

Front Porch Review



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8 am – 1 pm
- Samara Golabuk

Blowout yard sale near the duck pond,
help us lose our junk-drawer history
jumbled together like facts,
each wayward teacup
and candleholder
a warden to some cell-blocked
fractured memory.

Come one, come all!
We will haggle over quarters,
poker-faced and earnest –
high-rollers, wheeler-dealers on the block
I'll snap a thread or two of my past,
you spin a new one, weave it far from here.
Everything's free after 1 pm
(there will be coffee and brownies
while supplies last).

Ampharete
- Ion Corcos

*A woman who died around 430-420 BC,
her grave stele located in Athens*

A long tunic falls
over her marble feet, gathered
in folds,
the chiseled form
of Ampharete;
a shawl over her hair, a veil
over a baby,
the child of her daughter,
dead, as she is dead.
In her hand
she holds a bird, gently;
it cannot escape her grasp,
just as her grandchild
must remain in her care,
in death. Her daughter has chiseled this
in stone.

Bring in the Clowns

- J.R. Paradiso





Fairy Tales
- Lois Greene Stone

Televised commercials capture women with young daughters sharing private moments. Filmed, with soft lenses, in fertile fields, few can watch for ten seconds without experiencing stirrings. Marriage is 'messed' under similar packaging. The bride buys a dress she never expects to wear again, yet cleans/wraps/ boxes it like a precious antique after a few hours use. Her transparent veil is often hand-rolled. A man in a prom tuxedo parades down an aisle lined with chosen chums who help him usher out bachelorhood.

Neither marriage nor parenthood, in reality, has but a fleeting resemblance to the mystique media creates. Marriage is depicted as a rite of passage. At a wedding, or seeing a newborn baby, we re-experience awe, vulnerability, and are perhaps jealous of the fresh start we can no longer have. A limp tear may wander down a man's cheek but only a woman can sob without embarrassment. Camera lenses are not covered with gauze for males. Men are sharp, defined, powerful, macho. Doesn't this packaging also limit our vision?

A teenaged boy, called upon to stand and recite in class, jams fists into his trouser pockets to mask the center bulge. Years later, he may show off for his friends by toting a towel on his organ. Social conditioning calls for men to be strong, independent, eternally virile, confident, and capable. Power, position, and money spell success...until mid-life when the concern with time left to live changes priorities.

In our mind's eye, leaders are giants; reality measures them shorter. Napoleon, for example, was 5 feet 2 1/2 inches tall. The New Columbia Encyclopedia called Napoleon "the idol of half of Europe" and, after lengthy data about his battle successes, briefly mentioned his physical characteristics: "...his small stature won him the nickname 'the Little Corporal'." While the Battle of Waterloo worked its way into every high school history class, textbooks didn't tell students "...a witness to the autopsy described the body as effeminate, with hardly any body hair.."

Somehow we relate better to Henry VIII (1491-1547). His weight approached 400 pounds. His last suit of armor was made for a 57-inch waist. With a massive body, six wives, two divorces, two wives beheaded, one wife dead after childbirth and one surviving him, we accept his appetite and aggression easily. After all he was a large man with a super ego.

Few ever pictured Mozart as a remarkably small man, very thin, pale, with a large head and an enormous nose inherited from his mother. His hair was thick and fair, his eyes myopic. His plump hands were always moving. Audiences at the theatre performance or movie *Amadeus* had imagined Charlton Heston.

Lawrence Hart, lyricist, had an oversized head on a five-foot body (he was later dubbed the Toulouse-Lautrec of Broadway), a grotesque figure but fascinating when he talked. Dr. P.Z. Gray, dentist in 1896, is best remembered for his Zane Grey novels. In adulthood he grew to 5 ft. 9 in., but his small frame carried a muscular 150 lb. all his life. His first name was Pearl. Muscles must be mentioned else we might think of Zane Grey as puny, feminine, weak.

Public men's' lavatories, with walls of urinals, invite comparison. Heck, anyone who ever sat near the stage watching the old musical *Hair* could note, during one nude scene, that flaccid male organs are different.

More American men are living to old age. This could be a positive influence. As one ages, comparison with others in all areas decreases. One doesn't care if 'everyone' likes him; self-respect seeks a bigger place than peer approval. Making it, performing well in bed, and macho-

man move into a different dimension. "...sexuality is not an all or nothing experience, and it has vastly different meanings for different people."(Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality", January 1983, vol.17 #1, pg. 32w.)

The feminist movement has attempted to alert women to their own self-worth as individuals rather than persons defined by the roles the men in their lives play. Don't men, as well as women, have to alter the definition of "a real man" and include personality, values, philosophical expression?

A specific breed of cactus that's covered with white down is named 'old man'; the plant, however, didn't name itself and certainly wouldn't have selected that label. Will the geriatric generation help to change the picture of superman into a caring, gentle, sexual, productive, super man? Why wasn't the 1992 death of the comic-strip Superman symbolic for this commencement?

Showering With Racists
- Mike Mulvey

“Nigger lover.”

Startled, I looked up, not sure if I'd heard right. Wasn't even sure if he was talking to me at first, but he'd looked directly at me as he walked by. And I was the only one sitting there, cleaning my weapon.

His name didn't register right away, but I recognized the face. He'd once been in second platoon. Luther was his name, I think. Took some shrapnel in the leg east of Tay Ninh City. When he was discharged from the hospital, he was transferred to company headquarters and assigned a slot with the supply sergeant.

I briefly entertained thoughts of kicking Luther's ass, but it was too hot, and I was showered. Didn't want to be rolling around in the dirt in a freshly-laundered uniform. Truth be told, he probably could have kicked my skinny, 145-pound ass from here to payday, anyhow. I had him in height, but he had the build of a West Virginia coal miner; hairy-chested, broad shoulders, arms like he could lift a Jeep with one hand to change a tire, and an ominous five o'clock shadow at eight in the a.m.

From his accent I knew Luther was a southern boy who probably had no love for anyone other than his own kind. My skin was the same color as his, but this skinny northern boy was a little too friendly with the local brothers for his liking, particularly one black kid from Alabama, my buddy Curtis.

Even though Luther tossed his comment over his shoulder as he walked by, the look in his eyes, somewhere between hate and disgust, gave me pause and sent a shiver down my spine. I'd seen that look before, in the eyes of a Georgia State Trooper who pulled me and my buddies over one Sunday afternoon when he saw the Massachusetts plates on our car. We were on a weekend pass from Fort Benning, our first. After weeks of crawling around in the red Georgia clay, we were out cruising the countryside, in search of cold beer and warm women.

“Yankees are like hemorrhoids,” the trooper said, giving the four of us what my Aunt Rita would call 'the stink eye,' especially Johnny, our black buddy from Queens, New York. “When they come down but go back up, that's OK. But when they come down and stay, they're a pain in the ass.” The trooper let us off with a warning, but the look in his eye made us turn around and race back for the safety of Fort Benning where we replayed our introduction to southern hospitality over beer in the barracks.

This is the Army, I said to myself as I tried to make sense out of Luther's comment. We're all in this shit together, month after friggin' month 'til death or DEROS (Date of Expected Return from Over Seas). Or least *we* were. Me, Curtis and the rest of our squad. This ridge-runnin' fuck stain might have once been one of us, but he was a REMF now, a Rear Echelon Mother Fucker who took a hot shower *every* day, slept up off the ground on a bunk *every* night, ate hot chow *three* times a day, and drank *cold* beer into the early hours at the Enlisted Men's Club.

Out in the field we depended on each other. We needed to in order to survive. Whatever differences we may have had back in the world – race, color, religion and all – faded as our uniforms and our bodies slowly turned the color of the earth which sheltered us from harm. As uniform and skin accumulated dirt, mud, grease, assorted bodily excretions – sweat, shit, piss, snot, tears, blood – and the stench of death and dying, we lost our individuality. Uniforms turned a greasy gray with only vague memories of green. White skin, pounded by sun and assaulted by

filth, turned assorted shades of brown.

Mexicans and blacks, too, began to mutate into beings the folks back home might not recognize at first. All went through the transformation from humans to primitive earth people, all trying to live through the night to the next sunrise. We inhabited a deadly world where day-to-day survival mattered more than anything our parents, teachers and preachers had taught or told us. Here, death was everywhere. God was nowhere to be found. Some prayed when the green tracers reached out or the mortars sought flesh, but in the end, we knew that all we had was each other. We were one. We looked as one. One brownish-green mass that hung on to humanity and sanity by its nails.

Always exhausted, and even if so inclined, we didn't have the energy to think about our differences or toss racial epithets back and forth. You use any of those words in casual conversation out in the bush or even in anger, there's gonna be trouble. Sure, we called each other names: asshole, dickhead, shithead, shit for brains, numb nuts, to name just a few. We got angry, even fought each other once in awhile, but our beefs weren't based on race or regional affiliation. Usually, fueled by too much beer or weed during a stand down, the cause of a rumble was often a difference of opinion as to who had the nicer tits, Miss November or Miss April, or who had the better football team, Alabama or Ohio State. These differences were quickly forgotten as we slogged through paddy muck, pounded by the sun day after day, or fought the wait-a-minute bushes and bamboo thickets, all the while keeping an eye out for mines, booby traps, and the little people who wanted to do us harm.

Out in the field it was someone fucking up or fucking off that caused tempers to flare, doing something stupid that could lead to a long nap in a body bag. "Hey, asshole, you fall asleep on guard again, and I'm gonna plant my boot so far up your ass they'll have to send out a recon patrol to find it. You fuckin' hear me?"

Luther may have once been a grunt, but when he returned from the hospital and transferred to supply, the fear of death or dismemberment became only a remote possibility, something that only happened in war movies. Out of harm's way, he was free of those bonds that had forced him to work with people he didn't normally break bread with back home. Clean, well-fed, well-rested, his head clear now, Luther had slowly gravitated back to his own kind and reclaimed his bigoted baggage at the Southern Airways luggage carousel.

I'd said nothing to Luther as he walked away, just stared for a moment in disbelief. I reassembled my weapon and walked to the mess hall where I joined my buddies for hot chow: Army pork chops, Army peas, Army mashed potatoes, Army bread and Army butter, washed down with Kool-Aide or Army coffee – not exactly haute cuisine, but a brief and welcome respite from the monotonous C-rats we ate when out on an operation.

Sam, Butch, Poncho, Pete, Larry, Bob, Curtis and I ate quietly. After twenty-eight days chasing Charlie around Hau Nghia Province, there wasn't much chatter or grab ass. Later that night, though, after we finished cleaning our gear, we'd drink till we forgot where we were. We'd drink some beer, lie about all the women we'd known, laugh at our shit-for-brains officers, bust balls, drink some more beer, tell jokes, listen to music on AFRN, drink some more beer and any hard liquor we could get our hands on. Exhausted and drunk, we'd drop off into a deep but sometimes fitful sleep - on a bunk, on the floor, outside on top of a bunker, or in the dirt, wherever and whenever the beer and our bodies gave out.

For some reason, Curtis, the black kid from the deep South, and me, the whitest kid from up north had buddied up. Maybe it was my lack of a southern accent or that I'd told him I'd grown up in a city housing project. Whatever the reason, Curtis and I became inseparable.

We both loved C-ration peaches and shared a can whenever one of us snagged a B-1 unit from a just-opened case of C's. On stand-down we went to our favorite bar just outside the back gate for cold beer and horizontal entertainment. When we walked in, the girls screamed, "Here come Vanilla and Chocolate! You buy us drinks, we love you long time," or some other bullshit line meant to part us from our MPC's.

After chow, Curtis and I were ordered to the ammo dump for Claymores and grenades by our platoon sergeant, another Southern-fried asshole named Harvey. While waiting for our requisition to be filled, Curtis and I sat down on a couple of ammo crates. I pulled out a pint of vodka I'd traded the mess sergeant for some black pajamas I'd captured when our company stumbled on a recently-vacated VC base camp. I took a long drink, winced, waited for the burn to ease, then handed the bottle to Curtis. On the other side of the division perimeter, outgoing artillery, firing in support of a unit that had probably stepped in some deep shit, volleyed and boomed as Curtis and I patiently sat and waited.

I told Curtis what Luther had said to me that morning. "He was in second platoon. Works in supply now. When I went to pick up some batteries for the PRC-25, portable radio, last stand-down, I snorted a laugh when I heard the supply sergeant call Luther the way you'd call a mangy dog. Luther gave me a 'What are you lookin' at' look when he handed me the batteries, but I gave him a 'Fuck You' look back and walked away."

"Yeah, I know him," said Curtis. "When I first got to battalion – before we were assigned to the company – me, Luther, and Butch were assigned perimeter bunker guard one night. Luther acted like I was the invisible fuckin' man." Curtis took a tug at the bottle and looked at me for a second, then continued. "I joined the Army to get away from guys like him." Curtis's usual, easy-going smile was missing.

"Next morning he kicked me in the leg to wake me up then ordered me to go bring in the Claymores. We were both PFC's at the time so I told him to go get 'em himself. We stood there nose to nose until Butch said he'd go out and get 'em." Curtis took another long tug at the bottle and passed it back.

I tried to imagine what it must have been like living in a state filled with guys like Luther. I couldn't though. I was a white kid from the north. All I knew about the South came from Walter fuckin' Cronkite on the CBS evening news. In high school my classmates had names like Sal Boccuzzi, Ira Cohen, Washington Penny, Charlie Vlahos, Jorge 'Georgie' Rodriguez, and Gerry Hogan. For the most part, we all got along. When we didn't, it wasn't because of skin color or last names.

I took a swig from the bottle, winced and dug in the dirt with the heel of my boot. "A few weeks after the incident with that Georgia State Trooper I told you about, a bunch of us drove out to some hick town. We'd been drinking beer all morning, so, of course we had to stop to take a leak. Dave he pulls up in front of the county courthouse, right in the center of town. He parks the car, we all get out and head for the restrooms. By the restroom doors I see signs that say 'White,' and, 'Colored.' I'm floored. I'd seen that sort of thing on TV back home, but to see it for real, well, it fuckin' blew my mind. I turned to say something to Dave, but he told me to shut the fuck up and just take care of business."

Curtis nodded in acknowledgement, but said nothing. I took another long drink from the bottle and handed it back. Curtis took another drink, thought for a minute, tapped the bottle on the wooden ammo crate, then told me what one of his black friends, another REMF, had said to him a few weeks ago, on another stand-down.

"'Stick to your own kind,' he said. And he said it as he walked by, like Luther. Didn't

have the balls to stop and say it to my face."

"Assholes come in all colors, I guess." Curtis laughed then took out his knife and drew large X's in the dirt.

Stand down was supposed to be a time for us to take hot showers, drink cold beer, eat hot chow, send our filthy clothes downtown to mamma-san, laugh at *Combat* and *Twelve O'clock High* on Armed Forces TV, get laid in the bars downtown, and remember what it was like to act like a civilized human being. It was supposed to be a three-day reprieve from the shit. Instead, we had to deal with another type of shit from our own kind.

"Remember last September when we went on R&R to Bangkok?" I said. "We were sitting on a bench in our starched khakis, twiddling our thumbs, waiting for our plane."

"Yeah, I remember," said Curtis, handing the bottle back.

"I got us a couple of cans of cold soda. I popped yours open and poured it into a Styrofoam cup filled with ice. I handed it to you and asked, 'Cold enough?'"

"Yeah," said Curtis smiling. "That white guy sitting across from us was looking on like he wasn't too happy with you serving a colored boy like me."

"Yeah, when I saw the disgusted look on his face, I was gonna say something like, 'Is there anything else I can fetch for ya boss?' but I let it go. Didn't want to fuck with our R&R by getting into a fight at the airport."

I handed the bottle back to Curtis. He finished it off and threw the bottle at a nearby rock. The bottle broke into a couple of dozen big and little pieces, leaving a small wet stain.

When our requisition was finally filled, Curtis and I each grabbed a rope handle on either end of a case of grenades, stacked a case of Claymores on top and headed back to the company. Luther's comment still stuck in my craw.

We stumbled along with our crates of explosives, passing through Headquarters Company on our way back to our platoon. It was late in the day, and the REMF's were already off work, knocking back their first cold beer of the day. Music blasted from their hooches. Buck Owens or Conway Twitty from the farmers and Southern boys, The Four Tops or Aretha Franklin from the brothers, and The Stones or The Rascals for anyone born north of the Pentagon or west of Nevada.

Even the Vietnamese bars outside the back gate catered to the assorted regional and racial groups. A juke box in one bar played only country and western, while another blasted out R&B. Jim Reeves' "I Won't Come in While He's There" fought with "Beauty is Only Skin Deep" by the Temptations.

We dropped off our ammo crates and walked back to our squad hootch. Pete handed Curtis and me a cold beer as we walked in. "Where you been?" he asked.

"On ammo detail," said Curtis, taking off his shirt and opening the can. I sat on my bunk and looked around at our squad. Some lay on their bunks reading Playboy magazines. Others wrote letters home while listening to Armed Forces Radio. Most caught up on their sleep.

"I want one last hot shower before the company goes back out," I suddenly announced. And like one last beer at closing time, I would savor this shower slowly. It would be our last chance to scrape off another layer of dirt before going back out to be covered, once again, in our own filth and the filth of this country. Vodka and beer for the brain, water for the flesh.

"I'll go with you," said Curtis. We finished our beers, ripped off our sweaty uniforms, grabbed our soap, wrapped ourselves in our green towels and walked to the company shower. But when we got there, the water was gone, the black, overhead storage tanks empty.

"Fuck! If we weren't on ammo detail, we'd a made it before the water ran out," I said.

"Headquarters Company always has hot water," said Curtis. "Officers and NCO's gotta smell sweet for the Donut Dollies." Wrapped only in towels, we jogged across the street to Headquarters Company but found a crowd of REMF's hogging all the shower heads. I toyed with the idea of tossing in a CS grenade when two REMF's stepped out, toweled off and left. Curtis and I took their places.

While I stood there, savoring the warm water, I spotted Luther a few feet away. I elbowed Curtis and nodded toward our red-neck buddy who hadn't yet noticed our presence – or maybe he was deliberately avoiding eye contact.

Like our M-16's, the family jewels required much care and maintenance, especially in this hot, humid and filthy world of ours where crotch rot – an itchy fungal reminder to wash your ass whenever possible – was a constant threat. So, while showering, we spent particular attention to our privates, making sure we got all the cracks, creases, crevices and crannies.

As I stood there staring at Luther – who continued to ignore my presence – a thought suddenly came to me. A good way of getting back at people like Luther, besides kicking his ass, would be to get up a good lather on my dick and nuts then throw the suds in his face.

I worked up a good handful then took a step toward Luther. Sensing what I was about to do, Curtis caught me by the arm and shot me a crazed look. "What, you fuckin' nuts?" he whispered. "These crackers will beat your ass bloody!" He was right, of course, so I backed away and continued my shower.

A few minutes later I noticed a changed look on Curtis's face, a look I hadn't ever seen before. "I'll do it," he whispered. "Now who's nuts," I whispered back. Curtis continued to stare at Luther, all the while lathering up. Looking around, I noticed that Curtis was the only black face in the shower.

"These good 'ole boys will string your black ass up from the nearest tree," I whispered. "Let's finish up and get outta here."

But Curtis continued to gather white ballsy suds until he had a large handful, about the size of a small pumpkin. "Come on, man. Let's get the fuck outta here before we do something stupid," I begged. But before I could grab Curtis by the arm and drag him away, he walked over and tapped Luther on the shoulder. When Luther turned, Curtis smiled and threw the suds in his face. Luther's head jerked back like he'd been doused with acid.

Luther held both hands to his face and looked like he wanted to scream, but nothing came out. He just stood there, face-to-face with his assailant, a naked, six-foot-two, dark-as-a-witch's-asshole-at-midnight Southern black man.

Curtis was shooting Luther a look like he was saying, "We're not in Alabama, asshole. Nobody has to take your shit over here." Curtis and Luther stood face to face until, noticing me, Luther wiped his face, gave Curtis hard look, glanced around, then walked out.

Martin Luther King used non-violent boycotts and sit-ins to fight racism and injustice. LBJ used the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Acts. Curtis Goodman used the soap off his nuts. I wanted to thank him, but I knew Curtis hadn't tossed those suds for me.

I knew there had to be other Southern boys in the shower who'd witnessed the tossing of the suds and for a minute I thought we might have to fight our way out, but nothing was said. All we got were looks from a few. "This isn't Mississippi or Georgia," I wanted to say. Instead, I looked at the one G.I. I knew was from the South and said, "Vietnam is a dangerous place. Accidents happen all the time." Curtis and I walked back to our hooch and quietly changed back into our uniforms.

I was sure the squad would hear about the incident in the shower. Sam was a Mormon

from Utah. Butch – aka Nils Sonderberg – was from North Dakota. Poncho – aka Richard Sanchez – from East L.A., and The Kid – aka Larry Clemens – hailed from West Texas. Bobbie was from Georgia, and Pete, from southern Illinois. I wasn't sure how the Southerners in our squad would react, but I was guessing a "Fuck Luther and the horse he rode in on" would have been the general consensus if the topic came up for discussion. It didn't.

As we sat around and readied our weapons and gear, our lifer platoon sergeant walked in. "Report to the battalion aid station. The medics want to check your shot records."

We reluctantly trudged over to the battalion aid station where we lined up and waited. The head pecker-checker perused our shot records while two other medics, standing next to a table piled high with syringes, either waved us on or quickly issued the required immunizations.

"Hey, look at that," I said to Curtis as we waited in line. Inside the large tent that passed for our aid station, the battalion surgeon was removing the dressing from the upper arm of a black G.I. who had what appeared to be a superficial, grazing bullet wound. I stood there in amazement, watching through the open tent flap at the pink flesh under the black skin of this wounded G.I.

"Look at what?" Curtis asked. In our short time in this hellish place we had both seen our fair share of death and dying, so he was at a loss as to what I was pointing at.

"That," I said, pointing to the bright pink flesh of the black soldier's wound.

When Curtis realized what I was pointing at – when my ignorance became apparent – he said, in exasperation and incredulity, "What'd you expect to see under there? You think we're black all the way through, like a chocolate Easter bunny or something?" He laughed, sort of, or maybe it was an exasperated snort, but I didn't know if he was laughing at my ignorance or laughing in disgust. This was the first time I saw a look in his eyes that he reserved for some of the pickup drivin', shotgun totin', tobacco chawin' good 'ole boys like Luther. I was at a loss for words. I put my head down, shoved my hands deep in my pockets and waited my turn in line.

File Under Melancholy
- Marty Marcus

Nightclub at noon...

Old people's laps...

Monday's ball scores, again...

Groupsongs, anyplace...

Lamed robin
in the car tire's path...

Hairy mole hiding
on the young girl's throat...

All the rains described
by all the poets
of all time
falling in your mind...

A derelict road
wanders off in a wood...

Two strangers thinking:
"He seems nice"
"She seems nice"...

The unwashable window
speeding too fast
to find stars...

Already it is tomorrow...

Immigrant Memoir
- Adam Restinow

The kiss I ne'er stole
The hand I ne'er shook
The promise I ne'er kept
The child I ne'er had

These, these
I regret.

And yet, and yet,

The weight of *my* books
The words of *my* God
The feel of *my* soil
The walls of *my* home

These, these
worth the journey.

Gilded Flicker

- Len Kazmer



Housebreaking
- Ray Scanlon

This was the year Uncle Russell no longer had the wherewithal to make his annual Memorial Day pilgrimage to place flowers on the family graves, and this was the week Cheryl moved him to a rest home from his assisted-living apartment. The logistics were not particularly daunting; indeed, a lot of people worked to make the move happen, and the pieces of the puzzle pretty much put themselves together. The problem was going to be Russell.

Russell is a dear, sweet, kind man, prone to impulsive gestures of generosity. He loved horseback riding and his 1938 Packard straight eight, and juggled and did sleight of hand to entertain the kids. When Cheryl was young and her mother was having a hard time of it, Russell, the only driver in the family, helped out.

In recent years Cheryl and I have become privy to a more complete picture of Russell. When a new peccadillo surfaced his sister, Cheryl's grandmother, would always say, "Russell's odd, but we love him." He has, as we now euphemize, issues. They are mental, though his body is a willing accomplice. They are real, they are lifelong, and they torment him. From time to time they overwhelm him. He is the most credulous, fear-driven, anxious man I have ever known. Even in photographs of him at his calmest, he always looks to me like a vulnerable little boy, as if he's about to scrunch up his eyes and cry.

In the push to mainstream mental illness, it's easy to forget that just because you're mentally ill doesn't mean you don't have character flaws. Certainly Russell's anxieties color what he perceives and wants us to believe, but we've long known that he withholds information, misrepresents, and outright fabricates. His prevarication and his mental illness exploit each other; they're intimately entwined. Once your interlocutor breaks your trust in his truthfulness, it doesn't matter whether he has a character flaw or mental illness. Once you accept that you're in an unsolvable one of those liar/truth-teller logic puzzles, it's not so hard to deal with someone who may or may not be speaking truth. I marvel that I can sometimes even let that ambiguity feel liberating. The words are ephemeral. They carry no weight, impose no obligation to believe.

I'm inclined to dismiss how Russell copes with his pain as maladaptive, but his continued existence at a surprisingly robust 93 belies that assessment. I'm on much firmer ground when I say that it's suboptimal, and no one could contradict me if I say he's high-maintenance and often maddening. The disorder in his life has increased over the last several months with the realization that his memory is declining, feeding his voracious anxiety. The wheels to move him to a place safer than a hands-off assisted living facility began to turn, slowly, then with gratifying urgency.

With Russell no decision is ever final. He changes his mind and mood from day to day, hour to hour, and even from one minute to the next. It's as if the only way he can perceive grey is to flip back and forth between black and white really, really fast. Cheryl and I embark on the campaign to get him on board with moving to a more supportive home, a prospect stressful even for those less excitable than he. Basically, our plan is to wing it and be flexible, a strategy that is way out of my comfort zone. I like to know where I'm going and how I'm going to get there, but Russell's state of mind is so unpredictable, there isn't any useful road map. There's nothing for it but to just do it. We take him on visits to his potential new quarters in a family-run rest home, help him weigh the pros and cons, coordinate with the powers involved, allay his anxieties. He resists out of habit, but it's *pro forma*; his heart's not in it. His acceptance buoys us. We can exhale.

It's a week of all Russell, all the time. To decompress, Cheryl and I indulge in consecutive stolen evenings at our corner pizza joint, where we recap and analyze the latest events, and make rudimentary plans for the next day. Finally, the siege ends. Russell has spent the night in his new place.

Cheryl and I bring our grandson, the hired muscle, to start dismantling Russell's old room at assisted living. It's just as he left it. The curtains are drawn against sunlight and the outside world. Both the heat and air conditioner are cranking. The air is viscous with old-people aroma: sketchy hygiene, perfumed insecticide laid down during the institution's periodic cockroach pogroms, and mummified sardines. The scent will be sticking to our clothes and hair when we leave, following us home.

Russell swims against the tide as best he can, now and again showing a hard-won scintilla of awareness of the nature of his problems. Hope endures. We trust Russell won't leave his current incarnation until he gains some insight into where true happiness lies. Meanwhile he teaches us patience, how to help without being enablers, and not to invest too much emotional capital in a specific outcome. These are non-trivial jobs, and we're all slow learners.

Waste Anything But Time
- R.L.M. Cooper

Gawd, but it's hot!

August had rolled over into September over two weeks ago, but no one would ever know it by looking at the thermometer.

Josie wasn't sure if it was the heat or her nerves, but, whichever it was, she was roasting. Her thin, gauzy blouse clung to her body like a second skin and did little in the way of keeping her cool, yet she didn't want to go back inside the house. Not yet.

"Whatcha doin' out here, Josie?"

Josie's younger sister, Becca, came out onto the deck and stood beside her. She was barefoot, wearing cut-off jeans and a halter top, and sipping a large glass of iced tea with two big lemon wedges poked down in amongst the ice cubes. Anything to keep cool. She set the glass down on the railing and stood there alongside Josie, looking out over the fields beyond the house.

Josie closed her eyes and continued leaning on the deck railing. The railing encircled a high balcony at the rear of the old plantation-style house overlooking acres and acres of cotton fields which now lay beneath a defoliated layer so white it appeared south Alabama had recently been hit by a whopping snow storm. The cotton was ready to be picked before the hurricane gods decided to toss a big one at them. It was like some kind of choreographed dance every year, timing everything just right to get it all in and keep it dry for market.

Josie was twenty-six and had been a part of every planting and picking season since she was five years old. At first, she just rode along up front in the cab with Garret, the picker driver. Later, she kept the books for the whole operation. Everybody worked during picking, in what seemed like the hottest time of the year. This year would be no different – except for Josie.

"Just standin' out here thinkin'." She finally answered and looked over at Becca, then turned away to look out over the fields again.

"About what?" Becca sipped her tea.

"Time, mostly."

"What about it?"

Josie looked back at Becca and reached for her tea. She took a drink and then handed back the glass. She looked out over the cotton fields for a minute and then said, "I saw this movie once. An old science fiction movie. Everybody was runnin' around tryin' to build a space ship so some of them could get away from Earth because this other big, old planet was going to crash into it. Anyway, this other planet had a moon, or somethin', and they all figured it would support human life so they were rushin' around tryin' to get the space ship built before the earth was destroyed."

"Must have been a mighty big space ship to hold all the people." Becca's interest in science fiction and space ships was slim-to-none, and she sounded bored as she reached down to scratch the head of their old dog, Bear. Bear had somehow imprinted on her and followed her everywhere like a baby duckling after its mama.

"Well, they weren't all goin' – just the ones lucky enough to have their numbers pulled out of a box. Kinda like a lottery. Anyway, they had these loudspeakers that kept shoutin' at them to hurry up and to waste anything but time. Somehow, I always remembered that. Waste anything but time."

"When did you ever waste time, Josie? You're the busiest person I know."

"Yeah, well. There's time, and then there's time."

Becca frowned at her. "Sometimes I think you're crazy, Josie."

Josie looked at her and half smiled. "You could be right."

Maybe she *was* crazy. She had a good job here. Cotton paid well, and even though it was a family business, she had her own bank account and a good salary for her efforts. She'd been saving for a long time and had accumulated quite a little stash. It was enough to see her through for a while after today. Of course it all depended on whether or not she found the courage to do what she planned to do. All she needed was the gumption to go through with it. That was the hard part. Gumption often proved elusive to all but the truly foolhardy. But if she somehow found it, she could always get another job.

This was not the first time she had been here – right on the edge of it – but her courage had always evaporated like dew in the hot Alabama sun, and she had been left with the secret humiliation and loss of self-respect with each failure to act. It was like the crushing beat-down of a nail head beneath a hammer, each successive failure a blow making it harder to believe she could ever disentangle herself. But today was going to be different. She was determined that this time she would either be free or forever trapped in a soul-crushing life of muck and deception. There would be no next time. That decision had definitely been made because she had spoken the truth to Becca. There's time, and then there's time. And the time she had already done was enough for anybody.

Becca finished off her tea and poured the ice and lemon wedges over the railing and onto the grass below. "Anyway." She shrugged. "Daddy'll be here in a minute so we better get inside and get the table set."

"Mama's arms broke?" Josie continued looking out over the cotton fields as she spoke, her tone flat and emotionless.

Becca ignored the sarcasm and said, "There's Daddy's car! C'mon, Bear! You comin', Josie?"

Josie mumbled under her breath between tightly clenched teeth. "Daddy's car. Daddy's house. Daddy's girl."

"Josie! What's on earth is the matter with you today? Come on!" Becca frowned at her but didn't wait for a reply. She went back into the house and headed down to the front door. Old Bear waddled along after her, leaving Josie alone on the deck.

Josie hadn't bothered to answer. She couldn't have explained it anyway. Not to Becca. Instead, she waited a minute and then, with a deep sigh of resignation, pushed herself away from the railing and headed into the cool of the house and down the stairs to the dining room, her left hand sliding along the curved, polished handrail as she slowly descended. Her mother was alone in the kitchen fussing, last-minute, with mashed potatoes. Josie hesitated long enough to watch her for a moment through the crack, ironically, in the open kitchen door. She was wearing an old, cotton housedress and a flowered apron. She looked tired. Old. Worn. Josie watched without emotion – as though watching some stranger – before going to the sideboard and getting out the plates and silverware to lay the table. She almost felt sorry for her. Almost. She finally turned away and began, mechanically, to lay out the place settings on the linen-covered, mahogany dining table.

Becca raced to greet their daddy as he came through the front door. He grabbed her up into a tight hug. "There's my girl!"

Josie narrowed her eyes and turned away. Then, "Dinner's ready!" she hollered loud enough for everybody in the county to hear as her mother came in and placed the mashed

potatoes and the last bowl of side vegetables on the table. A ham for carving was placed directly in front of daddy's place at the end.

They all took their usual places. Without conversation, bowls were passed and helpings were dipped with silver ladles onto rose-bud-encircled plates. Iced tea was poured and the ham was carved and meted out. It could have been any family on any Sunday afternoon sitting down to dinner. It could have been. But it wasn't.

Josie's daddy looked around at everybody with a self-satisfied expression on his face while he was loading up his plate with potatoes. He announced, "We'll start the pickin' tomorrow morning. Josie, you need to gear up and get the books ready. We'll be taking the first of it over to Bennet's. I expect they'll pay a fair price to get this show on the road. Garret's already been told, and he'll be over here bright and early. I checked out the picker this mornin' and it's runnin' fine. Looks like it's goin' to be a good crop this year."

This was it. It was now or never. And never, for Josie, was just not an option anymore. It was time. Waste anything but time. She had already wasted too much as it was. She finished her biscuit, took a sip of her tea, wiped her fingers on a linen napkin that matched the tablecloth, took a deep breath, and said, "Not this year, Daddy."

She waited for the world to end. But there was nothing except the loud sound of sudden silence around the table and Bear's thick tail thumping on the Aubusson at Becca's feet. The earth didn't shake or break apart. The sky didn't split open or rain down fire and brimstone. Josie knew she was still here because her hands were shaking. Whatever happened now was going to happen. She had done it, and there was no stopping it. She had been here, on the precipice, dozens of times before but never, until today, had she summoned up the courage to take that final step.

In the deafening silence, Josie wondered what had fueled that final push. Her daddy just now hugging Becca? He'd done that a hundred times before. A thousand times, probably. No. It wasn't that, as much as she despised it. So what, then?

Time. She decided it was time. She had held herself prisoner far too long. That part was her own doing, once she came of age, and she could not deny it. But now it was past time to throw off the spirit-crushing weight of the thing. She was tired of living a lie. Her clothes were already packed in the trunk of her car – insurance against changing her mind – and she was determined she would not suffer the defeat and humiliation of dragging everything back inside this house. Not this time. The words had finally been spoken, and she was glad.

Her daddy, in a temporary state of patriarchal shock, half-laughed, looked straight at her, and said, "What do you mean, not this year?"

"I mean I'm not goin' to do the books this year. Or next year. Or the year after that."

"Josie!" Becca looked at her as though she had just announced plans to burn down the house.

Josie ignored her sister and calmly sliced off a bite of the ham on her plate.

Her daddy set down his knife and fork and looked over at her. He said, "You will do what I tell you to do. Now eat your dinner, and we won't hear any more about it."

Josie put her own silverware down and pushed away from the table. She stood up to leave.

"Where you think you're goin', girl? Sit back down!"

"Well, I'll tell you. I'm not exactly sure where I'm goin', Daddy. But I'm goin' just the same."

"Get back in here and sit down to the table! What the hell is the matter with you?"

"No. Don't think so. Not this time."

Her daddy laughed then and looked at her mother and sister as though he thought Josie had lost her mind. He was half-way embarrassed, evidenced by the red slowly creeping up his neck and face, and half-way miffed. He searched for something to say as Josie was leaving the dining room. Then he yelled after her, "You think you're gon' find a job that pays like this one just anywhere? Or maybe you think you'll find some boy out there who wants you? You got a face only a mother could love, Josie!"

At that, Josie stopped and turned. She walked back to her place at the table and leaned on the back of her chair. "Oh, yeah! That's right!" All the emotion she had ever tamped down inside suddenly boiled up from the depths. "But she didn't, did she, Daddy? Did she?" She paused for a couple of ticks and then, "It was never a problem for *you*, though, was it?"

At this, Josie's mama looked down at her hands as she folded them on her lap. She said nothing.

Her daddy laughed, now obviously embarrassed. "What the devil are you talkin' about?"

Josie wanted to gag at this act of innocent denial. "You know what I'm talkin' about. And she knows it, too, even though she pretended not to all those years." Josie nodded toward her mother without taking her eyes off him.

His face noticeably flushed, and he laughed again. A nervous laugh now.

"What *are* you talkin' about, Josie?" Becca, Josie's junior by a good ten years, sensed something very wrong here. She just wasn't sure what.

Josie finally turned to her and spat out the words. "Ask Daddy."

"Ask him *what*?" Becca pleaded.

Josie ignored her and turned again to her daddy. "You never had any trouble lovin' me, did you? Homely face and all. What you call *love*, anyway." The word rolled out of her mouth like some slimy substance usually coughed up in a tissue.

"I don't know what you are talkin' about." He laughed again. "Sit back down here and eat your dinner and stop goin' on like some damned fool."

"And she –," Josie nodded again toward her mother, "she turned a blind eye. Didn't you, Mama?" Josie now faced her mother straight-on. "Don't pretend you didn't know. I saw you! I saw you through the crack in the door! You knew!" Josie stomped her foot for emphasis. "You knew, and you never said anything! You never *did* anything!"

Her mother said nothing.

"How many times?" Josie shouted at her. "How many!"

Josie's anger spilling forth caused her mother to flinch but she continued to look down at her own hands on her lap. The woman was obviously wounded – even tormented – but Josie couldn't stop, and she couldn't forgive. At least not right now. It was time for a lot of things, but it wasn't time for that.

"How many *what*?" Becca was in tears.

Josie turned to her sister. "Be careful, Becca. Watch yourself. If ever you need me, I'll be there. But, somehow, I don't think you will. Not since Eileen Tipton became a very young widow."

"You shut up right now!" Her daddy slammed his fists down hard on the table and stood up.

Josie stared him down and said, "You think people don't notice her drivin' around town in that land yacht you bought her? Smellin' like she just walked through some cheap perfume factory? People are not that dumb, Daddy. Not in this town. They know. Believe me. They

know."

She turned away and headed out of the dining room on her way to the front door.

"Where are you goin', Josie?" Becca called and ran after her.

"I'm not exactly sure, Becca, but I think my lucky number just got pulled out of the box, and I'm not wastin' any more time."

Josie opened the front door, and stepped out into the sunshine. She wasn't fooling herself even for a minute. There were a lot of things to work through. Maybe she would never get through all of them, but for the first time in many years she felt light. Free. She finally smiled for what seemed like the first time, too.

"No, ma'am. I'm not wastin' any more time."

The Family Life
- Psycho Kanev

Nobody pays any attention any more
to
the slowly dripping sink

After 10 years

it can become a river

We'll have to fix it before
we drown inside our running out
love

Setting

_ Ken Wheatcroft-Pardue

What is place?

Touch it – it is the hole in my heart
where sneakers echoed between brick and oleander,
the fecund smell of swerving ditch,
and at dusk, the rainbow of effluent
floating on its surface.

It was the sky every afternoon
filling with the Gulf's humidity,
until the clouds burst
and steam rose from the streets.

It was the honeysuckles
that hung like sagging crosses.
How we stopped to pull
one green, wet stem after another,
till we sucked them all to the last.

What is time?

The ticking of a watch,
the whisper of digital,
the sidelong glance of girl,
resembling someone we knew –
what was it? – 40 years ago now?

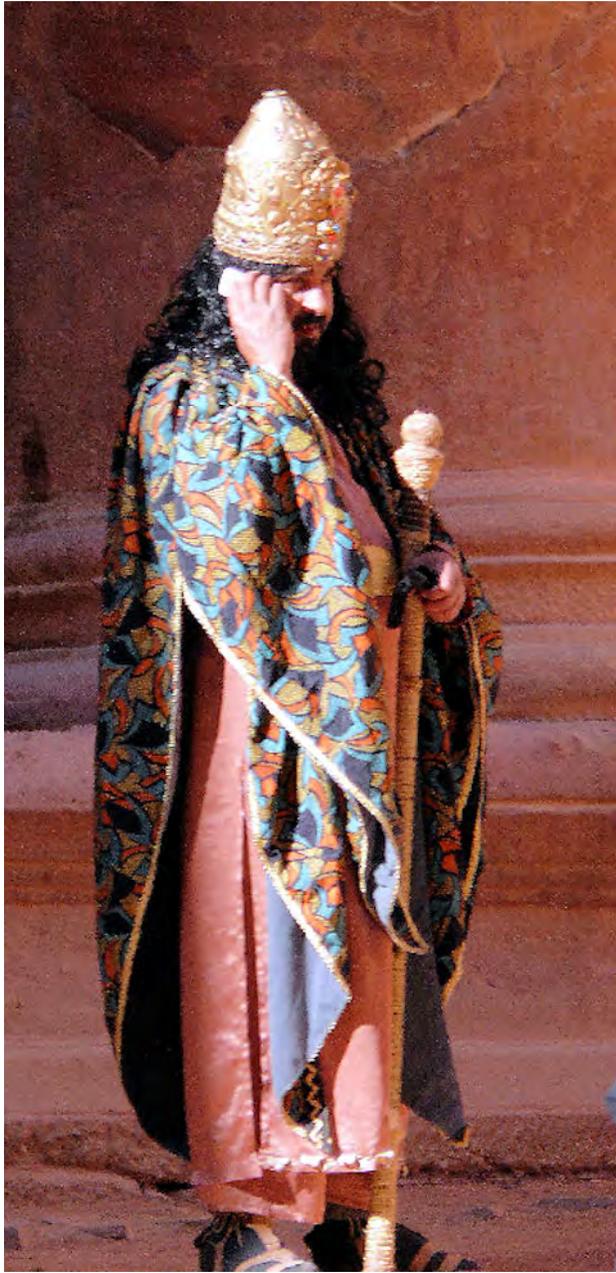
It is the slow
hardening of our hearts,
our memories slowly leaking,
staining all we see,
the slow shriveling,
shrinking of our lives.

By the Way

- Ivan Berk



A woman's work is never done



God, I could use a little help down here.

The End of a Long Love Affair - Farewell to My Kenwood Garden
— Betsy Holleman Burke

This morning the hummingbird is busy in the *lonicera*, visiting each tiny fuchsia flower before darting high into the yellow wood. Long white blossoms drape the tree in a bridal veil. Creamy blooms cover the *kousa* dogwood at the west end of the garden, bookending this beautiful space of peace and quiet. This is my place, created after the 1989 wind storm that upended twelve giant oaks, crushed every shrub, every plant. It looked as if a bomb exploded but suddenly a densely shaded yard was filled with sun.

This rage of nature opened up a wonderful opportunity to design a landscape beautiful in every season, rich in color and texture, supplying flowers and foliage for floral arrangements. Like every love affair, there are highs – the glory of mature azaleas – and lows –deer destroying a perfect hosta border. Always, there is the anticipation of what each new season will reveal, what Mother Nature has wrought with mild winters, late frosts.

If a garden is a metaphor for life, this garden has endured every stage, bearing witness as it grew and matured. It sustained our family through the death of my husband, the loss of three dogs, marriage of two children, births of five grandchildren, my own re-marriage. It hosted too many showers, graduations, reunions, bar-be-cues, birthday parties to count. Easter eggs and lacrosse balls lie buried in the iris. Wedding gift peonies bloom as well as hundred year old lily-of-the valley transplanted from Tennessee.

When I look across the stone wall of the patio to the lush beds, memories abound and I laugh at my expectation of a smooth path to perfection and delight in nature's magical gifts: the hummingbird who arrived the afternoon of Vernon's wake and re-appears every spring; the fox sunning in the back yard after I prayed for one to rid me of rabbits; the coyote howling at a full moon as my old Husky and I walked late; the cardinal who banged into a window to scare his rival in the glass; the hundreds of birds who live here and feast on berries, briars and seeds planted for their sustenance.

As I prepare to leave my *magnum opus*, I wonder how I became that obsessive gardener who sacrificed fingernails, back and knees, who loved sweat-drenched shirts, filthy jeans. Was it the victory garden our family harvested before my father discovered golf? Or was it the passion of my grandmother and mother tending their rival pieces of earth?

The answer is the meditative quality, the single minded focus on making something beautiful, engaging fully with nature. Stress vanishes as all the senses are united in an act of creation. What a gift I have enjoyed all these years. A piece of my heart will always be in my Kenwood garden.

The Usual
- Dawn Lynn Snyder

The waitress plinks down the saucer and coffee cup. The customer, a woman, smiles politely. The waitress recognizes the woman and wonders when the man will join her. He's usually a few minutes late; the woman is usually checking the time on her phone, smiling but anxious. Today, she looks sad. She does not check her phone. Despite this, the waitress thinks the man will come. He always does.

The waitress returns to her place behind the counter to wait for other customers. She avoids looking at the woman. It is a slow morning, as most mornings are. The owner, who is in the kitchen cleaning up the morning's baking, wants to relocate. Needs to relocate. The woman is the only customer.

The door jingles as the man enters. He hesitates before walking over to the table. The waitress smiles at him when he glances over at her, but he does not smile back. He never does.

The man and the woman usually meet on Monday and Thursday; today is Wednesday. The waitress thinks they do not look like the spontaneous type, and experience tells her people rarely abandon their habits. At other coffee shops, in other cities, she identified customers by their drinks. Every morning, the same thing. She wonders what else will be different today.

She pretends to clean behind the counter, idly wiping at non-existent dust, while she surreptitiously watches the man and the woman. She knows the man will not order anything, so she does not approach. She sprays cleaner on the curved glass display and mentally chooses which pastries she will take home. The owner always bakes too much, out of habit or out of hope. The waitress does not try to guess which one. Both options have a hint of sadness, as options always do. Something is lost in the choosing.

The man leans back in the chair and folds his arms. Usually, he reaches across the table and takes the woman's hand, and they smile at each other. Not today.

The woman begins to talk in a low, halting cadence. The waitress cannot hear the words from where she stands, but she catches the meaning from the woman's tone. The woman takes a gulp of coffee, then another, and leaves the pale red stain of her bottom lip on the glazed ceramic. The waitress doesn't need to see it; she knows it's there; it always is.

The woman's hand shakes as she sits the cup back on its saucer. The waitress hears the rattle of the ceramic more than she sees the jittering of the hand. The man says something brief and rough, leans forward then back, uncrosses his arms then crosses them again. He waits, staring hard at the woman. The woman seems engrossed in the contents of her cup. The waitress watches them as she fills the nearly full napkin holders.

The woman replies, softly, and the waitress cannot even catch the tone. The woman keeps her eyes on her cup; she does not look at the man as he stands and leaves. They usually leave together. Not today.

The woman cries. Openly. She lifts her head and looks out the window, tears striding down her cheeks. She allows the drops to roll freely. She does not wipe them. She does not sniffle her nose. She moves her eyes to the door. The waitress wants the door to open; she wants the man to return. She wonders if the woman wants that, too.

The woman looks down at her coffee cup then tilts it up high, draining the contents into her mouth. The waitress knows to wait a minute before offering a refill. She doesn't want the woman to think she is watching too closely.

They both look up when the door opens.

The waitress expects that the man has returned. It is a different man though, and she puts on a smile to greet him. She has never seen this man before, and her smile is almost genuine because he is something else new on this unusual Wednesday. The man does not see her smile. He does not look at her. He only looks at the woman.

He appears older than the other man, shorter, a bit softer, with graying hair and tired eyes. The waitress reads recognition and surprise in the woman's reaction: Her eyes widen; she bends her knees under her and leans forward as if she is about to stand up. After a frozen moment, the woman releases her muscles and sits back in the chair. The waitress watches her as she watches the man's approach. He sits down in the chair so recently occupied by another.

The waitress wonders if he can feel the warmth of the other man.

His face appears calm, resigned, but his voice is strong and full of bass. The waitress can hear what he is saying. She could not hear the words of the other man.

This man is saying that he knows, has known, has followed for a while. He knows about the Mondays and the Thursdays. The waitress notices that their wedding rings match. The other man wore a gold band; this man wears silver, as does the woman.

The woman's lips move, but the sounds, the tones, do not reach the waitress.

The man says that he watched and hoped because it was Wednesday, because of the way the other man left.

The woman nods. Tears seep from her eyes, but she does not bow her head. She looks directly at the man; whether defiant or yielding, the waitress cannot tell. The man takes her hand, as the other man usually did, and holds it atop the table. He rubs his thumb over her palm, watching his finger massage circles across her skin. The woman bows her head; her shoulders shudder. He squeezes her hand.

In unison they stand, and the woman fishes in her purse with one hand, the other now intertwined with the man's, and drops money onto the table. The waitress doubts that she will see the woman again.

They leave. Together.

The waitress picks up the money and cup and saucer and pushes through the swinging door into the kitchen. The owner is too close to the door; it hits him and bounces back. The waitress throws up her free hand to block the return swing, but she unbalances the cup. It tilts off its saucer and plunks to the floor. It strikes the black non-slip mat with a dull thud.

The waitress picks up the cup and examines the crack which has neatly sliced the lipstick stain in two. The cup did not break. There is only a jagged crack which does not pass through to the inside; the cup will not leak; the damage is only external. But customers will complain about a cracked cup, and there is no way to mend it.

The waitress tosses the cup in the garbage can, then goes back to the front of the shop to wait for other customers. Over the years, she has trashed innumerable broken cups. It's nothing unusual.

Calling Prophecies
- Annie Lampman

Snow hangs heavy, waiting for release, the emptiness of sky stretched long and grey, the canyon's rough basalt tilled with swallow mud, the swell of her stretched skin – silvery paths ripped from naval to groin, radiating out in electric halo from her infant's wet head, his mouth calling prophecies, this stranger of her body reflecting everything and yet nothing of her. Joined in an embrace of skin and blood they offer the world new bare dimpled fullness, already wondering summer – that fertile worship of green, mud nests and beaks stretched wide open, forever calling more.

Crease
- Kelsey Englert

Look to canopies of leaved trees.
In their shyness, some will not
touch. Still, they brace for it.

Deep in the woods, I fold
a fallen leaf against itself
to check for symmetry.

Offer me two of your quarters.
Lean close. All beautiful
things need matched halves.

Late Fall Sunshine

- Wally. P.



A Fraud Examiner and an Aerialist Walked into a Bar
- Paul Lewellan

Benjamin called the night Kat arrived from New York and proposed drinks at the Blackstone, Tuesday evening at 7:00. *To celebrate your return.* Monday, with her last paycheck from Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, Kat bought a sleeveless black dress, dark hose, three-inch heels, and a red lace bra and panty set. To accent her modest breasts she wore the colored stone necklace he'd bought her in Amsterdam. She painted her nails scarlet, to distract him from her calloused hands and muscular arms.

Katherine "Kat" Kling glanced at her phone. It was 7:43. She looked at her empty pint glass. If he didn't appear in five minutes, she would pay her tab and go home. Benjamin had disappointed her yet again.

"Would you care to join me for dinner?"

Kat swiveled to face a tall slender man. He was mid-to-late-forties, about her father's age. "I beg your pardon?"

The man smiled. "I'm being presumptuous.... I know you're meeting someone...."

"And how would you know that?" Kat put a brittle edge on her voice. She'd had enough of men telling her what she was and was not doing.

"In the last ten minutes, three men have approached you. You've turned each away, even the last gentleman who was...." He crunched up his face theatrically as if struggling to find the word.

"Buff?" Kat suggested. She repressed a smile. The stranger was amusing.

"More like...."

"Hot?" she offered.

"You'd have to be the judge of that...." He furrowed his brows.

"Dangerous?" she suggested.

"Exactly." He paused for effect. "You like danger."

Kat felt her face flush. When Ben first approached her, she was a senior in high school, and he was her boyfriend's father. The risk of discovery, the secret meetings, the fear of exposure, had intensified everything, but especially the sex.

She took another look at the athletic looking stranger. The cut, fit, and fabric of his suit suggested it was custom made. His hair and beard were impeccably trimmed, his nails perfectly groomed. No wedding ring, but that didn't mean much.

"By joining me," he explained, "you'd be spared further annoyances."

"Maybe I find you annoying," Kat suggested coyly.

"Really?" He feigned surprise. "I've respected your personal space. I didn't rest my hand on your thigh like the last male; didn't try to stroke your shoulder patronizingly like the first...." He stepped back and opened his stance, arms extended, empty palms out. "I've nothing to hide."

Kat grinned. He *was* amusing.

She lowered her eyes to the bar, suddenly fascinated by her empty beer glass. Picking up the orange slice hanging on the lip, she squeezed it, stopped herself, dropped it into the glass, and looked up. "What are you proposing?"

"A fine meal, good conversation, and a distraction from, rather than a substitute for, the man who isn't here." Kat flinched at the reference to Ben. "After dinner you can call an Uber, and I'll walk the two blocks to my hotel where I'll scan my notes for tomorrow's interviews, and fall asleep reading a Jo Nesbo novel."

Kat blinked. It was tempting. She hadn't had supper, and she despised eating alone. "Perhaps that's what those men wanted, too?"

"Doubtful." He tilted his head and grinned. "At least I wouldn't lie about my marital status."

"Yes. That would be a plus." Kat slipped off her bar stool and grabbed the red leather clutch purse she'd purchased in Madrid. "Show me the way."

He stepped aside and swept his right arm toward a table set for one near the courtyard windows. "Your table await, Ms. Kling."

Kat stopped. "How do you know my name?"

He smiled politely. "I'm Gunner Johanson, in town to interview someone who won't want to talk to me. I'm forty-eight, divorced for three years, and I regularly eat here at the Blackstone. I am a generous and appreciative tipper. It is not my habit to pick up women, as Carlene, our server, will tell you if you ask her privately."

"But how do you know my name?"

"I read the newspaper. There was an article on you in this morning's online edition." He walked to his table. Kat, now even more curious, followed.

He eased out her chair and waited until she was seated before taking his seat. "Gunner?" she asked. "An unusual name."

"My birth name is George Jasper Johanson. Early in my career at John Reid and Associates, I earned the nickname Gunner because of my ability to elicit confessions. Eventually I set up my own investigative consulting firm. Gunner Johanson, CFE, sounded more marketable than George Jasper."

"CFE?"

"I'm a Certified Fraud Examiner, a specialist in Interview and Interrogation."

"I'm Kat Kling," she said, extending her right hand to shake his. "But then, you know that." Her grip was firm. "I'm an aerialist."

"Obviously."

Carlene was in her thirties with dark brown hair pulled back and held in place by ebony-lacquered chopsticks. She wore a black skirt hemmed above her knees, a starched white blouse, black bowtie, and a cotton apron that extended from her waist to her hemline. She put a second place setting on the table, a water glass, and a tulip shaped beer glass. She lifted a twenty-six-ounce bottle from the ice bucket and asked Kat, "May I?"

"Please." Carlene filled her glass with golden liquid. A creamy white head appeared. Kat noticed the high carbonation of the cloudy beer.

"And when you have a moment, another bottle, please. Then cut us off. My companion needs her wits about her, and I'm working in the morning."

After Carlene left, Gunner raised his glass and lifted his eyebrows urging Kat to do the same. She shook her head. "I'm not drinking anything until you explain."

"Fair enough." Gunner set his glass down. "In my line of work I make conversation. I don't do it out of social need. I'm actually very introverted. I make conversation to establish a baseline of nonverbal behaviors for the people I'm interviewing. They, of course, don't know that's what I'm doing." Kat was alert, following his explanation with a mix of amusement and curiosity.

"I read local newspapers on-line. That's where I found a feature on a young woman, a former state champion gymnastic, juggler and aerialist, graduate of a famous circus school in France, laid off when Ringling Brothers closed. While she was in town visiting her parents, she

entertained patients at the Children's Hospital. Her name, Kat Kling, was easy to remember."

"I see."

"I watched your Copenhagen performance on YouTube – beautiful aerial work."

The tension in her neck and shoulders relaxed. Kat raised her glass, took in the aroma of the beer – fruity, lightly yeasty with spices she couldn't identify. "This is lovely. More subtle than Blue Moon." She sipped delicately. "Thank you, Mr. Johanson."

"Gunner."

"Gunner." She took another drink and rolled the beer in her mouth before swallowing. The apple flavors persisted, followed by a hint of bitterness from the malt. After a third sip the slight sweetness pushed through and lingered. She lifted the bottle from the ice bucket and noted the pink elephant on the label. "Delirium Tremens?"

"Life is too short to drink bad beer."

"Of course, though honestly, I'm not much of a drinker."

"The men hitting on you were counting on that."

"I suspected as much."

Carlene returned and set a second bottle in the ice bucket. "Are you ready to order?"

"I'll have the pulled pork ravioli," Gunner said.

Kat asked Carlene. "What's that like?"

"It's our house specialty: smoked pulled pork with spinach, bacon, and onion, topped with a BBQ demi-glaze and aged white cheddar."

"That's a little heavy for me. Is there something you'd recommend?"

Carlene pretended to ponder the question. "The trout with the roasted corn relish is lighter and showcases our chef's talents with a hickory smoker."

"Delightful. I'll have the trout." Carlene left with their orders.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" Gunner asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You examined the menu at the bar. You closed it when you decided. So I'm curious why you asked for suggestions?"

"Maybe I wanted to establish Carlene's baseline behavior." She smirked. "I suspect she has more than a professional interest in you."

Gunner raised his glass. "Well played."

"So does that mean that the Jo Nesbo novel back at the hotel is only a placeholder until Carlene gets off work?"

"It's not that simple."

"She's not why you're here?"

"This restaurant is two blocks from my hotel, and the food here is excellent." He set down his glass. "Ms. Kling, I'm curious. You're dressed and accessorized to signal your, how should I put this delicately, availability."

Kat's anger flared. "I am not *available!*"

"You've fielded three offers..."

"Four, if you count yourself," she sneered.

"Fair enough." Gunner said. "But I have shifted my theory about whom you were meeting."

"Your theory?"

"I assumed you were meeting a young man, a peer, someone from high school, someone with unresolved issues. Perhaps your decision to attend circus school in France sidetracked a

relationship on the verge of fruition.”

Kat blinked. Gunner, she realized, was very good at what he did. “But you don’t think that anymore?”

“Oh, I know I’m right about the unresolved issues. But your simple black dress is intended to attract an older man. It isn’t a millennial mating dress. So when your date failed to show, you settled for me because I came close to being him.”

“An interesting theory,” she said flatly.

“Ah, so I’m right.”

“I said it was a theory, not that you were right.” Kat folded her arms across her chest protectively. She refused to consider that he might be right.

“The giveaway is the lack of a denial. If I was wrong, you would have told me.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Too late.” Gunner leaned toward her and tilted his head slightly. “So this man is your father’s business partner....”

“My father is a Lutheran minister....” Kat caught herself. She’d corrected him immediately when he was wrong, just as he’d predicted.

“Let’s explore the clichés, shall we? You’re meeting the man next door, the father of one of your girlfriends...?” Gunner saw the slightest physical reaction to his suggestion. “The father of a former boyfriend?” She nodded. “I had everything reversed. You didn’t risk the relationship by going to circus school; you went to France to end it.”

Mercifully the meals arrived before he could ask her more questions. Carlene refilled their glasses in silence as Kat stared at her plate. The server raised her eyebrows but Gunner waved her off.

“So, tell me about this circus school in Paris....”

As they ate the conversation became animated. Kat asked him about the criminals he’d caught. He deflected questions about his personal life, though he admitted he was the father of two college students.

“Nine months ago Benjamin, the man I was to meet, traveled to Italy for business,” she finally admitted. “He arranged to see me perform in Milan. After the show he took me to a local bistro, then back to his hotel. Suddenly it was like I’d never left him.” Kat daubed her mouth with her napkin, then folded it and set it on the table. “Do you want to know the irony? When I was his teenaged lover, I felt very adult. When we met in Italy, a lifetime and several relationships later, I felt like a child again.”

“Perhaps that’s what he wanted. The girl he’d seduced, not the woman she’d become.”

“It left a bad taste....”

“Still you joined Ringling Brothers to be back on this continent.”

“I knew it was a temp job. Everyone knew they were closing.” Kat picked up her beer, but didn’t immediately drink. She needed a clear head tonight. “The other irony: I was back in the States, but he couldn’t make time to see me. It wasn’t convenient.”

“It was a power play.”

“Oh, I knew that.” She set down the glass without drinking. “I have a job offer to teach at the gymnastics studio that I once went to. My parents think I should take it, but they don’t know about Ben.”

“Want to see a dessert menu, Gunner?” Carlene asked as she cleared away their plates.

“Two orders of your rum raisin bread pudding and two snifters of twenty-five-year-old Ron Zacapa XO. No ice cream tonight. Kat and I are watching our waistlines.”

“I can order for myself,” Kat snapped as Carlene walked away.

“Of course you can. I was out of line. I’ll call Carlene back, and you can pick our desserts.”

Kat waved him off. “No, that’s all right. It’s fine.” Bread pudding and rum would finish the meal nicely.

“After dessert I’ll call an Uber for you.”

“What if I’d prefer to join you at your hotel?” she said coyly. “You were my best offer.”

“This evening was never about seduction,” Gunner said, gesturing to the bistro, the table, and the two of them. “You selected your outfit to feed your date’s desire, but you had no intention of satisfying it.” He finished his beer. “But thank you for the offer.”

Kat’s pushed her pint aside. “Why would a man your age – married, single, or divorced – turn down a proposition like mine?”

“My age? You say that as if I were elderly.”

“Close enough.”

Gunner seemed amused. “Short answer? A man my age wouldn’t.... You’re gorgeous.” His answer momentarily satisfied her. “But inevitably conversations with someone your age turn to college sororities, mind-numbing entry level jobs, bands I’ve never heard of, or their last bachelorette party.” She started to interrupt him, but he waved her off. “Frankly, young women are not very interesting. After sex, then what?”

Kat wasn’t amused. “I’m twenty-five. After high school I went to circus school in Paris. I’m an aerialist who works without a net. I’ve performed in ten countries on three continents. Since I parted with Benjamin, I’ve had a series of lovers who have nothing but praise for my acrobatic skills.”

“And so someone my age,” Gunner interjected, “might convince himself that a relationship with you would be different. As a bonus he could prove his virility and be the envy of his peers.”

“However...?” Kat was confused. This wasn’t the way the conversation was supposed to go.

“You could never satisfy him.”

Carlene appeared with their desserts. “Apparently I’ve arrived just in time,” she teased. “Judging from your expressions, the conversation has taken an ugly turn.” She placed sniffers of rum and the bread puddings in front of them, then backed away.

Kat refused to break eye contact. “So why does Ben pursue?”

“He relishes his ability to control you. Your youth is an inconvenience. Great sex is a bonus.”

“He doesn’t control me,” she hissed.

“And yet you are here tonight, dressed to please him, faithful to your infidelity with him.”

“And what about the other men tonight?”

“You appeared young, vulnerable, and available. They had nothing to lose by asking.”

“No one in this place was looking for a relationship?”

“Hell no. That’s what girlfriends, wives, and co-workers are for. Who needs another relationship to complicate their lives? But anonymous sex? Men can’t get enough of it.” Gunner raised the snifter, rolled the rum gently, inhaled the aroma and drank. “What about your side of the equation. What’s in it for you?”

“Benjamin was..., correction, is...charming. Handsome. Bright. Successful. Confident. And well-adjusted.”

“No he isn’t.” Gunner set his snifter down. “He seduced his son’s girlfriend. A man who is all those things wouldn’t have.”

Kat held her snifter near her lips and inhaled the aroma. She drank. “Oh my.... This is rum? It’s like cognac. I never knew....” She set the glass down. “What else don’t I know?”

“He’s had other affairs. When these became routine, he met you, his son’s lover, the pastor’s daughter, an aerialist, a forbidden underage nymph....”

“That’s so cynical,” she said, trying to dismiss what he was suggesting.

Carlene reappeared. “How is the bread pudding?”

“Honestly,” Kat said, “we haven’t tasted it.” She noted the shift in Gunner’s posture and turned to Carlene. “It’s none of my business, but is there something between you and Gunner?”

“I was once married to a very violent man,” Carlene acknowledged. “Mr. Johanson rescued me and put him away for thirty years. When I moved here, Gunner arranged for this job and found a walk-up apartment that my son and I could afford. He eats here when he’s in town and tips me an obscene amount.”

“Tell me confidentially,” Kat lowered her voice, “do you think he’s trying to seduce me?”

“Only in your dreams, Sweet Pea.” Carlene looked over to Gunner who was smiling. “Gunner prefers more complicated women.” She picked up the two untouched dishes of bread pudding. “Let me warm these for you. You’ve obviously got things to work out. I’ll comp a couple scoops of ice cream, just to sweeten the conversation.”

Kat considered her options. Two of the three men who’d hit on her were gone. The third was chatting up a bored brunette. She sipped her rum.

“Why do you think Benjamin wants to see me?”

“He wasn’t finished with you. He liked being in control. He wanted that feeling back.”

She took a deep breath and sighed. She’d suspected as much.

They sat in silence until Carlene arrived with the steaming desserts, each with a rapidly melting scoop of hand-churned vanilla bean ice cream. They focused on eating until, finally, Kat pushed her plate away. “I suppose I lucked out. I don’t know what I would do if he showed up.”

“You should give it some thought.” Kat turned in the direction Gunner was staring. Standing in the doorway was a middle-aged man in a tailored gray suit. Their eyes met.

Much to Kat’s surprise, Benjamin walked over to her dinner companion and greeted him in a booming voice, “Gunner Johanson, what a surprise! Now I won’t have to drink alone.” The man turned to Kat. “And who’s your lovely young companion?”

“Oh, Bennie,” Gunner said, “you are such a terrible liar. Why do you even try?” He laughed. “Pull up a chair and join us. Kat and I are drinking well-aged rum, but I believe you’re a martini man. I’ll wager Carlene brings one before you can even ask.”

Kat looked to Gunner and then back to Benjamin. “You know each other?”

“I do consulting work for his boss,” Gunner explained.

Benjamin appeared uncomfortable. “Carl didn’t tell me you were in town.”

“Must have slipped his mind.” Gunner looked from the young woman to Benjamin. “I understand Kat used to date your son?”

“I don’t know what she’s told you....”

“Go home, Ben,” Kat said. “Staying will only make things more awkward.”

“But Kat...,” he sputtered. He looked at the grinning fraud examiner and then back to the young aerialist. “You and Gunner...?”

“What can I say? I have a weakness for older men.”

Gunner started laughing. “Oh, Bennie, she’s a much better liar than you’ll ever be.”

Carlene arrived with Benjamin’s martini.

“I think,” Gunner told her, “I’m ready for the check. And put Bennie’s drink on my tab.” He turned to the businessman. “I didn’t expect to see you here. If I had, I would have dined elsewhere.” He motioned to Kat. “And when I struck up a conversation with this young woman, I failed to make the connection, until it was too late. She’s right. If you stay, it will get awkward.”

“I’m going back to Paris,” Kat told Ben. “I’ve been offered a contract with Cirque d’Hiver.”

“I see.” Benjamin hesitated. “And what about the job at the gymnastics studio?”

“Too risky.”

His face flushed. He picked up the martini and downed it. His iPhone started buzzing. “That’s probably my wife, wondering where I am,” he said. “Will I see you in the morning, Gunner.” Gunner nodded.

Benjamin turned to Kat. “Nice seeing you again, Ms. Kling. I’ll give your regards to my son.”

“Don’t,” she said sharply. “He knows about us.”

The businessman withered at the suggestion. “You look lovely tonight, Kat.”

“I had a date, but he stood me up,” she said.

After Benjamin left, Carlene appeared with the bill. “You’re my last table. I’m checking out after you settle up. So, can I drop Gunner before giving the young lady a ride home?”

“Don’t you two have plans?” Kat asked. She was confused.

“We’re meeting for breakfast in the morning. Tonight he’ll put his notes together for tomorrow’s interview.”

“Exactly so.”

“Plus, the ride to your parents’ home will give us a chance to get acquainted. It seems that we both have a thing for older men, fatherly types....”

“Tired old farts,” Kat added.

“Exactly.” Carlene picked up Gunner’s bill and his American Express card. “Be back in a sec.”

Linger a Bit
- Claire Scott

Linger a bit & I will sing you my song
shaped over seventy years.
You turn away.
I understand
you are not yet ready for the song of an old lady,
her blade of life grown dull;
not yet ready to mourn your barely-started life
with songs of loneliness & loss.

Can you see the world leaning away
(no forwarding address),
can you see my crack of hope sealing,
the final light flickering;
can you feel the night's chill burn
as black pillows descend?

It is time to count out pills
eat them one by one.
Before you leave,
learn from this old lady
Listen to the music calling you.
Let love strum the strings
. of your heart.

Surrounded by Daffodils
- Barb Brooks

Toast brown, he and the mule plow ridges
for tobacco. A sweet spring flows
from the hills to his forty acres.
Waiting for autumn's crop, the weathered barn
stands empty. Mornings, his wife tends
chickens, scatters corn, collects eggs.
She makes biscuits and milk gravy
from last evening's meal, hangs wash to dry.

Now, driving past on the four lane – all that is left
is the listing barn covered with poison ivy,
chinking between the timbers dried
and falling out, metal roof peeled open.

Furrows are filled with Little Blue Stem
and Queen Anne's Lace.
And the old stone foundation encircled
by the daffodils she had planted.

Things of the Past
- James Piatt

The din of the city's
Raucous reality fades into
A peaceful silence as
I stroll the forest's paths.
Only memories are talking,
And the wind carries them
Across the silence, where
My waning mind sees visions
Of things of the past...

Once Upon a Time in Berlin

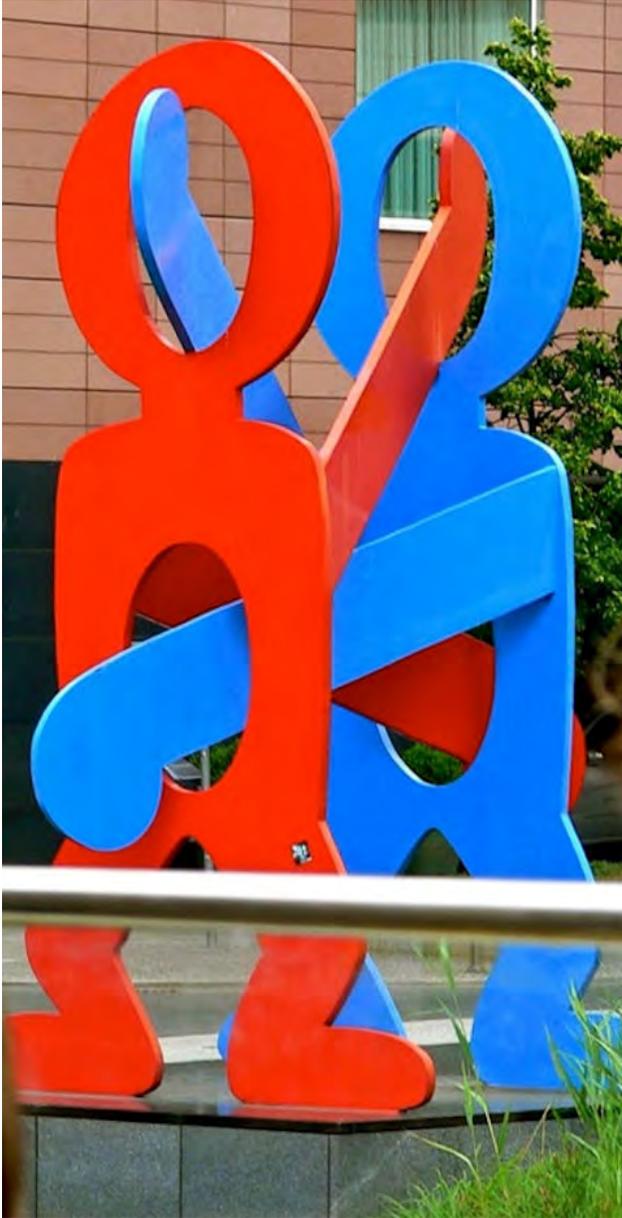
- Joe Glaser



A chance encounter among mutual acquaintances



A stroll along the avenue



A lasting embrace

Above the Tension Zone
- Marty Marcus

The couple were alone at the water's edge, nothing but the North Woods behind and before them. No people, no buildings, only the boat-rental shack tucked away in the forest some fifty yards up from the shore, and behind that, by the road, the tree-shrouded resort. The close-mouthed proprietor who had signed them up without speaking more than five words now must have returned to whatever the solitary duties might be in such a remote hostelry. Even in high season, it seemed to be absent of guests.

The woman peered down, appraising her stiff, new L.L. Bean high water pants and spotless deck shoes, then looked about as if for the mirror of another woman's approval. This was just a reflex, of course, since for the time being she would have to depend on her male partner for her needs. At the moment he was not paying any attention to her; he squatted on the dock studying the contents of the modest vessel they had rented.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Russell," she said, this remark successfully winning his attention, but at some small price, perhaps. He frowned at her. She held out her elbow for him to help before stepping awkwardly into the fourteen-foot aluminum boat. "Jesus, it's wilderness out here."

Russell shook off his earlier resentment. "But that's the idea," he laughed. "That's why we're here..." then giving in to a meaner impulse, "... remember? to experience *nature*?"

While he fiddled with the outboard motor, she scanned the treetops as if there she might still spot the comforting presence of a sylvan skyscraper or even a cell tower. She was a person not used to being outside of a city, or a busy suburb. But here in the Upper Peninsula the woods stood thick, green and monotonous, as threatening as a massed army as far as the eye could see. "I don't know," she said. "We could have found something a little bit more populated than this."

"Are we going to have an argument, Pamela? This was something we both wanted to do. Damn this thing. Maybe I should go ask the guy to start it for us."

Russ was short and round-shouldered, in fact rounded-off just about every place. Round-headed, round-rumped, round-bellied. Not fat, just round. Not a straight plane anywhere along the route of Russ. Even in his work he was sometimes described by resentful competitors as having round heels, meaning the shameless ability to turn his loyalties or arguments one hundred eighty degrees whenever it seemed expedient to do so. Not necessarily a bad quality in a sales rep. Russ was not just any sales rep. Big ticket. He sold six and seven figure office systems to national outfits.

"Do you think that guy was an Indian?" Pamela asked. She, in contrast to Russ, had a narrow, patrician look with high cheekbones and a well-dieted figure. She had the kind of sharp face that might even be called pretty by some. An executive in a public relations agency specializing in insurance accounts, she and Russ lived and worked on the hot pavements of St. Louis. They were husband and wife, fiftyish with no children.

"He didn't look anything like an Indian. Why would you think that?" Russ yanked the engine's rope a couple more times without success.

"I know. It's just that he didn't seem to want to talk...just sort of grunted like Indians do."

Russ was glaring at the lifeless engine now. "My guess he was some kind of Scandinavian. An old Norwegian or a Finn maybe. They're not known for being gabby either, I believe."

“Well how do they expect to attract customers with such a sourpuss attitude? No wonder their resort looks empty.”

They had surprised themselves one boiling Missouri day by saying “What the hell, why not?” in agreeing to drive some six hundred miles for a plunge into northern scene and temperature. The locals joked that the North Woods was “above the tension zone.” Escape from tension was especially what Pamela and Russ had thought they needed when they left St. Louis.

Deciding to give it one more try, he jerked the rope. A reluctant growling noise told them the motor was finally going to co-operate, and, after some tinkering with the choke, Russ steered them out of the little cove toward open water.

They saw no other crafts on the lake’s broad expanse. “My God,” Russ said with an unbelieving shake of his head, “we’re all alone out here.”

“Yes, it’s spooky isn’t it,” Pamela said, misunderstanding him.

“Spooky? It’s wonderful. Who would even dare to hope for such a thing. To have a whole body of water all to yourself.”

That thought did nothing to reassure Pamela. Sadness and resignation joined anxiety in her expression, producing a clammy look, like a tray of cafeteria food gone cold.

“I’m going to open her up, see what she’ll do.” He twisted the throttle on the heavy, 35 horsepower motor. The small boat jumped forward, opening a long white wedge in the quiet blue surface of the twinkling lake.

“You’re going too fast, Russell,” she called over the racketing motor and wind rush. The noise made it easy for him to pretend not to hear. She called again, louder. “Please, Russ. It’s too fast. Damn it!” Russ was now occupied with turning the boat in a long figure eight, the loops of the eight dipping the gunnels and increasing Pamela’s anxiety. “You bastard. Stop this, damn you, you macho jerk!”

He reluctantly cut their speed. “Okay, okay,” he said lightly. He was just a guy playing a guy’s game. “I didn’t know you were so fearful.”

“Fearful? *Fearful?*” She had to repeat his unpalatable word to clear her mouth of it. “Oh, so are you my therapist now... Nature boy?” She fell into a sullen silence. The boat putt-putted over several more acres of the long lake before they spoke again.

“We’re out of place here,” she muttered at long last.

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t belong here. I don’t anyway. We shouldn’t have come. We’re out of our element.”

“That’s crap. We came for a change of scene. That’s what we’re seeing. The truth is you just don’t like that’s it’s me driving the boat, isn’t it?” He offered her the tiller. “Here. Would you feel better doing the driving? I won’t mind if you do.”

But, as if to match the distance in their thinking, she remained as far from him as was possible in a fourteen-foot boat. She was a self-shriveled thing sitting up there in the tight little wedge of the bow. She said, “We came for relaxation. I am not relaxed at all. In fact, I feel more wound up out here than normal.”

He saw it was time to drop his playful attitude and called up his sincerest tone. “Okay, I promise I’ll take it easy with the boat. Come on, Pams. Give it a chance. Give yourself a few minutes to adapt. Why don’t you try focusing your eyes on the shore? There’s so much in the woods to see but you have to really focus.”

She didn’t give it a glance, possibly because it was his suggestion. Her expression said she was convinced he was only pretending to know about any of this, that he really didn’t know

any more than she did about nature. “Just looks like a wall of trees to me.” She sat stiffly, straight up on the backless seat.

“Breathe this fabulous air, honey, tune in to the sounds. Wait...hear that?”

“No. What?”

“Listen....it’s a tree cracking.” He whirled in place. “Look, there it is, that birch there on the shore. See? It’s tipping. It’s gonna come down. Incredible. There it goes! It’s got to be a beaver. Just cut it down this minute.”

“A beaver? Can you see the beaver?” Still she wouldn’t look.

“No. It’s too far away, but it’s got to be a beaver. A tree wouldn’t just fall down all by itself like that on a calm day.”

“I don’t believe it was a beaver. It’s farfetched. You are a child.”

“Jesus, you are starting to remind me of the sourpuss Finn back there at the boat rental.”

That drew a dry smile across her lips, but a smile. He seized the small opportunity to brighten the mood. “Come on, Pams, lighten up. It’s a beautiful day. We’re perfectly safe. It’s time to start enjoying ourselves.”

At that, Pamela moved her head around freely for the first time as if a padlock had been removed that until now held neck and head rigidly together. She peered out over the open water for some time.

“Well,” she said, “you’re probably not going to believe this but now I see a dog.”

“What? A *dog*?” Russ’s round head revolved atop his rounded shoulders. “Where? Can’t be a dog. There’s not a house on this whole lake. Where there’s no people, there’s no dogs.”

“A wild dog then. I think I know a dog when I see one.”

“There are no domestic wild dogs. We’re not in Africa.”

She pointed to a spot out on the water, jiggling the index finger. Russ’s eyes followed it to a rippling about an eighth of a mile away.

“A dog,” she said. “A dog swimming across the lake.”

He saw something, too. A raising of the eyebrows and pouting lips said he semi-agreed. Whatever it was, it didn’t look like a duck or a loon. “But what would a pet be doing out here in the wilderness?”

She jumped with both feet on her opportunity. “Well...uh, maybe it’s stupid like we are.”

Russ turned the boat toward the sight.

She was laughing. “Maybe it’s a brainless Borzoi. Or a ...dim-witted dachshund.”

He ploughed the boat dogwards.

The berries were not in the expected place, the fat dark berries with the pungent juice that appeared at this time every year, this the ninth year of his adult life. Perhaps others had come earlier and taken them all. He hunted high and low for them, poking into stiff summer brush and wiry tangles, pushing them aside with his broad head. He growled at the sting of thistle that scratched his large brown eye. The afternoon sun lit up the woods in pools where it breached the sparse-leafed birches. But its light illuminated no clusters of juice-filled wild fruit. It brought a thick heat, however, and with it the thirst that is not quenched by water alone.

He twisted his sinewy neck upward as if to forage the sky and, finding no sustenance there, let out a low moan. For a long while he stood stock-still in a pose of contemplation. The air around him did not move. No intelligent breeze came as it had other times, carrying a message of nature’s change of plan. At last, almost with reluctance, his right shoulder chose a

direction, drawing the rest of him sideways into motion.

On flat feet he trotted a straight path over jumbles of dead logs, stumps, years of accumulated leaves. He hardly seemed to have a need to jump. He cleared every obstacle without visible effort, or every obstacle cleared itself away for him. His six foot length stretched to ten in shadow. Black and blacker, they ran in tandem, silent as clouds across the sun, weaving, as they passed, a double strand across the trunks of pine, maple and birch. They ran until the woods gave way to water.

The big water was quiet this afternoon. From a high, cloudless sky the blazing sun had pierced through to bottom, silvering the gravel, tipping the somber water weeds with gold, revealing its creatures as in an aquarium. His left front paw scraped at the shallow water, but drink was not his need. He examined the horizon, measuring the distance across. Low at that range, but plainly in sight, the trees of another forest. He might yet find the dark berries there.

His four hundred pounds slipped lightly into the peaceful water. He waded easily until his tremendous paws no longer touched the bottom but pulled against the lake. His great head tipped upward, ears testing the breeze, until he determined the shortest angle and launched himself toward the opposite shore.

The water cooled as he reached the greater depths. The coolness aided his effort, the churning of his machinery, those four limbs plunging piston-like, unseen, his serene face belying the work below. Soon there would be forage. The pungent drupelets in the new forest.

Russ slowed the boat as they approached within fifty yards of the swimming dog. The slowing pace brought Pamela's laughter down with it until only a trace of that private gaiety remained on her narrow features. Both their eyes fell on the broad wake of the animal at once.

"My god," she said in a husky voice that seemed not to belong to her.

"I knew it couldn't be a dog," he said.

"Don't. Don't go too near it, Russ."

Russ was thinking.

As though she could read his mind, she cautioned, "Don't try any of your Boy Scout stuff. That's a real wild animal there."

"But don't you see. It's harmless out here in the water. It's not a bear's natural environment."

"It looks like an awfully good swimmer to me."

"We'll circle it. See how it reacts. What an opportunity. A National Geographic moment. We'll be like naturalists." Russ took them in wide circle, finally fronting the animal at some distance, but close enough so that they could easily look into its eyes.

Aware of them in its path now, the creature veered in a direction that would take it across a wider stretch of water, but still on aim to the opposite shore.

"Look, you've forced it off course," Pamela said. "It's afraid of the boat."

But Russ was transfixed, staring at the bear, while the bear's eyes alternately swept to them and back to the shifting horizon ahead of him. "Shush," he said. "If anything scares it, it's your whining voice."

"We're too close to it, Russ. Move the boat out farther."

Instead, he moved closer, lowering the speed, but removing his hand from the tiller. "First let me get some pictures of this. Get the camera out of the bag."

Seeing his determination, Pamela decided her best hope for safety was to act quickly, even though it meant going along with him. She obediently rummaged through his sport bag and

fished out the Fuji.

“Bring it to me,” he ordered.

She scrambled over the intervening seats, holding the camera out as far as she could with one arm, while using the other to balance herself. “Hurry up,” she said, “Please!” handing it to him; then she used two hands on the gunnels to support her return to the bow.

Russ lifted the camera to his eye. He adjusted the focus, then brought the camera down to change the exposure. His concentration was so strong he did not recognize the sudden odd movements of the craft now without a helmsman. He did not hear the thin, rising, soprano noises coming from the other end of the boat. When he clicked to full zoom and peered through the lens once more, the boat thumped under him and began an erratic swinging movement. He lost his balance, dropping the camera in order to break his fall and to keep himself inside the boat.

“Oo, ooh, oooooh,” Pamela’s wordless cries seemed to surround them as they spun and lurched in a self-made maelstrom. Before his head slammed against the Evinrude and unconsciousness came, Russ noticed the odd red bubbling that had surfaced around the boat.

Once or twice before he had made this trip. Now he trusted his body to stay afloat across the wide water until the moment when his paws would sink into the sandy bottom once again.

When the obstacle appeared before him he let it have its way. He could not skip over it as he would in the forest. It was not the low boughs of a tree he could crouch beneath to pass under. Instinct told him he was beyond the point where his strength was enough to take him back across the distance he had come. The huge object in his path made a horrible noise. It belched a strong dangerous breath across the water. Its paddling legs spun with the power of ten of his kind, so strong they produced currents of their own.

He made to bypass the creature, but it came even closer and was quickly upon him. Its heavy head butted him at the shoulder, forcing him under the water. Its broad armored belly scraped his nose and eyes as it passed over him. He raised a paw to hold it off, but it was seized by the beast’s own paw, then twisted and ripped as though in a mouth full of teeth instead of the clutch of a limb. For a long while he was helpless to release himself, and the underwater world spun with him in a dizzy dance. Through a growing red cloud he became aware of a desperation for air. With one giant effort he freed the mangled forepaw, then with empty lungs and three useful legs, was barely able to churn to the surface.

He took the air’s sweet life into himself with affirming groans. A short distance away he could see his adversary was spinning helplessly in place. In the struggle he had evidently wounded it. He turned and continued his journey to the far shore. After a time, a high-pitched wailing followed him across the water. This pained cry had replaced the beast’s rough, confident growl of earlier.

At last the shore rose up before him. His hind legs found the sandy bottom first. Holding his injured forelimb close to him, he let his weight down carefully on the opposite foot. He labored in this manner through the shallows until he reached the pebbly strand. On the narrow beach, for the first time he could see to his wounds. Many fleshy cuts. The worst, a half severed claw. He investigated it with his tongue. It did not quite dangle. It might yet heal to bone. He rose on his back legs to his full height and shook water from himself, showering the shoreline trees as he did. He stretched to the ends of his six foot length. He yawned. He returned to his three-footed stance. Very slowly he tested some of his weight on the damaged paw. Once more he shook off a spray of water. He sniffed at the air and, on the first breeze, discovered the promise of his day’s exploration.

To Pamela's relief, during its ordeal, the motor had finally stopped on its own. After having a long, miserable cry, she was at least grateful that they had not capsized. Now she did the best she could. Try as she might, however, she could not revive Russ. The blow to his head had knocked him cold. He lay as heavy and wet in the bottom of the boat as some enormous exhausted fish. She tried to move him to a more central position in the boat, to make him more comfortable, but his round figure was pried in tightly and would not budge.

She made a few half-hearted attempts to restart the motor. She guessed it must be broken. She tried the oars. But her thin arms were no match for the back-heavy boat, dragging the living Russ and the dead weight of the silenced engine. She quickly gave it up and took her seat at the bow once again. It was the smallest, least comfortable seat, but the unbalanced boat had seemed to be dipping dangerously at the stern. She decided to drop the anchor, maybe better not to allow the boat to drift. "Oh damn you. Damn you," she muttered to her insensible husband.

She could spot nothing near or far on the lake or on the shore that might suggest a human presence. It seemed pointless to call out for help. Surely when they did not return, the resort would send out a search boat. There were plenty of hours yet before dark. Surely they would be found before dark.

Wrecking Ball
- Joanne Faries

jagged cracks in the edifice
terms it "minor" hip pain, tightness, nothing BIG
groan in the morning, ease muscles in the shower
shake it off, refuse to concede

oh time - the wrecking ball takes huge swings
slams the spine, loses five inches
tweaks twisted hip, oh the ache
swollen ankles, shuffled steps

muster energy, muscle through
ball rams harder, arthritic wrists
brain churns, keeps pace, no dementia creep
mixed blessing of awareness equals frustration

tick-tock clock, pendulum swing
pills, reactions, pills for the reactions

STOP the inevitable wrecking ball

Visitor
- Karen Holmes

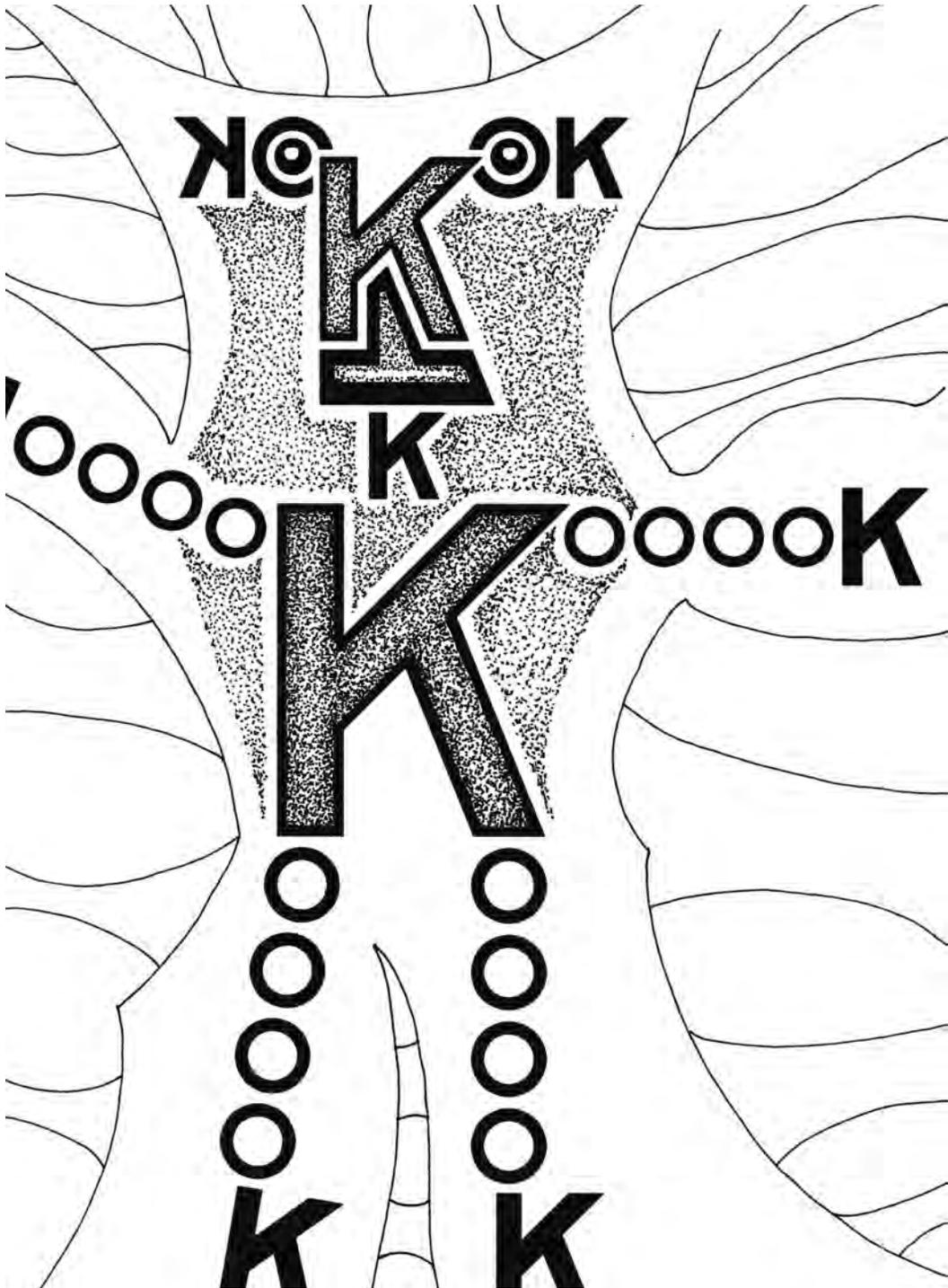
A bare branch lounges
in my Adirondack chair
under the Japanese maple –
gray, elegant:
Comforting to me,
now without a husband,
a good omen
in my walled garden
cocooned by snow.

Appeared in *Town Creek Poetry*

Letter People

- Denny E. Marshall





On the Rocks

- Bruce Harris



Screen Shot
-Mark Danowsky

I wish you were in the passenger's seat
when music shapes the space

Attempts to salvage with new eyes
catch us in the grip of curated nostalgia

Remembrance as a souvenir
with a lost reference point

Rough gems slow worn smooth
as the rapids of experience wash over us

Roots Run Deep

-Joanne Faires





The New Couple
- Lisa Marie Brodsky

We sit in a restaurant –
a carnival, really,
the circus, Carnegie Hall.
Dressed in our finest silk –
well, flannel.

You sport a tie,

I a rosebud

in my hair.

All right – a bun pinned

with a pencil. You

in a New York tee.

I ask first what you'd like me

to know about you

and you peer into

the clear pool of your soda –
an ocean, really,

are you drowning?

and say, "I'd want you to know that
I'm not perfect –
that I'm flawed, really"

adding while meeting my gaze,

my look-back, my blushing cheeks

and plate-round eyes

(twin satellites coming home)

"I'd tell you that you're

really quite wonderful.”

We sit still smiling –
dancing, really,
with the trees so tall
the earth so warm
so safe to tread upon.

Have a Seat

- Tim Prosch



Things That Slay Me

- Barry Basden

The loveliness of the garden. Morning coffee there. Wine in the evening. How quickly late-season creeping jenny covers a hanging basket. A squirrel's nest high in the post oak. Sparrows waiting at dusk for me to go inside so they can roost on the ceiling fans. Watching from a kitchen window while the squirrel chomps on the porch rugs and, despite myself, thinking of pellet guns. Carly, bless her, giving vain chase. Carly, who in her youth could jump high enough to touch the top of the door, no longer able to get up on the sofa. Leaves falling. Shadows. Mauve fronds of ornamental grass swaying in the north wind. Unanswered messages to your distant hospital room.

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.
-
- 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.

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