ll be introduced at our monthly residents’ meeting by our Hospitality chairman, a handsome widower you’ll like.”

“It’s kind of overwhelming,” Allie said.

“We’re a friendly community. You’ll enjoy getting acquainted with us.”

So she thanked Gwen, decided it was late-afternoon enough for a glass of sherry, kicked off her shoes and curled into a comfortable bedroom armchair to leaf through the directory. Just browsing, the way one might thumb through a birdbook when visiting a new country or territory, familiarizing oneself with the local denizens and plumage.

And there was Lex! Lexington Armstrong, as handsome as he’d been at Madison High more

than five decades ago. "My God, Lex," she murmured to herself, "You've hardly aged!"

Which had sent her down to that basement storeroom, where she muscled boxes for half an hour before finding her high school yearbook and taking it back to the apartment.

*

There they were, page after page: valedictorian and salutatorian, king and queen of the senior prom, stars of the senior play. Born Allison Thompson, she'd been Tommy since junior high; most friends didn't even know her given name. Lex and Tommy. They were everyone's bet for high school sweethearts most likely to enjoy long years of blissful marriage.

Although he was going across the country to a plum scholarship at Stanford that summer, and she was going to Ohio in the fall with her own scholarship at Oberlin, that would be an inconsequential pause in Madison High's romance of the decade.

She pored over the photos, then took the book into the bathroom to compare the Allie in the mirror against the adolescent Tommy in the yearbook. It took imagination, thank God, to see them as the same woman. If she wore a Covid mask, her own mother might not recognize her.

Back in the armchair, she compared the yearbook photos with the new Harmony Acres directory Gwen had given her. Sure enough, Lex was an easily-discerned older version of his high school self, even to the dark head of wavy hair – never mind if he touched it up. She'd gasped the moment she saw him; hadn't needed to read the name.

She, by contrast, was thicker. Not fat; she hadn't let that happen. Still, what had been a willowy frame was maybe fifteen pounds heavier. And she had long ago given up on long blonde tresses; the salon nowadays kept her short bob regally white-haired, which was better than her natural mousy gray – and nothing like the golden-haired slip of a girl Lex had loved.

And compare that creamily smooth-skinned yearbook girl with the face she'd studied in the mirror. Even if exaggerated by the harsh white light, it was now a face that seemed to her as deeply furrowed as a freshly-plowed cornfield – probably the price paid for years in beachfront vacation sunshine.

She was, in short, all but unrecognizable as the beautiful Tommy Thompson of her high school years. Thank goodness! Lex might sit right across from her and not know her. And since they'd lost touch long before she met and married Michael Borders, he wouldn't recognize her by name, either. He might not even remember the Allie; she'd been so universally known by her nickname that she'd been Tommy on the graduation rolls, even if the diploma had her full name.

She would have to be artful in that bio they wanted, but that shouldn't be too hard. She could settle in here at Harmony Acres, make new friends and a new life, and not worry that Lexington Armstrong would some day look, blink, and shout out, "Tommy! Tommy Thompson! My long-lost high school sweetheart!"

Not likely he'd think that anyway. Their lives had diverged so far that convergence now would churn up a lot of history that was better left behind.

*

There was another photo to compare: She took the yearbook back to the bedroom to focus on the oversized frame on the bedside table. There she was with Libbie Tucker, the younger woman who had for decades called her 'Auntie A'. The Tuckers, her foster parents, formally named her Elizabeth, but called her Libbie. Allie thought of her only by that pet name.

The photo, taken at Libbie's high school graduation, showed a very pretty young woman. If you looked closely, expectantly, you might see something of that young Tommy from the yearbook - and maybe more than a touch of Lex, too.

Wangling an invitation to that graduation had been a piece of work. But nothing, Allie thought to herself, like the work involved in becoming "aunt" to her own child. All the agencies that helped unwed mothers put babies up for adoption wanted a clean break. The mothers weren't supposed to know even where the adopting couple lived, let alone their names or the baby's new name.

Daddy had made it happen. He was well known in town, a lawyer and a judge who sometimes heard child custody cases, so the agency had been deferential.

And money had helped. Let the child and her parents stay in touch with her Aunt Allie, Daddy the lawyer proposed, and her 'Auntie A' would create and regularly add to a trust fund sufficient to see her through college and even an advanced degree. The Tuckers could share oversight of the fund, to guarantee its reality. They needn't go into details of the supposed kinship; Allie was just a distant relative.

She gratefully became Auntie A.

The Tuckers - who Libbie always thought were her real parents - moved soon after that graduation to a new job in the Midwest, so in-person contact had been scarce for more than a decade. But they corresponded, and became quite close when Libbie's studies brought her back East.

*

The first encounter with Lex went better than she could have hoped. The most recent COVID

variant had sent Harmony Acres back into semi-lockdown, so the monthly meeting of the residents' association was conducted on Zoom. The Hospitality chair Gwen had mentioned turned out to be . . . Lex!

"We have a half-dozen to welcome today," he began. They had forced everyone's screen into speaker view, so he was big as life in front of her. His baritone was as strong as she remembered it, and she suddenly wondered whether her own voice still had any memorable traces of her high school self.

Too late now to experiment with disguising her voice. She toyed with putting on a mask, but decided that would seem stupid, since they were all alone in their apartments, in front of their computers. So a moment of risk.

"We'll go alphabetically," Lex said on her screen. "Allison Borders is first." The screen turned to gallery view. "Are you here, Ms. Borders?" His eyes darted around, obviously scanning the regimented Zoom images.

"Right here, Mr. Armstrong," she said. Her face suddenly filled the screen. She had written this out and even practiced it, to be sure she would say nothing that might jog his memory. She carefully skipped the early years. "I'm Allie Borders," she began. "After graduation, I immediately went on for a master's degree in guidance and counseling at Cornell, then was lucky enough to be hired by Bryn Mawr High in Pennsylvania. My husband died within a year of our marriage, and I never re-married. I spent most of my career at Bryn Mawr, moving up to be guidance chair and then principal of the school. That prompted me to study for another advanced degree in administration, and I spent my last working decade as superintendent of schools in the nearby town of King of Prussia. I have a niece, my only next-generation kin, who used to call me the Queen of Prussia."

She heard a few chuckles, and was pleased with herself. There was a smile on Lex' face, too, but it was quickly apparent he'd been planning ahead for his next introduction, so hadn't paid close attention to her. "Thank you, Allison. Is that how you like to be called? I may have missed that. And our next self-introduction is from Barbara Levine. Barbara, I'm sorry, I should have asked beforehand, do you say it LeVEEN or LeVYNE?"

So Barbara Levine - VEEN - was off and running. It had obviously never occurred to Lex that he might have known Allie Borders in another life.

*

"Does he have an idea that you might be pregnant?" her father had asked.

"No, Daddy," she'd said. She felt her face bright red, hot. "It only ... we only ... it was the night before he left for California. I'm so embarrassed. I'm so sorry!"

Her parents had been just terrific. No recriminations. No scolding. She should confess her sin to Father Fitzpatrick – she was still a devout girl back then – and would be forgiven, and that would be the end of it.

Or the end as far as shame and humiliation went. But there were consequences and prohibitions, permutations. She was not even to hint to any of her girlfriends, let alone to Lex, that she was pregnant. There was never any doubt that she would bear the child; in those days abortionists were back-alley practitioners of a dark art, far beyond the pale, especially in the view of Catholic believers. And she would go away to bear the child, leaving long before her pregnancy showed.

Not telling Lex, surprisingly enough, had been the easy part. Since he had left for California right after graduation, in early June, they had written several times a week; long-distance phones back then were expensive and not always clear. The mails were slow: Usually each had written again before an answer came to a prior letter, so their responses to each other's questions or comments were always tardy.

She'd missed her period in July – ironically, not long after Independence Day – and managed to make an appointment within a few days without telling Mommy and Daddy. Her doctor then was still her pediatrician, a warm and supportive woman, who did a test and phoned the next day.

The letter from Lex had come that very day. "Dearest Tommy," he wrote, "it is hard being apart. I won't see you until I come back for Christmas. I don't want to deny you a normal social life at Oberlin, or make you some kind of outcast. You must feel free to date others, knowing that the time will come when we can truly be together again."

That hadn't been hard to decipher: He was dating others out there at Stanford, and maybe even had a special someone. That made not telling him an easy decision. She began writing less often. When she got to Nebraska, where the postmark might have led to questions, she just stopped writing.

Meanwhile, Daddy the arranger had been arranging. An uncle and aunt in Nebraska, a childless older couple, would happily have her live with them until she delivered. Daddy persuaded Oberlin that she had an unnamed transient illness making it impossible to begin her studies in the fall, but that might permit a tardy arrival for the following summer semester.

A gift to the university's latest growth fund probably helped: Oberlin agreed. She took a Greyhound bus to Nebraska and settled in with a kinfolk couple who proved warm, supportive, and non-judgmental. She even enrolled in what turned out to be stimulating courses for would-be teachers at the University of Nebraska in nearby Lincoln, credits that she could take back to Oberlin and, with some extra effort, hope to graduate with her class

of '67.

When the time came, Mommy came out as support, and she delivered her child at Bryan Medical Center's "birthing center" in Lincoln. Four days later she flew back - her first flight - with her baby, as Daddy had arranged, to leave her at the already-familiar Adoptions from the Heart center.

They wouldn't let her meet the Tuckers just then; it would have been too obvious. But the Tuckers were told a little more about the distant aunt who would help underwrite college. Several months later, she had tea with them at a nearby restaurant to get acquainted. Only then did she learn her own daughter's name; she wouldn't see the baby girl herself for several years.

It would be several years more before their first, awkward phone conversation. She managed a first in-person visit when the girl was in grade school, and then managed to stay in touch and meet occasionally until after high school when the Tucker family moved west. Happy coincidences: Young Libbie went to Oberlin, too, taking courses aimed at a career in - amazingly! - guidance and counselling. Her 'Auntie A' was pleased to say that had been her major, too, and to suggest that Cornell had a good post-graduate program. In due course Libbie enrolled there too.

When the Tuckers, her 'parents', died in the following decade, Allie finally became not merely a distant, wealthy, supportive aunt, but a friend and quasi-parental advisor. They made a point of getting together at least once a year, often spending a weekend in New York and taking in plays or concerts.

*

And then Libbie proposed to come visit here at Harmony Acres. That was hardly a surprise, although sooner than expected; welcome, of course.

Libbie was, as Allie herself had done, going back to college for a doctorate, at almost the same age, 56. How exciting! Her thesis was to be on how best to counsel residents of senior life care communities like this. Might she come for a few days visit? she asked in a phone call. Shadow her aunt around for a few days, and perhaps arrange an interview with some of the senior staff?

Of course! Allie booked a guest room, and alerted the director of the place, who seemed flattered that Harmony Acres might draw the attention of a distinguished doctoral program; she would be glad to help Libbie with her studies.

It proved a delightful visit. Since the Tuckers' death, Libbie had felt closer to her Auntie A. Even beyond their chosen studies and careers, they had life experience in common: Both

had been widowed within a few years of their marriages, kept their married names – she was Libbie Godwin – and never remarried. Neither had children from those unions.

Libbie had read about communities like Harmony Acres, but this was the first that she'd visited, and she took an immediate liking to some of Allie's new friends. They went to early-morning exercise class together every day of the visit, and went together to meetings of the Health Committee and then the full Residents' Association.

On the last day, Libbie expressed interest in how newcomers were oriented to this new community life, and without thinking Allie suggested they go together to that morning's meeting of the Hospitality Committee. And of course, there was Lex.

"Nice to have you visit us, Ms. Godwin," Lex said. "I see by your nametag that you're Libbie; may I call you that? We're quite informal here. I haven't really gotten to know your mother yet, she's such a newcomer, but . . ."

"She's my niece," Allie interrupted him.

"Sorry."

Libbie broke the awkwardness: "Nice to meet you, Mr. Armstrong – Lex – and of course call me Libbie."

That exchange didn't last any longer, thank goodness: Lex was chairman, and had to get the meeting underway. But they both noticed that he kept glancing their way throughout the meeting, and after adjourning the gathering he came back at full steam to resume the conversation.

"Ms. Godwin," he said. "I hope you'll forgive me, but you bear a striking resemblance to my own mother. I haven't been able to keep my eyes off you."

"We noticed," Allie said. "Wondered."

"I have a photo of her," Lex went on, "with my father, in their fifties. I keep it on my bedroom dresser. Your likeness to her is quite remarkable. Mom was a native of Kansas, who came East for college. Might your roots by any chance be in Kansas?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. . . uh, Lex, but I'd never been out of New Jersey until I went to college, and I never went west of Ohio until many years later still. Any resemblance must be a remarkable coincidence."

"Well, I couldn't help asking. Sorry. Hope you continue to enjoy your visit."

"Auntie A," Libbie said as he left, "if I understand the way your culinary service works, we could pick something up at what you call The Refectory, bring it back to your place, and just be together, the two of us, for supper. What do you think?"

*

So there they were, back in her tiny-cozy living room, each with a cup of soup, a sandwich, and glasse of Pinot Grigio on the coffee table between them. "Can I share a secret with you?" Libbie asked. "At least, maybe it's a secret."

"Of course, dear."

"It's something I learned just before Mom's death."

Allie could think of nothing to say. She thought to have a sip of soup, but her hand seemed inexplicably fragile.

"Dad, as you may remember, had died several years earlier. Mom wasn't going to last more than an hour or two. And suddenly she pulled herself together, seemed almost to sit up in bed, and said I should know that they weren't my real parents."

"Oh, my!" was all Allie could manage.

"That I was a foster child."

"What a shock!" Allie struggled to say.

"Not entirely. I'd begun to wonder, in my teen years, how I could be so different from them: A foot taller, blue eyes instead of their brown, flaxen blonde instead of their brown hair. Nobody meeting us for the first time would have guessed I was their daughter."

"Well, dear, you know that inherited traits don't always follow a straight line. There are bends in the road; gaps. There's a lot we don't know about genetics and all that."

"Of course," Libbie said. "I don't think I ever would've been bold enough to ask Mom or Dad why we looked so different."

"And did she tell you more?"

"Not a word more. She sank back, and in what seemed no time, she was gone."

"How sad," Allie said. "And frustrating, I suppose."

"Yes. I have to confess: It's been chewing at me. And now suddenly your Mr. Armstrong – sorry, not yours, he says he hasn't gotten to know you – tells me I favor his mother. What am I to think?"

"Oh, that must be just a coincidence. You heard him say his family was from Kansas."

Libbie went on as though Allie hadn't spoken. "And I have an 'aunt' whose relationship to my parents – or foster parents, or me – I've never known. But friends who've seen your photo in my apartment think I favor you. What should I make of that? Another coincidence?"

Silence. Allie sat looking at this daughter she had never acknowledged, struggling to find words, trying to find the right course. A tear appeared, and she let it roll down her cheek. Finally: "I have an idea," she said. "Wait."

She took out her phone, found the directory, and dialed Lex Armstrong. While it rang, she put it on speakerphone so Libbie could hear the whole conversation.

"Hello, this is Lex."

"Lex, this is Allie Borders. We haven't really gotten acquainted, but I'm calling to ask a favor."

"Of course."

"Libbie and I have just finished a little supper, and are lingering over a glass of fair-to-middling Pinot Grigio and talking about genetic coincidences, so to speak."

"Hmmm. How can I help?"

"I think our apartments aren't too far apart. I wondered if you might join us for a glass of wine, and bring that picture of your mother?"

"I My goodness! . . . Come now? . . . With the photo?"

"It would be a huge favor."

"Well Sure! I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Thank you. I'll set the door ajar." She punched the phone off, and looked across the coffee table at a Libbie who seemed too perplexed to say anything.

He wedged the door open; went to the kitchen to retrieve the wine from the fridge and get another glass, and put those on the little table. She almost sat down, but instead went to

the bedroom for the yearbook, which she put face down on the floor beside her chair. All that in silence as thick and dense as the moments before a summer rainstorm.

Then, as she settled down to wait: "I think, my dear, we'll find more than one likeness." She looked up at a knock on the door. "Come in, Lex."



MARK KEANE

A TRAGIC STORY

Simon dashes down Palmerston Place and takes the shortcut across Rutland Square. He sees Kate, in her red raincoat, leaning against a railing, one foot tapping the ground.

"Sorry I'm late." He bends forward, hands on hips, to catch his breath. "I was held up at work."

"What's new?" She gives him the full moue. "I work too, but I always manage to show up on time."

"Sorry. Nothing I could do about it. A difficult student..." He checks his watch. "Do we have time for a quick pint?"

"No." She steps away from the railing. "I'm not rushing a drink and spoiling my appetite because you're late. Let's go straight to the restaurant."

A soft April rain patters the pavement. Once they turn onto Frederick Street, the sign for Chez Henri comes into view. The raindrops grow heavier, the walkway down to the restaurant entrance slick with rain. Simon runs a hand over the wet sleeves of his jacket when they get inside. Kate pats her auburn hair and tucks a strand behind her ear. "Is it raining again?" the maître d' asks in a pronounced French accent.

"Of course," Kate replies. "Springtime in Edinburgh."

They examine their menus though they know them by heart. Friday evening at Chez Henri has become a mainstay of their married life. They order different dishes, as they always do. Most Fridays, they swap plates during the meal to sample what the other has ordered.

Simon unwraps the napkin from his knife and fork and arranges it on his lap. He looks around the room, scanning the ersatz French prints on the walls, and lingers on the image from George Méliès *Le Voyage dans la Lune*.

"You seem very distracted," Kate says. "Is anything wrong?"

"Just a bad day at work." He lifts the napkin from his lap and folds it. "Nothing important."

How about you? How was your day?"

Kate pours water from a carafe. "Remember I told you about one of my colleagues, Trevor Coulson, in the audit team?"

"Yes... well, sort of. The name rings a bell."

A waiter approaches, holding out a bottle of wine. Kate goes through the motions of checking the label and waiting for him to pour some for her to taste and approve.

Simon's thoughts return to the difficult student: Antônio Souza, rimless round glasses, pudgy sallow face and sculpted beard. In his mid-twenties, older than the other students, an added maturity that he flaunts. He had knocked on Simon's door well after office hours. Simon told him he was about to leave, but that didn't dissuade Antônio. He had come to query his exam mark. There were extenuating circumstances—he was separated from his family and hadn't been back to Brazil for over a year. Something about a sick grandmother and visa complications.

"It's a really tragic story."

Simon looks up to see Kate eyeing him. "Really?" he says.

"Yes. I can't imagine anything worse."

"What happened?"

"I told you before that Trevor was seriously ill in hospital." Kate holds her glass by the stem and swirls the wine. "Do you listen to anything I say?"

"Of course I do." Simon picks an olive from a plate of oddments served as an appetiser. "Trevor, your colleague—I remember you saying he was in hospital."

"Our office manager went to see him." Kate spears a cornichon on her fork. "Trevor was in a coma, hooked up to a machine. She said he was barely recognizable, just skin and bones. Hard to believe. Trevor was such a fitness fanatic, always looking for sponsorship for 5K or 10K runs. You know, he ran five London marathons."

"So, what happened? What landed him in the hospital?"

"Nobody is sure, not even the doctors. Exposure to some sort of toxin. They think it has

something to do with his flat refurbishment. He was having it completely renovated. Something in the paint or the flooring. It's being investigated."

"Sounds strange."

The waiter brings their first course: moules à l'étuvée for Kate and soupe à l'oignon gratinée for Simon.

"Bon appétit."

Antônio Souza is special. He always carries a briefcase. At the start of each class, he makes a big deal of laying it flat on the desk and snapping it open. He asks questions while other students yawn or check their phones. Questions that are intended to catch Simon out, like the anthropogenic question.

"Sir, I wish to seek clarification. I do not understand what you mean by anthropogenic. From my understanding it means man-made pollution. But the way you present it makes it sound like something natural. I am confused."

At the time, Simon knew he'd made a mistake, which he tried to correct, and ended up contradicting himself. No one took any notice, apart from Antônio.

"It's easy to be confused." Simon directed his response to the class, and not specifically to Antônio. "The term is often misused and can be misleading. It very much depends on context. Strictly speaking, you should take anthropogenic as referring to non-natural phenomena rather than the natural environment."

He moved on to the next slide, but couldn't stop himself from glancing in Antônio's direction and seeing the knowing grin on that pudgy face.

"How's your soup?"

Simon shifts in his seat. "Fine, same as ever."

Kate drops an empty mussel shell onto her plate. "You didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"You really are distracted this evening." She wipes her fingers on her napkin. "I asked you about additives in paint. Can they be that toxic?"

"I don't know. I'm not a medical scientist. I'm just a lowly chemistry professor."

Simon considers telling Kate about Antônio, the meeting in his office, even the mix-up with the definition of anthropogenic. He recalls Antônio's grin and decides not to say anything.

"Isn't it dreadful about Trevor's wife and daughter?"

"What about them?" Simon takes another mouthful of soup, then lays the spoon down.

"Are you not finishing your soup?"

"I have finished it." He moves the bowl so it's out of her line of vision, hidden behind the water jug. "What happened to the wife and kid?"

"I knew you weren't listening. I told you. Trevor's wife and daughter died."

The waiter approaches their table.

"How is everything?"

"Perfect," Kate answers.

The waiter turns to Simon. "Have you finished?"

"Yes." Simon gestures to have the dish removed. "I need to leave space for the next course." He watches the waiter sidle between the tables, and avoids Kate's stare.

"You really are acting strangely," she says. "Very detached, like you're not here."

They sit in silence. The waiter returns with the second course.

"Boeuf bourguignon for madam. Steak frite au poivre for monsieur." He smirks at Simon. "Bien cuit. Bon appétit."

Simon waits until the waiter is out of earshot. "Bloody cheek. I never noticed that attitude before. Maybe it's time to find a new restaurant."

He waits for Kate to respond, but she keeps her eyes on her food. No exchanging dishes this time—if she suggests it, he'll refuse. He cuts into his well-done steak and loads his fork with a chunk of meat and three thin frites.

Antônio had demanded that Simon go over his exam paper and explain why he'd deducted so many marks.

"You're the only one asking for this," Simon said. "No one else haggles over marks. Just you." "It is my right, sir." Antônio sat with his briefcase propped on his lap. "I have read it in the student handbook."

"I see." Simon fiddled with a pen, anger fizzing in his veins. "If that's what you want, send me an e-mail and I'll arrange a time. But remember, it can go both ways. I'm quite certain I was very lenient when I marked your exam. If I find I should have given you fewer marks, then I may have to lower your grade." Simon tapped the pen on the desk, and felt the urge to slam down his fist. "It can go both ways. Think about that."

Antônio shook his head. "I am not intimidated by you. I have learnt to be independent, living in a foreign country." He adjusted his glasses and puckered his lips. "You do not care about your students."

Kate says something that Simon doesn't catch. He fills their wine glasses.

"Yes, terrible." He shakes his head. "Both wife and daughter dying. That's terrible."

"Of the same thing that put Trevor in hospital. The toxin in the paint, or whatever." Kate sips her wine. "But that's not what's so tragic. It's tragic, of course, but what's going to happen to Trevor is the real tragedy. That's what I've been trying to explain to you."

Simon cuts a fatty edge from his steak. "Yes, of course."

He had shouted at Antônio, releasing his rage in a surge of unbridled freedom.

"You know what? You're a slimy arse-licker and a cheat."

Antônio recoiled in his seat, mouth open, cheeks wobbling. Simon was sure he'd start crying, blubbing like a fat bearded baby. Instead, Antônio stood and puffed out his chest.

"You have no right to speak to me in this way. I will take the matter higher. I will go to the university administration."

"Go ahead. Be my guest." Simon waved him away, making the gesture as dismissive as possible. "Just get out of my sight."

"Attention, please." Kate pings the glass with her fork. "I'm trying to tell you the real tragedy."

"Sure, sure. I'm listening." Simon chews his last piece of steak without tasting the peppered meat.

"When Trevor went into a coma and was taken into hospital, his wife and daughter were fine. Nothing wrong with them whatsoever." Kate pauses, and runs a finger along the rim of her glass. "Trevor came out of the coma yesterday. The doctors think he'll make a full recovery. He's still very weak and in no shape to deal with what's happened. The doctors are monitoring his condition, deciding when he can be told. That's the real tragedy. When he's strong enough, someone will tell him his wife and daughter are dead. He survived and they died, and he never even knew they were sick. He's been brought back from the dead to face that."

Chances are Ant6nio will go to the university administration. After all, he's so mature and knows his rights and deserves to be heard and coddled and rewarded. Or he'll go to the students' union and they'll encourage him to kick up a fuss. Or else he'll back down, too cowardly to act on his threat, worried his plan will backfire. Simon can see no alternative but to wait and see what happens.

"So, what do you think?" Kate pours more water for herself. "Can you imagine anything worse? Doesn't it put things into perspective?"

"Yes, it's terrible, no question about it." Simon empties the wine bottle and wants more. "Are you having dessert?"

"No, I'm full."

"How about coffee?"

"Nothing for me. You have something more if you like."

Simon signals to the waiter and orders one espresso and one Cognac. He turns to Kate. "Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Simon sits back in his chair and looks over at the M6li6s print, taking in the moon's disgruntled expression and the space capsule embedded in one eye. He swallows what's left of the wine, aware of Kate's watchful glare.

The waiter returns with his coffee and digestif. Simon sniffs the Cognac, and holds the glass aloft. "Puts things into perspective."

"You know what?" Kate wads her napkin into a ball and drops it on the table. "It's not that you're detached. You're self-absorbed and insensitive."

Simon shrugs. "Maybe so."

"No maybe about it." Kate turns to take the red raincoat from the back of her chair.

"Leaving so soon?"

"You really don't care about anyone but yourself." She buttons the coat with exaggerated slowness. "I suppose you'll stagger home at some point."

"Hmm... probably." He nods his head and smiles. "You may be right. I'm insensitive. But I can appreciate tragedy."

"And I'm not particularly interested in what you can appreciate."

Simon watches her walk away, and stops for a moment to share some banality with the *maitre d'* on her way out. He finishes the Cognac and orders another.

Monday morning beckons, the ten o'clock class, Ant6nio snapping open his briefcase. The waiter brings his drink. He gathers the cutlery, plates, and wine glasses, and brushes crumbs from the tablecloth.

Alone at the table, Simon thinks about Trevor and savours the burn of Cognac in his throat as he imagines that moment when Trevor is told.



RENEE WILLIAMS

A NORMAL POEM

Write a normal poem
you know, one about your dad dying
or unrequited love,
or lusting after your high school sweetheart
that you found online except now he's twenty years older,
thirty-five pounds overweight, balding, and broke.

Write a normal poem
you know, one that talks about your dreams of going to Tahiti
or Thailand, or Jamaica, or who knows where,
and it will be warm, and tropical, with palm trees,
and mojitos and margaritas with funny little umbrellas in the drinks.
but leave out the part
about how everyone on the cruise came down with Covid
days after you left port.

Write a normal poem
you know, one that most assuredly doesn't deal
with your dog and his constant issues with food and farting
or maybe one that doesn't lend itself to the angst
you felt when you had to buy bread at Kroger
and realized that you had to put eight-five cents on your Visa
because you didn't have enough cash.

Write a normal poem,
you know, something along the lines of your neighbors all loving you
instead of despising you
because you got in the way of their quarter of a million dollar deal
all because you didn't want a halfway house for juvenile offenders
to be located right next door to your child's school.
Yes, write a normal poem.



AUTHOR BIOS

Charlotte M. Friedman is a poet, teacher and translator who grew up in Seattle and now lives in Princeton, New Jersey. Her poetry has been published in journals such as Connecticut River Review, Intima, Waterwheel Review, The Maine Review, Nightingale & Sparrow, Lilith and in the anthology, *A 21st Century Plague: Poetry from a Pandemic*. Her translations of Ch'ol poetry (with Carol Rose Little) have been published in *Latin American Literature Today*, *World Literature Today*, *Exchanges*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *The Arkansas International*. Her first book, *The Girl Pages*, was published by Hyperion.

Bob Zaslav is a retired NYC teacher, advertising copywriter, and documentary filmmaker, one of which won a Bronze from the American Film Institute. He also has written a half-dozen one-act plays produced Off-Off-Broadway and a book to a full-length musical play produced Off-Broadway. Today, Bob lives in WA, where he has written and published a dozen children's books, including the first-place award-winner, *'The Mayfly and the Methuselah Tree.'* His poetry has been published in three local anthologies.

Angela Hoffman's poetry collections include *Resurrection Lily* (Kelsay Books, 2022) and *Olly Olly Oxen Free* (forthcoming, Kelsay Books, 2023). She placed third in the WFOP Kay Saunders Memorial Emerging Poet in 2022. She has written a poem a day since the start of the pandemic. Angela lives in rural Wisconsin.

Robert Nisbet is a poet from Wales who has over 500 poems published in Britain and the USA, in magazines like *San Pedro River Review*, *Third Wednesday* and *Burningword Literary Journal*. He lives in a small market town within 15 miles in one direction of the ancient cathedral city of St. David's, and 20 miles in the other direction from Dylan Thomas's Boathouse.

Alison Auch (she/her) is an editor for a small, independent book publisher and a lover of poetry. An avid reader, she is (re)learning how to cook and loves writing poetry and spending time outdoors. She lives in Colorado with her daughter, dog, and three cats.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. Today he is a poet in the greater Chicagoland area, IL. He has 275 YouTube poetry videos. Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 44 countries, has several published poetry books, has been nominated for 6 Pushcart Prize awards, and 6 Best of the Net nominations. He is editor-in-chief of 3 poetry anthologies, all available on Amazon, and has several poetry books and chapbooks. He has over 453 published poems. Michael is the administrator of 6 Facebook Poetry groups. Member Illinois State Poetry Society: <http://www.illinoispoets.org/>.

Stuart Watson wrote for newspapers in Anchorage, Seattle and Portland. His writing is in *yolk.literary*, *Barzakh*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Bloom*, *Fewer than 500*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Bending Genres* (Best Microfictions nominee), *433*, *Flash Boulevard*, *Revolution John*, *Montana Mouthful*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, *Five South*, *Shotgun Honey*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Reckon Review* and *Pulp Modern Flash*, among others. He lives in Oregon, with his wife and their amazing dog.

Patrick Parks is author of a novel, *Tucumcari*, and has had fiction, poetry, reviews and interviews appear or are forthcoming in a number of places, including *Ocotillo Review*, *Bridge Eight*, *Full Stop*, *Southeast Review*, *Six Sentences*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *OxMag*, and elsewhere (the adverb, not the publication). He is a graduate of the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, a recipient of two Illinois Arts Council artist grants, and lives with his wife and requisite cats near Chicago. More at patrick-parks.com.

Steve Brisendine lives, works, and wrangles words in Mission, Kansas. His most recent poetry collections are *Salt Holds No Secret But This* (Spartan Press, 2022) and *To Dance with Cassiopeia and Die* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022), a "split collaboration" with his former pen name of Stephen Clay Dearborn. His first collection, *The Words We Do Not Have* (Spartan Press, 2021) was nominated for the Thorpe Menn Literary Excellence Award. He is a two-time finalist for the Derick Burleson Poetry Prize. His work has appeared in *Flint Hills Review*, *Modern Haiku*, *Connecticut River Review* and elsewhere.

AUTHOR BIOS

Ryan Westmoreland currently lives in Connecticut with her fiancé, and one grumpy kitty. Her work has previously been published in Back Patio Press, Misery Tourism, Full House Literary and many others. Find her at twitter.com/reeltuffcookie.

Dan Lawrence received his MFA from Columbia University, where he was a Graduate Fellow and Fiction Editor of Columbia Journal. After a career as a magazine editor with Time Inc. and Reed Elsevier, he recently returned to writing fiction. In the past 18 months, nine of his stories have been published in literary magazines and anthologies. He was a finalist for the 2022 Tennessee Williams Fiction Prize, the 2022 Watertower Press Novel Writing Contest, the Summer 2021 Novel Slices Contest, and the 2020 James River Writers Best Unpublished Novel Contest. He lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his wife and three sons.

Edward Miller teaches writing at Madera Community College. Included among his areas of interest are outsider art, street photography, and the American vernacular.

Sam Moe is the first-place winner of Invisible City's Blurred Genres contest in 2022, and the 2021 recipient of an Author Fellowship from Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing. Her first chapbook, "Heart Weeds," is out from Alien Buddha Press and her second chapbook, "Grief Birds," is forthcoming from Bullshit Lit in April 2023. You can find them on Twitter and Instagram as @SamAnneMoe.

Alice G. Waldert is a poet, creative nonfiction/fiction writer, and visual artist. Her poetry has appeared in Arc Poetry Magazine, Misfit Magazine, Prometheus Dreaming, and other literary journals and has work forthcoming in the Evening Street Review. She is currently working on a full-length collection of poetry titled Surviving the Survivors.

Roger Patulny is a Sydney-based academic, writer, and poet, and is the Chief Editor for Authora Australis. He has published fiction and poetry in numerous outlets including The Suburban Review, Cordite, Poets Corner InDaily, Dwell Time, The Rye Whisky Review, the Mark Literary Review, and Silver Birch Press. Twitter - @rpatulny

Gary Duehr has taught creative writing for institutions including Boston University, Lesley University, and Tufts University. His MFA is from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. In 2001 he received an NEA Fellowship, and he has also received grants and fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the LEF Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Journals in which his writing has appeared include Agni, American Literary Review, Chiron Review, Cottonwood, Hawaii Review, Hotel Amerika, Iowa Review, North American Review, and Southern Poetry Review. His books include Winter Light (Four Way Books) and Where Everyone Is Going To (St. Andrews College Press).

Paul Hostovsky's poems appear and disappear simultaneously--voila!--and have recently been sighted in places where they pay you for your trouble with your own trouble doubled, and other people's troubles thrown in, which never seem to him as great as his troubles, though he tries not to compare. He has no life and spends it with his poems, trying to perfect their perfect disappearances, which is the working title of his new collection, which is looking for a publisher and for itself.

Roberta Spivek is a Philadelphia poet with poems published or soon to be published in The New Croton Review, Pure Slush, Friends Journal, Women's Studies Quarterly, and Quo Modo. Her poems have been included in several anthologies, including, recently, Stand With Ukraine (Moonstone Press). She has an MA in Communications from the University of Pennsylvania and is part of a longstanding Philadelphia women's poetry circle.

Sarah Das Gupta is 81 years young. She started writing 6 months ago when spending time in hospital after a serious accident She is currently re-learning to walk. She lives near Cambridge in UK and has had work published online and in print.

AUTHOR BIOS

Hari Mitar Khalsa studied filmmaking and screenwriting as an undergraduate at Santa Fe University of Art and Design. This is his first flash fiction story.

D. E. Lee's novel, *The Sky After Rain*, won the Brighthorse Books 2015 novel contest and is available in paperback. His novella *Mexico Beach* (2020) is available from Running Wild Press. Awards include Pushcart Prize nominee, finalist in Prairie Schooner's 2018 Book Prize, Honorable Mention in the Cincinnati Review's Robert and Adelle Shiff 2018 & 2022 award, Nimrod's 2011 Katherine Ann Porter Prize, and the 2014 Nelson Algren Award. His short fiction appears or is forthcoming in *Barely South Review*, *The Adirondack Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Palooka*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Quiddity*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Alligator Juniper*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *Broad River Review*, and others.

Don Noel is retired from four decades' prizewinning print and broadcast journalism. He took an MFA from Fairfield University at age 81, and in the decade since has since published more than six dozen short stories or other pieces.

Mark Keane has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in *Shooter*, *Black Moon Magazine*, *untethered*, *Liennek Journal*, *Granfalloon*, *Samjoko*, *upstreet*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Into the Void*, *Night Picnic*, *Firewords*, *Dog and Vile Short Fiction*, *the Dark Lane* and *What Monsters Do for Love* anthologies, and *Bards and Sages Best Indie Speculative Fiction*. He lives in Edinburgh (Scotland).

Renee Williams received a Master of Arts and Sciences in English from Ohio University in 1991 and retired from teaching at Hocking College in 2019. Since retiring, she has been working on poetry and photography. Her poem, "Misguided," was published on the *New Verse News* site; the *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, the *Rye Whiskey Review*, and the *Literary Yard* websites have posted her poems. "Use Grief" can be seen in the latest edition of *Common Threads* by the Ohio Poetry Association. *Alien Buddha Press* has published her work in the November zine and *Microdoses* anthology. Her photography can be seen in this year's *Corolla Wild Horse Fund* calendar (September) and on the cover of the 2023 calendar. The winter issue of the *New Feathers Anthology* has her work on the cover, and *Mossy Piglet* includes her work, as well.





THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.