

Front Porch Review



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A Bellwether Moment
- Martha Phillips

The clouds are on the move
Seemingly intent to go
east by southeast.
But of course, where else
on a mission to meet the sun
at 7:30 in the morning
on this third day of spring.

Grey bottoms heavy
with a full load of later day's rain
or unshed tears
for the lonely tired woman
who has forgotten
the words of her truth.

An Airtight Metal Container
- Lois Greene Stone

Radio. "Lux Presents Hollywood"...just hearing those words in the quiet of my room sent a special message. The characters during that hour entered my life, and I didn't do homework or chores as I listened to every word. I didn't like the sinister "The Shadow," often broadcasting on our car's radio during the trip from my grandfather's place to ours. "The Battle of the Baritones" was time with my older sister. I always cheered for whichever baritone she didn't like as sibling stuff began to take on a different dimension; we did our assigned household chores during that show. I tried to take the living room to dust as that radio had the best speaker in the entire house.

I learned to knit, embroider; and do needlepoint during broadcasts we heard as a family. Only Lux Presents and also a weekend morning show called "Let's Pretend" seemed to need, for me, total privacy.

At age seven, I was taken to the Metropolitan Opera to see *Hansel and Gretel* sung in English. I whispered to my nine and a half year old sister that I didn't understand the language, and the music sounded as if Hansel was a girl as well as Gretel. She teased me about that years later. Yes, two women had the leading role, and I was waiting for dialogue rather than understand that singing in English required my attention to grasp the words. At least at the ballet, I didn't have to figure out anything as the graceful movements and gentle music took hold.

In May 1948, I stared at a test pattern showing on a tiny screen called a television. Nothing would make me give up radio, I thought, looking at 'nothing' that became a piece of furniture in the living room.

In darkened movie theatres, or live stage productions, I was in charge of personal emotional responses. Sometimes that spilled over. While in college, a date took me to the small town near campus to see the film *Singing in the Rain*. When we exited the movie house, it was raining, and the town had old-fashioned street lights and sidewalks. I embraced a light pole and began to sing and dance, splashing the water at the curb, and feeling I really was Gene Kelly. No matter that my dirndl skirt got soaked, and my penny loafers got soggy, and, in the dorm, there'd be no place to dry them, I wanted the feelings from the film to linger.

With thousands of songs sitting inside a rectangle the size of a credit card, and telephones that take pictures and e-mail them to others minus the need to develop prints, plus television sets so large some hang on a wall and the speakers surround the room, why hasn't technology allowed TV viewers something important: to hear words, to respond as one feels, and/or to mute background blaring that's called music!

Tin cans, as a child, were for collecting for the 'war effort'. Currently, 'canned' has nothing to do with food preservation but, rather, laughter. A television comedy, so unsure of its content, has a laugh-track doing its 'ha ha' after almost every line spoken. Instead of getting into the rhythm of the character's words, I'm waiting for the sentence to conclude so the 'ha ha' will come on and then be over for several seconds before I'm 'told' to 'ha ha' again as another line gets orated.

Dramas must have producers so insecure about the worth of content that dialogue is drowned-out now by repetitive music. No longer the kind of John Williams' background music added to *background*, the jarring music is foreground, and it's a strain to follow lines. I don't want drum beats pounding and pounding because characters are walking; I can see they're walking. And if there's a possibility of doom, let *me* feel it. A new program aired winter 2014, and I was interested in the interplay among the characters and unusual story line; however, I

found I could not continue watching the show because the alleged background music made the dialogue so difficult to hear I had to turn up the volume. All that did was cause the disturbing sound track to be even louder. I turned off the show and deleted it from the DVR's taping.

Why can't a drama be treated as a stage play? Give viewers the opportunity to get involved with the story and respond with fear, amusement, caring, dislike, 'whatever'. If any music is needed, it should be so subtle that it enhances; today's detracts.

So a comedy show insists I 'ha ha' on cue, and a drama obliterates the dialogue, replacing engrossing words with constant bombardment of background noise muting characters' words. I don't like reality-TV, and Jeopardy only lasts half an hour of my viewing. I've a huge TV used less frequently each season except for old movies.

I'd like to can the canned laughter and put the sound tracks into a can so I can turn on the television in 2015 and know I can stay in the room for a program.

Graceland

- Alan Shiner



At Midnight
- Joshua A Colwell

Your breath warms the back
of my neck as we lay here
naked, your arm and leg
slung over my body the way
a sleeve of your favorite
sweater hangs over the back
of my dining room chair.

I'd warm the tips of your
fingers with my breath,
but I'm afraid you're asleep.
Your body stirs with the
wind and I feel you longing
to leave, even though this
time you said you'd stay.

Headless

- Joanne Faries



Loosey Goosey?
- Martha Phillips

Those goofy tracks in the spring snow?! They're from the pair of geese I saw claim our five or six acres to nest. That was only a few days ago, before the snow came, when the ground was finally soft with the welcoming promise to accept my garden seed. I wish I could strap a pedometer on that lanky pair; it amazes me that they would trudge through four inches of snow, to the tune of 5000 goose steps, when they have the gift of flight. They usually walk the perimeter of the buildings, rarely down the alley, except to poop, unless there are some especially appealing tufts of grass growing through the cracks in the sidewalk.

I've only seen one of this particular pair fly. It was the female, and she landed on the tile-peaked rooftop of a little apartment which sticks out from the rest of the Building H's façade. That peak is a wonderful vantage point to check for coyotes or raptors in the vicinity.

Now, I don't like geese all that much even though I come from a genetic line of birders. Their poopy ways demand a hazmat suit and galoshes when you go for a walk around here, seeing how there are at a minimum forty or so on our grounds on any given day. They particularly like leaving their grass-fed excrement on the sidewalks. Do you suppose they're checking their stools for health purposes and like a concrete canvas? Oooo me o my, my kingdom for a swan or two.

Just the sight of a swan scares the living down off any goose with an ounce of sense. Except the Sentinel in a flock. Check this out when there are group of them grazing on your favorite golf course. The Sentinel is the one with his neck stretched high, head periscoping back and forth continually checking for any threat. It's also prudent to watch out for those breeding couples who will protect the whole goose community, every other goose egg in addition to their own and even any gosling. They do this with the head and neck thrust forward, wings extended **charge**, which has scared the living poop out of more than one child squealing, "Here lucky ducky." And that just adds to the mess.

What galls me the most is that the Canadian goose is protected. A former college roommate gifted her mother some hoity-toity animal protection agency certificate guaranteeing the care and feeding of the Canadian goose for something like a year. Mind you, this family had the largest Czech meat market on Cermak Road from the 50's to the 90's, and their home was the first place I ever tasted goose. Of course, those geese were raised for slaughter so there was no buckshot to deal with like there was when my Episcopal priest boyfriend used to bring me geese that he and his hunting buddies shot on some farmer's hunting range over in Iowa. The buckshot hidden in those roasters cost me more than a couple of dental visits. Oy.

So what's the point here? As an urban gardener, I guess I like geese better than deer. Since we've finally put a deer fence around our community garden, I've taken down the contract I had on Bambi. Geese are far more interesting to watch than pigeons mostly because I've never seen a pigeon dance in a puddle. I like geese a boatload better than rats but, then, I really don't know what rat scat looks like and, frankly, don't want to know because I might start seeing it. Geese are far superior to possum since their tail flight feathers beat the heck out of a possum tail in any butt-end beauty contest. And those little goslings, OMG, are sooooo adorable and fluffy. Okay, okay, I guess I will let the lanky pair roost without harassment. Nonetheless, they are kinda poopy.

One Step Ahead
- Anne Whitehouse

All my life I've stayed
one step ahead
so as not to fall behind
and be overtaken
by the living nightmares
that pursue me.
If they caught me,
they would drag
me down, down,
down to a dark place
where I couldn't escape.

So I keep ahead of myself,
out of sync.
Always planning the next phase
before the current one's complete,
trying to dodge the traps ahead
while fleeing the terrors behind.

Iowa Sky

- Flo Hayes



Rejection 101
- Margaret Karmazin

Tara Wilkes set aside her napkin, stood and walked to a nearby table where three men in business suits were enjoying a jovial conversation. They stopped talking and looked up at her.

“Excuse me,” she said to the nearest man, “but I noticed that you ordered the escargot. I was wondering, actually, I’ve wondered for years, what escargot tastes like but feared to order the dish and then discover I couldn’t stand the taste. Would you let me sample one of yours?”

The man’s expression morphed from shock to something akin to awe. “Well, I, I don’t know what to say.” His companions’ heads shifted back and forth between him and Tara as if watching a tennis match.

“Say yes,” said Tara.

Three months earlier, she’d realized her problem had pretty much become a disease – from the moment a year before that when she noticed the gas gauge on Frank’s car. She’d been with him when he filled the tank and that same evening he was presumed to have played racquetball with his brother-in-law, so why was the gauge down a third the next morning?

She experienced that particular stab to the solar plexus she got when something threatening was up and later came to light. Frank had not met Rick at all, but had driven to see Shelley Whatshername, the new associate professor with an office next to his. Thirty-two years old, never been married, athletic and feisty, just what Frank liked and what Tara wasn’t anymore. Fifteen years of marriage yanked out from under her. “It was only a charade,” Frank said after the big reveal.

After that, things unraveled quickly. Soon she found herself divorced and living in a small apartment over a New Age store that sold gauzy Indian clothing, djembe drums and Wicca supplies. The hirsute owner gave off an insufferable air of smirkiness, as if he knew all there was to know about the universe, perhaps having learned all this by a personal visit from the gods. But he was her landlord, so she remained detached and polite. Indeed, she was like that with everyone now, only moving beyond mere detachment, turning in fact into what she herself labeled “a terrorized recluse.”

How this had happened so quickly was beyond her understanding, but she could not deny it was real. Since the past fifteen years had been a “charade” (during that time Frank had often told her he loved her), she could only deduce that everything in the world might also be a charade and could no longer trust herself to judge what people really felt about her. It only seemed logical to avoid further encounters and attachments, though she still trusted Martha, one of the editors of the health periodicals for which Tara wrote articles and a close friend of several years.

“Tara?” said Martha. Tara and she spoke almost daily on the phone. “I expected to see you at the luncheon last week. Everyone was there, and I wanted you to meet the editor of that new magazine I told you about, *Bloody News*. It covers everything *au courant* having to do with blood, healthy and diseased. You could get in on the ground floor, become one of the editor’s dependables. So I don’t understand what happened. You said you’d be there.”

“Yeah,” said Tara, trying to sound matter-of-fact. “I-I normally would have, but something came up, a family matter.” Family matters were vague, and something everyone had sooner or later.

“I hope it wasn’t serious,” said Martha, her voice rising at the end of the sentence, clearly

hoping for detailed information.

But Tara had none to give. “Um, not really, but thanks for asking.” Then somewhat ineptly, Tara steered Martha back to business with details on her current project, an article about a new diabetes drug.

“I’m looking forward to reading it,” said Martha. “Especially since almost ten percent of the American population is diabetic.”

“I’m enjoying working on it,” Tara said, which was half true. She didn’t want to tell Martha that she felt stuck in quicksand. She needed quotes. The best thing would be to ask some cardiologists and endocrinologists from the teaching hospital she often used for this purpose, a mere ten minutes from her apartment. She could telephone of course, but it was easier to walk in and grab the doctors in question at lunch. In the past, she’d pulled this off numerous times because her father, now deceased, had been a surgeon there, and she had been small and cute with a head of shiny bronze curls. A sad thing to admit in this day and age, but cuteness often did get you information you wanted. But now she did not feel cute, and soon the memory of her father would fade for the hospital’s staff, and then no one would be eager to talk to her.

Since both of them were currently single, Tara and Martha frequently ate out together and a few evenings later were trying a new seafood place. “I’m really in the mood for fresh salmon,” said Tara, “not that farm-raised crap,” but when the waiter arrived for their order, Tara refrained from questioning him about the salmon and ordered the special.

Martha leaned forward. “What is the matter with you? You’re not even that fond of tuna. I remember you putting waiters through the third degree. Remember that business about the fatty beef in the soup?”

Tara sighed. “I know. I-“ But she couldn’t explain.

Martha gave her a long look but did not pursue the subject. Instead, as if sensing that her friend needed a boost, she said, “That article you wrote for *Total Health* on supplement safety was one of your best. And I loved how you put it all in perspective, comparing the dangers of pharmaceutical drugs.”

“Thanks,” mumbled Tara.

“So,” said Martha brightly, “going out on any dates yet?”

Was she kidding? Tara’s head shot up in surprise.

”You know...men?” said Martha, smiling uncertainly.

“I wouldn’t consider it,” said Tara.

“What do you mean?”

Tara shook her head. How could she explain to Martha that things had grown so dire she could not bring herself to ask the landlord if he would let her paint her kitchen? Daily, she suffered the harsh orange from a former tenant; sometimes even shuddering as she ate. She’d even purchased a soft cream paint, which sat in the corner waiting, its wooden stirrer on top. But she’d picture walking downstairs and into his store and having to wait while he dealt with customers, then becoming all tongue-tied and shaky and, knowing herself the way she was now, ending up buying something she didn’t want and never asking him.

“You’re pretty,” said Martha. “Healthy and unburdened by children. Just what some divorced or widowed man would be looking for. You’re educated and do excellent work, so I can’t imagine why you’d- “

Tara cut her off. “I just don’t want to,” she said firmly. “Right now the only thing I trust is my cat and sometimes not even him.” Indeed, at this point, Martha was the only person left with whom Tara felt she could be firmly honest.

Martha gave her a long look while taking a sip of her wine. “You’ve totally lost your confidence,” she pronounced.

If she only knew the half of it, Tara thought. On her kitchen table were three papers, one from her health insurance company stating they wouldn’t pay for a recent mole removal, one from her dental insurance stating they would only cover half of her root canal and a bill from the car dealer for work that was supposed to be covered by her warranty. All three called for her to make firm, no compromising phone calls and all three had been sitting there for two weeks.

She just couldn’t imagine demanding her rights. Not when someone with better logic and verbal skills would probably end up charging her more than they’d started with. Just like Frank had twisted around all the things she had ever said and ended up walking away with everything that mattered even when he was the one who cheated.

“I guess I have lost my confidence,” she finally said. “I don’t know what happened.”

“You’ve allowed the rejection of *one* person to drive you into a tailspin,” said Martha. “Admittedly, an important person in your life, but still, just *one*.”

“Mmmm,” Tara mumbled as she took a forkful of her salad. She was thinking that she just wanted to get home and back to work and not talk about this at all.

Martha lay down her fork and bent to get her purse. She opened it and, after some fumbling, took out a card to slide across the table. Tapping it with one long, salmon fingernail, she said, “I’ve been meaning to give it to you. Had to work up my own nerve.”

With hesitation, Tara picked it up. It read, in bold Ariel font, **Rejection 101**. A name and telephone number followed. “What’s this?”

“As one of your editors but mostly as a friend, I suggest that you call this woman”

Tara looked at Martha’s face, hoping to see that she was joking, but no.

“I care about you,” Martha said.

With reluctance, Tara slipped the card into her wallet.

Dr. Karen Altman appeared colorless, dressed as she was in a nondescript, wool skirt and tailored shirt and with her hair in the style Tara thought of as lady-in-the-church-choir. But as soon as the therapist opened her mouth, Tara knew she was wrong. The woman’s eyes sparkled, and her voice was tinged with joie de vivre.

“So,” said the psychologist, “it seems you’ve lost your confidence.”

“You can tell that just by looking at me?” Tara snapped.

“That and the fact that my practice is called Rejection 101, yes. People don’t come here for strange urges or drinking problems.” She chuckled. “All of my patients have had their spirits dampened. And every one of them, whether here voluntarily or by force, has lost his or her self-assurance. My job is to help them get it back.”

Tara cringed inside. Was this one of those aversion therapy things where after so many hours, days or weeks, you end up holding a tarantula on your palm or wearing a boa constrictor necklace? No thanks. She started to stand, but Dr. Altman held up a restraining hand. It seemed to wield a mystical power because Tara sank onto the sofa.

“Trust me,” Dr. Altman said. “I have led hundreds to a safe shore. The thing is that fear is something you just need to walk through. Walk right through it. You think it’s this brick wall, but you’ll soon see that’s an illusion. The brick wall is made of flimsy material - Jell-O, water, whatever, but you’ll walk right through it.”

“Well,” said Tara, “fear has its place, don’t you think? I mean, it tells you not to walk down a dark alley with money hanging out of your pockets. It tells you not to swim in shark-

infested waters.”

The therapist laughed. “Of course. Those things are just common sense, physical dangers. Though I might point out that the odds of some of those physical things we fear happening are quite low while others are higher but don’t scare us at all. For instance, your odds of dying in motor vehicle incidents are one in one hundred and twelve and life threatening falls, one in one hundred and fifty-two. Yet, you drive places every day. You walk all over the place and don’t worry about tripping.”

I’ll check those statistics later, Tara told herself. She leaned forward. “So,” she said, “what are the odds of being rejected? I imagine they’re pretty damn high. Half of marriages end in divorce so, gee, your chances of being stabbed in the heart are about 50-50, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Dr. Altman. “Most likely the odds of being, as you put it, stabbed in the heart, are about 100% for any person. But what are the odds of it happening numerous times? To find out, I am giving you your first assignment. If you want this therapy to work, it is a *given* that you do the homework. This week your task is to ask ten people how many times they have been stabbed in the heart. If you can, question older people, that would be best since someone young is only starting out.” She looked at her watch. “Next week, same time?”

My God, did Tara even know ten older people? After some mental grinding, she thought of the hospital. It didn’t have a nursing home, and she didn’t want to bother anyone in the hospice section, but there was physical therapy. A lot of old people would be in there after hip and knee replacements. She already knew the staff in that section; for that matter, she knew a lot of the staff all over the complex, so it wasn’t hard to convince them to allow her to approach the patients. “You can talk to them once they’re finished,” suggested a nurse.

The following week, Tara sat down on Karen Altman’s sofa more eagerly than she had before. She opened her notebook.

“Your report,” prompted the doctor.

“Yes. Of the ten, six had their hearts broken two or more times. One man said his number was ten, but I believe he must consider himself some kind of Don Juan, and I couldn’t take him seriously. Not when he started flirting with *me*. Two people said they’d never had their hearts broken but had broken several themselves, and two others had their hearts broken once and then met their present mates with whom they were happy.”

“Did any of them appear to be worse for the wear?” asked Dr. Altman.

“Well, aside from being old, not really,” said Tara. “Of course maybe the ones that are messed up just don’t go out at all. How do we know?”

The psychologist smiled. “All righty, then. Your next assignment is to ask six people for the time. Obviously, don’t wear a watch.”

“That’s silly,” said Tara. “Everyone, including me, has the time on their cells.”

“Do it anyway,” ordered Dr. Altman.

That turned out to be slightly embarrassing though ridiculously easy, but the next assignment was to return something to a store. Tara didn’t have anything she wanted to return, so Dr. Altman, as if having a camera inside Tara’s apartment, asked, “Are there any issues you need to bring up with a company of some kind? Insurance? Bills of some sort?”

“Oh, no,” said Tara, and of course her assignment was to clean up those bills and notices still lying on her kitchen table. Which she did after fortifying herself with a homemade martini. The health insurance people agreed to pay for the mole removal though not the office visit, the dental insurance wouldn’t budge past half of the root canal, and the car dealer gave in on the warranty coverage. Afterwards, Tara felt as if she had grown a full inch.

"We're not done yet," said the therapist. "Don't get slap-happy."

Tara began an article promoting the use of milk thistle as a preventative of liver damage. She'd found a few good studies for backup and wanted comments from gastroenterologists. One in particular at the hospital would be excellent; she had dealt with him before. He had numerous published articles in high prestige journals and was relatively open-minded about alternative medicine. She picked up the phone and left a message. His secretary called within the hour. "Dr. Vergas left in November for a year at University Hospital in Heidelberg. But I can recommend his associate, Dr. Paul Remick. Is this Tara, Dr. Wilkes' daughter? I do so miss him. We all do."

Tara sighed. She missed her father, and appreciated how his name still got her what she wanted, but she wished she could just march into places and get it on her own.

"Do you think Dr. Remick would give me a comment for one of my articles?"

"Well, I'll put in a word," said the secretary. "He's a bit, shall we say... surly, but he means well. At least I think he does." She laughed. "I'll get back to you."

At 6 AM – that's when Dr. Remick demanded that she arrive as he was preparing for surgery – Tara stood outside a surgical suite. Her heart pounded unpleasantly as a man walked toward her. She had the feeling that Remick was one of those one hundred percent allopathic types who detested anything deviating from his narrow norm.

He didn't disappoint her. "You have the wrong man," he stated somewhat belligerently. "I am not interested in herbal crap. Whether real drugs sometimes derive from them or not, the fact is pharmaceuticals are concentrated to a degree that actually works and are tailored to particular problems."

She felt her face flush and an urge to punch him. Arrogant son of a bitch. "Yeah?" she said. "Apparently you've forgotten that many drugs on the market only work in a small percentage of cases and leave the patient with horrible side effect, even death. According to statistics, pharmaceuticals and doctors are the fourth cause of death in this country! There are zero deaths caused by dietary supplements and none on record by milk thistle, which is the subject of my article."

"I am not interested in being involved with this, sorry," he said as put his hand on the surgery unit door.

Tara felt an invigorating rage, something she had not experienced since the divorce and before her resulting depression had set in. "The trials show definite help with some liver issues," she snapped. Would Dr. Altman count this as progressing with her therapy?

"Trials by whom?" he said sarcastically. "Hippies working for *Natural News*?"

Normally, she couldn't have cared less whether any particular doctor personally supported anything she wrote about, but this condescending snake was driving her up a wall. "I can supply you with links to several controlled studies and, trust me, they were *not* performed by 'hippies!' And you might be interested to know that vets occasionally use the supplement for liver issues in dogs. I don't imagine they would waste time with it if it never worked!"

Dr. Remick turned from her as if she were a fly on the wall. "I need to be in surgery now, Miss...." He trailed off.

"Screw you," she muttered and trotted away, smacking into a cart a nurse was pushing and settling everything to rattling. "I am so sorry," she said.

The nurse laughed. "Dr. Remick, I presume. The look on your face is one we all occasionally wear."

Her outrage persisted for hours. She needed other quote sources, which eventually she

obtained from more sympathetic doctors at another hospital's "People's Clinic" an hour away, to which she drove over the speed limit and earned a traffic ticket. "You bastard!" she screamed at an imaginary Remick, shaking the steering wheel after the cop had left. "I ought to make you pay for the damn ticket!"

Next afternoon, she told Dr. Altman, "Give me something interesting to do!"

"Okay," said the therapist, giving her a once over. "I want you to ask someone something outrageous. You need to think it up yourself. Something any sane person would probably say no to. Make it fun for you, not necessarily for them. This is the top of the line for confidence. You pass this, and we're done here. Unless for some reason you want to continue with more of the regular stuff."

Tara didn't answer; she was too busy trying to think of an outrageous request. Eventually she ended up in the restaurant, asking a businessman for a taste of his escargot.

For a long moment, the man was silent and finally said, "You have a lot of balls, don't you?"

Tara laughed. "Actually, none at all."

"Anybody got an extra fork?" he said, and one of the other men handed him one. He pushed his plate towards her. "Be my guest!"

Tara speared one of the tiny snails and popped it into her mouth. The men all seemed to wait with interest. After she swallowed, she said, "I can't thank you enough. It was delicious. In fact, I am going order some for myself and will gladly give you one of mine."

"No need," laughed the man. "But do take my card." She took it, shook his hand and returned to her own table where Martha waited, her eyes large and round.

"I can't believe you did that. Wow. Apparently Dr. Altman knows her stuff."

Tara smiled, raised her hand for the waiter and ordered escargot. Then she looked at the card. The man was a pharmaceutical rep. Not surprising since the town boasted four hospitals. She slipped the card into her purse; it was always good to have more quote sources.

That weekend, she painted the kitchen without bothering to check with the landlord. When he waylaid her in the entry hall to ask about the fumes, she said, "I did something about that awful color in the kitchen. You'd have trouble renting the place to anyone but me if I didn't."

Looking alarmed, he said, "You're not thinking of moving, are you?" It pleased her to see that he valued her, even in just a small way.

"No, no," she said. "I just couldn't live with it anymore and probably neither could anyone else."

With what appeared to be respect, he moved back to let her pass on up the stairs.

"I'm *back!*" she exclaimed, once inside her door. Then she put on some '80s funk and danced all over the apartment.

She almost missed the telephone ringing, not her cell but the landline. Silencing the music, she picked it up to hear a man's voice she didn't recognize. "Tara Wilkes?" he said. "Paul Remick."

Who the hell was Paul Remick? Oh, the nasty doctor. She mumbled a cold and puzzled, "Yes" while wondering what on earth he wanted.

"I wondered if you could, um, help me with something."

"Like what?"

"The milk thistle thing. You mentioned vets? My dog..." He paused, and she had the wild and probably insane thought that he was trying to hold on to his composure. "I have this

friend visiting, and he left his open suitcase on the floor in his room and...and Hamburger got into it and ate half a bottle of acetaminophen.”

Hamburger? “Well, um, doesn’t your vet have some? Milk thistle, I mean?”

“I just moved here and don’t have a vet. I’m a doctor, I mean, I can administer it myself if you just-“

“I’ve read that you don’t mainline the same stuff that you take orally,” Tara said. “I don’t know where you would get the right stuff. Take him to my vet; just get him into the car and get there. His office is on Spruce St., the red, barnlike building next to the dental offices in the white Victorian house. I’ll call there now and say you’re coming. Wait! What’s your cell number?” She scribbled it down while frantically calling her vet with her cell, then yelled into the phone, “121 Spruce! I’ll meet you there!”

The vet managed to save Hamburger, though the setter would never be quite the same, always a bit listless.

Tara met Martha at their favorite Chinese restaurant that Friday evening. “All finished with Rejection 101,” Tara told her. “Graduated with mild honors. I do want to thank you.”

“That’s all well and good,” said Martha, “but what I am most interested in is the arrogant doctor, this Remick person.”

”There’s really little to say,” said Tara. “The man is grateful and, for him, a bit humble now. He cooked me dinner. We did not have sex, Martha. We didn’t even kiss or touch in any way. I doubt that anything will develop. I can tell that the way he thinks, feels and votes is the opposite of how I do. No relationship is going to happen. All I care about is that I got my mojo back.”

She placed her order for ginger chicken. “No MSG,” she gruffly told the waiter. “I mean it.”

Martha smiled and raised her glass in salute.

Downsizing
- Joe Glaser

Moving time looms seriously finally
I will soon wear out the shredder
I feed it and it grinds again and again
chewing relentlessly
spewing out bag after bag of confetti
a deliberate detritus of once-precious papers.

I am chopping up the past
to make room for the future.

Goodbye to dusty old statements and stacks of checks
away with shopworn receipts for long-forgotten transactions
a poignant ta-ta to long letters unsent and crafted essays never aired.

Crunch grind crunch
a weight slowly lifts from my shoulders
and I feel light-headed almost exhilarated
though I keep getting stuck from time to time
feeling criminal in murdering lifetime warranties
and furtively glancing around
while shredding old tax returns.

Suddenly time has run out
and I must nod a sad farewell
to the now creaky stump-toothed shredder
and actually move out
and then move in
and unpack and unpack and unpack.

And it's still too much
so I bought another shredder.

Faded old photos are next
but only redundant ones
...ghosts are watching.

Fit for a Vase

- Len Kazmer





The Last Taboo
- SuzAnne C. Cole

Feelings about money are tangled, complex, and often unclear, even to oneself. A therapist friend, skilled in conducting group therapy, says no matter how intimate a group becomes, easily divulging and exchanging prejudices, biases, weird personal habits, dirty secrets, and sexual proclivities to shock the most experienced listener, one question always brings a session to stone-walling silence: “So, X, how much does a lawyer (nurse, journalist, professor, analyst) make these days?” Group members might know an individual liked wearing panty hose under pinstriped suits, regularly beat his wife, and once caused a fatal accident, but they could never, never, never know how much money he made.

Why such reluctance? My mother never wanted anyone to know how much money my family of origin made because it was so little, and she wished it were so much more. I, on the other hand, am careful to use only the euphemism “comfortable” regarding our financial footing.

When I take electronic surveys that pay me in airplane miles and hotel stays, I regularly understate our annual income. Am I motivated by modesty (I’d like to think so) or fear? (Somewhere the unwashed are reading my responses. They could track me by my e-mail address, and, come the revolution, they will be raging at my door, pick-axes and cobblestones in hand.)

I wish the surveys allowed the response I once heard Ethel Kennedy make when Bobby was running for president. When a cheeky reporter asked how many household helpers she employed, the wealthy mother of ten quickly and succinctly replied, “Sufficient.” “Sufficient for our needs” is the basic answer to how I feel about our money.

My husband and I grew up in families with modest incomes – my father was a mechanic for fifteen years before becoming a low-level, white-collar worker. My husband’s father managed a small, chain credit union his entire career, refusing promotions that involved moving. Both of our mothers were employed by the public school system. So, having never inherited money or property from anyone, we fairly say what we have acquired, we have earned. Or can we?

Our parents supported our desire for education, even when they could not completely fund it. We were born in a country where who you are is usually more important than what or who you came from. We left home, took some risks, never passed up an opportunity, and worked hard, very hard. Further, because there was such a disparity between my husband’s income and my own, despite my having a more prestigious (if not more useful) degree than his, for too many years I thought of our income as primarily his and let him make most financial decisions. That is no longer true, and, besides, others manage what we have.

“Sufficient” money means not having to worry – about unexpected medical expenses or the loss of some of our portfolio. Not worrying about eating out several times a week, paying for our share of a forthcoming wedding, taking at least two long holidays every year. Not worrying about sending our children (and putting in trust for our grandchildren) to the universities of their choice. Sufficient to share with family and others. To buy a new car when one is needed. To spend \$50 on fruit and vegetables at the farmer’s market if the grandchildren are coming for the weekend.

I have become an excellent customer of a clothing chain store which sends me a monthly coupon for \$25 off a \$100 purchase because I feel I’ve wasted money if I don’t use the coupons. In defense of this attitude, though, I can say that the clothes are comfortable, as stylish as I am apt to get these days, and practical for grandmothering and traveling, being lightweight and

wash-and-wear. Besides, once I'd established the base wardrobe, most new additions go with most of the older pieces. A decade ago, I shopped expensive trunk shows where a jacket could cost between \$500 and \$1,000, pants \$300 to \$500, and tops and shirts from \$200 up. I enjoyed the clothes, and I wore them happily, but I'm just as happy now with not attending events that require those clothes or expenditure.

I enjoy my charitable spending. In January every year, my husband and I decide on a few joint charities, then we split evenly the remainder of what we intend to give away. I like knowing I can spontaneously donate a few hundred or a thousand to a plea that strikes both heart and head, I like reading the reports of the charities to whom I regularly contribute, and I like constantly re-evaluating my "causes."

A dozen years ago I wrote and published a book of meditations, only one of which (out of 366) was on money. It concluded that money does bring happiness, but that only an individual (or family) could decide how much money that might require. In case I should ever decide to update the book, I've kept a quotation bank with more than a thousand entries and 350 potential meditations. Searching that material now, I found not a single quotation on *money*, *finances*, *financial security*, *income*, or *salary*. In fact, in all those pages, I found not a single use of the word "money."

So, is it true that those of us who have sufficient money to be comfortable think about it the least except at tax time? I'm not sure. When my weekly grocery budget was \$15, which had to include wine and flowers if we were to have either, I clipped coupons and shopped the sales. Today, there is no budget, we have a well-stocked wine cooler and fresh flowers in abundance, yet I still clip coupons and shop sales. And I haven't yet told you how much money we have. Sharing such information is, perhaps, in this age of reality shows where no depravity stays closeted, the last societal taboo.

Three Small Poems in April
- Alida Woods

Unfurling
fiddlers shed their brief mantle
waking all the wings
of sun-softened noons
breaking glacial gloom
of narrow days.
Unsated
we hunger for more.

A tangle of birdsong
breaks darkness
urges dawn
lighting blade and leaf.
Grey gives way
to yellow, green
magenta morning.
How did we not notice?

Night laps at my eyelids
revising dreams
crawls into absence.
Night hawk finds the wire,
warden of things not visible,
dives catching dawn.
He flies at the conjunction
of rivers where we wake.

Silent Speech

- Joseph Glaser







Who Are They?
- Ed Nichols

Clarice and I were on our way to Florida. To the beach. To save our marriage. Things had not been good. The beach was where we'd had some good times. I thought this might be our last shot. She thought it was probably over. We'd been married twelve years. No children. Clarice couldn't have any. Some months back, I'd had an affair. It was a stupid mistake, which, at the time, seemed so right. I was so wrong. After I told her, she went ballistic and moved out the next day. Then, *she* decided to have a one-night stand. With one of my friends, if you can believe that. Things got worse between us, and as a last resort, we signed up for counseling. The sessions had been okay. Kept us from screaming and hollering, and saying all sorts of things we really didn't mean. By the fourth session, two weeks ago, we had calmed down somewhat. The shrink recommended that the next step for mending our relationship – if we really wanted to mend it – should be a trip. “Take a nice, relaxed trip,” he had said. “Somewhere you have been in the past that you enjoyed.”

Clarice was reluctant at first – she said she couldn't see the logic in taking a trip. She said I was a different person. That the man she used to love had disappeared, and a stranger now inhabited my body. We hadn't kissed or done anything else for over two months. Since the night she'd learned of my affair. I didn't know if she'd ever forgive me – and I didn't know if I'd ever forgive her. That's where we were when we finally decided to drive to Florida. I was hoping for the best but I wasn't sure if she was.

We drove along highway 441 through South Georgia. I don't like interstate highways. Late in the afternoon, nearing the Okefenokee Swamp, we spotted a motel. It was a typical old 1950's structure: large parking lot, concrete blocks painted white, office in the center, with about twenty rooms. Clarice said, “Good, Lord, Charlie. This place reminds me of that dumpy motel in Asheville where we stayed on our honeymoon.”

“Well, maybe that's what we need,” I said chuckling. “We can pretend we're back on our honeymoon.”

“I doubt that. I just hope it's clean. I want to look at a room before we sign in.”

“Sure. We can do that.”

The room we examined was very clean. The motel clerk was not displeased that we'd asked. I got the impression other guests had asked to look inside the rooms. So it was no problem. Clarice insisted on a room with two beds. The clerk said there was a good café five miles south. We had sandwiches and drinks in a cooler and decided to eat in our room. We said that we'd stop at the cafe in the morning for breakfast. I was on one bed watching a golf tournament, and Clarice was sitting beside the big picture window reading a John Grisham novel. She had always read a lot, but because of our current predicament, she had started reading constantly. An avoidance issue, the shrink had told her. That had set her off real good; she'd threatened for a while to cancel the trip.

I heard a bus pull into the parking lot. I looked over to Clarice. “Tourist bus?” I asked.

Holding her book, she looked out the window. “Looks like it. Really nice bus.”

“That's not a bad way to travel,” I said. “You know, that's the way Morris and Stella went all the way to Alaska. On a big tour bus.”

“I remember.”

“That would be fun, I think.” I turned back to the TV. The possibility of taking a little nap crossed my mind – I closed my eyes.

“My God, look at this!” Clarice blurted. She put her book on the little table beneath the window and stood.

“What?”

“Look at them getting off the bus!”

“What?” I said sliding off the bed and staring out the window. It was a sight. We could hardly believe what we were seeing. The people getting off the bus were all dressed like hippies – 1960’s hippies. Clarice smiled. “What do you think about this?” she asked.

“I don’t know. They’re something, aren’t they?”

I bent closer. The women were dressed in long flowery dresses or in colorful pants and blouses. They had beads around their necks that bounced against their breasts as they hopped off the bus, and some had flowers in their hair. Some had wide head bands. Some of the men had head bands and beads, and most wore bell-bottomed pants and colorful shirts that generally did not match the pants. Many of the men, and women, were wearing sandals. I put my hand on Clarice’s shoulder. She looked at me but didn’t move. “What do you see?” I said. “I don’t believe it, look at their faces. They’re old!”

“My word!” Clarice said. “Most of them have gray hair. Who are they?”

“It must be a club of some type – maybe a class reunion. That’s it. I’ll bet it’s a high school, or maybe a college, class reunion, from the sixties.”

“You may be right,” Clarice said, “but what are they doing at this way-out-in-the-country motel?”

“We’ll go ask them.”

“Really. You want to?” she said.

“Yes. They’ve got my curiosity up.”

“Mine, too. Let’s do it.”

We waited for them to check in and get settled. As soon as some of them wandered out of their rooms, we left our room, locked the door and walked toward the motel office. There was a little water fountain in a grassy area next to the office with a few lounge chairs arranged around it. Several of them were sitting in the chairs or standing, talking. There was a cooler on a table, and I could see crushed ice covering cans of beer, and wine bottles stuck down halfway into the ice. There was a platter of cheese and crackers. We walked up to the nearest woman, and I said, “Hello, my name’s Charles Henry, and this is my wife, Clarice – “

“Clarice! Oh, my God,” the woman said. “I love that name. I almost named my first daughter Clarice. I’m Helen, and this is my husband, Paul,” she said pulling the arm of a man who was brushing ice off a can he’d just removed from the cooler.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Paul said, shaking Clarice’s hand first, then mine. “Please join us. Everything’s cool.”

I said, “We were wondering...I mean all of you dressed like the sixties. Are you having a class reunion?”

“No, man. We’re on our way to a Baez concert. Tomorrow night in Jacksonville.”

Helen pointed to the cooler. “Can I get you a glass of wine, or maybe a beer?”

Clarice said, “We don’t mean to intrude. We just wondered – “

Helen put her arm around Clarice’s waist and addressed the crowd. “Folks, listen up. This is Charles and Clarice Henry. You know,” she went on, “I wanted to name my daughter Mary, Clarice, but George, my first husband, insisted on naming her after his mother. Damn him!” Everybody laughed and came over and shook our hands. Their greetings and talk held a constant flow of sixties slang. “Joan Baez, man,” Paul said. “We love her.” Another woman said, “Oh,

yeah, she takes us back to the good old days.”

They were all from the Charlotte area. Most were old enough to be our parents, a few our grandparents. One man, Homer, said I looked just like his best friend who had been killed in Vietnam in 1967. One lady knew Clarice’s uncle, Billy Johnson, from Hendersonville. Paul and Helen kept pushing beer on me and wine on Clarice. We enjoyed their company, and when I watched Clarice and Helen talking by the cheese platter, I got the feeling they might be discussing our predicament.

One lady in a bright, thin dress walked up to me and said, “I’m so glad you and Clarice *crashed* our party.”

She had on lots of beads, and a rose with thorns stuck in her hair, and everything about her reminded me of pictures I’d seen of the sixties. Another woman joined us. She had on black pants and boots and a loud flowery blouse that was cut so low I could almost see her nipples. She didn’t have any beads on – I assumed so everyone could see her exposed breasts better. I tried not to stare, reminding myself she was probably about the same age as my mother. I looked for Clarice. Helen had steered her further away, talking.

“How...often do you guys go out like this?” I said to the two women. “I mean, how often do you go to concerts?”

They laughed. Both stood very close to me. “We try to hang out, whenever.”

“Yeah,” the other woman said. “It keeps us going. Percolating.”

“We call ourselves the Woodstock Bunch, although none of us were at *that* concert. Well, Homer claims he was there, but we know he wasn’t. He was married and living in Wilmington then.”

“That’s a good name, Woodstock Bunch,” I said. “I like the clothes, the...laid back attitude you all have.”

“That’s it, keeps us young,” the woman with the exposed breasts said. “God, you and your wife look so *bad*, so young! How long have you been together?”

“Thank you. We’ve been married a little over twelve years.”

“Babies! You’re just babies, that’s all,” she said laughing loudly.

I keep staring at her bosom. I tried to visualize what she had looked like in the sixties. Smooth skin, no wrinkles or gray hair. They were all young once, younger even than Clarice and I are right now. “Were either of you...actually hippies back then?” I asked.

The woman in the thin dress said, “Some of us were, some weren’t. Some got drafted and went to Vietnam. Some went to college. Some went to work. Paul was in a commune in California. He finally left it in the seventies and started a computer company. Sold it and moved back home. He pays for our little trips – pays for everything, the bus, the motel, the concert tickets. He told us once we were his hippie family.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Gives him that old commune feeling, I suppose.”

“That’s it. It does.” The two women looked at each other. “Why don’t you and Clarice join us at the concert? I know Paul has extra tickets.”

“I don’t know...we plan to stay on the beach, and – “

“Nonsense, y’all should join us in Jacksonville. Tomorrow night. The beach won’t go anywhere.”

“Right,” the woman with the exposed breasts said. “The beach will *always* be there!”

Both women laughed loudly, and with one on each arm, they escorted me toward Paul.

Back in our room, much later, I locked the door, and Clarice closed the window curtain. “What an experience,” she said moving to her chair. “I think I’ve got a buzz from the wine.”

I sat on the edge of my bed. “They’re something, aren’t they? Old hippies, sure enough.” Clarice giggled. “I saw you ogling Mama Joan – I think that’s her name, the one with her breasts hanging out.”

“Mama Joan. Lord, she’s as old as my mother. It felt strange. I mean, good grief. What about them? The whole time I felt like I was in a movie. Flashbacks to sixties stuff we’ve seen on TV and all.”

Clarice put the two tickets on the table and stared at them. “Paul is generous, isn’t he?”

“He is. Must’ve made a fortune in California.”

“Helen sure adores him.” Clarice looked at me. “You want to go to the concert?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking forward to walking on the beach. You want to go?”

“I don’t guess so. Besides, we sure don’t have any hippie clothes. We would look out of place with them.”

I nodded. I went into the bathroom, shaved and took a shower. Then I got under the covers on my bed and closed my eyes. Clarice read awhile then took a shower and got in the other bed. It was very dark in the room. It was quiet outside, and I figured all the old hippies were snoring away by now.

I was almost asleep when I heard Clarice get up, and then I felt my covers rise as she slid in next to me. She got close and put her arm across my chest. “What about the one who had the rose with thorns in her hair?”

I opened my eyes and said, “I looked close. The thorns were rubber.”

“They sure looked real, didn’t they?”

“They did. Everything, and *everybody*, looked real.”

Clarice rubbed my chest. She said, “We could stop at a store...buy some headbands and beads.”

“We can do that,” I said, laughing. I don’t know if she was half awake or what, but I swear she was humming lyrics from *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down* until she went to sleep with her arm still on my chest. I felt good.

Lagoon

- Pat Burns



Triptych
- Adam Restinow

Triptych: a work of art often religious in nature and usually a panel painting divided into three sections, or three carved panels, hinged together and which can be folded shut or displayed open.

Panel 1

On a Saturday afternoon during his sixteenth summer, Bart McIver strolled toward the neighborhood McDonald's, hopeful that one of its customers would be Sara Tilken. Although they passed each other without comment in the hallways of Frontier High School only once a day, Bart was convinced that a moment's conversation would establish an unbreakable bond. On such faith are wars waged and kingdoms won.

Hormones being what they are, Bart was as sane as any boy his age could possibly be and was slightly above average physically and intellectually. Because he was also semi-articulate and adept at the latest computer games, he had a few close friends and casual acquaintances, though not as close or as many as Sara. And yet, and yet...he was certain he did not fit into normal society. He often felt like an animal in a males-only zoo, examined and evaluated by female visitors who then moved on to more interesting specimens. When asked he concocted sexual fantasies that only equally desperate boys would believe. But Bart persevered, intent on securing Sara's recognition, garnering the applause he deserved. That he had randomly identified Sara as his one true love, that she was, literally, just a girl he passed in the hall without comment, was of no matter. He had diligently learned her name, what classes she took, where she lived; he even knew the names and ages of her brother and sister. He tried but failed to discover her religion.

Sara had no illusions about the dynamics of relationships. She knew exactly where she fit within the synthetic Frontier society and which boys were and were not within her grasp. She knew, with almost primal instinct, when to smile, when to flirt, how to position her body just so, and when to be as invisible as the wind. There were no open declarations of ownership among the Frontier females; none were needed.

Bart entered, appreciated the fast-food aromas, looked at the conglomerate, recognized many as Frontier juniors and seniors, and then saw her, his Sara, as she stood to leave. Had he arrived five minutes later, what would his future have been? But as any salesman will tell you, timing is everything.

Blocking the exit as Sara approached, Bart's words gushed, his palms sweat, his tongue soured. "Hi. I'm Bart McIver. I've seen you at school but we don't have any classes together. I run track, cross country, and play trombone in the marching band. Maybe you've seen me during one of the games. Anyway, I think your name is Sara. Is that right?" And the well went dry.

Sara's first thought, *Dork*. Her second thought, *Cute dork*. Her final thought, *Strange*. Sara said, "You're funny," and with feline agility slipped past and disappeared.

Seven years later Sara would not find Bart so amusing.

Panel 2

Bart forgave Sara her supposed wrong but he did not forget her. How could he possibly forget the illusion he had crafted? Indeed so strong was his tie to the past that when they bumped

shoulders in the elevator of Rabbit Software, Bart almost said, "I've seen you at school." Instead he muttered, "Sorry" and exited at the next floor, his face and hands sweat shiny. He stood, ruminating, thanking God for a second chance.

Rabbit Software, a three-story building in an industrial park, produced proprietary systems pivotal in military drones. Hired a year ago as a software engineer, Bart was a Rabbit star: obsessed and talented, a proficient tactical strategist, and a proponent of weapons of vengeance. Without attachments he was the workaholic management over appreciates and underpays. His appearance had changed. Premature thinning of the hair, a slight bulge, and glasses disguised him from Sara, a just-hired programmer, not that she ever suspected he was the boy child she had once eluded.

Despite a brief college romance and numerous weekend hookups, Bart remained eligible for commitment. His on-line dating requirements: never married, reasonably attractive, wants children, in her twenties (he was willing to marry an older woman), career professional preferably in computers, and witty. Bart could not explain why he chose wit as an ingredient; at the time he thought it sounded sophisticated and would certainly be a conversation starter when meeting someone for the first time.

In the intervening years Sara had been engaged and disengaged twice (keeping the ring in both cases) and was now sharing a third-floor walkup with an old, garrulous poet, who insisted his one and only name was Indigo. If love landed on her doorstep, so be it, but, given her experience, she certainly was not going to forage through the bristles and thorns of a relationship to achieve it. Sara believed, as most pragmatic women do, that the male of the species is emotionally needy and that, therefore, her white knight would eventually make an appearance. If he didn't, *c'est la vie*. However, vanity being her principal virtue, she did her best to look years younger than her actual age, the reason Bart recognized her.

They met again in the company cafeteria. Bart was next to her at the salad bar, putting a few croutons on a pile of spinach, radishes, and shredded carrots. "When you work at Rabbit, you also eat like one," he joked.

Sara said, "I guess so. At least it's free." She then walked to a table crowded with fellow female programmers. Bart joined his engineering gang, and the social fabric remained intact.

For the next three weeks Bart and Sara entered the cafeteria almost simultaneously from opposite ends, politicians coming on stage for a debate. He always waved, she always smiled in return. What he considered a gesture of camaraderie, she considered civility.

Sara had discussed Bart's potential with her workplace acquaintances after their first lunch encounter. The consensus was that she could do better. One comment summarized, "The bosses like him but he'll never make a lot, never be management. You'd be better off going after someone in sales. That's where the money is." Bart's fate was sealed.

On Monday of the fourth week, they were once again at the salad bar.

"You know," he said, "I don't even know your name. Mine's Bart McIver."

"Sara. Sara Tilken."

"Hmmm, did you go to Frontier High?"

"Why, I did, as a matter of fact. Did you?"

"Yep. Graduated the year we won state in basketball."

Sara's eyes widened. "So did I! I don't remember seeing you there. Were you in anything?"

"Naw. Had to work after school. How about you?"

"Nothing special just cheerleading. Isn't this a coincidence?! Well, I have to join my

group. Nice to meet someone from the past.” And she touched Bart’s hand. A simple thing, that touch, not worth noticing or mentioning under other circumstances but not so as regards Bart McIver. For Bart it was a passionate kiss, a joy beyond words.

Bart was a problem solver, the skill he brought to the Rabbit table. Given the company’s turnover rate, particularly among programmers, he believed he had little time in which to develop a cement-the-relationship plan. A romantic bond would take years to develop if limited to happenstance meetings. He needed to be with Sara in a comfortable, non-threatening setting, a restaurant, and he needed to have carefully thought through what he was going to say.

At their next cafeteria duet Bart, the armpits of his shirt visibly wet, suggested, “How would you like to get together after work and talk over our days at Frontier? There’s a pizza place not far from here that’s pretty good. My treat.”

Never one to pass up a free meal, Sara said, “Sure. Why not?”

God’s in His heaven, Bart thought. “Great! I’ll see you there at 7:30. It’s called Pablo’s Pizza on the corner of Nature and Hill.”

Seated with her fellows Sara casually mentioned her impending date. The response was a collective giggle, then a sigh, then the verdict, “Pathetic.” Sara smiled.

Bart spent the rest of the afternoon composing his speech. As if speaking to his colleagues, he labeled the paper Why Sara and Bart Should be Together. He then listed bullet point after bullet point in support of his argument. Since creating believable fiction is much harder than creating truth, Bart was repeatedly disgusted with the end product and stated over again and again.

At 7:00 PM he stopped, somewhat satisfied. At that moment Betsy came in to clean his cubicle. “Good evening, Mr. McIver. You’re working late.”

“Putting together a speech I’m going to make to a certain young lady. I’m really attracted to her, and I hope she feels the same about me.” Such openness, albeit charming, was, at the moment, directed at a stranger much like a fellow passenger on a plane even though he knew more about Betsy than he did Sara.

Betty shoved the dust rag into the pocket of her work apron and looked at Bart. “Well, as my mother used to say, ‘When all else fails, there always hope. Sets us apart from the animals, it surely does.’ Of course that was a different time and a different place. Success to you.”

Sliding behind the wheel of his antiquated Ford, Bart looked in the rear view mirror, smiled, and started toward Pablo’s. Yes, he thought, the new, improved Bart is on his way. The speech was in his left hand, compressed against the steering wheel.

Two blocks from the restaurant, he stopped for a red light. When the light turned green, Bart, instead of proceeding straight ahead, turned right and parked. Enveloped in darkness but with the motor running, he considered what he was about to do. Talking to his steering wheel, he confessed, “You’ve done some stupid things in your life, and despite your stupidity you are better off than most. Why are you doing this? You know Sara doesn’t give a shit about you, never has, never will. There’ll be others. Go home, Bart, go home before you get accused of sexual harassment. Don’t be the village idiot or a goddam stalker.”

Cleansed, Bart pulled out into the street, went to turn on his headlights and was hit broadside by a UPS truck whose driver did not see him in the night.

Panel 3

As they pushed an unconscious Bart toward the ER door, the two paramedics lapsed into

trade talk. The older, Larry, an expert witness to injury, said, “Well, he’ll live. His ribs will heal, and the head injury looks superficial. But there’ll be constant pain in his legs and arms; body was too rigid when he was hit, torqued somethin’ fierce. Hope he doesn’t turn to heavy narcotics.”

The younger, Paul, once idealistic about the future of humanity but now cynical, replied, “Can’t be avoided. He’ll resist for a while, maybe a month, but finally he’ll give in. Only chance: someone provides TLC, talks him through the rough spots, manages his medications.”

Larry nodded. “Sad but true. Glad I married as well as I did. Not a trophy in the looks department but loving, great with the kids. Tenth anniversary coming up; a long weekend at some fancy hotel would be just right.”

“Well, you know,” Paul said, leading the way past the door and into the hallway, “I’m glad for you and Agnes. But for me the dating scene works out fine. No restrictions, no attachments. Yeah, I know my day will come but not yet.”

Because he was at the foot of the gurney, Larry noticed the paper clenched in Bart’s hand. Thinking it might be important, he removed it, scanned it, and handed it to Paul. “Read this, Mr. Irresistible.”

A quick glance and Paul mumbled, “Son of a bitch.”

Nurses swooped down like hawks, and the paramedics never saw Bart again; the letter went without further reading into a manila folder which went into a file cabinet which squatted in the hospital basement until it was reduced a month later to a sodden mash by an accidental triggering of the sprinkler system.

Back in their truck, the two philosophized. “You know,” Paul mused, “Bart was probably a good guy. Whoever Sara is, I hope she cares about him. Of course, it doesn’t sound like he was the sharpest knife in the drawer, especially when it comes to women.”

Larry said, “I’d guess that when he’s back at work he’ll know enough to say something to her. Maybe she’ll appreciate what he was trying to do.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Larry sighed. “Remember that song from *Chorus Line*? ‘What I Did for Love.’ Great song; Agnes sings it when she’s peeling potatoes and ironing my shirts. Anyway, guess that song pretty much sums up what happened with Bart.”

“I saw that play. I was trying to impress some girl, make her think I was cultured. The only song I remember was something about tits and ass.” Paul put the ambulance in gear and drove away, laughing.

Since her white knight was a no-show, Sara grudgingly paid for her glass of Chianti, exited Pablo’s and went home to Indigo.

Two months later Bart limped along a frescoed corridor, toward his cubicle, eager to take his twice-a-day pain pill. Coming the other way, Sara marched toward HR, already spending the money she would receive for her unused vacation days and hoping that her new job would be more rewarding. They passed. Neither spoke.

Locking Out Winter

- Joanne Faries



Submission Guidelines

We publish thoughtful, provocative fiction, poetry, essays and visual arts.

Submissions are accepted year-round.

- If accepted, submissions may appear in any quarterly issue.
 - Biographical information will be requested for accepted submissions.
 - If your submission was previously published, please cite the reference.
 - Simultaneous submissions should be accompanied by a statement stating so.
 - If your work is accepted elsewhere prior to our evaluation, please notify us.
 - No erotica or works which rely on explicit language or gratuitous violence.
 - All work must be original and in English.
-
- Fiction and essays can be up to 5000 words.
 - No novel excerpts
 - No memoirs
 - No genre fiction; e.g., horror, science fiction, mysteries
 - Fiction should deal with critical, universal aspects of human behavior.
 - Essays can be on any topic but must express a reasoned opinion.
 - Poems should have strong images and concise, evocative language.
 - Visual arts which elicit the comment, "How interesting!" are desired.
 - Submit visual arts as **.jpg** files; do not send **.tif** or **.bmp** files.
 - Accepted visual arts may be reduced to fit the available space.
 - Prose and poetry may be accompanied by one or more relevant photos.
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- Mac users, please be sure that your files are readable by Windows 10.
 - This magazine does not currently pay upon publication.

Accepted material will be edited. If changes are deemed significant, the contributor will be notified and given an opportunity to accept the changes or request that the piece be withdrawn from publication.

Send submissions to gphillips938@comcast.net Send 1 prose piece, 1-5 poems, or 1-4 photos at a time. For prose or poetry, type or paste your submission into the body of the email message. We will not open any unsolicited print attachments. Photos, however, should be sent as attachments. Include your name and e-mail address.

Please expect to wait up to one month for a reply. Occasionally, with email, there are technical difficulties. We cannot be responsible for delay or loss of submissions. To check on the status of your submission after one month has passed, please send a message to gphillips938@comcast.net.

By submitting your work to *Front Porch Review*, you grant us the right to archive your work online for an indefinite period of time. You retain all other rights. Once the issue featuring your work has been published, you are free to republish your work as you wish, online and/or in print. You are also welcome to create a link to *Front Porch Review* from your personal Website.