

Front Porch Review



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Aid to Dependent Poets
- Ron Singer

The other night,
at a reading
in Greenwich Village,
I helped an old poet.
He was short, wide, dissolute,
a disreputable denizen
of a village that still is one.

He wore suspenders — “braces” —
beneath his faded shirt,
and a poet’s hat,
a Brooklyn Dodgers’ cap.
His hair was stringy, long and gray.

“I like this room,” he said.
“It’s like a railroad car.”
He had something there.
The room was long,
narrow, dimly lit, and red.
“But I don’t like how
they kick you out
before the next act.”

The poet had no front teeth,
but he laughed, anyway
— often, phlegmy, loud —
without covering his mouth,
a poet with yellow fangs
framed by a desperado beard.
I helped him navigate
the single step down toward
the podium and the mike.
He leaned heavily
on a big, gnarled cane,
as if to vault with it.
The step was small,
and painted yellow.

“That’s not so bad,”
he said, sliding down,
and landing with a thump.
“I got here early
because of the bus schedule.

So I already had a few.”

My role was to carry
his glass of wine (red).
He settled down
on a folding chair
at a little table,
where I placed the wine.
Retreating to my own table
in the back, next to the bar,
I waited for his turn to read.

That was the least I could do
for Art, to further
the cause of Poetry.
Aid to Dependent Poets:
This poet probably
has no dental plan,
one of many Americans
who lack health-care coverage
of any ilk, however poor
(the plans – and people).
These many are, in turn,
among many, many more
citizens of the world
who lack any plans, at all
— or, for that matter, any hope.

But not this poet. Oh, no!
A gentle, fierce, very funny fellow,
he had a poetry plan.
When his number came up,
singing like a bird, croaking, too,
and still loaded, he had us locked
into the world of his words.
Singing, swaying, swelling,
he ruled the roost and room.

Amen

- Geoff Anderson

Tonight, the doorway frames a still of you,
asleep in silence waiting to be snapped. On its own,
it cannot tell of a table splayed with sweet potato,
graces pressed through joined hands, a chorus of Amen.
I missed that word, flying over Appalachia;
the last strum of a collapsing arpeggio
before a meal. Amen is something to be shared,
regardless of belief, like small talk, fish, or bread.
When absent, its weight hangs in the air,
a chandelier spent by the switch.
Once the first roll is sliced, the plates fill
and glasses empty, it feels too late
to claim, like an apology, or
even worse, regret.

Depictions

- Bud Sents





Cecilia had a brightness
- Stephanie Guo

”swallows sip speed and night”
borrowed from Gottfried Benn,
translated by Michael Hofmann

Cecilia had a brightness, a shimmer swallows
mistook for the sun. They’d flutter near, sip
the dew from nearby bushes, speed
away when she returned to the loft. And
then Edison, no, Tesla, invented electricity. Suns, all night.

Change, Perception, and the Perception of Change
- Amy Saia

Edison Lightfoot sat nursing a beer at the Three Clovers Pub when a beautiful college-aged student came up to his table and halted in place. It looked to him like she might be a little lost, but the way she stared hinted at something much more urgent. He asked the usual questions: *Are you meeting someone? Looking for the bathroom? Do I know you? Can I buy you a drink?* At last she sat in the chair opposite his.

“You could grow your hair out,” she said. “I’d like it like that. Older men think they should cut it short, but you’d be so beautiful with long hair.”

“It takes a long time to grow.”

“I have time. Here’s what else you should do.”

“Hmm?”

“You should get rid of those new-style glasses and wear something vintage, like Teddy Roosevelt. Do that...” she said, sliding the frames from his nose and placing them on the table, “and stop using fake tan cream, and *don’t* whiten your teeth anymore. I hate perfectly white teeth. Oh!” Her eyes deepened. “Grow a beard.”

He felt at his chin, at the bare skin with just a hint of stubble underneath. His ex had always told him a beard felt dirty, adding that it made him look like a boring philosopher. “Fuck Socrates,” she’d said. Indeed, she hadn’t — anytime a prickly hair made its way to the surface.

“Anything else I should change?” he asked.

“That’s all. I can’t tell you about the things I can’t see.”

“Sure I can’t buy you a drink?”

She nodded her head real slow then stood to leave. He tried to stand, too, but his sciatica throbbed like a rabid cat under his skin; he remained seated with a fake look of calm. “So, I grow my hair out, grow a beard, get new glasses...what’s all this for?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” And then she was gone.

Two months passed. Edison sat down at the same table as before. He ordered a beer, but not the light version. He’d convinced himself that the standard of a typical man tasted like cold, filtered piss. No, a dark, full-bodied beer is what he liked to drink now. It came, and he sat there sucking through its amber frothiness. It was the same table, same type of week, day, evening.

His hair was past his shoulders now, conditioned so thoroughly that every strand shimmered under the string lights that hung from the Three Clovers’ ceiling along with a collection of eclectic, junky decorations. He’d also started drinking coffee again so his teeth were no longer an obnoxious bluish-white like skim milk. His last step had been to search the Internet for a pair of 1930’s style, wire-rimmed glasses. They were a perfect fit.

Now, he waited. When she saw him, she sat with an expression of satisfied melancholy. “You look...better than good. You look...dashing and sexy and irresistible. It’s amazing, because I thought it would be impossible, but you never really know how things are going to turn out. You hope.”

Gordon felt his chest swell with pride. Many years had passed since a woman had described his appearance with such glowing appraisal. He felt something else swell as well. “So, now that I’ve done all of this, can you at least tell me your name?”

“Violet.”

“Just Violet?”

“No, not just Violet. Violet Dorchester.”

“Violet Dorchester. That’s a lovely name. Now will you tell me why you — “

“When I saw you that night, I had a vision of what it would be like to make love to you, but the *you* in my dream was a better version of the you sitting there in front of me. And now that you look just like the *you* in my dream, everything is perfect. And now we can make love.”

“Uh — “ Gordon fumbled with his wallet so he could fish out some money for the waitress. He hoped she took fifties. “Should we go?”

Violet nodded, still caught up in her beautiful melancholy. Rising, she waited for Gordon to do the same. That’s when his sciatica again made its cruel entrance into his life. Born from years of sitting in an office chair thinking up ad campaigns for EverLife Batteries. Made worse by too much liquor. And now any time he got the least bit excited, his body spasmed, a serrated knife cutting through his spine. He tried to stand without screaming, but the pain was so intense he couldn’t help the usual groan.

“Oh, you must not exercise. Getting out of that chair seems like a lot of work for you.”

“I *do* exercise,” he replied, using the last bit of breath in his left lung. “I do yoga.” That was a lie. But he didn’t feel guilty. Not at all. He then replicated a pose he’d seen on an early morning news program; hands together above his head pointing to the sky; leg hiked up on the other in a delicate balance. The sciatica throbbed, and Gordon fell to the floor in convulsions of pain.

“You see, this is why I usually ask men to stand before the trial period. I was very lenient and sent you off without a full examination. I’m so sorry, but this just isn’t going to work.” She repeated again how sorry she was but Gordon lay there like an injured dog.

“Can you at least help me up?”

“No. I’d like to remember you like this. My poor, poor lover.” Then she left.

It was a long time before Gordon got himself up off the floor. He’d decided that the junk on the ceiling, and all the hanging lights, were beautiful. Someone had taken great care in hanging them from the rafters. It all looked so lovely, mixed in with his tears and the thick, rounded blur of his vintage frames. Like a swirling carnival.

Ship to Shore

- Eric Cooper







February Thaw's
- Maureen Kingston

giddy
right-angle
turns
arcs
going
nowhere
but
longing to
Hope
lines up
seven deep
at the
carwash
buys
watermelon
taffy
colt-kicks
the river's
icy
façade
before
vaulting
madly
from
the stage
snapping
its wand
in two.

His Red Shoes
- Jane Elliott

His red shoes tapped the ground, beating a rhythm of anticipation. Heel to toe, heel to toe, echoing through his caverns of fear. They had hidden in his closet for five years, since a time when his feet slipped uncertainly down the smooth sloped hills of their mouths; since tightly curled toes and flexed arches became raw wounds and cramped muscles, secret tokens he bound in the bathroom alone.

Today they slipped on like magic glass or gold, a bright skin that mimicked the high curve of his instep, the jut of his long second toe. Years of private communion had molded them to his peculiarities, and as they clicked, heel to toe, heel to toe, they hugged him with soft reassurance. He was eighteen today. When he woke his age flashed over him in great neon numbers. Pink and green. Forty feet tall.

So, who are you? They wanted to know. Who are you today?

Strange, but he truly saw them, solid and imposing. Their demand certain. If he didn't answer them, he knew they would come crashing over his head.

"Good morning," said his mother, stealing softly into his room. She had breakfast on a tray, pancakes with a candle stuck in the center

Jeffry smiled and tried to chew a bite though his tongue felt thick and dry.

His father stood in the doorway. "Here's our young man," he said and placed a cigar at the edge of his son's dresser. "You don't have to smoke it, but just know that you can."

"You grew up so fast," said his mother, as she brushed his long bangs across his forehead, "and we were so lucky to have been here for it."

The door shut, and Jeffry pushed his tray to the side.

Grown up, said the numbers. It happens so fast.

He pulled the blankets over his head, but as soon as he did, the flannel sheets and thick down comforter crowded in to suffocate him. He pushed them off his body, struggling for breath. Downstairs the front door clicked shut; moments later the car engine roared. A breeze from his open window tickled his skin, and Jeffry lay exposed – alone in his house.

"I think you're in the wrong section, sweetheart," said the saleslady from a long time ago.

He'd dropped the shoe in fright. Before she spoke, he'd been stroking its satin, playing with the ribbons made to wind around some slender ankle.

The woman had a small smile on her face, and he knew she was about to laugh.

"I'm not," said Jeffry, who hadn't meant to buy them. Who had come for a new basketball for his father. "It's my mother's birthday," he lied.

"Well, you're in luck then," said the woman. "Because those are on sale."

She asked what size, and he chose something large to show they weren't for him; then she placed them carefully, heel to toe, in a wide, black box.

They were still nestled in black tissue. Their soles were still smooth. No snag marred their silky sleeves. No chip threatened the integrity of the heel. Jeffry, naked from sleep, slipped one easily over his foot and began winding its straps in perfect diamonds, tying a trailing bow below the knee. The angle at which it placed his foot praised the rounded muscle of his calf, lauded the perk of his ass. His closet door was a wall length mirror, and he watched himself as he lifted his knees high across the room to swivel on his toes at the wall. Never had they fit him so

well as today. Never had he walked so erect.

As a test, Jeffrey took the cigar and placed it between his teeth. He faced his reflection chewing on the sharply bitter wrappings, tip angled up, hands on his hips and legs spread. He wished for a bowler to cock over one eye and a line of chorus girls to link him on either side. He dreamed the image on a billboard that towered over neon streets, his shoes as striking as rubies, his dark nest of pubic hair twelve feet tall.

Still naked and tied in ribbons, Jeffrey opened the door and stalked stately down the stairs to his father's study where, on the wide oak desk, he found a silver lighter. He bit off the nub of his cigar like he'd seen in the movies and lit its tapered end. The first puff made him choke until his face ran with tears.

"Where's the basketball?" his father had asked when Jeffrey walked up the driveway.

A block from home, he had stopped to hide the shoebox in a hedge. He had made a quick check for anyone watching before parting the leaves and placing it deep in the shadows. *They can stay here forever*, he thought. *I should never have bought them.*

"I lost the money on the way," said Jeffrey. "I didn't buy it."

His father frowned. "Twenty dollars?"

"I'm sorry," said Jeffrey. "I must have a hole in my pocket."

His father sighed. "Well," he said with a nod, "these things happen. It was stupid of me not to buy the ball with the hoop in the first place." He pulled his shoulders to his ears and walked inside with his hands in his pockets.

Jeffrey watched him go, then he looked to the hoop that hung just slightly askew over the garage. His father had hauled it up alone, laughing as the ladder teetered on one leg, and he nearly fell. Jeffrey's mother screeched in terror then stalked into the house angrily, claiming she wouldn't come out again until her husband had landed back on earth. Her fear made Jeffrey's father laugh louder. To die for his boy would be a good death, he said. And if he didn't die, he would make sure his son never missed a three-pointer. The best gift a father could give.

The blue square above the hoop framed Jeffrey's vision, and he pictured another version of this day in which his father molded his small hands around the ball and guided him to a perfect shot, one that bounced lightly from that square and through the white, nylon net. He knew he would never go back to the bush. He would let his lie rot there and never think of it again. Tomorrow he would break his piggy bank and go to his father with the money that he'd lost. Tomorrow they would make a day that could blot this one out of time.

Late that night Jeffrey climbed out his window, down the Douglas fir, and snuck the shoes inside. He didn't understand the shoes, so how could anyone else? He couldn't say if they were lonely oddities or signs of a larger truth. Were they the bearded lady at the circus? Were they the visible caps of an unearthed fungus? And if he showed someone, what would they want to know?

"Is it just shoes," they would ask, "or panties, too? Silky slips? Ruffled skirts?"

Jeffrey could not tell them. He had not tried those things.

There could be harder questions, too. "What else have you been pretending? Is there a woman caged inside you, waiting to get out?"

Jeffrey stroked the stubble across his angular jaw. He looked down at the lean lines of muscle in his chest and arms.

"Are you a fag?"

Jeffry tried his cigar again, but this time he did not inhale. He kept the smoke rolling in his mouth and around his lips, appreciating its aesthetics, creating thick white clouds that rose slowly through his eyelashes and caught in his hair. The residue left on his tongue tasted like apple wood, a little like jerky. It quickly went stale and left him dry, pining for water that he would not drink. The end of the tobacco glowed low like a newly extinguished birthday candle. Jeffry closed his eyes and made a wish.

He hadn't tried them on right away. He hadn't been sure he wanted to. He hadn't been sure he'd gotten them to wear. They might have been an accident, he thought, part of the strange things that happen every day. Maybe, for a moment, Jeffry had not controlled his own mind. Maybe he had been suddenly stupefied by the variety of the department store. Maybe he had, indeed, simply stumbled into the wrong section. The clerk had startled him. She'd made assumptions. She'd forced him to create an explanation, pressured him into the purchase.

The box had sat open on his floor, two red pumps peeking through black wrapping. Jeffry had tried to stare them out of existence, pressure them from his room with the intensity of his gaze. When they still sat there an hour later, he had taken one from the paper and slipped it on.

Who are you? The numbers asked him, pressured him to know. The magnitude of the question threatened to crush his skull.

"I am Jeffry Allen Smith," he told them, but for red satin heels and a cigar, standing naked in his father's study. "I am the point guard of my basketball team. I am the valedictorian of my graduating class. I am Frederick and Vivian's son," he said. "I am an artist, a carpenter, a gun nut, a poet."

He went back to his room and dressed in black slacks and a white button up. The shirt hung open where he left the top two buttons undone. He kept the shoes on.

Half an hour later, when he heard his parents' car park in the driveway, he opened his door and walked down the hall.

They had hidden in his closet for five years.

"Is it just shoes?"

Today they slipped on like magic glass or gold.

"Do you want to be a woman?"

They had never fit him so well as today.

"Are you gay?"

The purchase had not been an accident, he knew, because through the blisters and back ache, Jeffry dug them from his closet day after day. He wound their ribbons up his calves. He learned to walk on the balls of his feet. The sound of their heels on hardwood thrilled through his spine. The sight of his legs lengthened and bound lifted his soul.

"I don't know," said Jeffry honestly

His mother drew a deep breath and let it go. "Well, they're pretty," she said. She gave him a shaky kiss on the cheek.

"Okay," said his father simply, nodding his head.

"Do you want me to take them off?" asked Jeffry.

"No," barked his father. "This is your home."

They walked to the study together, and Jeffry relit his cigar.

"I'm proud of you," said his father from the edge of a deep leather chair, leaning forward, hands on his knees. "This is what it means to be a man."

“Thank you,” said Jeffrey. His legs were crossed, his toe pointed down.

Jeffrey was only eighteen, but his father poured him a tumbler of whisky from the bar.

“Happy birthday. You earned this one.”

For the rest of the afternoon they passed the glass back and forth, taking small sips from its cut crystal edge, savoring the flavor of its age.

Dune Fence

- Flo Hayes



Dune Fence looks much like a watercolor due to the subtle application of minimal pastel used to create the piece. Dunes along the Great Lakes offer a multitude of artistic possibilities, and I will surely be exploring this subject matter further.

New Paint
- Angie Frese

Annie Douglass, fifteen, died on the first day of summer. Her heart went into cardiac arrest when a horse's hoof made an imprint on her chest. It is said that a death either brings people together or tears them apart, but a death that occurs so young, such as Annie's, often causes curiosity. There's a guilty sweetness in witnessing a young death, and everyone wanted a taste of mourning Annie Douglass. In the days that followed, her home was open to a multitude of visitors: friends her parents, Robert and Laura, hadn't talked to since college and neighbors who had never before introduced themselves.

Then there were the reporters who Robert and Laura suffered for the sake of keeping rumors away. *How does it feel to lose your child?* On an interview that would be seen by the entire tri-state area, Laura asked the interviewer if he had ever lost a child. He hadn't. She responded that, therefore, she would never be able to explain her feelings and to try would be wasting words. She turned her back to the camera and left her husband to deal with the reporters.

After a week people stopped coming. Robert returned to work. Alone and contemplating the silence, Laura stood in the doorway of Annie's room. The bed was unmade, and the girl's shoes were in a pile next to it. On the walls hung ribbons won at the county fair and next to those were photographs of every horse Annie had loved, rode, or dreamed of owning. The sense of the room was overwhelming. The walls were a deep orange and, in the evening when the sun came in from the west, the room glowed orange. Laura closed her eyes and felt her daughter's presence.

One night Laura was lying on the floor in Annie's room when Robert came home. Her eyes were closed, and her face looked pained. In his tie and dress pants, he kneeled and then laid on the floor next to his wife. The silence was so thick that Laura hoped he would be uncomfortable enough to leave. Finally he turned to her and asked if she were alright. She just nodded.

"What are you doing on the floor?" He kept probing.

"I don't want to mess up how she left her covers," Laura said.

"Hmm," he replied.

She turned her head towards him, "Robert, don't move anything in here."

"I won't."

"I mean ever. This room must never change. Promise me you'll never touch anything in here."

He sighed, "I promise."

"You don't mean that."

He sat up, "Listen, this is hard, and I love you, but do not lose control of yourself. We will leave this room as it is for now, but someday we'll move or get old. Whatever happens, I know that in twenty years, this room will not be the same. It can't."

She sat up, too, "But I don't want her to leave."

"But, sweetheart, she'll always be with you."

"Don't say that! That's all anyone says. Why don't you be like my mother, too, and tell me she's in a better place. That'll make me feel better, telling me things that mean nothing. I don't mean her soul or whatever it is that stays with me. I mean her. Our daughter, in the flesh."

Robert's eyes softened, "You need time. I'm sorry. It'll be ok. For now, can I distract you? Let's go get ice cream, or go for a walk." He got up and went to the doorway, "You've

been in this house for a week. Let's just get out for a while."

"You go ahead. I'll follow you."

Robert sighed and left the room. Laura stayed on the floor, and her gaze floated from pictures, to her daughter's books, across the walls, and around the clothes hanging in the closet, until she fell asleep from emotional exhaustion.

Their daughter had been gone a month the night Laura woke her husband by screaming.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Annie. Do you hear her? She needs me."

"I don't hear anything."

"How can you not hear that? Robert, she needs me."

Robert took her in his arms. "Go to sleep. You need to sleep. Annie's gone, pretty girl. I need you to sleep."

The next morning, Laura woke early and went to lie on Annie's floor as she had done every morning since she died. This morning, however, Robert interrupted.

He knocked once on the door then came in, "I just wanted to see how you're feeling this morning."

She looked up, puzzled, "What do you mean? I feel fine."

He came in, sat down next to her, and touched her arm, "Are you sure you're not exhausted. You didn't sleep."

She took her arm away and sat up, "What are you talking about? I slept fine."

"Stop that. Why are you immediately defensive?" He grabbed her arm again, "You screamed! Last night, for Annie."

"I didn't."

"Listen to me. You did," he sighed, "You worry me. Maybe I should take a few days off."

"No. Don't you dare start babysitting me. I'm fine."

"Do me a favor then, and do something today besides sitting in this room." He stood up and kissed her on the forehead. "I love you. You're ok."

She made sure he didn't see her as she rolled her eyes. She stayed on Annie's floor the rest of the day, but instead of her daughter, she thought of Robert. Through the entire situation, he kept control of his emotions for what remained of their small family. When they received the call that Annie was hurt, Laura collapsed on the couch, hysterical and screaming her daughter's name. Robert just reached for his keys and told his wife to get into the car. He handled the funeral arrangements and called the family. Laura barely left the house. After they buried Annie, when Laura wouldn't speak, her husband held her and said, "Don't let go of everything. Let's keep our marriage together." On the floor that day a month after Annie was gone, Laura cried out of helplessness. The grief was slowly fading as her daughter's death was becoming normal, but now she cried at the overwhelming task of rebuilding her life.

Laura decided to keep herself busy. That summer she started a scholarship in her daughter's name. When Annie's birthday came in September, she organized the **Annie Douglass 5k Run**. She had T-shirts made with Annie's face. To fund the event, she went to local businesses with a letter explaining Annie's death and how this event would allow her friends to remember her and Annie to still be a part of the community.

Around Christmas, she invited a few of Annie's close friends to make Christmas cookies.

During the 5k she had met other families affected by the death of someone young. So Laura and five teenage girls spent December delivering cookies to these families along with the letter of Annie's death and the experience since. This she did for Robert, to prove that she was healing, as he kept telling her she needed to do, and that she wasn't doing this for herself, but, rather, to help people like her. Yet she always found a way to tell people about Annie, people she just met. How she had this beautiful daughter, talented, too. Annie was her entire joy. She always forgot to mention that this Annie had been gone for seven months.

It was January when Mrs. Douglass had another night terror.

"Robert! Annie's gone."

In the dark she felt him search for her hand. "Shh. I know, dear. I know. She is, but you're doing so well."

"She's gone! I went into her room, and she wasn't there. The bathroom light was off. I checked downstairs, but she wasn't there either! Where is she, Robert? Where's Annie?"

"Sweetheart," he shook her shoulders as if to wake her up, "Come to me. You're here and Annie's not." Robert held her until she fell asleep.

The night terrors occurred every night that week, and every morning Robert and Laura had the same conversation.

"See someone," the conversation would always include his plea for her to seek professional counseling, "You've proving to me that you can't deal with this. Please. For what's left of our family."

Then she would provide her counter argument, "But I'm not crazy," and the least convincing, "I'll be ok. Just let me deal with this in my own way."

Then he would end the conversation with, "You just need some kind of change. Something to move on."

And she would have nothing left to say.

Laura walked into the hardware store, consulted an array of colors, and turned toward the paint counter. A teenage girl was leaning on the counter, one hand on her face, popping bubblegum.

She greeted Laura, monotone and mumbling, "Can I help you?"

"How old are you?"

"Does that matter?"

"It does."

"Seventeen."

"Close enough," Laura held out a palette of muted gray colors, "Which do you hate the most?"

"Well, what are you painting?"

"It doesn't matter," Mrs. Douglass insisted, "Just what color are you least likely to paint your room?"

"I guess this one," said the girl, pointing to a dark gray, equivalent to a quiet pond on a cloudy day.

"Thank you for your help, Miss," and Laura left.

When Robert came home that night, Annie's bed was next to the mailbox. Her dresser was on its side beside it, and her desk was in three pieces about the driveway. In the living room, he found cardboard boxes hiding the couch and covering the floor. He opened one labeled Goodwill and pulled out Annie's favorite sweater. Photographs of Annie and her horses were

spilling out of the trash can and onto the floor. Underneath them was what, out of the overflow of fifteen-year-old emotions, Annie had once claimed to be her purpose in life, every ribbon a horse had ever won her.

Robert found his wife in Annie's empty room, quiet and staring at the walls.

"Did you think to ask me before trying to erase our daughter from this home?"

She kept looking at the walls, "I'm doing what you said."

He shifted his weight and stomped his foot a little, "What does that mean?"

"You told me to move on."

He didn't raise his voice, but he was impatient, "No. Don't you dare blame me. I said crap about healing, moving on with your life, not moving on from our daughter. Not the same thing."

"This is me moving on."

"No. This is you making a decision without me." He grabbed her shoulders, "Would you look at me? This is more than a new haircut! You are changing our home and throwing away our daughter!"

Her voice remained quiet, "Annie is still here, and as long as she remains here, nothing will keep me from her. She needs to be gone. Now let me do this."

"Sweet heart, you sound crazy."

"Listen, you told me the most important thing that we have left is our marriage, and you were right. I need change, physical change, or we're going to lose each other, like we lost her."

Mrs. Douglass held out paintbrush to her husband, "We can discuss her stuff. We don't have to get rid of everything, but, please, the painting needs to be done."

Mr. Douglass eyed his wife, but cautiously took the paintbrush from her hand, "Okay, then."

So they stood side by side, taking their time, one stroke of the brush at a time, applying the gray to the walls until Annie's orange was gone, rebuilding the room.

North Eastern Promise
- Colin James

George rubbed his hands together and sucked on his dentures. Getting old was a *bastard* and something he really didn't appreciate. The doc had told him he needed to get away, find some blue sky and palm trees but fat chance of that. With a wife to support on an ex-coalminer's pension, they weren't exactly living large. Thirty-five years he'd spent down in the pit; man and boy giving his life for the black stuff. What else could he have done? His dad had been a miner and his grandfather before him, so for his thirteenth birthday he received a pair of steel-toed boots and a permission slip to leave school early. A brown paper envelope with a couple of quid at the end of the week was far more important to the family than a leaving certificate; besides, higher education wasn't for the likes of them, that was for posh folk.

George coughed and tasted blood in his mouth, he was in his sixties but you would easily have given him seventy. The problem with working in the pit was that it took as much from you as you took out of it. The more coal, the more aches and pains. With slipped disks, rheumatism, grating joints, stone lung and a lazy eye he'd paid the price and was more than thankful when they'd finally retired him. He'd just about bitten the pit manager's hand off when he'd been presented with his gold watch and thanked for his years of service. Put out to grass like some old knackered horse, to enjoy the last years of his life stumbling around his vegetable patch and getting under his wife's feet. Big gardener was George, took good care of his council allotment – nobody grew onions like him. The secret was pigeon shit but people didn't need to know that!

His long-suffering wife would watch him through condensed pains as he potted around the back yard, mindful of the strong, virulent man he'd been. The pit had crushed him like a bug, and she couldn't remember the last time they'd been physical. Loved him to death though, even if he was a cantankerous old fart. Liked his own way did George, but Mary made sure he didn't always get it.

For Christmas the kids had bought him a greenhouse, one of those modular, all-year-round, bio-thermal units. Aluminum framed with special glass that would attract more uv's and help the plants flourish, at least that's what the description read in the catalogue. They'd clubbed together and with a fortuitous win at Friday night bingo had enough to pay off the thing in twenty-seven easy installments.

Strange looking thing. Like a crushed egg with a pyramid shaped top. Designed ergonomically to insure the maximum utilization of the space within.

Christmas had come and gone, and they'd hired a couple of strapping lads to help erect it in the back yard. They'd placed it out on the cobbles where the old wooden shed had stood. George had seen his wife eye the young lads sweating in the afternoon sun – he wasn't jealous, just cognizant of a reluctant acceptance that age and infirmity spared no one. Now it was full of tomatoes, peppers and various other greenery not indigenous to the Yorkshire countryside.

George had loved the gift and from the very beginning had gone to work preparing his seed beds and perfecting his irrigation. The watery north eastern sun radiating through the polarized glass had felt good on his body as he toiled in the dirt, and there was definitely a lessening of the ache in his joints. After working all day beneath the glass and sitting in his comfy chair of an evening, sleep came easily. Mary noticed a lifting of his mood and had even commented on the extra spring in his step; it was good to see a man who'd worked hard all his life enjoying his final years.

George was amazed at the crops that flourished beneath the glass, he'd never seen such

tomatoes - giant, red brutes bursting with juice and flavor. Even the onions he prided himself on were larger and tastier, and he no longer had to use the pigeon manure although, it'd been a hard habit to break.

During show season he'd taken first prize in nearly every category, something nobody in the town had ever done. The judges had admired his bounty, and his competitors, green with envy, had patted him on the back and congratulated him. What was his secret and would he share? George had just tapped his soil-stained finger against the side of his nose and smiled noncommittally. "Now then, lads," he'd said, "a gentleman never kisses and tells."

He was a little baffled himself as he wasn't the only gardener in the area with a green house, some of the other old boys had them, too, and yet their produce, although fantastic, didn't come close to what he was producing. His veg seemed to grow twice as quick, twice as large, and twice as tasty. George put it down to his green thumb; his colleagues put it down to devious practices and cried foul play behind his back.

Sitting in front of the telly one evening, the fire blazing and with fish and chips in newspaper on his lap, he watched some random program on the B.B.C. There was horse jumping on the other channel. He wouldn't watch I.T.V. (hated the adverts!) out of principle and so was stuck with whatever Aunty Beeb was showing. Some documentary about Egypt and the pyramids; alien technology and conspiracy theories! All very well he thought as he shoveled a couple of soggy chips into his mouth, the salt and vinegar biting into his lips. A man in khaki, wearing a Pith helmet was enthusiastically remonstrating about the power of the pyramids – how he believed that they were ancient energy sources, not just tombs as mainstream Egyptologists would have us believe. Obviously the fella was a nutter thought George but it would kill an hour before he went up to bed. The commentator went on to describe propagation theory, how plants placed within the ancient structures would flourish, generating abundant harvests. It was also believed that the energy within the chambers had medicinal properties and that the ancients had used the pyramids for their healing properties.

"Codswallop!" spluttered George through battered haddock and mushy peas. For a brief instant light swept through the front room as scudding clouds revealed a reluctant moon – the fleeting beams glanced off the green house at the bottom of the garden. George gulped. "Bloody hell," he cursed under his breath.

"George, love," called his wife, "I'm going up to bed. See you in a bit?"

"Right-o lass. I'll just finish me scran, and I'll be up."

His green-house was an *effing* pyramid! No wonder the vegetables were doing so well. It was ancient Egyptian technology that was causing his onions to expand at such an enviable rate.

No bleeding wonder! George wasn't a big believer in coincidence but the titles running up the television screen on the rear end of a retreating camel seemed to be screaming out to him. Maybe they were bloody right? Maybe there was something in it? He wondered if just maybe they were right about the other stuff as well. George finished his dinner and then sat through a program on political affairs almost falling asleep himself until he heard the soft snores of his wife emanating from the upstairs bedroom.

It was worth a shot. What did he have to lose?

He grabbed a blanket from the airing cupboard, a thermos filled with cocoa from the kitchen and, as quietly as possible, stole from the house. Careful to make as little noise as possible he headed out into the yard. It was cold; however, he felt warmth emanate from the

greenhouse as he slid open the glass door. He'd obviously gone of his rocker. Folk would think he was bonkers but it was worth a try. He'd already noticed a change in his temperament and friends and family had commented on how well he was looking. Even the squeak in his dodgy knee had somehow been lubricated and disappeared. He settled himself onto an old deck chair, wrapped the blanket around himself and, with the odor of warm soil and ripening tomatoes in his nostrils, drifted into sleep.

Mary came down the stairs and entered the living room. She'd woken alone, which wasn't unusual, as George would often fall asleep in front of the telly. She'd find him fully dressed and unconscious in the big, comfy chair – the television playing to an inattentive audience. She walked towards where she expected to find her husband but the chair was empty. Now she was worried. George never went anywhere without telling her first and even then those occasions were few and far between. She walked into the kitchen, called out his name, but there was no reply. Where could he be? It wasn't like him. She eyed the telephone hanging on the wall, thought about calling the police and then dismissed the idea as silly. Where could he be, he couldn't have gone far? She peered through the kitchen window out to where George's pride and joy stood. Surely not she thought, but it was worth a try. Given the recent success he'd enjoyed at the local horticultural show, she wouldn't put it passed the old fool. She shuffled her feet into her slippers, pulled her nightgown around her, opened the back-door and went into the garden. Silly old bugger! What did he think he was playing at scaring her like that? She'd give him what for.

"George? George, are you out here?" she called. Nothing except the clink of the electric milk float as it rattled past, but no sign of George. She walked towards the greenhouse and slid open the door. She was getting nervous now, a little bit afraid of what she might find. He may be half lame, blind in one eye and but he certainly wasn't deaf.

Mary screamed, slumped in a chair was her George. A look of serenity covered his face.

"My God not George! Surely not her George? Not like this. Not now!

Mary's scream caused George to shoot up out of this chair. "Bloody hell, woman, what the hell are you doing? You half scared me to bleeding death. Are you trying to collect on the life insurance or somat?"

Mary stood in front of her husband. One hand covered her mouth, the other pointed towards him.

"What is it lass? What's wrong?"

Mary couldn't believe her eyes. It was George alright, large as life but not the George she'd said goodnight to. The man in front of her was buff and virile; his toned physique bulged through an unbuttoned shirt. His hair was thick and dark, and there was the twinkle in both his eyes that had caused her fall in love with him those thirty odd years ago. It was as though he'd lost years. Shocked by the man who stood in front of her, she felt her knees buckle.

George, still not understanding what was going on, caught her as she fell, gathered her up in his massive arms and carried her back to the house. Neglecting to take off his boots he pushed open the kitchen door, walked through to the living room and laid her on the couch. As he stood up he caught his reflection in the mirror above the fireplace, or rather the reflection of the man he'd once been.

"Flippin Nora!" he gasped out loud. How was he going to explain this to the lads down at the working men's club? This was going to be slightly more difficult than giant onions and pigeon poop!



“YOUTH’S A THING, WILL NOT ENDURE”
Bill Shakespeare – 12th Night.

Who Doesn't Love a Parade?

- Joseph Glaser





Onsen

- Joseph Glaser

Not just any old bath no, no, no!
— a public bath
— a communal bath
and not at all for washing no, no, no!
strictly for soaking silently in social separation.

PATRONS MUST SCRUB THOROUGHLY BEFORE ENTERING!
— PLEASE USE THE INDIVIDUAL WASHSTATIONS!
— FULLY EQUIPPED WITH SOAP AND SHOWER!
AND NO TATTOOS ALLOWED!!!

In full view yet alone
amid a scattering of solitary scrubbers
the washing proceeds with vigor
as the foreverwipingcleaning matron
stolidly works round the naked men
who casually ignore her presence.

See the hot waters expectantly awaiting
the now-pristine bathers
like a simmering pot ready to poach eggs.

Watch the naked bathers engage the Onsen
see them slip into the pot and settle down
immersed to the chin
washcloth on head
each in self-selected isolation
sharing the waters
inhaling the surface steam.

Ahhhh so hot so good so relaxing!

Natural hot springs
have volcanic bubbles
and exotic minerals
— to cure the body
— to clear the mind
they say.

A ten minute soak is suggested
— for reasons Japocryphal;
perhaps a Samurai ritual before battle,

or maybe a Chinese character saying BOIL FROG SLOWLY
acquired new meaning when adopted into Japanese.

Planting in Winter
- Don Cadwallader

I was not refusing
to dig deep.

It was the self-deception,
the errancy of
cross examination,

not to mention
the tolerance of
laziness

that,
when I struck rock,
caused this crisis:

I stopped.

But now, in later years,
I breathe deep,

use the shovel
like a chisel
until the hardness
breaks free.

And then,
hopeful for rebirth,
I tamp the earth and
gradually
disappear.

Break in the Clouds

- Marty Walker



Scenes from California
- Anne Whitehouse

I. Elk In Fog

To think that diaphanous fog
could obscure
so massive a creature
silhouetted against the horizon
as if far away,
while the ocean, veiled in mists,
roared against the cliffs.

II. Trapped Cow

Somehow it slipped
down the muddy gully
and couldn't climb out.
A man out hiking
heard the bellowing
and summoned the farmer
who shot the animal
out of mercy.
Surprisingly preserved,
its body leans
against the incline
like a black shadow,
its unseen feet resting
in shallow water.

III. Life/Land Forms

The slopes of the headlands
slide smoothly to the sea
of cold waters and roiling tides.
Under a wet shock of brown grass,
the narrow skeleton of a fox,
where weeds blow back yellow and russet,
and coots align in even rows
across the rippling surface of a pond.
Past mossy trees tangled in vines
and lichen-covered fences of an old farm,
lies a ribbon of brown sand
without beginning or end.

Seeing Things
- Dayna Patterson

Rainwater pools in the creases of the leaves.
They look like lettuce with dark pink veins
and grow in a planter's box along the sidewalk.
My girl sees the clear thimbles full and calls them
bathtubs. So this is parenthood,
to be taught by a child and feel the scales
fall from eyes clouded with years of experience
seeing things. We give them language,
they take it, shake it like a snow globe,
and give it back to us whirling.
Little *h* upside down is big sister *u*.
Big *K* touches at the chest.
Little *k* touches at the waist.
I lean in closer to those tiny verdant tubs.
For fairies? I ask, slow student that I am.
And fingertips, she says, dipping them in.
Again. And again. Times a million.

Fruit Creatively Seen

- Mary Jo Huck





Piperat in the fall
warmer of summer juice

Pomegranate
pink

m. G. H. H.

The Bride to Beat
- Mary Lamphere

As the organ began to play *The Wedding March*, I turned and saw that witch in taffeta gaining on me. I growled through gritted teeth and pushed myself harder, my muscles burning. Mouth dry, nostrils flared, hair matted and stringy in a hurricane-inspired upswEEP, I pumped my arms faster, willing my legs to do the same. After three days of grueling competition, I was not about to yield my lead. Hearing the music, I knew I was in the final stretch of this beastly bridal battle.

“Taffeta?” I smirked, glancing downward at the dress I’d chosen for the competition. It had been a comfortable, off-white, A-line, tea-length satin number, selected for grace, agility and movement. Now it was a tattered mess. So? I had dressed for the race. A lot of contestants preferred dresses that were “pretty” or flattered their figures — for the television audience. I had long ago forgotten the cameras, the cheering bystanders, and my appearance. I had my eye on the prize, my *Dream Wedding*. I was so close, I could taste it. Or maybe that was just the remnants of icing slicked to the roof of my mouth from the cake-decorating portion of the race.

The click, click of heels on pavement lulled me into a comfortable rhythm. My mind replayed the past few days. It was hard to believe all I had endured, physically and mentally, in less than seventy-two hours. “What a great opportunity for you,” I heard my mother’s voice, teased nasal by my mood. “You are such a great competitor,” she continued, “You know your father and I would love to pay for your wedding, but, well, with Daddy’s gambling debts...”

I shook my head to interrupt the inner loop. To be fair, I had thought it sounded kind of fun. Reality TV for *me*. Three days in tropical Hawaii, all expenses paid, food, fun, adventure — all with a wedding theme! And the Grand Prize was a *Dream Wedding*. As I had been researching and saving for the perfect wedding for nearly three years, I couldn’t fail! I wouldn’t fail. Mom was right, I *am* competitive.

My research paid off. After selecting an outfit and shoes, worn for the duration of the three-day event, including the mandatory six-hour recoup times from 11 pm to 5 am, the first trial was to order flowers for sixty ten-person round tables. There were a variety of breeds and displays available. The top 50% of contestants closest to, but not over, the budget of \$1800 would continue onto the next round. At \$1794.89, I not only set the tables, I set the bar. Over three hundred women were cut. Those calla lilies will get you every time.

The next test consisted of hand-addressing 600 invitations. I didn’t know I was ambidextrous until envelope 409. We were judged on speed as well as overall legibility because, it was stressed, “Your guests need to believe that this is a special day for them as well as for you.” I was not as ‘first’ as I wanted to be, but I was far from the bottom 40% to whom we said good-bye.

Giving our swollen hands a break, the next task was easy. Or not. In celebration of traditional wedding pictures, we were all to strike a pose and hold it. That was it. That was hard. I distracted myself with childhood memories and pretended I was playing statue tag. I out-stood all but four ladies. And we were down to the final 100 candidates.

Then things got tough. Tediously, we had to color coordinate a seating chart for 600 that took into consideration that blues hated reds and yellows had slept with greens in college. I never thought I’d be thankful for having a family full of reds and blues, and, honestly, I’m not, but it certainly helped with this task.

Between missions, we were a parade of formally attired gals traipsing through fields and

meadows, over gravel, pavement, and wood chips, all the time heads held high and alternating hand waving. We either emphasized left hands clad with a garish display of gem and plastic fitted snugly over thousands of dollars of engagement rings or waved politely to our admirers with a dainty right hand.

Several other tasks came and went, and I survived each one. I'm not sure which I detested more, the climbing of 300 stairs in heels or the descending of 300 stairs in heels. Thankfully the congealing blood from my ruined feet created an effective adhesive that held my shoes in place.

Our numbers dwindled quickly. Having to style our two-day dirty hair with only a pencil and twisty ties was quite a feat. By the time we got to the three-layer cake that was to be frosted with real icing solely using our tongues, I was one of only twenty women who remained.

And now, as I dashed "to catch my plane to paradise," with a twenty-two-pound carry-on strapped to my back, I realized just how close I was to winning.

A loud crack and a piercing, expletive-laced scream shot through my reverie. I looked back to see my nearest competition sprawled on the blacktop, her high-heeled foot jutting at an angle foreign to her ankle. It seems Ms. Taffeta will be hobbling down the aisle in her *non-dream* wedding.

The *Wedding March* continued to play as I approached the tulle-decorated Bridal Aisle. I was so tired — bruised, battered, and dirty. And then I saw my fiancé. With a sudden surge of love-inspired verve, I crossed the line and collapsed into his waiting arms.

The cameras encircled us, the crowd, buzzing with excitement and cheers, tossed confetti and streamers. The host interrupted our embrace to congratulate me and enthusiastically ask, "You've just become America's Bride to Beat. What are you going to do now?"

With a contented smile I sighed, "Elope."

purpling one's breasts in shade

- Charles Hayes



The Deep Anesthesia of Pleasure
- Amy Huffman

Her blush was not real.
But an artistic embellishment.
Applied.
For pleasure.
His, of course.
She preferred not to feel.
Anything.
Anyway,
that was against the rules.
Hers.
He didn't have or need any.
To dissect her skin
was his only desire.
That he would crawl inside
was her only fear.
As she stood —
silenced —
before him.
Naked and cold for him.
She shattered them both.
With a touch
so like glass.
He completely lost himself.
Forgetting
he ever had a reflection.
Of his own.

Birds of Paradise

- Roy Slovenko







The Tea Party
- Janeen Rastall

I remember tea parties,
water in a chipped cup,
crackers on a plastic plate.
My mother did not participate.
Dress up would be tolerated
if her hats were neatly put away.

She taught us gin and solitaire,
how to shuffle into tidy stacks.
She liked croquet and hopscotch.
She swept us all at jacks.

She preferred games with rules
not because she'd win,
but because she knew
how each game would end.

Señorita Student

- Gabriel Navar



Tweet Dreams
- Ivan Jensen

A revelation will
dawn on civilization like
the second coming or the
twelfth hour arrival of the prophecy
promised by various
dusty non-digital books
and this sermon will amount
to a hill of hallelujahs
and certain sects will
say "I told you so"
and others will say
"how could I know?"
and the stoners
and the stone throwers
will unite in a
holographic chant
as they are beamed up
like Spock and Kirk
to a place where
Charlton Heston
shoots flowers from a rifle
and that trifle you
worry your little head about
will be straightened out
like the sheets everyone
will wear wrapped around them
and Bacchus's wine will flow
on a summer's day
in the fall
of ideologies both
Western and Eastern
and everything intangible
will be all right

The Old Village

- Edward Rosodek



Underground
- Gale Acuff

My best friends live in the cemetery
behind our church. I talk to them but they
don't talk back. They just listen. They listen
hard. Their ears are stone but my words get through
They're good listeners. I have lots to say
about Sunday School. And regular school,
which I'm failing this year, the fourth grade but
their silence tells me not to worry. You
can make it, they mean. No strain. I'm in love
with Miss Hooker, my Sunday School teacher.
I don't care that she's fifteen years older,
it's true love, I know it. It's got to be.
I wish they were as enthusiastic.
They don't want to tell me that it's hopeless
unless she stays single until I'm old
enough and by then maybe I'll have changed
my mind. Maybe you're right, I say. Who knows?
They agree — who knows, they ask without asking.
Sunday School's over, church, too, and I should
be walking home now but these are my friends.
We've never met but know one another.
We've never been formally introduced.
We'll meet again as soon as I join them.
That could happen any time. I'm only
ten but could die walking home today, smashed
by a car while I'm crossing over to
the house. Or I could live to be ninety.
When I join them it won't matter how long
I've lived, just like it doesn't matter now.
Miss Hooker says that they're in Heaven but
I don't really care. Today I asked them
Where are you, exactly? Still underground?
They wouldn't tell me. And neither would I.

Water Folk

- Robert Weston





Winter Dance
- Al Ortolani

Snow spits
against the window,
the furnace clicks in the
crawl space below the
floor and warm air pours
into the living room. It's
not magic; it's mechanics,
simple pragmatism and pre-
dictability: a fire started
in advance in the mouth
of a cave, a plumber crawling
below the floor joists,
running galvanized pipe
through the murk, gas jets,
forced air, heat. Directions
for pilot lighting
painted on the walls.
This said, a woman
dancing through the empty
rooms of the house, her
bare legs tattooed with
the play of light,
excites more
than desire, her grace
in movement sublime,
her beauty, not
just a come on.

Submission Guidelines

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

Submissions are accepted year-round.

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

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