



BRYANT

Literary Review

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Since our first issue in 2000, we have actively sought to expand our audience. We expect readers of the *Bryant Literary Review* to be sophisticated, educated, and familiar with the conventions of contemporary literature. We see our purpose to be the cultivation of an active and growing connection between our community and the larger culture. The *BLR* provides a respected venue for creative writing of every kind around the world. Our only standard is quality.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES: Published annually by the *Bryant Literary Review*. Send no more than three to five poems, with name and address on each page. Fiction should be no longer than 5,000 words (approximately). We do not accept previously published work. Reading period is September 1 to December 1. Payment is in contributor's copies. Copyright reverts to author upon publication.

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Editor's Note

"In the deepest hour of the night, confess to yourself that you would die if you were forbidden to write. And look deep into your heart where it spreads its roots, the answer, and ask yourself, must I write?"

~ Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Thank you for picking up the latest edition of the *Bryant Literary Review*. It is our honor to present the following works received from all over the world. We would also like to thank those who submitted their work, allowing their voices to be heard and keeping the *BLR* alive throughout its many years.

Rainer Maria Rilke, author of *Letters to a Young Poet*, advises a young poet to ask himself, "must I write?", even if that moment may happen in the dead of night. The works selected prove that there are those who must and will continue to do so. Art finds its way through most things in life, allowing one to explain the unexplainable. It provides a channel of empathy, looking into a snapshot of life through words alone. It allows one to escape to a world of one's own, even if it's just for a little bit. The connection between art and emotion suggests a universal characteristic, transcending even language itself.

None of this would have been possible without Professor Tom Chandler, the *BLR*'s founder, who is retiring this year and whose work is featured in this edition; Professor Tom Roach; the Bryant University

English and Cultural Studies Department; all student editors; and, of course, you. Thank you for taking the time to read our curated collection, keeping this wonderful tradition alive, and we hope you enjoy reading this edition as much as we did.

Brennan D'Elena
Student Editor

Respect Your Elders

CHARLES HARPER WEBB

“Ready for a fastball,” the grizzled grampa
leather-lungs. “Alls he’s got’s a fastball.
You can hit a fastball,” he assures

the child of (he’s pretty sure) his own
son’s loins. “Here comes a fastball. Sit
on the fastball. Fastball’s alls he’s got.”

He’s waited 67 years for this: the universe
that has bashed and baffled him—
kept him in shit jobs, a shit marriage,

fishless fishing trips, deerless deer hunts,
Vegas jaunts with “seniors” groups
where he would have won a bundle

but for all those card-shark racketeers—
the universe, so roiled and murky, suddenly
made clear. “Here comes a fastball!

Fastball’s alls he’s got.” And so, for two
strikes and three balls: “Fastball’s
comin’. Has to. Fastball’s alls he’s got.”

Full of faith, the batter wags his stick,
coiled, adder-like to strike the darting rat
of a fastball. The pitcher winds. The pitch

swerves in: a freeze-you-in-your-tracks,
shoot-for-your-head-then drop-and-slice-
the-middle-of-the-plate curveball

that sends the boy back to the bench
scratching his pate, and cursing his idiot
Grampa.

Bald Eagle, Blackbirds

MATTHEW SPIRENG

A dead blackbird on the driveway, eagle
swooping down to avoid the plague of blackbirds

darting in and out to harass it, eagle
low and close, distracted by the blackbirds.

It was an old movie: bald eagle
the lumbering bomber with blackbirds

fighter planes attacking. The eagle
won my allegiance at once, blackbirds

the enemy, and it even seemed the eagle
was the underdog, whether it had killed the blackbird

or not.

If This Man

MATTHEW SPIRENG

If this man with hairy ears, ears
sprouting—not like an old man,
stiff from the ear-holes, but
like an animal, soft fur from the
flesh that circles and rises—if
this man were to know I am watching
sunlight glow in the hair of his ears
and thinking how in all my life I have
never seen human ears like this,
what would he think of me?

It Wasn't in the Cards

SARAH BROWN WEITZMAN

"I'm in", I announced and sat down
to play the cards I'd be dealt.

Flushed with a belief in luck,
my strong suit, yet I was aware

no one holds all the aces. When
the Jack of Hearts smiled at me,

I went "All in". Then the Queen of Clubs
turned up on his left. The others

in this pack consisted of a wild card
and a dude showing a deuce who insisted

we weren't playing with a full deck.
Sadly, that Heart Jack and I didn't become

a pair. In fact, he turned out to be a joker.
When the chips are down, I have to call

a spade a spade. Did love stack the deck
against me? Who knows? That's the luck

of the draw. As I shuffled away
I saw the deck of cards holding hands.

Rising to the Call

CHRISTA ALBRECHT-VEGAS

Julie heard them calling: the high, shrill pinging of a thousand points of – not light, but tinnitus. Most people never heard the cries, because they were not attuned to that particular pitch of anguish. They were, to most people, silent screams. Yet, for Julie they were as pervasive and persistent as the sound of traffic along the interstate, or the disembodied voice in the airport forever admonishing you to keep a closer eye on your luggage. They grieved her like the relentless stabbing of a broken rib with each breath. People wondered about that look on her face, her default expression. Unless there was someone around to lure a smile or spark a conversation, she always appeared to be contemplating something unpleasant.

Usually, she could sleep through it. She could occupy herself with a book until her body surrendered, but tonight the moon was poking its beam through the slats of the bedroom blinds and into the receptive, white orbs beneath Julie's eyelids. It woke her with its blinding luminescence, and the cries flooded her awareness with such intensity that she bolted from her bed and burst out of her family's vacation bungalow in her nightgown, onto the white beach where the starfish lay stranded in the sand. There were thousands of them, washed in with that evening's storm. They were fresh and wet and black, and covered the beach as far as she could see in either direction, as though they had been pulled from the water and sprinkled over the white sand in reverse-contrast to the light and darkness of the white stars in the night sky. Someone's idea of creation?

Creation. She definitely didn't believe what she had heard about those first seven days. She was pretty sure that suffering was older than that. She was *certain*, however, that mercy existed only in the hands of the beholder, and so she began to throw the starfish back into the sea, one after the next. They felt hard and rough on top, yet the underside was a vital wiggling of soft tentacles. They sucked desperately onto her flesh after their long journeys free-falling with the waves that had carried them to this dry, alien terrain. Given the chance, they quickly glued themselves to her palms, so that it felt mean when she had to remove them forcibly and send them tumbling once again through the airy void to land as far out as she could propel them. She hoped that they would not feel it as rejection. She had cast them homeward out of love, though she yearned to be eternally embraced by all of them.

The tide was low, so she had to run back and forth to the water's edge in order to get the starfish deposited farthest inshore. She hoped that they would move to deeper water before the tide rose again. It was an infinite task that would have buried others in a sense of futility, but Julie was okay with it. She was only at peace when she was throwing starfish back into the water or skimming drowning insects out of the birdbath, or practicing any of the many pursuits that had earned her the nickname *Saint Francissy*.

Throwing stars, she forgot about Ebola and the Taliban and the fact that they'd never found a match for her brother's bone marrow. They had all been tested, of course, and she had been certain that hers would be the match that saved him. They'd been twins, after all. He would have been the first to jump out of bed and follow her to the beach.

Together, they would have thrown the starfish back. On her own, it was lonely work. To live was to be separate from so much of her self.

She was glad that no one was there to watch. Sometimes at school, when she was picking up worms stranded on the sidewalk after a spring rain, the other children made fun of her and found ways to be malicious to the worms just to spite her. It was hard to say whether the worms were better or worse off for her interventions. Was it better to bake slowly on the concrete under the heat of an apathetic sun, or to be torn maliciously into segments or flattened under rocks or drowned in the gutters or sawed in half with blunt sticks in lieu of knives or buried under piles of salt or smuggled into science class to be sizzled over the Bunsen burners? It seemed as though her efforts fostered more suffering than they eased.

Still, she threw them back. It was the only thing in the world that made absolute sense in dangerous times: an act of love driven not by personal desire, but compassion. It was an act small enough to be pure, and yet large enough to mean the whole world. It was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the right thing to do at that moment. Each starfish splashing into the sea was like a star falling from the sky.

She had seen a meteor shower once. It had been incredible. She and her brother had been lying in the back of the camper during their last trip to the Cape together. Thought to be sleeping, they'd really been counting falling stars. There had been so many! It was almost as though someone was pitching the stars right to them. They had reached to catch them in their hands before they disappeared. She wondered now if that was how the starfish appeared down below, each star plunging into the atmosphere of the underwater world. Was there

someone down there welcoming them home? Maybe her brother was there, catching them before they hit the bottom and laying them gently onto rocks so that they could anchor themselves in a better world. □

as if it mattered (gambling sounds)

FREDDA S. PEARLSON

if today moves
through its hours
with no lost rings
with no nausea
with no bones aching
or hearts bent
to the point of breaking
with no last breaths
no last rites
with only fruit
and oatmeal
a new pair of shoes
two new pens
and tiles for the kitchen floor
then you can
take a chance
cut your hair
gain five pounds
and lose them
walk the dog
feed the cats
and season
your spaghetti sauce
tonight
as if it mattered

Chez Moi

DENNIS SALEH

I am all there is
of me Of this there

is no doubt How
do I know so much

about me You see
I have been me as

long as I recall
Simply no one else

at all Boring Not
really Anyone

preferable to me
I cannot imagine

You try I did not
think so Mayhap

another time
I shall check in

is all I can promise
I shall be very busy

indeed being me
you may imagine

It's a full-time job
the first-person

Not free at all
to not be me

The rote-self
requires practice

Takes all my brains
That's for certain

Every Few Years

JACK COOPER

Every few years
I look back and think
what a fool I was before
how professionally duped
how aesthetically passé
how romantically mortifying

And how relieved now
to have arrived at a more enlightened stage
able to disentangle my delusions
as if I already know tomorrow

Every few years
I want to vomit up my past
escape to a place
where no one knows me
and remake who I am
the mensch I admire in the mirror

I'm haunted by the futility of averageness
of unremarkable accomplishment
of not being loved but humored
my presence habituated
my absence shrugged off

Every few years
I want to turn to her
with my mind full of unconsidered ideas
my heart circulating all new molecules

Prayer of the Bell

LAURA BONAZZOLI

I guess you probably want to know how I got to be in a mess like this. Maybe I should start out by saying I'm not smart. My dad is smart. He's a materials scientist. And my sister—that's Sonya—she's a chemical engineer, and my brother Sam designs cars. I can't even drive a car 'cause I can't pass my driving test. Which is why I ride my bike everywhere, which is how I met Genko a couple of months ago, when I moved here at the start of summer. He was getting your mail when I rode my bike past your driveway and I stopped and said hello. He asked me if he could ride my bike sometimes if he stuck to the road around the pond, and I said sure, if he'd promise he'd always bring it back to my cabin when I needed it, 'cause I have to ride my bike to work and stuff 'cause I can't drive. And he said he would and that's how Genko and me met.

I saw you before that, though, a couple of times I think, out in your garden or ringing your bell at sunset. You didn't live here last summer, I know that. I don't think anybody lived in your cabin last summer, or if they did I was never in ours when they were in theirs. I asked Genko when you moved here, and he said right before school started last year, so that's why we never met till this summer, 'cause I live with my dad and stepmom in town except in summer 'cause my dad's cabin doesn't have heat. I told Genko him and me are opposites. He has you and lost his dad, and I have my dad and lost my mom. I've got my stepmom of course, and she's okay, but I don't think it's the same as having my mom.

Anyway, if you want to know how this happened—and I feel better now, by the way—well, I guess like everything else in my life, I don't know. It's like it just did. If I was smart I maybe could have stopped it from happening. But Dad says I take after my mom, and he married my mom for her looks, not her brains, and Sonya and Sam got Mom's looks and his brains but I got stuff the other way around. That's why I live in my dad's cabin in summer, 'cause him and my stepmom get tired of me hanging around their house and I embarrass them riding my bike around like a kid like Genko, and they throw these pool parties all summer long and don't want to have to be explaining me all the time.

So that's why I'm here, and I don't mean to sound like I don't like it. I'm glad I'm here. I like to be alone and come out to the pond at night and listen to the loons and the frogs. I bring my quilt and lie down on our dock and look up at all the stars surrounding me like I'm in a cave of stars. You ever notice how you watch and watch and all of a sudden it's like the roof of stars starts to come down toward you so you feel like you can almost touch them? You ever do that, just come out at night and listen and look? I see you all the time in the daytime watering and weeding your vegetables and flowers, and at sunset, when you come out and ring your bell. But not when it's really dark. If my dad would fix it so I could, I'd live here right through the winter like you and Genko and on clear nights I'd get my quilt and walk out to the pond all iced over and lie down at the end of the dock with the frogs all frozen asleep underneath me and watch the stars.

I guess you're waiting for me to say, though, how I got to be messed up like this. It must be hard having to listen to people and not

be able to tell them to hurry up. I just want to say I really appreciate you coming over to help me tonight and I'm really sorry about your operation and your not being able to talk. Genko said you wouldn't mind him telling me and I hope you don't, and I wouldn't tell anybody else. I guess it came out one day 'cause I asked him why you always wear a scarf tied right up high around your neck, even when it's boiling hot out, and that's when he told me they had to take your voice box out 'cause it had cancer. But he said you got a settlement and that's how you could buy your cabin and he said you're okay now and that you don't mind the scarf or the sun and that you love Earth. That's the way he put it. He said you love Earth.

So like I said, I don't know why it happened but I guess it must have started 'cause I took the astronomy course at the junior college. Sonya said don't bother, Lucy, you need to know math to do astronomy, but I said it wasn't like I was saying I wanted to be an astronomer—though I'd love that, of course—just that I wanted to be able to name the stars and know why the moon gets bigger and smaller, that kind of stuff, that's all. So Sonya said she'd help me fill out the registration form, and I took the class, but Sonya was right, I flunked, even though I studied and most of the time in class I thought I knew what the teacher was teaching. So that was a big disappointment but the thing that came out of it was they were looking for volunteers to help out at their Friday night planetarium shows and I volunteered and they took me as an usher.

That's how I met Gregory last spring. He was real nice to me, thanking me every night for volunteering, and that was pretty amazing 'cause he's going for his PhD and knows everything there is to know about astronomy.

Maybe you already know what I'm gonna say happened and you don't even need me to say it, but I swear I didn't mean it to happen and I sure didn't know it was going to. It's just that one night we were cleaning up after a show, and he said he was heading out for a beer to celebrate the end of the term, and did I want to go with him. I said all right and he put my bike in his car and we went into town and he asked me about myself and I told him I work at the Walmart stocking shelves and bringing in the shopping carts and stuff 'cause I'm not good with cash and he asked me what are you good at. I said I was good at seeing things most people don't seem to see, and he asked me what I meant and I tried to tell him. Like how sometimes when I'm riding my bike out here, away from town, everything stops being what it usually is and starts to be something else, something—wider, sort of, and shinier, and this humming starts to happen like bees but it's not a sound, it's more like the air, like the light I see is humming and all of a sudden I'm not there, not as me, anyway, and not even human, really, and everything I was thinking before disappears. It only lasts for a minute or two, or maybe just a few seconds. But when it ends I know that the things people think matter don't matter at all. We don't matter either, not like we think we do, 'cause we're—well, we're not these whole, separate things we're pretending to be—and we don't even know it's pretend. I didn't tell Gregory this but sometimes it happens when I think about my mom, but anyway that's just sometimes. It happens other times, too, so I didn't mention it. Instead I told him about this place, the pond and the stars and the loons, and he said he'd take me home in his car, so we came back here, and that's I guess what I did wrong. I spread my quilt out on the dock and said let's look at the stars and then he leans over

me and kisses me and stuff and I didn't say no 'cause I didn't want him to be disappointed in me or think I didn't love him when I did, when all I ever did was wait for Friday night to see him, even just to say hello and have him say thank you before I went home.

I guess maybe I knew the whole time he was just pretending, 'cause as soon as he went home I cried the rest of the night. I cried so hard I felt sick the next day and like I didn't want to show up to work. Everybody goes to the Walmart and I kept feeling like, what if somebody knew. What if he came in, or if he told somebody. When I got home from work, for the first time, I locked the door as soon as I got in the house, and even though the sun was only just starting to set, and I could hear you and Genko ringing your bell, I pulled down all the shades. I was like that all week, and then on Friday night when I went to the planetarium I was so scared to see him again, scared he might say something funny to me, or not say anything at all, and then when I got there, he's not there. It's my astronomy teacher working that night and he sees me and says, "Oh, hello!" real casual, and then he says, "You took one of my classes, didn't you?" And I say yeah, I flunked it, but I still wanted to help out, and he said that was really nice of me, most students do it for brownie points. And then he says, "I'm glad I can rely on you, Lucy," in this real friendly way so I knew he didn't know anything about me, so I ask him if Mr. Phelps—that's Gregory—if he's off tonight, and he says to me, "Mr. Phelps is off for good, lucky man. He won a fellowship at an observatory in Chile, and he's probably arriving there right about now."

I just nodded and said, oh, that's great, that's so nice for him. And then I put out the programs and said hello to the people who were

lining up, and when it was all dark and the show started, I remember I just sat there not understanding a single thing my teacher was saying to the audience, just looking at that bowl of stars and realizing I was going to live my whole life without ever making sense of anything. And then when I was riding my bike home that night, I thought, I might as well stop trying to think since it never does me any good. I should just look at the world, and hear it and touch it and smell it and taste it until some day I go to sleep.

And that felt good, to just be okay with not trying to figure stuff out any more. And the next morning, I was able to go to work at the store and not feel like everybody knew stuff about me. And I could come back to the cabin at night and not feel like I had to pull down the shades as soon as I stepped in the door. And that's how it went for a few more weeks, until all of a sudden I realized I'd missed my period. So I bought one of those kits at Walmart and when I got home I used it and it said I was pregnant.

And when I read that, well, the sun was just starting to set and I looked out the window and saw you and Genko in your garden, bowing in front of your bell like I've seen you do lots of times, and I thought I'd listen 'cause I like the words you say when you ring the bell—not you, I mean, 'cause you can't talk, what Genko says while you pull the bell: "May this bell sound throughout the world. May all beings hear it. May their longings cease as it echoes in their hearts."

Well, Genko saw me watching and looked straight at me and said it again. And I thought, maybe he knows, maybe he saw us out there and somehow he knows and he's making this wish for me. But I decided I didn't care if he was. I'd just listen to the bell. And

I did, until it faded away and you went back inside. And then I got hungry and made myself some peanut butter toast and a glass of milk and sat watching the sky get dark and eating my dinner. And then I went to bed. And that night and every night last week I fell asleep remembering you and Genko and the bell.

I guess what I mean is, part of me knew if I wanted to do something I had to do it soon, but the rest of me never held onto thinking about it long enough to decide. Then Saturday my dad calls and says he and my stepmom and Sonya and her husband, Pete, are coming Sunday 'cause it's Pete's birthday and he wants to go fishing, and would I have the place all nice and clean? So I said I would and when I got home from work I scrubbed the kitchen and vacuumed and pulled all the weeds in the front yard and made a potato salad. So when I got up in the morning and my back hurt so much, I thought it was all the cleaning I did, and then after they got here and headed out onto the dock and fished, I lay down for a while, but I didn't feel good. Then they came in and they hadn't caught anything but that was okay 'cause my dad brought steaks and I'd made potato salad and Sonya made a lettuce salad, but when we all sat down to eat, I could barely touch a thing. Then it was time for cake, and everybody sang Happy Birthday and Pete cut cake for everybody and gave me a big piece and I tried to eat it but all of a sudden I had to excuse myself and went to the bathroom and threw up. I didn't tell anybody and they all went home pretty soon after the cake, but I couldn't lie down again 'cause the pain had gotten so bad. And then the bleeding started and I knew. So I sat on the toilet for a while and it came out. Then I wrapped up in my quilt and came out here, but even though I passed it, the cramps were

still so bad I guess I was crying. I'm sorry if I woke you up but I really appreciate your coming out here and helping me clean up. I never had so much blood before. And for bringing me tea and talking with me. I mean, for listening.

I'm okay now. And I'm glad you know. I don't know why, but it feels good somebody else knows.

And I'm sorry I took so long telling you. You must want to get back to bed. But before you go... could I ask something?

Well, I thought I'd call in sick to work tomorrow and rest and...

Well, I kept it. There's not much, just kind of a lump, but I don't know, it didn't feel right flushing it down the toilet, so I put it in a cup and I was wondering, tomorrow, if you're not busy, could you and Genko come down to the pond with me? There's a place I like, where we could move this big stone away, and I thought we could bury it there, under the stone, and you could ring your bell, and I could mark the stone with a star. □

Leaning Into the Party

STEPHEN ROBERTS

I was having a good time at the party
until I leaned back on the door frame
into the kitchen, dislodging an antique
serving platter from the wall where
it had hung, presumably for years,
from a single bent nail, well driven,
according to the hostess, by an ancestor
with some degree of separation yet
close enough to be reminisced over,
as great old uncle so-and-so who had
built the dwelling, over a century ago.

The lady of the house had just finished
elaborating on the history and all family
connections when I, simply trying to relax,
leaned against her ancestor's handiwork
causing the exquisitely hand-painted plate
to slip and shatter in the kitchen doorway.
Screaming silently through her inherited
violet eyes, but smiling, she poured me
a second glass of a richly dark cabernet.
Then I ambled into her living room
onto the amazingly plush, white carpet.

Right Now at this Moment as We Speak

TOM CHANDLER

Two humpback whales
are breaching eight miles
off the coast of Venezuela
and monks are chanting
in Nepalese in Nepal
and in Monserrat in Spanish
and a woman in a suburb
of Lincoln, Nebraska
has just been told her nephew's
cancer is in remission
and a 3,000 year old Redwood
on the north coast of California
is still alive at this moment
and someone in Salamanca
has just found a fifty Euro bill
on the sidewalk and a newborn is crying
in the village of a nearly extinct tribe
in East Timor and the sun here just now
broke through to paint everything in color
and the coffee I'm sipping as I write this
tastes especially rich and in Nigeria
a man at this moment has lost his goat
just so he will find it again and be glad.

Old Mirror

TOM CHANDLER

Speckled from having witnessed too much,
from being peered into for an answer.

It has gazed unfazed at the same
wallpaper for decades while the joinery
gently changed its mind.

Imagine all the quarrels sweetly dissolved
in the bedrooms of two hundred years ago,
all the lives stretched to brittle resolve.

Imagine the dead babies and the babies
who grew old and died later.

Imagine if I held it up to another mirror
so that it could look into itself and realize

what the dead have stared at down the years.
All it would see is nothing.

The Womb of the Unknown Soldier

TOM CHANDLER

Is unoccupied at the moment
could be most anywhere
maybe belongs to that woman
three seats ahead of me on the bus
who is waiting patiently for her stop
after another busy boring day
in an office with beige drapes
and coffee stains on the carpeting
to go home to an unemployed husband
already working his second six pack
of the afternoon neither of them
having the slightest notion that
they will conceive a child
who will become dead
in a war not yet named
between their country
and another not yet hostile
and the sacrificed child
as yet still unconceived
will be nameless
and famous forever.

Wildfire

CHARLES LAIRD CALIA

For months there was no rain or very little, the mountain grasses were dry, prone to lightning strikes and wildfires, and Frank could see the river far from his little cabin, just beyond Federal land, drying up before his eyes. The snowmelt had been early this year, the result of less snow and higher than normal temperatures, and the river and its inhabitants were suffering. The trout had moved downriver to the deepest pools they could and Frank noticed more tracks by the water than usual—coyotes, elk, bighorn sheep and others—all stepping on the other and not caring. Thirst will do that.

The wildfire came up suddenly, with no warning, fueled by hot, westerly winds that started in the valley and spread along the side of the ridge, far away at first. Frank could see them from his cabin. He built it after first moving to Colorado, well north of Denver, in the 1980s never expecting to actually live here. There were jobs in those days, a series of warehouses for a year or two here, five years there, and then a couple of factory jobs that lasted until the company moved. The money was good enough for a small place and a cabin, where Frank fished for trout and took his girlfriends, later his two wives. He never saw himself working with his back much but there he was, despite the books that he read, the college classes that he took. Frank hoped he would do something lasting with his life—paint some pictures maybe, write a book—something that would outlast his earthly existence. The way it was, he was prone to the vagaries of a company staying or going,

he was relying on his back staying strong, tough enough when you're a kid, harder when you're old.

After he divorced his second wife, Frank was fifty-three and he swore off women, certainly he swore off passion. *If I get married again, it'll be for a better reason than love.* He considered his past failures, all his mistakes, the children that neither wife wanted nor bore, and it weighed on him like some kind of rock you never let go of, his mistakes, what he could have done better, what he had done wrong and might have improved if only he did. Frank took the blame but taking the blame didn't change anything really—he was still divorced, still working at jobs that didn't satisfy him and still trying to hold down the accelerator in life. It was going too fast for him to figure it out.

After the last company went bankrupt, Frank assessed his chances, laying out the cards for his future. He was getting old for this shift work and asking around for more wasn't any easier; a foreman wanted younger men, and Frank struggled with temporary jobs for a bit before he found his dream job—at a bookstore. It was a big used shop run by a veteran of the book trade, and Frank hardly got started when his boss began to give signals.

The book business is changing. Everything's online and it's cheaper.

Frank's job really wasn't much better than a factory slot. He hauled books upstairs and he hauled them back downstairs again, he hauled them from trucks and estate sales and he hauled them from sellers and he hauled them to buyers who were always negotiating. Frank imagined that working in a bookstore, especially a used one, involved a lot of reading and consideration of titles but found that it was little of that, just lugging, packing and shelving, warehouse work without the wages.

After a month his boss called him over, same tired look in the eyes that Frank had seen from other bosses over the years.

“I just want to tell you, Frank, I’m selling out. The books are going to one of those mega sites in the desert where maybe they can make a living, I can’t.”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before,” said Frank.

“I know it. If you want I’ll stake you a few thousand books of your own, if you want to make a go of it. Your own bookshop. I won’t need them and what they’re paying me—”

Frank considered the offer in two seconds.

“I’ll take you up on that. Not sure when I’ll open or if I will.”

“Fine with me. Read them if you want. Point is, I’m out.”

And so a month later Frank took possession of two thousand books, more than he could haul at once with his truck but really less than he could store. They sat in his living room while he looked for work, boxed and labeled—science, poetry, fiction—this is what he took, not the others, not what he wasn’t interested in. He liked stories and he liked listening to words that, strung together, had a meaning that seemed to evade him, like chasing something in the dark, and he liked science to remind him that the dark wasn’t really so. The boxes took over his living room. It was an apartment. He sold the house long ago to wife number two and split the proceeds with her but he kept the cabin, a cabin for the future, Frank thought, but the more he struggled with finding work the more the cabin didn’t look like a distant possibility, but a reality.

He went through his budget and calculated his meager savings.

At this rate, they’ll be gone in a year. I have one year and then nothing. I’ll

be nothing. Back to the library he went, back to the newspaper, where he used to get work regularly but now seldom did, and back to the computer which he found he was too old to keep up with. While he waited for work he read and while he read he also fretted; the bill for this, his life, was coming due, already mailed, and Frank could feel the postman at the door.

Work came with a temporary packing job that lasted until Christmas and then another that ran until Easter but then spring ran dry and this is when Frank made the decision: he'd move to the cabin, live off his land, read his books, maybe get a store later.

The cabin itself was sparse. There was a pallet bed built by Frank himself, raised, with a small kitchen, wood stove and space for eating plus a chair and bookshelves, lots of these, books occupied every single available space in the cabin—around window frames, in the outhouse, walling in the bed. Frank left some space for essentials of course: a couple of fly rods, his shotgun, snow shoes, rucksack, and tire chains, but mostly it was books and wood in there, and if you counted the novels and poetry between the covers, it was all wood, wood just waiting to burn.

Frank looked out one morning and saw the smoke. A thin trail, blacker than the sky at night and faintly acrid, it hung like a damp sheet over the mountains, above the valleys. It didn't worry him. The fire service acted plenty fast in these parts.

The next morning the smoke was thicker, heavier.

A man from the service drove up Frank's road with a warning.

"We're just alerting folks. Keep an eye out. You might have to move."

A few days later the smoke died down some and Frank relaxed.

Good men, these. They're working. But just in case, Frank went down to

his river, a smear of water not more than a light hike from his cabin. He could see it from his window, blue ribbon trout water. The river was usually high from snowmelt and full of rainbows and cutthroats which Frank picked off for dinner but the fish were all gone, and the water was a slip of gravel twisting into sky. Not much there. A trickle, ankle deep at the heaviest.

People kept waiting for rain and the service kept waiting for it too, putting out any sparks, telling folks to be careful, increasing the alerts. Meanwhile a few fires would get started, lightning strikes mostly, and these would be fought but the smoke stayed on the horizon, it kept to the valleys reminding everyone that nothing had changed.

The man showed up again, looking tired this time.

“There’s still work up there.”

“I see the smoke,” said Frank.

“There’ll be smoke until winter, I’m afraid.”

Frank did three things: he watched for smoke, he read, and he checked on the river. Sometimes he did all three at once, sometimes he switched off. Usually he’d read by the river or he’d watch for smoke from his porch or he checked the river from the hill above. From there he could see the twist of things, the grasses creeping closer to the banks searching for moisture and the banks turning color, like clay, hard clay.

When the man returned next he looked worried.

“You’d better make plans. The smoke’s moving.”

“I’ve seen it.”

“Then you’ve seen the winds. They’re shifting.”

“You need help up there?”

“How’s your back?”

“Strong enough.”

“We need it then.”

The man told Frank where they were, how to reach them and what to bring: pickax, shovel, saw—the tools of the firefighter out here. And then he told Frank what he already suspected. It wasn't clear they could contain it, that he had to get his place ready, water down what he could, save what he needed. Frank looked at the books. Everything else could go in the truck. His clothes, the rods and shotgun, his gear, all stored, but the books were a problem. They were tinder, they were old and a match waiting to spark.

Then he got an idea. He boxed the pile up and took them to the river where he found a gravel bar, in the middle, and he started there, stacking, one after the other then covering the boxes with a tarp. The river might give him a chance, it just might hold off the flames if the wildfire came this way. None of this was original of course. Frank read about early settlers doing exactly the same thing in novels, parking their wagons on islands and surrounding themselves with water and making fire breaks, his thought exactly. Frank burned a bit of the grass carefully around the banks, like he would on the fire patrol, and he did the same around his cabin, hoping this would do, and he left for the mountains.

The mountains were alive with men and flames. The men had come in from California and Montana and were getting the federal wage which now Frank was getting too, working and building berms and breaks, setting backfires and trying to make headway. The underbrush was heavy and dense, thick with dead trees and this made the fires angry,

coming at the men. Frank worked day and night, hardly sleeping, eating only rations when they were finally doled out, and the job never ended. Winds would shift and the men were off again, fighting somewhere else, and then counter winds would come and they'd change directions, dogs chasing their own tails.

Then there was the lightning. Storms started new fires and the men began to fear the late afternoon. Frank could see them building at the high altitudes, thin wisps of papery black that would gather and coalesce into something fierce, but there was never any rain, what the men pointed out.

We need rain. Why aren't we getting rain?

Frank heard the rains were east, over the range, but never here. Something about the winds.

Until we get rain, we'll be battling this.

One week became two. The grasses were even drier, walking through them sounding like walking over chalk and the men did their best, fighting the storms, fighting the wind. It was past threatening his cabin now with all the changes but Frank stayed on anyway, part was the pay but he also wanted to see this through. Man versus nature had an allure and he was in the middle of it, digging his trenches, cutting trees, mending his back when he could.

And then they got a break. A thunderhead.

We'll get rain here, boys, for sure.

It began, steady and hard. The men worked through the rain, a turn in the battle, and they pushed to the center of the wildfire with more rain, a downpour now, sloshing on the ground, pooling mud. Frank saw what rain did, tamping everything. Soon the underbrush was

wet and the moisture acted like a collar, closing the wildfire in, cutting it off, and now there were signs of it choking.

The rain continued steady for the next day into night and when Frank got up the following morning, he told the foreman he had to go.

“The last battle and you want to go?”

“I have to. My cabin.”

“This is saving everyone’s cabin.”

“I have my reasons,” said Frank. The books.

“We need you.”

Frank considered just walking off the job, leaving the wildfire behind, but he had bonded with the men, he’d seen a larger purpose fighting this fire had, like he never had a purpose before. Frank had worked jobs, jobs that ended at dinnertime, jobs that could close up for little reason other than a change of locale. He was never needed before. Even his two wives didn’t need him. They had their own jobs, one had an actual career as a nurse, so there was something else. Frank had nothing. He had some stories, a sense that he wanted to be remembered and little else. Now he was wanted. That meant something.

“They’ll remember this, Frank, what we did here.”

There won’t be markers erected in their honor or plaques citing what they did, but people will know it, said the foreman, there’ll be a future, something measureable, with kids going to school, families happy, something that Frank will see every day.

It took two more afternoons of rain and work to see it this way. The fire died little by little, from scrub oak to scrub oak, from lodgepole to

lodgepole, until they were down to the last flames. The rain kept up, punctuating the defeat.

And still it rained.

As Frank made his way back home he knew what he would see. Already nature was flipping signals, going from fire season to rainy autumn. There was a rumor of a mudslide far up caused from the deforestation. The fire had burnt everything to the ground and now the ground was bare, unable to hold the water. It was a new problem that Frank could see walking up his road. The river was up, flowing hard, flowing madly. The little gravel island had washed away and with it everything else—the tarpaulin, the boxes of books, all gone. Now the water was lapping past the bank and over it.

Frank considered his library, now floating away, waterlogged and stuck together probably, the exposed rocks tearing away at the cardboard boxes and books, just words now, they were torn and tumbling and shearing into pieces. Nature was claiming everything here—the future, the past, every aspiration of making something last—everything was now, this minute. Frank thought about his jobs, always throwing these out into the future, hoping they'd last. It was mistake, all that. The only future was today.

For the next afternoon the rain increased, harder than before. Inches of rain. A new weather pattern, one that hadn't been seen in decades, now closed over the mountains like a tropical storm. Frank started getting ready to move to higher ground when the man came again, looking even worse.

“We're warning folks. The water's high.”

“I'm moving.”

“Good. We’re worried about the earthen dam.”

“The town?”

“They’re sandbagging as we speak.”

Frank looked at his cabin. He studied his land, a place he was only borrowing and then someone else would borrow and then someone after them, all borrowers, these land owners. He was just one of many passing through this life, thinking about himself mostly and maybe that was the issue. *You think about yourself so much that you can’t consider much else.*

“You need help?” asked Frank.

“How’s your back?”

“Strong enough.”

“We’ll need it then.”

And Frank packed up. He looked behind, smiled, and knew he wouldn’t be coming back. □

Ennis

RUTH HOLZER

The dusty road to Ennis
rose up to meet me
like a blessing,
and when I arrived,
what was there to see
in Ennis, but the inside
of a pub lavatory
where I rested
until the worst of the day
had passed and then,
still tight as a newt, made for Galway.

What's Going On

RUTH HOLZER

I'm making my way through the stormy night,
a long road back, after I've left Father
in the hospital and Mother ranting
in the rest home, and I'm drifting
across the lanes in a mild trance
when suddenly I see those punitive
red, white and blue flashes
in the rearview. But maybe because
the cop notices me beating my head
against the steering wheel
he lets me off this once with a warning
for driving without lights.
I did think everything looked
a little darker than usual,
but just assumed I was going blind
as well as crazy.

Eating the Whale

MITCH LESCARBEAU

He brings the sizzling strip
on a bone china plate.

Outside it's Iceland, winter
solstice. For a few hours the sun's
been slanting like a swollen eye
above the orange mountain range.

And then twenty hours of darkness.

Outside the whales turn flukes
in the frigid black sea.

Inside, the restaurant is a refuge
of old lanterns on polished tables.

The waiter told us the whale
tastes like the best steak
you've never eaten, tastes. . . *ahh*,
he kisses his fingers.

Time-jagged and sleepless in Reykjavik
we contemplate our appetizer

*just a taste, he'd pleaded. No,
not endangered. Minke.*

We lift the first morsel to our lips
and a world we thought we knew
has slipped away.

Heat Wave: November in Vermont

MITCH LESCARBEAU

The world's askew:
there should be packed pads
in the snow, clawmarks of wildness
around the white birches, not
these honeybees lazing and gnats tonguing my arm,
the air soft as a ghost's breath,
a single peepfrog peeping
in woods emptied of their leaves last month,
the sky the sweet blue balm of June,
and just now, my cat Alice, companion
in our indolent afternoon, pawing the air
on her hind legs, heraldic as a coat of arms
in the buttery sunlight.

Death Comes to the Office for Daniel Downer

JENNIFER COMPANIK

He might've dispatched one of his Angels to do it, but Death knew Daniel would resist, and his best Angel was on vacation, harvesting souls in Costa Rica for the next month, so Death resolved to take Daniel himself.

He'd gone to Daniel's house on Mirror Lake, but Daniel pretended not to be home, so Death, patient in the knowledge that he always wins, decided to catch up with him at the office. He would just call, pretend he needed a lawyer because he'd been in a terrible, disfiguring accident with someone driving for a well-insured major company, and make an appointment.

Death called on a Friday and spoke with one of Daniel's assistants, who took down all the details of his "accident" and "injuries." She made "Mort LeJour" an appointment for Monday at ten.

Death didn't have much going on that weekend, but he was restless. So he went to the nearest nursing home and killed some time harvesting souls he'd put on the back burner years ago. They were, for the most part, happy to see him.

He remained restless, so he visited all the emergency rooms in the area, and harvested the souls of some people who looked terrified to find him in their beds. He didn't blame them, but God's Orders were God's Orders.

That did not cure his restlessness. So he took a train to the

city and got off in the roughest neighborhood. He hadn't been to the South Side in years. He remembered when it was an enclave of Polish immigrants and not nearly as rough. He had an Angel, a crazy motherfucker, to be honest with you, who actually liked harvesting on the South Side. And Death, to be honest with you, had qualms about God's Orders with regard to the South Side, so he avoided it.

But today he needed to remember that the poor died early, at random, and in droves. He needed to do something to make himself feel better about harvesting Daniel Downer's soul. Daniel Downer was a wealthy, selfish ambulance chaser in his seventies: Death should have been looking forward to it.

He wasn't. His least favorite harvests were people like Daniel who would try anything to get out of it. He just didn't like being in the same room with people who thought they were so special they should be passed over, eternally.

Death carried out God's Orders on the South Side and got the hell out of there. Back to the suburbs; where harvesting was clean, quiet, and generally appropriate business.

Monday came. Death arrived for his appointment at ten on the dot. He could be punctual, when it suited him. And he just wanted to get this over with.

Daniel wasn't there. Something had come up. His elderly mother.

The receptionist rescheduled him for the following day at 3:00 p.m.

Death arrived at the appointed time. Daniel was late. Death waited.

Daniel walked in at 3:30, carrying a McDonald's bag and holding a cup of coffee at such an angle that he left a trail of it throughout the office. His hair was wet under his ball cap and he wore a coffee-spotted T-shirt. Inside out.

Didn't lawyers dress up for work?

Death remembered when everyone dressed up for work. He shrugged inwardly. People wore flip-flops to church these days. The world had gone to pajamas. Still, inside out?

Daniel ushered Death into his office, where he proceeded to eat hot cakes with syrup and eggs—and talk with his mouth full between bites. Bits of egg clung to his unkempt beard.

Death nearly gagged, then said: I am Death. I have come to harvest your soul on Orders from God.

Daniel tried to climb out the nearest window, thinking he could jump down. They were only on the second floor. That was ten feet up, right? He was six feet tall. Surely he could jump four feet. But he didn't. He got stuck in the window.

Death said: Make peace with God or whatever. This won't take long. But who will take care of my ninety-five year old mother if I die?

Death said: Your sister.

She's useless.

Death said: Fine, I'll take care of your mom for you.

Forget it. My sister will do okay.

Death said: I'll probably take care of your mom soon either way.

I know I shouldn't say this, Mort, but that would be a relief.

But are you sure you're here for me? My son and I have the same first and last name. Are you sure you're here for Daniel Downer *Senior*?

Death paused, then said: My Orders are pretty clear. And they come from—

Daniel interrupted: Anyone can make a mistake, Mort.

Death went on as though Daniel hadn't interrupted: My Orders

come from God. And, I gotta say, Daniel, in all my eternity of doing this job, I have never met anyone who tried to have me take their kid instead. That's—

Daniel interrupted: What do you know about my kid? My kid is an ingrate! All my kids are ingrates! I gave them everything! Coached their little league, went to their dance recitals. Worked my ass off so they could go to good schools. Paid for their colleges.

My namesake, the one you might or might not be mistaking me for—
Death said: Excuse me—

No, Daniel said. Let me finish! My son, Daniel Downer the Second—which by the way should make me “the First,” not “Senior” for cry Pete—I'm not that old, I took him as my business partner—right out of law school! Full partner! You know how long he'd've had to work to make partner anywhere else?

We practiced together for fifteen years and then he leaves his first wife and three kids after knocking up the bimbo he's married to now and because she doesn't like me, he left me to practice alone here like some kind of asshole.

He stole from me, too! Two hundred thousand dollars! I can't prove it, but one of these days—

And on top of everything, Mort, my wife of forty years divorced me. Do you have any idea how devastating that is?! Forty years! And she divorces me! That woman is heartless! Never marry a girl who graduated from Catholic school. She took all my money! I'm broke! Do you hear me? Broke! That's why I'm still working in this shithole at my age!

Death sat stoically in his chair. It wasn't that he couldn't take

Daniel Downer anytime he wanted; it was that he was getting too old for the grappling. And this guy was a grappler. But maybe...

Death said: With all due respect, Daniel: what do you have to live for?

Daniel thought for a minute, then said: Nothing.

Death said: Then why don't you let me take you out of this pain?

Daniel said: You don't get to tell me what to do!

Death asked: Does anybody love you?

No.

Death asked: Do you love anybody?

My ex wife.

I don't believe you.

No, it's true. I love her.

You don't even love your kids, Daniel, I'm supposed to believe you love your ex wife?

But I do.

Prove it.

How?

Tell you what: I can give you a reprieve.

Yeah?

Yeah.

What do I have to do?

Give me her address.

Why?

I'll take her instead.

Daniel, who was still stuck in the window, tried prying the window open wider. It didn't budge. He looked Death in the eye.

I get a reprieve if I give you her address? For how long?

Death waited a beat before replying: Depends.

What if I give you the wrong address?

I could make it painful for you, Daniel, when I come back. And I would come right back.

Won't it be painful this time?

Maybe.

You don't know?! Wait! How can you make sure it's painful next time if you don't know whether it will be painful this time?

If you give me the wrong address, I'll know you really love her. So I'll make sure I find her—and I'll take her, too. You'll know that. And that will be painful.

You can't do that! You said you take your Orders from God! He says who goes!

God permits me discretion in these matters.

Daniel jerked himself out the window, onto the cold pavement of a Midwestern winter afternoon. Smacked his head hard on the concrete.

Death left the office relieved. How he hated grapplers. □

Perseids

DEBORAH FLEMING

Mid-August and the hemisphere
Now turns its head away from light;
Earth plunges through a waterfall
Of fiery rocks; white stars
Cascade into the endless pool of night.

Peasant Woman in Gascony

DEBORAH FLEMING

1972

Under the shadow of the Pyrenees
In a field at the bottom of a hillside,
Before a line of locust and of popular trees,
Around her waist a plain white apron tied,
In long black skirt and bonnet stands a woman,
Dressed as her mother dressed, and hers,
Raking grass for cattle fodder
Below the stony ruins of a Roman
Aqueduct, legacy of builders
Long forgotten, that spans the valley and the river.

Clouds rise into the azure sky like columns.

One hundred twenty centuries
Have celebrated this her holy labor.
From her rose the walls of cities;
Armies ceased to march before her.
Farmers on her day paused in their toil
To contemplate recurring mysteries

Sprung from the generous, tended soil
From which unending harvest flows
And all the other gifts that she bestows.

Note: Demeter, called Ceres by the Romans, also Rhea or Magna Mater (Great Mother), was goddess of agriculture. During her festival celebrating the cycles of birth and death, called the Eleusinian Mysteries, all work ceased and war was outlawed.

With a Phone Call to Heaven

BILL HOADLEY

I wish I had a phone
that could talk straight to heaven.
I'd call your dad and tell him
thank you.

Thank him for you,
for changing his mind
about having kids,
for giving me the reason
I ache in an empty bed.

I'd tell him that I love you.
Not the kind of love that
wrinkles the lips of people
after a movie,
the kind that enables
male penguins to guard
an egg in the biting cold,
while mom goes out to eat.

Before hanging up,
I'd ask for his blessing
and allow me the chance
to stand in the cold
because you're going
to make the world's
greatest mother,
I already bought the mug.
Now all we need is a mantle.

My Date With the Scientist

KRISTY NIELSEN

He tells me even land has tides,
pulled like water by the moon.
“Whole continents heaving,”
he says, circling my breast,
lifting it against gravity.

He tells about attraction
in an atom, the way an electron sings
around the outer edges of orbit, looking
to be drawn away, hoping to be sucked back in.
“The facts are beautiful,” he says
against the back of my knee.

Clouds gather and make shapes. He predicts weather,
makes mountains disintegrate and puddles
of water rise up on two legs and walk. He draws
the milky way on my belly, flings planets
across like strawberries.

He demonstrates an atom with his tongue
on my neck. Then shows me quarks
below, unwrapping
particles along the way,
taking molecules apart,

smaller and smaller pieces
flying off, everything
unraveling but for what
must hold it together:

“God!” I yell aloud.

Lists

MICHAEL ONOFREY

Earl has begun the prep work for painting the “foyer” of Bob and Lisa Kob’s house, “foyer” a term Bob had used. The foyer has cracks in its walls, drywall. The cracks are from earthquakes, so Earl has to gouge and patch and sand before applying a primer/sealer and then paint, Navajo white, an off-white that’s common in Southern California.

Earl is middle-aged, and Bob and Lisa are middle-aged as well. The Kobs have no children and no pets. It’s a nice house, not part of a development, not a tract house. It’s custom built and it’s nestled in the hills of Studio City, south of Ventura Boulevard, a nice section of the San Fernando Valley. It’s Earl’s first day on the job. He’ll probably finish up the next day or possibly the day after in the morning. There’s a lot of woodwork that requires an angled brush, semi-gloss applied. A closet for hanging coats is part of the foyer, part of what Earl has to paint. The Kobs are at work. Earl’s been given a device that opens and closes the garage door. From inside the garage, double-car garage, Earl can enter the house via a door that connects the garage to a service porch. The Kobs trust Earl, or so it seems. Earl has done work for some of the Kobs’s friends.

It’s break time, 3 p.m., and Earl has a thermos of hot coffee that he’s brought from home. Lisa told Earl that he can help himself to iced tea that’s in the refrigerator, so Earl naturally assumes he can sit on a stool at the counter that separates the kitchen from the dining room and drink his coffee. And that’s what he’s doing when he notices a

sheet of letter-sized paper, but then there seems to be more than one sheet of paper. A glass paperweight with a seashell suspended in the glass is anchoring the papers. Earl's not sure why his eyes are looking at this, but now that he's looking he naturally starts reading, and in this way he understands he's looking at a list of things to do that day, a Monday, date at the top of the page confirming that it's the current Monday. It's a very neat list, probably a computer printout.

What's listed is very practical, or so it seems to Earl as he skims down the page, but then there's something that draws Earl's attention. Ah! He sees his name: 8:00 a.m. – Earl, painter, arrives. Jeez, how'd they know he was going to arrive at eight? Actually, he arrived at 8:05. In a sense, though, this was discussed on Saturday when Earl gave the Kobs a price and when they okayed it. The Kobs leave for work at seven-thirty. This was mentioned on Saturday and the list confirms it. Earl could come over and begin working any time after 7:30.

At the bottom of the page Earl finds his name again. He's listed as leaving at five o'clock. Well, yeah, Earl has to be out of the house by 5:45 because the Kobs get home then, or so it was explained on Saturday. So now Earl wonders if this list was left on the counter as a reminder of when he supposed to arrive and leave, or at least a reminder of when he's supposed to leave. Maybe the Kobs anticipated Earl looking at the list.

Alright, but now that Earl's looking at the list there's something more that trips his attention. Perhaps it's the details. Bob and Lisa get up at 6:30. Then they "urinate." Bob is the first to urinate, then Lisa. Next, 6:35, while Lisa is urinating, Bob switches on the coffee machine, the word "kitchen" in parenthesis, so it reads: 6:35 a.m. -

Bob – coffee machine, turn on (kitchen), Lisa - urinate (bathroom). Brushing their teeth follows. After that there's 6:40, which is when Bob and Lisa get out of their “respective nightwear” and “dress for work.” And then, of all things, it breaks down into what Bob is going to wear and what Lisa is going to wear, one short list for Bob, and one short list for Lisa. Bob's socks are listed as brown and so are his shoes. Lisa, it is noted, is going to wear a white bra and black panties, and so forth. It's after coffee and toast (kitchen counter), that Bob and Lisa use the toilet(s) again (defecate), 7:10 a.m. Evidently there are two toilets in the house. Earl only knows of one, but it makes sense that there are two because it's a nice house, somewhat large. Earl, being a housepainter-slash-handyman, works on exteriors and interiors, and it is the interiors of people's homes that tell him so much about the lives of the people he works for. But in all the years he's been going into people's houses, he's never come across anything like this.

Earl sips his coffee and continues reading. The glass-seashell paperweight has been set aside, and indeed it is not a single sheet of paper that Earl is dealing with. It's quite a few papers. Monday, for example, consists of two sheets, lines single-spaced. Tuesday, too, two sheets. Wednesday, though, continues onto a third sheet, which ends halfway down the page: 11:00 p.m. – lights out, sleep. The end of each day is always: 11:00 p.m. – lights out, sleep, except for Friday and Saturday nights. Friday ends at midnight, whereas Saturday ends at 1:00 a.m. or 1:30 a.m. The “or” in “1:00 a.m. or 1:30 a.m.” causes Earl to pause because it is the only sign of vagueness Earl has noticed in these daily lists. Earl will return to Saturday in a moment because that day and night seem to deserve further consideration, but for now Earl wants to take a closer look at Wednesday, the two-and-a-half-page day.

Evidently Wednesday is going to be a busy day. And yes, Earl discovers that it is, for on the way home from work Lisa and Bob are as follows: 5:45 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. – supermarket: “milk, one quart; yogurt, 5 tubs; filet chicken,” and so on, one item after the next, several lines, household necessities typed out linearly as well: “toothpaste, 1 tube; toilet paper, 6 rolls.”

Earl tries to recall what Lisa and Bob do for a living, but he can't remember it. Perhaps it wasn't mentioned. They must work at the same place, though, and they must start work and finish work at the same time each day, for it's noted that they “enter parking lot and park; enter office building.” It seems there is only one car. Earl wonders how Bob and Lisa met, for to come up with a lifestyle that incorporates lists of this nature would mean they are extremely compatible. Of course they might have become super compatible after getting married, but nevertheless . . .

Earl sips his coffee. He should be finishing his break about now, but he wants to check a few more things.

Lisa and Bob don't shower in the morning. They shower after they get home from work, first Lisa, then Bob. There's an hour for “exercising” three days a week, which takes place before showering. Perhaps there are a couple of exercise machines in the house. Dinner preparation is in conjunction with showering: Lisa in the shower, Bob beginning dinner preparations, and then the other way around, Bob in the shower and Lisa preparing dinner. The food for dinner is listed and so are beverages, or rather beverage, as in singular, because only “bottled water” is listed. Bob and Lisa have changed into casual clothing after showering, clothing listed. Unbelievable. TV is watched

during dinner. TV is given an hour-and-a-half slot. After that, things on Wednesday get an extra zip, for after the dishes are done there's an hour of "sex," and it's further noted: "bedroom or living room or anywhere in the house." An hour, Earl thinks . . . well, that's pretty good. But what exactly do Lisa and Bob do during that hour? Earl examines what's in front of him closely, the third sheet of paper for Wednesday. Earl's looking for details of that hour's activities. To come this far and not go into the particulars of that precious hour produces a wave of disappointment.

Earl's got to get back to work, but he can't help scanning the papers for another "sex" entry. How often is sex scheduled, and is it always one hour? Earl's going through the papers, one sheet after the next, and he wonders if scheduled sex is a good idea or a weird idea. He also wonders if it is a common idea. Are other people doing this? Maybe this is something middle-aged people need to do, or ought to do. Maybe Earl and his girlfriend of six months, Lori, ought to try this. Thus far, though, there haven't been any problems with unscheduled sex, or so it seems to Earl. Of course Lori might have other thoughts about this. She hasn't voiced them, though, and she is very straightforward.

The details of Bob and Lisa's lives are flashing by as Earl skims down one page and then the next. Whoa! Earl comes to a halt. Saturday evening: 7:30 p.m. – Ben and Yvonne; Ralph and Maureen – arrive. Food and drinks; undress; sex. An hour later there's "coffee and cakes," which are allotted thirty minutes. Another hour of sex follows. Then: 12:30 a.m. – Ben and Yvonne; Ralph and Maureen – leave. Earl pauses. Again, no details about those two hours of sex except that six

people are involved. Earl looks at Sunday and discovers a normal day, as if “normal” can describe scheduling sleeping in, or what constitutes sleeping in, for Bob and Lisa will get up at 10 a.m. Do they set the alarm?

Earl returns to Saturday. Obviously Saturday is the most interesting day of the week. Housecleaning is done Saturday morning. Saturday afternoon has Lisa and Bob shopping, “Italian/imported grocery store,” for things like feta cheese, sharp cheddar cheese, Polish pickles, Greek olives (one quart), Italian bread (unsliced), olive oil, various pastas, various deserts, San Pellegrino sparkling mineral water (500 ml bottles). It’s with the purposely noted mineral water that Earl stops reading, for he wonders if the Saturday-night-sex get-together is alcohol-free. No wine, no beer, no hard liquor is listed. Earl raises his head and looks around. No signs of alcohol are to be seen in the kitchen or dining room. Earl stands up and steps over to the refrigerator and opens it. No beer or wine in the frig. Earl returns to the lists, but remains standing.

Before the Italian/imported store there’s a scheduled stop at a drug store, Ventura Blvd. – “condoms, regular and large size; KY lubricant, one tube.” Also: “bottled water;” but no brand name.

Earl straightens the papers and puts the paperweight back on top of them. Picking up his thermos, he heads for the foyer. For the next couple of hours, while he’s working, Earl thinks about those lists. He chides himself for having taken his morning break and his lunchbreak outside in the cab of his pickup truck with the windows down. It’s a nice day outside, beginning of October. Tomorrow, though, Earl will take all his breaks at the counter with the lists. But then he wonders if that weekly list is going to be on the kitchen counter tomorrow.

Perhaps those papers will be gone, or maybe Monday will be gone, given that it will have finished. The lists must have been composed on Sunday or possibly Saturday after Earl left the Kobs's house. What Earl would really like to do right now is photocopy those papers. He'd like to take a copy of the lists home and show the copies to Lori. With this thought, he turns over the idea of dropping everything and either looking all over the house for a copy machine or snatching up the papers and driving to a copy center to dash off a copy of the entire stack of papers, and then to return to the Kobs in time to be out of the house by five o'clock, his scheduled departure time, which he now chuckles about, for it's like he has begun to adhere to what's on Monday's list. Earl looks at his wristwatch. It's 4:45. Wow, where did the time go? He's got to wrap things up. Fortunately, he's where he ought to be with his work, no unforeseen problems having arisen. He'll be able to finish the job tomorrow. But the copy center? No way. Not enough time, at least not enough time today. But tomorrow . . .

Earl starts cleaning up. He'll leave the drop cloths as is. Bob and Lisa will, in all likelihood, enter the house through the door in the garage because that's where they'll park their car, or so Earl surmises because the garage wasn't noted on Monday's list, or at least Earl didn't notice it. No big deal, though, if they come in through the front door. The bottom of the front door will simply shove at a drop cloth. There's no wet paint about. As for visitors who might be dropping by, there weren't any scheduled. Earl is certain of that.

Upon reaching Ventura Boulevard, an impulse takes hold and Earl hangs a quick right turn onto a residential street and parks his pickup

truck curbside. He walks down the block to Ventura Boulevard and enters a Starbucks. He gets a caffè latte and goes outside to sit. People are passing by on the sidewalk.

Those lists of the Kobs continue to bubble in Earl's head, which was why he decided to stop for a cup of fancy-pants coffee. He needs time to think. The day continues to be beautiful as it wanes, temperature comfortable, air relatively clean. Earl is in his painter's whites. He removes his cap and takes a plastic comb from his back pocket and runs the comb through his thinning hair.

Sipping his coffee, he rethinks his thought about the lists. The idea that they were left out for him to see persists, but was it only to remind him what time he should begin working and what time he should be out of the house? Perhaps. But maybe there was something additional, for if Earl was going to notice his name on the top paper, then surely he'd start reading . . . other things. If the Kobs only wanted to give Earl a heads-up about starting and leaving times, they could have composed any kind of list, or lists, presumably simpler and normal. They wouldn't have had to include the sex stuff or the black panties or the urinating and the rest of it. No one in their right mind would list such things, and to think Earl believed it, or at least believed it while he was reading it. He shakes his head. He feels a little silly. He chuckles. But then, a glancing thought says: Could it be that Lisa and Bob are preparing for dementia? Or maybe the lists are meant to ward off dementia. And so then, if either of these scenarios are true, the Saturday night sex party is true, as well as everything else that's listed.

At this juncture in Earl's thoughts he tunes into the conversation at the table next to his, two women, for suddenly, while lifting his

cup of coffee, he catches: “. . . he uses these red condoms, Jill, and it’s the color of that thing when it’s on him that sets my head swirling, you know, when I look at it.” “Oh?” But now the conversation evades Earl’s ears, for the volume has been lowered. Did they notice Earl eavesdropping? Earl almost feels embarrassed, but then his mind drops this as it skips over to reflecting on coincidence—the lists, scheduled sex, three couples, and then the two women at the next table talking about red condoms. It’s amazing how coincidence works, for it seems that sex is tap-tap-tapping at Earl’s brain.

He looks at Ventura Boulevard, which is on the other side of the sidewalk. The street is congested, going-home traffic and people out shopping. He thinks about venturing a peek at the women at the next table, but how to make it discrete is the quandary.

Earl sips his coffee and his thoughts return to the Kobs, yet Earl recognizes that his thoughts are oscillating between the women next to him and the Kobs. Actually, Earl’s thoughts are touching on this and that and the next thing—pedestrians, cars, Kobs, women at the next table, paint-speckled shoes, Lori, Earl’s age, wife swapping, husband swapping, partner swapping, swinging.

Earl puts some purposeful effort into focusing, and what he focuses on is Lori, for a thought has struck that has to do with Lori and her friends. It was by way of Lori that Earl did an exterior in Toluca Lake because Lori is friends with the woman of that house who is middle-aged and married, and it was that Toluca Lake woman who gave Earl’s phone number to the Kobs. Earl hadn’t thought about it until now, but does Lori know the Kobs? The Toluca Lake couple, Roger and Karen, are friends of Lori’s because Lori works in the same office/room as

Karen at the phone company. What's making Earl think about this is the thought that maybe all this—Kobs, lists on the counter, iced tea in the frig, sex party on Saturday night—is a suggestion, or hint, for Earl's eyes and thoughts, like maybe Earl and Lori can participate. Wow. But then again, if that's the case, why didn't Lori just come out and ask about this, talk to Earl about it? Lori's very upfront about sex, and most everything else. But of course everyone has areas they shy away from, subjects they don't want to touch on directly, if at all. Taking part in one of the Kobs's Saturday night get-togethers would be something new, unexplored territory, which might be hazardous, for it would certainly go beyond the relationship Lori and Earl now have.

Earl leans back in his chair and shoots his legs out and crosses his legs at the ankles, a contemplative pose. He met Lori six months ago at a house in Burbank. Earl had just finished repairing and painting a gate and a fence, and when the homeowner, Jack Cirl, was giving Earl a check he asked Earl if he'd like a beer, but Earl was off of alcohol, so the offer was amended to: "Diet Pepsi or iced tea or coffee." Two women were sitting on chairs at a patio table, which was where Jack had come from, and so Earl thought, okay, maybe one of the women wants to meet Earl, which turned out to be the case, and which turned out to be Lori—widowed and about Earl's age. Jack and his wife, Damari, had probably set this up. Damari also worked at the phone company. As it turned out, coincidence coming to bear, Lori was off of alcohol too. So after finishing their Diet Pepsis, Lori and Earl kind of left the patio at the same time, all so casually, while saying bye to the Cirls, smiles all around, and then Lori and Earl wandered out to their respective vehicles, parked curbside, Earl in his painter's whites,

Lori in a pair of jeans and a light brown T-shirt, huaraches on her feet. Earl mentioned picking up a pizza on his way home, and home meant a house off of La Tuna Canyon in the nearby foothills, a house his mother had left him upon her death some years before, all this having been noted nonchalantly as part of the conversation on the patio. It was a spring night, a Friday night. “Oh, how I love pizza,” Lori said, which brought a smile to Earl’s oblong face, teeth slightly gapped.

Lori was very candid on that first night, and that has continued, and it’s that which helps to fuel their relationship. It opened Earl up. They told each other things, lots of things, and that has continued. In addition to personal subjects, Lori will sometimes talk about what someone at work has said, sexual matters part of the account. This sort of chitchat at work, regarding sex, is always between women. Lori has speculated, “The men are probably talking among themselves about women and sex, too.” But then Earl chipped in, “Men don’t talk about that stuff as much as people think. At least not regarding particulars.” Lori listened to this, just as Earl listens to her, and this is the other half of opening up, Lori and Earl listening to each other.

Wildlife, just beyond Earl’s backyard, can be seen from the patio and kitchen window—coyotes, squirrels, scrub jays, doves, bats, owls, even deer on occasion. Lori moved in three months after that initial night of pizza and sex and sex and sex. They were up until the first crows began cawing, gray in the sky whispering, and Lori, elbow wedged on a pillow, was leaning over him and was talking to his face: “What a surprise. I had almost given up on this.” And Earl: “Me too.”

Earl is nearing the end of his coffee. Should he mention those lists to Lori when he gets home? He feels like relating their contents,

for there's an urge to talk about those lists. But what if Lori is in fact interested in the Saturday night affair at the Kobs, interested and curious? Like maybe she wants to try it out. It doesn't necessarily have to be this Saturday night, yet that is a possibility because it's only Monday now. Perhaps the Kobs can amend the list, pencil Earl and Lori in. It would seem that it's a couples' deal at the Kobs, for only couples are listed. And isn't it all so coincidental that Lori and Earl don't drink? And neither do they have children. And they are a couple, a middle-aged couple, albeit not married.

In a way, the possibility of participating depends on whether Lori knows the Kobs. If she does, things could move rather quickly. She hasn't mentioned the Kobs, not that Earl can recall. Of course if things begin to move in the direction of participation, Earl would probably have to confess to looking at the lists: "I just happened to see those papers on the counter, and saw my name." Or maybe Lori could put it in a mirthful way while chuckling and talking to Lisa Kob on the phone: "Earl looked at the papers on your kitchen counter." Ha, ha. But does Earl want to admit looking at the lists? Or maybe it doesn't have to go that way. Maybe Lori can explore this through her friends at work. For all Earl knows, maybe Bob and Lisa work at the phone company too. Lori could drop hints. Then again, and this is really strange, maybe Lori was in on the composition of the lists. Lisa and Lori at work at lunchbreak coming up with this hilarious idea of drawing up those lists for Earl to see on the kitchen counter.

At this point, Earl recognizes that he can cook up possibility after possibility about the lists and Bob and Lisa and/or Lori. His mind is running away with this. He's got to set this aside and think in different

terms, for he understands that beneath all the speculation there is something much more cutting, and it is the question of whether Earl is ready for such an adventure—openly sharing Lori and himself with other people. Could Earl watch Lori with another man, or men, and would that be okay? He's not sure. Now that he's thinking about it, he definitely feels something, though. And then he thinks, or acknowledges, that thinking about it and experiencing it are different. He might be able to rationalize sharing Lori because Lori would be sharing him. But to actually see and experience this would be a lot different than sitting at Starbucks with a cup of coffee and thinking about it. And once at the Kobs, there'd be no way out, and there'd be no way of controlling what he'd see. But . . . it might be okay. It might be another dimension of sex. Another aspect of opening up.

But what about Lori? Would it be presumptuous on Earl's part to bring something like this up, even by way of telling her about the lists with all that nonsense? Maybe that's why those papers, those lists, were on the kitchen counter, for in this way the issue is masked in something that touches on a joke, as well as craziness and risqué and personal feelings. Yes, Earl can tell Lori about the lists and their contents, and let it go from there, wherever it might go. At this point, it's Earl's choice, for he doesn't have to mention the lists at all. They've put this on him. He can feel it. □

Island Time

TERESA FAIRLESS

Carry a sunset in your pocket,
let the beam break a seam.
Sand and sea glass tumble out
back onto the pavement.
Black asphalt glittering in dinnertime sun.
Pick it up with sunscreen-fingers,
kick it with bare calloused feet.
Bike home, classic rock as GPS.

On Island Time,
the tick tick tick of the tide clock
Is swept away by Dad
singing barbeque music, shucking clams.
Measure time in tide changes,
popsicle-melt, slices of watermelon.

What Is

STEPHEN MALIN

It is what it is
unless of course
it isn't in which case
it might have been
and for this
we are told
there are no sadder words
although some try to ease
the megrims
by saying when
one of those nights
comes along in one's life
it is what it is
even when it isn't

Block Island Haiku

FRED YANNANTUONO

So many hatchbacks.

Mopeds wobbling back and forth.

Can't they go fishing?

Big Red

RYAN WARNEKE

It loses value,
the faded red hood
with two poorly spray painted black racing stripes
attempting to cover up the obvious rust.

That old tough leather seat finally ripped
with the coldness of a warm feeling
and the old bed with the twisted tailgate,
fighting to stay on its hinges,
just how I remember

Every scratch and dent
are memories cut into the truck,
but if you ask me, you can't put a price on memories
so how does \$2,000 sound?

Tail of the Comet

PETER JOHNSON

At 11 p.m. Lucille Gorski found herself standing in a cemetery next to a monument proclaiming, “Herein Lies Phineas McGee, Who Left When He Had the Chance.”

“What do you think that means?” she asked her boyfriend, Marty, who was setting up his equipment.

“I guess the dude was glad to check out.”

“Very funny, Marty, but don’t be a wise guy. I’ve already done one ghost hunt tonight.”

Lucille was referring to earlier when Marty had brought his ghost hunting equipment to Alex Youngblood’s house, a kid who’d recently been murdered on the bike path. Convinced he’d seen Alex’s ghostly image wandering around at his vigil three nights before, Marty was hoping to catch Alex before he left for the Great Beyond.

In this sense, you could say Lucille’s night began the actual night of the shooting. She was about to plug into Cage the Elephant when a flash sparked outside her bedroom window, followed almost simultaneously by a loud bang. Once, about two years ago, she’d seen lightning, with its accompanying thunder, rend a tree. That’s what she thought the flash was until she realized the night sky was quiet and star-filled. The next day when she heard Alex had been shot, everything fell into place—the flash, the sound—because her house was no more than a quarter of a mile from where the murder occurred.

Murder. A strange word for Lucille’s upscale community, though Marty seemed as excited about it as a coyote chancing upon raw road

kill. To Marty, a dead body meant a fresh ghost, and much to Lucille's unhappiness, Marty, her brilliant, and let's face it, cool-looking boyfriend, had decided to put all his energy into catching what he called Alex's "spirit force" before it broke its earthly coils.

"Are you going to help me, Lucille?" Marty asked, pointing to something he called an Electromagnetic Field Detector.

"I think you're way beyond help, Marty," she said.

He looked puzzled, as if trying to decide whether she was serious. Then his eyes left hers, traveling down and finally resting upon her Converse high-tops.

"You know, Lucille," he said matter-of-factly, "you really have great legs. Don't know why you always wear jeans."

It was not unlike Marty to shift gears between topics, so Lucille always had to be on guard.

"You don't like the way I dress?" she asked.

"What?" Marty said.

"You were saying something about my legs."

"Yeah, I like them, but I'd like it better if we could get this stuff set up."

"Wouldn't you have a better chance of catching Alex if we went back to his house?" Lucille asked.

"I'm not interested just in him anymore. I'm after the tail of the comet."

"I'm afraid to ask."

He set up his tripod, and placed his infrared camcorder on top of it. "It's like when a comet flames out and drags all this cool shit behind it. Well, all these dead people under all these tombstones . . ."

“Thanks for reminding me, Marty . . .”

“. . . well, when Alex passes through the Vortex, they’ll all want to get another glimpse of the living, thinking they might worm their way back into our lives. I guess I’m saying that because of the way Alex died, the natural order of things has been messed up, and some of the dead have probably already passed through. Don’t tell me you can’t feel it.”

According to Marty, the Vortex, shaped like a funnel, was a gateway to the Other Side.

“Why would Phineas want to come back?” Lucille said. “He’s been dead for three hundred years. Could you imagine him wandering into a Pilates class by mistake?”

“Very funny, Lucille. I find your irreverence for the dead sexy, though this probably isn’t the best place to get them mad. They’re not known for their sense of humor.”

“Why’s that?”

“Envy of the living, of course.”

Lucille was about to respond but then thought better. She’d already gotten her father to extend her curfew, so she didn’t want to prod Marty into one of his long paranormal lectures or they’d be there all night. Instead, she helped assemble his equipment, then awaited his usual invocation to the dead: “Dear Lord, what we are about to do, we do in the interest of science. We ask for your blessing or protection if our presence brings forth any minions of evil.”

She sat down next to Phineas McGee’s tombstone, and Marty turned some dials and joined her. It was a beautiful night, low humidity and a full moon, so perfectly round you could imagine the eye of God pressed tightly against it.

“What are you expecting this time?” Lucille said, trying to seem interested, even though she knew nothing would happen for the next hour or so, and then they’d go home.

“Something or nothing,” Marty said, “but at least we’re together, huh?”

“Yeah, Marty, you really know how to treat a girl.”

“But you’re not ‘a girl.’ You’re Lucille. If you were ‘a girl’ you’d be afraid of cemeteries. You’d be home painting your toenails. That’s why I have trouble seeing you going out with Ryan Holt.”

“Marty . . .”

“I’m just saying.”

“Well, don’t.”

Earlier that day Marty had discovered that she’d dated Ryan Holt, a guy Marty thought was a jerk, and since then, he’d been harping on it, even though the guy had been killed in a car accident last winter. Lucille knew the information Marty wanted, and it bothered her that he thought, even for a moment, that she was his property.

“Okay,” Marty said, “but you’ll have to do penance for dating that guy, like telling me every day I have a large penis.”

“Not going to work, Marty.”

“What?”

“If I tell you you have a large penis, you’ll want to know what I’m comparing it to.”

“You’re a real piece of work, Lucille,” Marty said, “and I mean that as a compliment.”

Lucille grabbed his hand. He *really* was good-looking. He had deep-set blue eyes, a strong nose, and a slightly elongated chin, and when he

smiled, a little dimple seemed to explode on his left cheek. He could get most anything with that smile, and she found herself jealous when he flashed it around other girls, especially ones like Dory Scheff.

Not so, Lucille, who was always willing to battle almost anyone, as she did when she'd gotten into it with Dory at Alex's vigil. She didn't dislike Dory because she was rich or beautiful. She disliked her because Dory thought her beauty and money made her better than everyone else. Lucille knew that if she ever decided to wear her contacts and have her hair and nails done, she could be a real head-turner. That was made clear at the prom when Marty raved over her Japanese hairstyle with its long bangs that highlighted her eyes, and her tight red silk dress and red patent leather shoes. She didn't have to look around to know she was getting attention, and what she loved about Marty was that after she went back to her black jeans, black Converse sneakers, and T-shirts, he was okay with it. They had made their statement to the cool kids without having to say a word.

"Shhhh," Marty said.

"Shhhh, what?"

"Look over by that stone wall."

Two eyes inflamed by moonlight appeared, and Lucille wondered if Phineas McGee had returned to drag them to wherever three-hundred-year-old dead guys live. But then the eyes moved slowly out of the woods, attached to the body of a gaunt coyote.

"Will it hurt us?"

"No," Marty said, "but at least I know my instruments are working." He pointed to the lights on the EMF detector flashing on-and-off like bulbs on a miniature pinball machine.

The coyote sat down about thirty feet away, ignoring them. It glanced left, then right, as if it sensed a good meal scurrying through the wood's ground cover. Then it leaped over the stone wall and was gone.

Lucille locked her arm inside Marty's.

"Don't worry. I think they're afraid of people," Marty said. "It's the guy wandering around who shot Alex that makes me nervous."

"Did you know Alex?" Lucille asked.

"A little. He was on my Pop Warner and Little League teams when we were kids."

"I didn't know you used to play sports."

Marty frowned. "They were fun back then. Now it's just the usual jerks trying to exclude people. My dad said the way to beat them was to outwork them, but why bother, especially when there are more interesting things to do. I didn't see myself getting eighteen guys together to play baseball after high school, anyway."

"That's how many guys are on the field?"

"You're kidding, right, Lucille?"

"No, I'm not."

"You mean your parents never made you play sports?"

"My mom wanted me to be a cheerleader for the middle-school basketball team."

Marty started to laugh.

"So you see the problem."

"Oh, yeah."

"You know, I don't mind talking about her," Lucille said.

"Well, that's a change."

"From what?"

Marty looked like he was trying to suppress a smile.

“What’s your problem?” Lucille said.

“Look, Lucille, every time we talk about your mom, you get severely pissed off.” Lucille inched herself away from him, and Marty laughed. “I rest my case.”

“You know what really stinks?” she said. “Sitting in a goddam cemetery while you decide to give me a bad time about my mother.”

“Actually, I didn’t bring her up,” Marty said. Then he slid over next to her. “What’s going on, Lucille?”

“I don’t want to talk about it now,” she said.

“Sure you do. Let it rip, so we can be quiet for a while. There aren’t many rules to ghost hunting, but everyone agrees they won’t appear if people are making a racket.”

Lucille felt herself smile. “You promise not to defend her?”

“I don’t even know her.”

“I love you, Marty, but you got this thing about being nice to everyone. Some people are assholes, and you have to let them know it.”

“That’s your job, Lucille, and you’re really good at it.” He clasped his hands together as if in prayer, took a deep breath, and said, “So what’s going on with your mom?”

“My father says I need to spend more time with her,” Lucille confessed.

“Might be a good idea.”

“I can’t stand her house, or her new husband, and dig this, she’s pregnant.”

“Ah,” Marty said. “It makes sense you’re upset.”

“Don’t psychoanalyze me, Marty.”

“I’m just saying.”

Lucille felt herself about to cry and couldn’t figure out why. “She’s just so goddam happy that it’s not fair. My dad’s a cool guy. I mean he’s a respected professor. Maybe he doesn’t make a lot of money but he’s a great guy.”

“It was probably more than money. I’ve heard people break up for a bunch of reasons.”

“Not her. When they’d have fights, she’d say, ‘Make more money.’ One night she kept screaming it over and over again. My dad just sat in the kitchen with a glass of wine, while I felt like punching her in the face. And so now she’s got her rich guy . . .”

“And her new family,” Marty interrupted.

“That’s not the problem, Marty.”

“Just putting it out there. Who knows, maybe a new kid will change things.”

Lucille threw up her hands in frustration. “Obviously, I can’t talk to you about this, especially because your parents are so fucking happy.”

Marty slid next to her again and placed his palm on her back, then gently scratched between her shoulder blades. “Well, I’ll go with you if you want. Maybe I can beat up the guy.”

They both laughed at that comment, then sat quietly until they were surprised by an approaching bicyclist. The bike’s headlamp was lit, and it was moving towards them, stopping about fifty feet away. The rider got off and removed his helmet. Lucille couldn’t distinguish the rider’s features but he was tall and broad and appeared to be wearing a holster.

“He’s got a gun,” she whispered.

The man pointed a flashlight in their direction. "Just stay calm," he said.

Lucille tried to cooperate but her heart felt a size too big for her chest.

"Is that you, Marty?" the man said, coming out of the shadows.

Marty stood. "Oh, hi, Mr. Watts."

Mr. Watts was a hunky ex-gym teacher who looked like Bradley Cooper. After two years of screaming at high school kids to do pushups, he had joined the local police force. He'd obviously been assigned to night patrol, most likely because of the shooting.

"Does your father know you're here, Marty?" Officer Watts said.

"No, but it wouldn't surprise him," Marty said. "Would you mind not shining that flashlight in my face, Mr. Watts?"

"Sure," Officer Watts said, turning off the light. He looked at the equipment, seeming to realize that they hadn't come to the cemetery to make out.

"I can explain," Marty said, and he calmly began a mini lecture on ghost hunting.

Lucille expected Officer Watts to collapse into laughter, but he seemed interested, even asking Marty a few questions. When Marty finished, Officer Watts said, "You're a cool kid, Marty."

"Thanks."

"You always had interesting ideas in my health class, and you were polite. Some of those other guys could've used a kick in the ass."

"Thanks again, Mr. Watts."

"Having said that, I think you should pack up. Then I'll walk you kids home. I can get a squad car if it makes things easier."

“Probably not a good idea to have a police car pull up to the town solicitor’s house with his kid in it,” Marty said.

Officer Watts nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Lucille helped Marty to stuff the equipment into his backpack, and everyone was set to leave when Marty said, “I have to say something first. It’ll probably sound strange.”

This was the part of ghost hunting Lucille really hated. “You didn’t say it at Alex’s house,” she reminded him.

“That wasn’t a cemetery.”

“Aw, come on, Marty.”

Officer Watts seemed to be losing his patience.

“It’s just a little prayer, Mr. Watts. Some ghost hunters believe that evil spirits sometimes follow people home from cemeteries, and not all of these ghosts are nice guys.”

Lucille was waiting for Officer Watts to pull out his gun and put Marty out of his misery, but instead, he looked uneasily around the graveyard, and said, “Okay, so what’s next?”

“We hold hands and I say a few words. It’s kind of a prayer.”

“Or we can just go home,” Lucille said.

Lucille and Marty looked to Officer Watts for guidance. He probed the inside of his cheek with his tongue. “Okay, Marty, say your prayer, but this has to stay between us three, okay?”

Lucille and Marty agreed, then they all held hands, creating a small circle. After telling all evil spirits, in the name of God, to stay put, Marty lowered his head and said:

*St. Michael, the Archangel,
defend us in battle.*

*Be our protection
against the wickedness
and snares of the devil.
By the power of God,
cast into hell
Satan and all other evil spirits,
who prowl the world
seeking the ruin of souls.
Amen.*

Lucille cringed as each word came out. She hoped she didn't have the misfortune of running into Officer Watts for a while, and she guessed he felt the same.

When Marty finished, they let go of each other's hands, and Officer Watts said, "You know, Marty, you should have your own TV show. You can really scare the hell out of people."

"Thanks, Mr. Watts," Marty said. He was beaming, and although Lucille felt like smacking him upside his head, more than anything, she was glad someone was taking him seriously.

"Sure you don't want me to follow you?" Officer Watts said.

"We'll be okay," Marty said.

"Don't hang around, though."

"We won't," Marty said, and then he and Lucille grabbed Marty's stuff and headed home.

Later that evening, Marty called her as Lucille was sitting on her back porch, watching an old *Walking Dead* episode on her tablet while mosquitoes unhappily vanished into a nearby zapper shaped like a lantern.

“Just wanted to thank you for tonight,” Marty said.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know I’m a pain in the ass, but I really think I’m going to do something important someday.”

“But not with ghosts, right?”

“I dunno. I just don’t want you to think I’m an idiot.” There was a long pause, then he said, “I guess I’m trying to say I love you, Lucille.”

“Even if I made out with Ryan Holt?”

“I’m serious, okay?”

“Sorry, Marty. I’m not used to you saying that very often.”

“But I mean it. Right now, I’m kind of angry you can’t be here, you know, spend the night.”

Lucille knew exactly how he felt. “I love you, too, Marty, but can we leave it at that? Sometimes talking about this stuff ruins things.”

“You really are something, Lucille.”

“Yeah, all I have to do is figure out what it is.”

After the conversation Lucille sat for a while. She was tired from her trip to the cemetery but she couldn’t relax enough to go to bed. A hurt that had morphed into a dull ache over the last few years was rising again deep inside her. Her mother’s house was only a fifteen minute walk away. She knew what she was about to do would make her feel worse. But she was, after all, Lucille.

First, she checked to see if her father was asleep. Then she threw on a black hoodie. She didn’t want to take the sidewalks or side streets at midnight. That was a sure way to run into Officer Watts again, and she feared he wouldn’t be so laid back this time. So she jogged onto a path that cut through the woods behind her house, ending a block

from her mother's. She wasn't worried because from any place on the path, houses were no more than thirty to fifty yards away. Worst case scenario, she could run to one of them. And from what? A coyote? A fisher cat? A stray dog she might spook?

The night had cooled off, so she pulled the hood up over her head, glancing periodically to the left or right, as dead leaves and twigs crunched under her sneakers. She heard a dog bark and the squawk of a window being lowered. The first part of her walk was straight and level, then she reached a small incline and a bend that was faintly lit from the back-yard flood lights of nearby houses. When she made the turn, she was surprised by a large kid with a shaved head who was sitting on the ground with his back against a tree, drinking from a six-pack of beer. She thought to run, but it wasn't her nature to do that.

"Well, well, well," the kid said, standing up. It was Adam Igoe. He was a football player, a guy Lucille always thought looked like one of those G. I. Joe action figures. He was wearing jeans and work boots and nothing but a plain white T-shirt on top. He raised the bottle of beer to his lips in such a way that his right bicep flexed. She noticed thick strands of dark hair coating his knuckles, as if his body had compensated for the lack of hair on his head.

Lucille almost laughed, but even she was afraid of Adam. All he needed were a few tattoos of snakes on his head and he'd be ready for the UFC after graduation.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

"I'm not worried," Lucille said.

"Gorski, right?"

"Yeah."

“You know what I remember about you?”

“Nope.”

“Before you started going out with the film guy, we were both at this party when one of my friends grabbed your ass and you punched him in the face.”

Lucille smiled, remembering the incident, but she wasn't sure where he was going with this.

“You want a beer,” he said, trying to be friendly.

“No, I'm in a hurry.”

“Where're you goin'?”

Oh, what the hell. “To my mother's.”

“Well, Gorski, let me finish this beer and I'll walk you outta these woods.” He took a long suck on his bottle, then tossed it into some bushes.

“You going to leave the rest here?” she said.

“No, I'll come back later.”

“Aren't you afraid someone will steal them?”

“No, you and me are the only ones crazy enough to be here at midnight.”

So there she was, Lucille Gorski, being escorted by a kid who was only a few genes from being a Neanderthal.

She and Adam never said a word until they reached her destination. She thanked him and, with everything else that had happened that night, she wouldn't have been surprised if he knelt down and kissed her hand.

“You're okay, Gorski,” Adam said, before going back for his stash. “If anyone ever fucks with you, let me know.”

Lucille said she would, then watched as he lumbered into darkness.

After he left, she stayed close to the fringe of the woods until she reached her mother's backyard. All the lights were off, so she sat next to a shed that had a shovel leaning against it. She wrapped her arms around her knees and thought about the couple sleeping inside, imagining her unborn sibling coming to life inside her mother's womb.

She was angry and sad at the same time, wanting to leave but unable to move. She was surprised when a light came on in the living room, and then another, and another, until she could spot her mother pouring a glass of water from the kitchen sink. She was wearing a thin white nightgown that broke above her knees. Lucille watched as her mother bent over, then rubbed her stomach with her free hand before walking toward the kitchen window from where she looked out onto the backyard. She seemed to be staring right at Lucille, but darkness was Lucille's friend that night. After finishing her glass of water, her mother sat at the kitchen table, and Lucille wished she could see her face better. Was she happy, sad, or just tired? Disappointed, she stood to leave, but then nearly fell to her knees, surprised by a grief she'd been holding in for a long time. She felt like crying, but even more than that, she wanted her mother to hug her and to never let go.

Oh, how she wanted that.

But she was Lucille Gorski, and that girl wasn't about to give in. □

Space Storms

SARAH THOMPSON

You are the star
In the blackened sky
That shines slightly brighter than all the others;
You are Saturn's Rings
Beautiful and radiant
And unpredictable;
You are like Jupiter's atmosphere
Unbelievable to observe
But stormy depending on the day;
You are vast and mysterious
With a touch of blessing
And you are cold, void, and uncertain.

The Blind Man at the Grand Canyon

JOHN KRISTOFKO

He stood there with his friend,
the hundreds at the rim,
milling by the gash in earth,
the great wound's silent tears
still moving at the bottom,
this hint into the infinite,
strata from the times we never knew
though they flow yet in our veins.
We look across a moment,
but mainly we look down
drawn by the gravity of shadow,
as if to scare ourselves,
how small we are, how brief
because, of course, that is the measure of it all.

From that depth the silence rises up
like souls ascending in release,
but only he can hear the murmur,
feel the breath across his face,
only his internal eyes
can see those spirits,
know their grace.

Late To Find Me

MARGE PIERCY

In my adolescence, high school
and through college, I was amorphous.
I had not located my boundaries
or built them. If someone looked

into my eyes for long, I fell in love.
I cried at any sad story. Every time
I was moved by a novel or film,
I became one of the characters.

My body was a changing room
where I tried on heroines, villains,
victims. I was Romeo and then
Mercutio, but never Juliet. I knew

even then balconies were not my
forte. Every month a new role
to overplay. Mirrors told me nothing
useful. Lovers gave me scripts

I threw away soon enough. Then
I married a French physicist: between
those steel walls of tradition, I banged
my head and ouch knew myself.

Elegy

BRENDAN NIXON

Death stood there in a leather jacket,
sunglasses on and his hands in his pockets.
He didn't move. He just stood there watching.
After a time he fished out a pack of Newport 100's
looking totally bad ass as he lit one up
and took the first drag.
His forehead was wrinkled, but young.
His gray spiked up hair made him look like the newest Hollywood
blowhard but with a certain level of class.
He took a bow, ashed out his cigarette, and began the walk that
would take an eternity.

Birds of the Black Canyon

VICKI LINDNER

As they crossed the big mountains only she talked, hands off the wheel to gesture vivaciously. He squeezed her knee, wide blue stare fixed on the highway. Since the last time she'd seen him, Valentine's Day, he'd gotten himself a Navajo ring with a turquoise set in a moon of brushed silver. Surprising: despite his pretensions (Banderas cologne), he'd never been into jewelry.

"Great ring," she commented.

"A bewitching bauble indeed," he said, revving up the fake British accent that turned pompous statements into a joke. "A rare Fox Mine stone, chocolate matrix. The work of an immensely talented young native chick in downtown El Paso." This, for him, was a lengthy speech.

The Black Canyon National Park was chilly for Memorial Day weekend. From Kneeling Camel overlook the Gunnison River at the base of the cliffs looked like a squiggle instead of high speed water chiseling the canyon from metamorphic gneiss. "That rock is two *billion* years old!" She exclaimed, firing him up with her energized voice.

Absorbing this challenging scenery with him, she felt a premonition of dread. Since starting the Texas job he'd sent one vintage postcard—an Alamo photo—with "*The lack of you is a downer,*" printed on back. When she called, pinpointing a time before his first Guinness Stout, he growled "Miss your ass" in the tone that signified an emotional overload, hard to express.

In the visitor's center she picked up a pamphlet which said that this river, slowed by dams, still rushed furiously, descending 95 feet per mile. "By comparison the Colorado flowing through the Grand Canyon drops an average of 7.5," she read.

He nodded, large eyes adrift.

She asked about day hiking to Devil's Backbone. "A big expedition. You'd need a haul rope for the last thirty feet," the young ranger said. He recommended Rimrock, the trail below the deck. "That's a good one to start with. Moderately difficult, meaning strenuous as heck. Super easy to get lost."

He pointed to the dotted line on the map. "It's marked with rock cairns, but folks stick their own stones on false trails. One older dude got disoriented and spent a night curled up on the nature path a quarter mile from his vehicle." Judging them equally old, or out of shape, he scared them off with photos of the eighty-foot chain you grabbed to scramble down a bear of a slope.

This kid could not know she'd hiked her whole life, did yoga, swam laps, even endured Body Pump in the gym every Sunday. The chain made her queasy, but how could they get lost when the river was a mile away? She could see it from the window, a silver line in the gorge. Ranger Rick wasn't going to put the kibosh on their little adventure. "Piece of cake!" she proclaimed.

She expected Jobst—she called him by his last name—to suggest postponing the hike until they set up the tent, drove to a few overlooks, then got some lunch. He was a couch potato, no doubt about that. For him working out meant slouching in his Wassily chair, sketching fantasy cities with his father's Pelikan fountain pen

while revering the soiled foam on multiple glasses of Stout. But he said, “Can’t dance,” meaning he’d do what she wanted instead of a more enjoyable activity. Maybe he gave in because he’d turned their relationship long distance by taking that boring El Paso gig.

She’d learned the hard way to stay out of his face when he drank. Before he lost the Denver job, designing a box store, he slurred words, eyes slumped over pupils, and passed out after dinner. Unsure what was happening she googled the AA guidelines, then accused him of “functional alcoholism.” True, he despised the architecture he did—commercial crap—but jumped on the first project he got offered, supervising an airport terminal’s construction. At that point he began drinking less, only two beers plus a shot of tequila. He’d asked her to go with him, hinting he’d give her what he thought she wanted—marriage and a late life “rug rat,” his term for *child*.

Maybe she hadn’t voiced how much she loved her new gig on one of the last small town papers with the quaint storefront office, the old-fashioned printing plant, and “urgent” deadlines. She reminded him that the editor, who’d taken a chance on her, a wanna-be journalist with a useless MA in American Lit, had just assigned her to the government beat, pulling her off obits and cultural events. Just the other day Dan asked her to cover the pollution lawsuit against the cement plant, a sign of confidence. “We moved to this Podunk so I could get job experience,” she argued tearfully. “Without solid reporting under my belt no one will hire me in Texas.”

“Yo!” called the ranger as they headed to the Forester to retrieve their packs, “Don’t swim in that river! Don’t even wade. The water is freezing, like melted ice cubes, and the current will run you down like a freight train.”

“Jobst here might have a chance. He was a backstroke champ,” she tossed back, “in high school.”

Luckily he'd worn his purple Italian running shoes, not the \$1200 kangaroo cowboy boots he'd ordered the day Denver High Design laid him off. She got out her Komperdell trekking pole and handed Jobst the walking stick he'd carved after a UPS truck slammed his 1971 Datsun the day before their flight to Hanoi. They never made it to Vietnam; when his cast came off he wanted to do Paris instead. She taught freshman English at Metro State while he healed, with stoic calm, then stifled fury. After he grunted, “Not salmon again,” and she hurled back, “Maybe you'd like to try cooking for once,” he heaved a cast iron skillet at the wall behind her. He could have crushed her skull with it! She'd tried to take a therapeutic view: a six-pack no longer drowned his frustrations. Or did his explosions burst out of some active volcano buried inside him?

The glittering morning pushed this memory aside. The telescope on the wooden deck gave them a clear view of mud-colored cliffs molded by a fiery upheaval and pilings of sheared stone, their flat planes shuffled into angled affinities. The sandy trail, not a bit confusing, wound through dense scrub oak. She'd read about early explorers who crashed boats while taming the Gunnison's rock-spitting rapids for irrigation. Men working on a single gauge railroad were killed and maimed, too. Scenes of historic danger compelled her. So far her life lacked dramatic misfortunes, a handicap for a community reporter, assigned to cover grief-stricken tales.

Starting down instead of up the incline turned out to be harder. Her breath came easily, but her calves weren't in shape for the steep descent. Although she tried not to brake, leaning back, tightening her knees, she resisted letting the decline propel her. The dry clay, studded with pebbles, was slippery, like wet bentonite. Tracking from one side of the trail to the other, she tried to slow her forward momentum. "You're perambulating at a snail's pace, my dear," Jobst commented when he stopped to wait.

"Because I'm going to break my patootie if I go any faster!" she yelled, hating him for noticing her tentative slowness. "Men don't get osteopenia," she said to herself, thinking about the iffy bone scan, the expensive Boniva the gynecologist prescribed. She hadn't told Mr. Jobst about that yet. He was out of earshot anyway, skating down, loose limbs dancing through the skids, his Euro-trash sneakers sticking to the rolling pebbles better than her stiff Vibram-soled Vasques. Who'd believe that five years ago this man couldn't walk minus a crutch?

She didn't dare lift her eyes off her boots. When she did, the canyon's walls, shifting from dark grey to pink, dizzied her. Her clumsy footfalls hailed stones on Jobst a switchback ahead.

"Don't get too far ahead of me," she hollered, "I might get lost!" Once she did stray onto a false trail, but steered herself back by focusing on the glimmering water in the gorge below. Knowing dehydration can confuse you, she sucked from her bottle already a third empty. Even if she'd brought her pump to filter Giardia, she wouldn't put a toe in that rushing river. The ranger said if you slipped on a rock and broke your leg it'd take the Park Service a day to rescue you. And it dropped to zero even in summer.

Jobst was waiting at the heavy link chain they'd seen in the photo. "Good God," she groaned, peering down the stony slope, "like Chichen Itza without the steps."

"A bit of a challenge, say what?" he agreed, surprisingly cheerful, brushing gnats off his red Lycra shirt. "Not to worry, I'll be at the bottom to catch you." Before starting they split a chocolate cherry Cliff bar. She swigged more water, depleting her supply for the hot trek back up.

He lowered himself on the chain, maneuvering backwards, purple sneakers grazing the dirt. He was down in a sec, watched as she froze, hating to face away from the place she was going. Would she be so chicken shit if Jobst wasn't here and she had just herself to impress? "Maybe I should start up," she said, "wait for you at the top."

"Come on, Stella by Starlight," he encouraged, riffing off *Estelle*, the fraught middle name he'd pried out of her one night. As the sun pulsed like a strobe, she kept her eyes off the dark spires that lunged at her head.

"I don't know why I'm being such a wimp," she cried, willing her hands to grip the chain tighter. The stones kicked loose by her flailing boots crashed down the trail, clinking and shattering. "Thank you!" bounced out of her throat when her feet hit ground and she grabbed Jobst's large fleshy hand. "Madness!" she added. "How about a bungee cord jump?"

"T'wasn't my idea," he reminded her, but a meaner man might have rubbed it in. He was more tolerant of her delusions about her abilities than she was of his. Then he said, as always when he popped the cap off a Stout, "Ah, take me back to old Killarney." His blue eyes glinted above his twitching moustache, and she cracked up, too, venting anxiety.

They could now see the river's rock-crushing turmoil. A whole hour to go half the way... "I'll forge ahead, leader of the pack," he announced in an Irish brogue, "because you're kicking boulders onto me poor bald head."

The next stretch was flatter, lined by Gambel Oak and bristly Juniper. The path, cutting through the brush, led straight to the sandy shore. Canyon Wrens hopped on the twigs. Wait, what happened to the native chick's ring? Did it fall off his finger when he slid down the rope? He'd freak out when he realized he'd lost it...

At the trail's end she didn't see him on the shore. "Jooooobst!" she called. Her voice dove into the river's loud hurl. Either the sun couldn't penetrate the canyon bottom, or a lightning storm would soon slice the blue sky apart. A cloud's grey skin floated above. The temperature fell.

Maybe he's exploring, she thought, looking upstream. No sign of him, or any human. Eyes on the wet sand, she searched for footprints, but none said that a living soul had passed this way or used the primitive camp site and outhouse. "Jobst!" she screamed, her parched throat tightening, as the water's rush silenced her voice.

Refusing to give in to helpless wails, she peered into bushes along the bank. The severe liver-colored cliffs admonished unbalanced reactions, but she gasped, covering her head with her hands, when a loose rock tumbled from a ruffled overhang, landing with a gunshot crack. Jobst, she knew, was terrified of mountain lions and bears and could run into both in this National Park. If you encounter a lion, the website advised, bare your teeth and try to look larger. Could some

beast, even a coyote, drag a six foot tall man into the thick vegetation? “Ridiculous,” she chided herself, then remembered that Jobst didn’t have any food with him. She was carrying the tuna sandwiches and snacks. Wherever he was, lost, searching for her, he must be starving if he hadn’t passed out.

Crying soundlessly, she trudged back to the juncture where the trail met the beach. She sunk down on a log beside a dead fire and raked her hair, bushy from sweat. In the canyon walls, once boiling like stew beneath the earth’s crust, pegmatite streamers pressed illusory motion into cracked schist. Then it hit her: Jobst, the backstroke champ, had ignored the ranger’s warning. Hot and sweaty, he’d waded into the river to cool off, splashed water on his chest, then slipped and broke his leg or back like the early explorer. The swift current yanked him under. Or he’d hit his head—why she saw no sign of him. “Jobst is dead,” she announced to the sound-sucking cliffs.

In retrospect, her instant acceptance of this loss amazed her. Face in hands, she pictured herself in the Sioux City nursing home where his mom ended up after fracturing her hip. There’d be no way to soft peddle the truth: “He drowned in the Gunnison River,” she’d say, watching the elderly lady’s prim lips tremble in her cheeks’ fleshy chasms. She’d call his sister whose son had died in a drunken car wreck. When the phone ring at three a.m. she’d howl, knowing she’d lost someone else. Most likely it would be her, not a family member, who’d drive to Texas to clear out his chic white loft apartment with high beamed ceilings, the kind of space he’d always wanted to live in. Either she’d never offered to visit him there, or he’d been too busy, working weekends, to ask her to come. She would dump his Paul

Smith shirts into plastic bags for The Salvation Army, but keep the frigid black leather and chrome chair she'd detested from day one.

Scenes from their twelve years together scrolled through her mind as if she were the one drowning: Their first meeting in a San Francisco Laundromat so long ago, she too thin on a tortured rebound, his tasseled loafers effete among the washing machines. In the beginning Jobst's gruff concern for her misery was touching. He always called when he said he would. She pictured their nude bodies crushing the pine needles in an Oregon forest, kissing in his vintage Morgan in the Hearst Castle parking lot. In her journal she'd described him as "gently snobbish."

He slapped her the first time because she refused to cash in her return ticket to Denver. She forgave him, blamed the blunt way she'd told him, but swore if he hit her again she'd call the cops. (The next time she dialed 911 but couldn't make herself press charges.) Was that when she stole his silver cuff links? Childish revenge, she told herself, but tucked them into a pair of socks where she enjoyed the thought of them, signifying what once felt valuable and could still be worth something. He never missed them. But when he phoned her in Denver, murmuring in an embarrassed voice, "I never did, but now I do," her triumph told her that this man who avoided emotional language was talking about love.

Not long after that he moved into her cramped one-bedroom on Capitol Hill. She still had the photo he took of her in the black cape coat he bought in a LoDo boutique, an architect's vision of how an Emily Dickinson scholar should dress. She was wearing it the day she met Ben, the BBC photographer, in London. Stoned on mescaline,

she wasn't sure they'd actually had sex, but, whatever, she refused to feel guilty; Jobst owed her this. Home from the trip she locked herself in the bedroom to eke out "Pangs, Pits, and The Secluded Life," the brilliant thesis her committee made her rewrite twice, leaving him in front of the TV, drinking.

After the UPS crash his father, who died soon thereafter, flew from Sioux City to visit him in the university hospital. "You shouldn't have, Daddy-O," Jobst said harshly. He didn't respect his father for letting his mother, "the ice princess," run him ragged, but was moved that he'd come, she knew. His dad didn't see that. "Even as a little boy he was cold and bitter," sighed the short heavy man, a retired packaging executive. In the Chinese restaurant she tried to console him with what she told herself: "He sounds contemptuous, but deep down he's caring, incredibly loyal." Jobst's loyalty was important to her, she recognized, maybe because she herself wasn't trustworthy.

"Harry," she moaned his first name. Was she sobbing for his lifeless body, abraded by stones, for what time altered, or for herself, alone on this desolate shore? Her psyche took up residence in this basement of the world's beginning.

The orange whistle! Suddenly she remembered it, in the daypack's pouch with the notebook and compass she couldn't decipher. After blowing a blast that might trump the turbulent river's roar, she looked up and saw hummingbirds, drawn by what they probably interpreted as a mating call. Four, then five vibrated around her. One greenish blur, ruby throat pulsing, lit on her arm. She felt its claws, an infant's soft fingernails, and its inaudible vibration, like a piano string after playing a chord. She heard thunder, a cliff cracking. The birds slid into the air.

How much time floated by before the canyon offered another miracle? Minutes? A dream of seconds muffled by years? Suddenly a streak of azure materialized on a stunted tree. She had seen one other Indigo Bunting on an Audubon tour, singing “fire-fire-where-where-here-here.” This Bunting was silent, as if contemplating its symbolism.

The avian visitations calmed her. Better eat lunch, hungry or not. The sandwich tasted like Styrofoam until she took a few bites. Famished! She drank all but an inch of the water, enough to get her body to the Visitor’s Center. At that point Search and Rescue could start looking for Jobst with a helicopter. On the chance he was lost, might find his way here, she laid an oatmeal raisin bar on the outhouse floor, safe from bears. She pinned a note, “Honey: Gone for help, food in bathroom,” under a charred rock.

Then, as if the iridescent birds had lit up her brain, she realized that Jobst would have stripped off his purple shoes before plunging into the Gunnison River. Wouldn’t she have found them on the bleached sands? Wherever he was, he was probably alive. Her thirst, half-starved exhaustion, or—a revelation she wasn’t ready to analyze—her imagination had killed him.

Halfway up the trail she recognized his red shirt; he and another man, the ranger, were waving at her from the telescope deck. At that moment she believed everything was the same as before. She approached the chain rope with shaky composure. Her boots skidded, but without Jobst to judge or stop her fall, she hauled her body up the slope, distancing her mind from her fear.

After they hugged, exhaling relief, “*Jesus, I was so...*” “*What the hell happened?*” they figured out that the trail had diverged. Jobst,

walking ahead, arrived at the river via another path. Believing there was only one, sure she was right behind him, he waited awhile. When she didn't show he figured she'd turned around like she said she would. He asked the ranger, "Have you seen the woman I came in here with?" When the kid said no, he guessed she was lost as her sense of direction was never good. He visualized her, as she'd pictured him, lying unconscious, bones broken, in the stony dirt.

She confessed thinking he'd drowned in the Gunnison. Jobst ejected a rare coughing chuckle, displaying short yellow teeth, usually hidden behind his thin lips. "The architect hasn't voluntarily entered a large body of water since his swim team days," he reminded her. True: for an entire week in Zihuatanejo, he refused to put on his bathing suit. She should have known he'd never wade into the icy current of a dangerous river. Feigning a laugh, she wondered why she'd forgotten that. But how could he think, after so long together, that she'd give up, turn around on a risky trail without telling him?

That should have been the end of the story, but neither could stop replaying the separation the Black Canyon imposed upon them. That night, too tired to sleep, they rehashed the reasons why they'd missed one another. "How long did you wait for me on the beach before you started back up?" she asked for the third time.

"Why did a split trail look like a single line?" he questioned, obsessing about the geometry. He'd dropped his fake brogues.

"How come we didn't run into each other if you went up while I was coming down?"

"We were on different trails, Estelle, my dear girl," he explained again, and for once she didn't wince at her middle name, meaning

“star,” the name of her maternal grandmother who’d died in her ninth month of pregnancy long before she was born.

“I knew your sister would freak out when I told her you’d drowned,” she said. She didn’t mention the fearless hummingbirds or Indigo Bunting. In the Black Canyon the birds appeared real, but now she saw them as images from a waking dream, conjured by loss and despair. But since Jobst hadn’t died, what did the birds come to say?

As they talked, they shivered. She hugged his warm back through their sleeping bags. It was too cold to make love, a problem with camping on romantic reunions. She waited for his usual aggravating joke, “I’d like to get in your pants, wench,” but he’d fallen asleep.

The first to crawl out of the tent the next morning, she sat in the car, watching granular snow whitening the ground. Exhaling cold smoke, they decided to eat breakfast at the café instead of screwing the gas tank into the Coleman. Before driving east they stopped at Dragon Point, Painted Wall, and Devil’s Lookout. Grasping her elbow and pointing, as he did at gargoyles on a Parisian cathedral, he showed her how the light transformed the boulders’ colors as it muscled darkness out of the canyon. “The perfect southwest pink for our bloody airport lounge,” he commented. He hadn’t mentioned the missing ring. She knew why; he assumed it was still in his pocket where he hid it after she noticed it, making him explain.

She took a photo of a stone turret north of the river, glowing with internalized stars. Distance again slowed the water to a sinuous curve. She could write an article about this amazing place for the newspaper’s outdoor column. Or something more right brain—a poem? She visualized the shape of its lines, short, like Emily Dickinson’s ... but the

words? They floated like transparent balloons on the flaxen horizon.

They had drawn closer, she thought, like survivors of a shipwreck that didn't occur. They'd confessed their fear of losing each other. An overdue conversation wove between their explanations. So why didn't they firm up plans for their next reunion? He mentioned flying back for the Fourth, and that funky Jubilee Days parade, but the balls-to-the-wall contractor would keep them on schedule in the hundred-plus heat. And she responded defensively, "Well, I'm sure to get stuck interviewing half the damned town about that pollution suit."

When he took the wheel on the interstate, she knew why the native chick's ring was not on his finger. She found it before he got up, rummaging in his pockets for the car keys so she could get her fleece jacket out of the Forester.

He'd quit hitting her once he cut down on the booze, so she'd stopped taking his stuff. But as he was packing for Texas, she stole his father's green fountain pen, almost reflexively, without conscious intent. Watching him search for days, distraught, she pretended to find it under a throw rug and gave it back.

At the Denver airport he grabbed his duffel, saying, "Later," as always when they separated. In a no parking zone, with a cop signaling her to move her vehicle, she forgot to blow him a goodbye kiss. Driving north to the small town, where the cement plant's burning waste yellowed the sky, she pictured the precious Navajo ring in her purse—a gift from the birds. □

Contributors

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