

Untamed Ink

Volume 2

2009

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Featuring:

Jack Hirschman

Chris Mazauskas

Colleen McKee

David Meltzer

Michael Rothenberg

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VOLUME 2
2009

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY
St. Charles, Missouri

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Poetry

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Michael Rothenberg

REVERSIBLE RAINCOAT

Another busy night
Conducting tours
Of the ghost house

Come this way
I'm locking the doors
And knocking them down

Follow me
I'm going deeper inside
A reversible raincoat is all I need

Sky, clouds, ibis
Glasstoothed sawgrass river,
Wedgewood and porcelain dishes

This is mine
Orange
Virginia Dare
United Nations postage stamps
Here's the chest
Where I keep my cowboys and indians
Civil War armies
Baseball glove
Thumb for sucking
Alcoholic father

This is Miami
My nervous system paved with the flesh of it
Here it is

A pendulum swinging deeper and deeper
Check it out

7 DAYS IN DARIEN

Spanish moss, Live oaks, resurrection ferns
Fort King George Motel
Reading *Baghavat Gita*
Todd reads the turtle news
“Leatherback Nesting on Sapelo Island”
Apple passion fruit juice, peanut butter cookies
Shower, shave, and go to sleep

An American gator drifts down the river
Bottlenose dolphins roil

At 10 a.m. meet Sinkey Boone, shrimp fisherman
At the Waffle House for grits

Fishermen and environmentalists talk
About turtle excluder device
By-catch, aqua-culture, sodium dip
Marketing links, Georgia
Sweet browns, whites and pinks

Whelk shell heap glares in the hot noon sun

We visit Fort King George Historic Site
Tidal mills, saw blades, stockades, brick ruins
Gule Indians, French, Scottish, British
The Church fought for control of Altamaha Delta

Corn snake. Indigo snake
Ibis, egret, bunting
Cabbage palm, palmetto and holly

At the Buccaneer Club
Lunch of boiled shrimp
Hushpuppies and French fries

More talk about sea turtle strandings
Sea turtles caught in shrimp nets
Mutilated in Texas, drowned in Georgia
No one has an answer

“It isn’t the fisherman’s fault,” says Sinkey
“We’re sea farmers in Sea Gardens.”

I remember poaching loggerheads
In Everglades National Park 35 years ago
Butchered on the sand spit at night
The bloody heart and gutted carapace

Survey soft sand hills with Sinkey
Slash pine forests and cypress swamp
Find alligator skeleton and teeth
Todd roots and turns rotted wood
I sit on the banks and twirl a doodle-bug stick

Lake ripples lap the shore willows
Sand fleas bite my bare ankles
Orange velvet ants investigate the ground
Herons wade. Mulletts leap
A small bird with a pretty song
No one can identify

Mangrove seeds drift over oyster beds
Smilax thickets and bald cypress
Tangles of Muscadine vines
We climb a big old tree to look over
Miles and miles of cord grass marshlands

On the shrimp boat “Bertha”
Equipped with Turtle Excluder Device
The captain cooks us Certified Turtle Safe™ sea bobs
Pinches off their heads
Adds a bottle of medium hot salsa
Squirt of liquid margarine
Salt and pepper
Boil until pink
The shells pop right off
We eat four pounds

St. Simon’s Island Festival
Washboard thumping, bass singing, “Oh, When the Saints...”
Deviled crabs, barbecued ribs, smoked mullet
And sweet potato pie

We visit the vacant pond habitat of Wally
A pet alligator shot in the face by vandals

Bright blue tailed skink species
expecatus or *fasciatus* iridescent in a wood pile

Vultures on turtle carcass hill
Pink sunset splash

At Day's Inn in Jacksonville
Waves of discovery and no answers
I think we ought to boycott shrimp
Todd disagrees
The next day fly to Boston
Leave a note for Todd, "Save the Turtles"
Remember Darien

DAYS OF CHANGE

Toothpick, quarter, nickel, four pennies, red paper clip. No one to call
All heroes gone. Briefcase, calendars, fresh sharpened pencils
Business cards with another change of address

What did it mean when I said, "Don't stop" and she said, "I haven't *even* started"

Family photos

When will they bury me?

Puppet Shakespeare, stone crab claw relic, dead coral verse
Everyone complaining, philosophical, equipment malfunctioning

Wash towels, dishes, sheets, face, brush hair, teeth
Keep up appearances

until license plate, jazz lamp, onyx letter opener become slivers
in a nightmare-Armada of small jinxed boats

Like after Hurricane Donna when kids paddled down flooded Miami streets

Or when the outboard motor lept into an Everglades swamp and sank
No one said chain it down

I rowed home against a rising tide

*

Somewhere in the Keys,
a mile out fishing for sheepshead and snapper,
in rolling waves by tolling buoy when a storm blows in
We can't beat it back to shore
Bail with cup and saucer,

soaked in matching windbreakers
tiny white sneakers and daybreeze scarves
Until an old Dutch freighter takes us all aboard
Faces whipped by tears and rain
Mom thought it was the end of the family line

*

Still, tides played, drummed black sand shores, thundering again. Seagulls,
white ruffled, perched on tide-bound cliff. Braced against flying Pacific swell
and brine, while she thought of something else, Odessa, Black Sea or Crimea,
but not my deep need for intimacy. So I set sail, slept in a thousand rooms, drove
desert west, then south through clattery muck and thick green flesh of Florida.
Turnpiked and truckstopped, aimlessly, so maybe just once I could face the
ocean's fist, infinite daylight, play on bird's-nest reef, sift through olive, scallop,
conch shell, painlessly, conjure the stroke of tide, her pale narrow wrists, adore...
But that beach has slipped. Only dark poetry drives me

Pocket change, typewriting paper, blood-red inkjets

*

I took my son, Cosmos, and a shopping list

Bought size 1 running shoes, gray heeled socks
Bounced across the mall parking lot picking up lost pennies in potholes

*

Columbus Day weekend
Sailing synchronized clouds blossoming overhead
Impossible blue jets in formation
crossing between towers of joyous Golden Gate
Bumper to bumper we drove up the ridge
then down by foot, over slick face of scrubby Marin headland
Almost slept in the treble of pebbles bouncing on our heads
But we couldn't sleep, and what she said and I said
counted for nothing

*

See an exhibition of women's art
Four plaster death masks, none of them mine

I sign the guest book
to make a place, always

Yet never enough of a place to make a point, make a trip, guide
my free broken spirit into myth.

○

Colleen McKee

**FRONT STOOP POEM FOR YOU,
TWO DAYS AFTER YOUR DEATH**

for Miko

The starlings are going
through their stilted little motions, hunting
and pecking and gathering. This one tromps
down the rain-splattered sidewalk,
in his jaw, a piece
of spring's profuse litter,
a cluster of seedlings.
For a nest, I suppose.
I don't know why I tell you this.
You never liked starlings. You despised them.
They were loud, like the drunks you served.
You'd close down the pub, get home
at five a.m., lie in bed with the sheet
over your face, and wish
you could shoot them
one by one.
They blackened the tree outside your window, screamed
just to see the sun.

I should think of something nicer to write
than how you hated cute little birdies.
You were my bashert and my friend
for thirteen years. I should come up
with something better. I could write
what you loved: me, for example,
Diamond Dogs by David Bowie,
squirrels and fine scotch,
chicken curries from Pho Grand,
slingers from the Buttery,
the green velvet dress you got for me
at the AmVets Thrift Store on Grand —
you *loved* that place — and thick stacks
of pancakes from Uncle Bill's,
your mom's collard greens with bacon,
your granny's macaroni and cheese —
you ate more than anyone I've ever met,
all one hundred-fifteen pounds of you —

12

you loved snow globes, Scrabble, your nieces,
silk ties from the twenties,
prank calls, Jimmy Stewart,
your blue bowling shirt...

The list isn't you. Nor is this poem,
which, I know, is kind of long.
Nothing is you but you, and
you're gone, but that just can't be,
so I stare at the starlings
who have survived you,
all their days spent in tiny motions
of sustenance. I resent all the people
on my street who aren't you.
I give them the St. Louis Stink-Eye
just because they have the nerve to exist.

I turn the ring you gave me
on my bony finger, the only ring
that ever fit. I wait on the stoop
for your friend to pick me up
to go through your things, to find
a shirt for you to wear to your funeral.
I think I'll wear the sexy green dress
with extravagantly high heels.
It's not appropriate, but neither were you.

Today it's cold, and the car is late,
so I keep writing, and the poem
doesn't end. I don't want
it to. Besides,
I don't know how.

13

BLAME IT ON THE FOXGLOVE

Today the scum of churned sand
Is erased from the slate-gray

Slate of the Pacific
By stronger waves from the west.

I've been lulled by this rhythm
Without melody, save the occasional

Warbles of blackbirds, the rough
Shrieks of mountain jays and gulls.

What's happened? I'm writing *nature* poetry
Two days in a row, poems devoid of the dryness,

Despair, wit, and occasional wayward glamour
Of my landlocked St. Louis life.

I'll blame it on the foxglove,
The ubiquitous ferns,

And the scarlet berries that dot
The hills — I'll have to learn their names.

MY LITTLE CIRCUS FREAK

I looked through your sketchbooks
again today, picked a pen
and ink of a Russian acrobat,
her feet flexed by her face,
for a tattoo. I'll wear it on my
shoulder blade, the exact place you wore
our friend Hunter's tattoo
after he did himself in.

At thirty-four, I have outlived
both of you, but I take no pride in this.
I'll try to keep the contortionist girl
'til she wrinkles on my back and remember
the double-jointed sweetheart of my youth —
veins outstanding, muscles breathing
in unending motion.

WHAT I FOUND ON THE STREETS OF PORTLAND

A crisp dollar outside the Plaid Pantry,
which bought two rolls of toilet paper.
Horseshoes embedded in a square of cement.
Plastic dinosaurs, green, orange, and purple,
menacing with little claws and fangs,
their feet stuck to the sidewalk with mounds
of Mallow Whip. I saw a white rose
brushed with fuschia lipstick.

And later, a spindly hickory,
its shadow outlined in chalk,
each serrated leaf, every nick
of its narrow trunk. From the slant
of the full moon's light I could tell
it had been traced only moments before.

And in the gutter outside the Hawthorne Theatre
I spotted the superball,
joyous swirls of Play-Doh colors
packed in one taut sphere.
I bounced it with one hand, held yours
in the other. The ball careened away,
but you rushed into traffic to retrieve it for me.
I promised to be more careful, but things
have a way of escaping me.
At midnight, you dropped to your belly,
dressed all in black on a tar parking lot,
just to place the tiny world back in my palm.



This poem is for my dear friend Soup.

Chris Mazauskas

in paterson

striated granite
& silica
speckled with
feldspar
washed up
together
smooth as
a pearl
on the silt
bank of
the river,
strange roots
& driftwood,
random pieces
of colored
glass, a white
fish bone,
a snail's
shell, an old
license plate, a
broken oar;
detritus
moving
towards the lower
shore, the
bulk
of it
gathered
at the fall's
edge.

17

a poem for pine needles

how many times
have i made of you
a sweet, dark bed
to rest:
hiking,
fishing, camping,
tracking flowers
and streams—
New York,
Pennsy, Oregon,
pinesap aroma
like a lullaby
easing me
to sleep
at end of day;

living in
the city
many years,
again i find you
when i am tired
in a hand-
stitched pillow
from greeny
south Vermont,
embrace you like
a long-lost love
for dreams...

18

how could i have ever...

how could i have ever
possibly forgotten
the day we
first arrived
at that farmtown
somewhere
in the northwest
end of southern Ohio,
and all we
had to eat
was a bag full of cherries
we'd picked from a tree
and a half pound of cheese
somebody'd given us,
and when we discovered
our teeth had turned
pink after we
finished them,
how the whole damned
bus laughed at us
each time we smiled?

19

woman

rubbing your eyes
 you looked tired
 as you waited
 for a train
at Penn Station;

the pronounced
 veins and muscles
 in your hands
 and your thick,
strong arms

showed that you
 performed hard work
 on a daily basis--
 i remember the
red, raw skin of your

wrists and fingers;
 my train came
 before yours and
 i rose to leave,
without having had

the chance to say
 "hello" or ask
 your name; i hope
 your train
arrived soon after,

and you were able
 to begin your trip
 home, to eat,
 to rest,
to prepare

for the next day.



Jack Hirschman

FOR THE FLOR Y CANTO LATINO FESTIVAL

I remember the boxcars
not of a roll of dice, but
of that train from Mexico
smuggling across the border.

Remember its ceiling, O
hieroglyphs of last-gasp
screams of fingernails,
tears of blood,

and the flood of deaths that
came without water. 18
suffocated that day; how many
more have never been reported?

I read these lines now at Flor
y Canto, and indeed let's all
read and sing the living word
that's Latino and Chicano

hope wrapped in tortillas of rage,
and turn the sounds of battered-
down doors, of brutal round-ups
in the night, of the iron fingers

jabbed down into shoulders of
bending, grape-picking workers,
into flaming poems of resistance
and real change, a revolutionary

change that's all the way up from
the grassroots to the branching tree
of stars in a sky that finally will
belong to us all.

21

THE BRISTOL ARCANE

1.

Blue mist along the Avon
where it bends
toward the bridge and Nightingale Valley
like Turner touching up the lips
of a whirling molecule,

and the entractate puns
of wit's kinstone
the day I rhyme
spice with thyme
all the daffyrent

weather that make up
the bardd
of mia tea dance
sing through it all,
it tall.

And the meadows and hills,
bare-veined trees against the sky
that's close overhead
yet whirling cloud-away,
Brumel in a cirrus

mizmaze toward the central drama
of the chi-ro of the cromlech PI
at Avebury, Glastonbury,
on Gogmagog Hill:
the stones that

had eyes and were scattered 'round
the way your words,
"Isn't it strange," came
put together,
"these stones?"

22

2.

Everweare there shoal befund naisure
As in yes, certainly, and no\
war not feeled with speace
and shares of mayzypuns
on the farm of ontgels:

the words out of the wood spelling
a dolly's baking, everywhere
to be just
under the eyelids, sleep
of the land

and waking crisp-leaved and vintage,
gentry-poor with idioms of sod,
though Thatcher may be killing
with coots, let's botter
our bread with solidearieteases

and cape to the witterdoves
and the pipping and piping
of the herons as we walk
smoking along the shore
of springtamps.

Deep forever turnips came with nebs
in a dream at the verge of waking
in Bristol, the rain texturing
the window whistling with gusts
at the speed of cars on the way

to work, green patches of hill
the Clifton walls Du-
buffeted, what's The Black Dwarf?
Christmas Steps? Xenia?
The rain writes runes,

23

then the haywain always will be
gulden. May and your honor
must both be a daunce toward
the tree with Well, come Hall ye
on mixla toes.

The amber lights of Goldney Rd.
and Pennywhistle Lane
going up in blazing music.
Underneap or on your shareface
all I sea is teabrine,

the achinography of soonst
and the moony stares of the avs
and avnots between sleep
and walking as if within
a raga of old

walls, the lady Bristol whispering:
COXY DORG and RED ARMY
FACTION and written on
the bridge, O SUICIDES
ARE COMING, MILLENNI!

3.

And I write from The Plume
of Feathers or The Three Tuns,
Chatterton Lane or Moon Street
— “pounds and pence in every face” —
those tradewind places along by

bridge-stow east and west came
the ink of distances: “Ge’ owt!”
“S’gross!” and laughter pom-
pamphleting the air in an old
navvy pub near Winifred Dawes’

where there was bliss of time and
spice a twig on, and winterberries
red, in pairs picked, and fetishes
made of two budgee wings
while *shelliac* I heard inside me,

the flapping of lapels after the
wine bar whispers are over,
brisk skies met in brisk eyes,
the O's not zeroes, seafaring
in the ambixasterisks;

there's Backcuss of Sparerootfield,
Charnock of Kent, Neartune
of Bristol hearself, and mystically
Eshmoll of Everywhere, and of
course the alchemist Thomas Norton.

And "boat" touches an especial
chord, like "blitz," the whole town
a spired and faned maze of corniced
mizzens and crone-toothed
deckwalks in one floating mimpathy,

laughter bluing the heather and
taches with sashays the wonder
of flowers growing in winter soil,
daffodils, migwords, all coloryphull,
a rum spot to take it off civilly,

a rose in winter under a glass of air,
the brittle candy of regret. Original
punk Chatterton died of the town's
venereal mercantilism, feeled speed
awhored, the zounds of voices

avonly and the rever playing his
miranda aziv muzhik wore natural
feelusofthee while Stalin snows
upon Bristol neither cocaine
nor the sugar of confusion

but the clear definition of the
blood-blush couraging the cuts,
flaking down slowly from above,
provender moustache and all that
oddly tickles a breath bifur

a pun to capon christmouse, deep
stillness of the stone over the river,
O yes, the shape of bridges to come
where the light is liquid and the play
chiaroscuro variations infinitely

so fair as cults or celts are a matter
of druead or delight, it's a tree,
it's a maypole, and oak for okay,
a ship off the old black.
See?

IN MEMORY OF REGINALD LOCKETT

In the heart-shaped locket
around the neck of a 12-year-old student
Reggie wrote a poem about,
she who was “tiny, tidy,” and wanted
to learn to write well,
whose sensitivity and gumption
he called the “heartbeat /
which is our history,”
who now in her late 20s
or early 30s somewhere,
surely, having by this time heard,
is wearing, or clenching
in the fist of memory
that heart-shaped locket
in which, on a tiny, folded piece of paper,
is written the name of the poet and teacher
of affirmations we all still terribly miss:
Mister Lockett



Michael Castro

MR. PRYSTOWSKI

Mr Prystowski
taught us Bible in Sunday School
at Beth Am, The People's Temple
on Thayer Street in The Big Apple
where we pondered
the biblical Big Apple
& other tales.

Mr Prystowski was younger, more attractive
than the other (all male) teachers:
Mr Bernstein, sweat glistening over his lips,
broadcasting the indecipherable Hebrew lessons with shifting eyes,
desperate for the attention of spitball rolling twelve year olds —
yet he taught me first Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*, *As You Like It*,
especially the all the world's a stage speech

& half-bemused, half-disgusted Mr. Riisman,
solving the problem of getting through the hour
by making us write uncollected
unfinished essays — “Copy the text if you like” —
as a way to pass the time.
He'd read the newspaper.

But Mr Prystowski held us rapt in his delivery,
challenged us with questions, seduced us
with his youth, his good looks — overcame the barrier
of his nerdy first name, Seymour, going by
the ultra-cool Sy — Mr Prystowski
taught us the *Book of Job*,
explored the deal between God & Satan
to test a man's faith, to torture someone,
to make a good man suffer —
loss of wealth, loss of children,
a body burning with boils, Mr. Prystowski,
Sy, described each catastrophe — How could Job
not cry out in his misery?
How could he not decry his God?
Then the three friends come & offer comfort
& advice — don't blame God they say — but their words ring hollow.
“I am guiltless, free of transgression,” Job insists.

28

“I am innocent, without iniquity.”
& he’s right.
O Kafka! O Josef K! O Jews
rejecting & projecting guilt with every breath,
feeling sorry for ourselves saddled with our raw deal
tough-love, uncommunicative Father! God

speaks to Job though, boasts really, about His power, echoes
indignantly the arguments of Job’s three friends —
you Question *Me!* —

(& then throws some suffering the friends’ way
because they weren’t sincere enough for Him).
You can’t win.

K. lies on a slab in the quarry,
like Isaac, the knife passes over him,
but there’s no ram in sight;
Job, cowed by God’s words, intimidated
by a vision of His awesome power, pledges his love in terror —
Overwhelmed, terrified, realizing
his own insignificance, he
becomes the exemplary devotee once again,
& his health & wealth are restored.
A happy ending (if you don’t count the loss
of a few servants & all of Job’s children).

The question, Mr. Prystowski points out, lingers:
Why is it? Life *is* unfair.

“One man dies in robust health
All tranquil & untroubled;
His pails are full of milk;
Another dies embittered,
Never having tasted happiness.
They both lie in the dust
And are covered with worms.”

Why do good people suffer
while bad ones prosper?
Where is justice?
Mr. Prystowski implores,

hands outstretched, face pained, demands we consider
the questions, the answer. “The answer,”

he says, "is
there is no answer."

"The answer is there is no answer."

What a thing for a twelve year old to ponder.
How could there be no answer?
O Mr. Prystowski, say it isn't so!
But Mr. Prystowski repeats, shaking his head:
"The answer is there is no answer."

K. finds the air rarefied, stifling,
in the attics of The Law.

We leave class puzzled & disappointed
to be left
hanging
beneath the tree of knowledge

The answer is there is no answer.
The only lesson I remember from my Sunday School daze.



Gaylord Brewer

ZEN MAN WAKING

More accurately, sprawled
on a soft floor mattress
within a temple of netting.
Swami Keerti has suggested
I begin with at least six
spontaneous listening meditations

each day, to get going.
When I regain consciousness
after a bender of wisdom,
art, and Delhi whisky,
wake with the windows paling,
I close my eyes again

without seeking the clock
for guidance. I hear, anyway,
its bullying, incessant tick.
I hear parrots squawking.
It's my breath, though,
that I hear most intimately,

and I listen beyond the brief time
prescribed — harsh inhalations,
startled, urgent exhaling,
the body doing its damndest
to bear my mistreatment.
I try to listen without trying,

with no irony or judgment,
to whatever's left of my life
and in whatever form,
coming and going, laboring
as if my spirit deserved it,
no joke at all. ○

31

Alexander Balogh

QUESTIONS FOR NERUDA

How many dreams are lost to alarm clocks?

Where do kisses that never find lips go?

Do words unspoken ever find their voice?

Are new pencils jealous of their well-worn siblings?

Do coat pockets ever get lonely?

Can shirts tell the difference between silk and polyester ties?

Do illusions become real when they're recognized?

Does blood trapped in the penis feel superior to other blood?

When rain falls in the city, is the concrete nourished?

When sky and clouds embrace, would they rather produce thunder or lightning?

Is it the dusk or the sunrise that awakens the night? ○

David Meltzer

PEARL

Clash
crash
into jade
walls
barriers
to survive

then the opioids
opiates
lighter fluid
rubbing alcohol
all slow burn
nerve ends
into retreat

the pearl
the great pearl
the great seed
of knowing
beyond knowing
gets musty
in its satchel
as the archon
finds love
in all the wrong
spaces & places

it's a quick wrap
fast forget
diminished
capacity for
opacity & tenacity
erased
in pure blitz
of white-out

“I’m So Bored
With The USA”
downward
into total
limbo

Commercial interrupt

but if we’re returning to core
that’s another magic show
another “what else is new”?
to know & unknow

have so much work to do
which this so-called “vacation”
reminds me of impossibility
whose evil twin is possibility
tonguing spine

from this unrealized artichoke
abstract gaggle
boggle
blather

being anywhere beyond the candystore
is being back there
alive in words
immortal in silence
skin
betrayed by
tongues of speak

•

Inter/Inner/lude/lute

Circle of Power
orb of endless circulation
entropy

desire to be
empty & full
in control
what controls

•

meat, fiber, sinew
emptiness in void of word
w/out end or beginning

connected
disconnected
seek but not see
beyond
childhood maps
on the wall

forgetting everything
no awareness of forgiveness

•

You are [my] mind
bring me forth.
You are my treasury:
open for me.
You [are] my fullness:
accept me.
You are <my> rest:
give me incomprehensible perfection.

•

“It wasn’t time”
RD speaks to me
unasked for
he says
“Be ready”
“Use it all”
& the “play
of thought” or
Thoth

○

[#First of the MYnd mAP series]

RIVYR

Stream
of consequence
your currency
piles
up flow and stone
fish fowl we
beat back

the eddy
Bluffs leap Rag
time feet on
misty
slippy mud
You Rivyr
are mother
let me be my
own ophelia
confluences
so calm of
float multiplied by
pull of on-
ward the hear
of the here
now just a
royal roil a rolling a
long weight

wait
till the salt taste
of tear-tide barges
in Let me sink in
to the sweet ebb
of your swift
meander



Simon Perchik

*

You trick both thumbs into sunlight
the way footpaths squeeze the dead
though you can't breathe at night

unless this kettle is lit—you can see
where these matches end over end
are climbing midair—it's the mirage

heat uses to add water—the stove
with nothing inside, at attention
from the day it was asked.

*

Every sound has become a word, by now
sentences, ones that go step by step
and behind each other you hear

what falling water has to say, lets
its crushing wall do the talking
as if every voice begins among rocks

then end over end is carried down
for frozen seas and longing, tells you
it's OK, dirt will help you forget

calmed by what the dead squeeze out
and the gesture :this stream pushing back
unfolds over your mouth, makes an answer.

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*

Don't shake hands! bring flowers
the way all dirt has a place to go
though your arms stay behind, sifting

for a suit, a shirt :the granite
you grow piece by piece from a fragrance
spread out, feeding on open mountainside

and building-fronts :each stone picked
for its thin shadow ready to spring
swallow the smallest thing you have

—you're still not used to being here
surrounded by small shops, street lamps
a garment district where nothing fits

where one arm is hanging down, dissolving
into pathways and hollow roots trembling
under its silence —you can't lift a thing.

*

Appearing and disappearing, this gate
you wave between one hand
after the other and doves on cue

break through the way each flourish
opens midair, is helped along
clearing the rooftops, palms up

—on your back as the aimless path
that has such low windows
—from nowhere, no longer white

each stone is closing its wings
letting go the sky, the graves
and just as suddenly your shoulders.



Spencer Hurst

SUNDIALS

After De Chirico's The Delights of a Poet

The sun makes the clock a liar
casting shadows too long for two o'clock.
It's funny, don't you think?
That all shadows are dark —

buildings, stone arches, the water flying
from a fountain, a lone woman
in the plaza — the sun plays no favorites.

She stands with such courage,
refusing to flee: head bowed,
arms limp, an unwavering

pillar of defiance, contemplating
the silent march of an
unseen leviathan.

Why doesn't she run?
She must hear the fountain.
From the corner
of her right eye

she must see
the black waters
untainted by shadow.

THE FERRYMAN

Like a shattered light bulb in a shag carpet,
Missouri clay bristles with rock.
Rainwater runs off
to wash gullies. Down this muddy red road
the waters gather where some fear
to cross.

They come to be carried
and he's not afraid. He lifts them
across and watches them clamber
up the slope. After they cross
he sings. The notes fly high on soaked air
into dripping black oaks. ○

Jason W. Dockery

ENTROPY ON CARTER AVENUE

When she found, that last day, the pencils rubbed down
By draft after draft of *there's no easy way to say this*,

Could have been, though, the time the candles went hungry
crying over a cold dinner, and melted into disappointment,

Or, after having taken her name, rearranging the letters for comfort,
and crawling into the soft nape of another's lexicon,

The finality of it all fell in a box of photos at my feet,
curled remembrances worn at the edges, creases forcing into skin. ○

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Glenn Sheldon

**PHOTOGRAPH NEVER TAKEN:
BUTCHER APPRENTICE, OMAHA 1968**

His hands have always been too large
for his small body. Now they earn their keep.
Jeff leans against the counter, his
bloodied apron around him like a flag
of a barbarian country only a few have seen.
This will change. He is going to Vietnam
and is excited about seeing the world.
He doesn't know it will see him also,
that his trial for a massacre will mean
he will ache for these years when he held
a knife, raised it and sliced through ribs.
He will want simplicity back in his life:
like taking a coffee break, thinking of mopping
up the killing floor and going home
to spend money on used car parts.

○

Gina Tabasso

FRONT LINE

When a soldier comes
fresh from battle to bathe,
he enters the water as he would a woman,
releases what he carries on his skin.
Naked for a time, the gun must leave his hand.
Not clean nor new nor innocent,
he wants a way to scrub his eyes
of what they've seen, what his hands have done.
Ten digits, two palms may hold breasts and babies,
weigh them against the weight of a grenade,
find them lacking, too soft, in need.
He's tired of his job. Where's the line to sign
to get out, the way he did to join, the stop clause
before he develops a distaste for meat,
before he loses his mind to pity, to terror
or to some great love. ○

Tabitha Russo

THE SLOW DEATH

Did you knot the rope tight around your throat,
in preparation for the descent into some darkness?
Did your old body betray itself
as you willed it to step from its makeshift platform?
Did a gasp of pain fizzle in your intestines,
unable to escape the windpipe,
as the solid line clutched your neck and

did your children, your grandchildren, that wife
pound incessantly in your eardrums
as the screaming gave out,
finally?
Did you think twice at the absolute moment?
Your fingers clawing,
eyes weeping blood,
feet flapping frantically
in search of something solid.
Did you think?
Did you knot the rope tight?

Sixty-three exhausted years,
an inexplicable past in a war
your children had long forgot,
of hollow nights amid the torrent of gunfire,
discordant days swallowed into a jungle;
a wasted brigade that no longer heard the birds sing.
Nor when you came home
did the birds sing.

Or was it your memory that could never forget
the wife — a distorted delusion,
leaving
only whispers,
wild,
disturbing the inner ear.

Who knows these things?

When they discovered your body dangling heavy
from the ceiling post of her bedroom,
one must have felt the dust rising
from the now bone dry sockets of the bled limbs;
a body shriveled like something long forgotten,
overlooked, like

the sun's slow voyage into the shadows
of evening's constant darkness
as the clouds drape low
eradicating the stars
disturbing our vision
while making us forget
that we had ever even been there.

○

Jeff Penn May

**THE ORANGE, THE APPLE, AND THE PEACH
(excerpts)**

And who are you Klara
but a mother who lay
with three children
dead from diphtheria?

Were you someone's peach?

And who can blame you for
protecting your little boy?

Did my father think of you
marching into Germany
unhinging the gate?
All those walking bones
unleashed by
what you say?
Hate?

My father hero
killing killers
evil boys.
My father hero
lying dead in the ditch
waiting forever for
the pop pop pop.
Slugs into soldier friends
corpses still.

But one cloud one breeze,
black moonlight,
he runs,
alive in night,
another near miss
one second here, there,
and again
I am air.

My dad, he vomits,
bulldozers bury the fleshy bones.
Where do the dead boys go?

So it goes
 Bang!
Big or not
 sliver of snot
under a microscope.
 What do we find?
Einstein and you.
And Hitler too.

My father vomits
My father shoots
And kills
And liberates bones.

The orange, the apple,
and the peach.

*

And what becomes of Einstein?
And you. And me.
And what becomes of Hitler?
And you. And me.
And what becomes of
babies born when
they are all blown up?

What happens when
a genetic code
scrambles the egg
or a shell
breaks?

What does your dog think?
Do you pet and pray to God,
Dusty, meet me in Dog Heaven?
Why are you there?

Do dogs drunk
bite babies and
dog hell deserve?

And what of the maggot?
Surely it feels.
The insects and germs?
My worm in your
apple?

Full plump and juices ripe
smack and suck
our lips run round
orange seed,
apple core,
peach pit.

*

A drop of dew
on apple leaf
orange
sunlight
orb
balancing
on moonlit peak
one hand
on blue ice
the other
frozen for you
in mid-reach.

○

Laura Madeline Wiseman

MY GREAT GRANDMOTHER'S WINTER COAT

Hangs in a closet behind the front door of my father's home.
The double row of rose buttons unhooked, slack under dust.

A white hand-stitched label, *Wolf's*, a store that collapsed
during the war. The lining threaded in scarlet and gold.

*In those days, this cost a lot of money, my father says
and lifts it from the hanger. If it fits, you can have it.*

At her full length mirror in the hall I button three holes.
In her pockets white kid gloves and a single stiff tissue.

On the sleeve a silver curled hair. I step outside to go
into the cold, folded in scent, part my father's, part hers.

○

Michael Anthony Dorlac

THE BACHELOR'S NOCTURNE

Shining dark carnage boots in the
Butchering hours of the night
Remaining at rest to hear
The blare of horns by first light
The cervine sirens
The beast being split from
The breastbone to the ass
The field dressing
Intestines that slop hot to the cool earth
Mammal blood on the cheeks given in ritual
The death of a beast is a prayer
Giving up its life force for food
The dark tent of deerskin airing out its
Organic cologne
Gazing into the concentrated campfire
Evening that brings antique memories:
Like the
Recollections of the chipped tooth and
The first fight
The Holy black eye
The bottle rocket in the hand
Thrown too late spreading
The original sizzle and fire to
Juvenile skin
The awkwardness of adolescent sex
The sudden first thrust of
Development into adulthood
Tall, strange, and awkward in the presence of
The smolder of God monologues across
The grey hemispheres of the head
The thinnest razor to the softest-bellied trout
The red fish gills of death exposed like
Women whose bodies open in childbirth
Like stripping the peach to its pit with incisors
The lily patterned dress unfastened quickly
The proliferation of female machines
Acknowledgment of the deeper meaning

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Of a man making measured circles to his shoes
Nocturnal remembrances
Of high-school girls with perfect penmanship
Who haunted the male skull with their
Curvaceous consonant bodies
With their offhand flourishing script
And their wild breath of wisteria
Their intentional health
And their attractive skeletons
Ambulating inch by inch
The mechanics of their metrical hips
Foreign but just slightly out of reach
Like the dreams of dead cousins in
Rapid rivers twisting caught in fishing line
Held down in the current's frozen grasp
Such nightmares now made of hard stream
In the rapid eye kinesis:
Hallucinations of slave girls
Pulling a heavy pail of water under stars
The girls move in the wet darkness
They are thirsty and silent
The skies liquefy with indigo smoke
Motioning out on discolored windows
Awakened to the task at hand
The sheen of a zippered boot
These are the hours of men's shoes
The polished prophesy of leather reflection
These are the days of elderly women
Those who often came quickly
With festooned umbrellas
Who always arrived too early to
Funerals, burials, and I do's
This is when I will spit upon my
Bachelor boots
By the hot polish and by
The interment head of the
Chromatic moon.



Jessica Moses

LAID BARE

A bust with no name,
sitting stately among the
artistic renderings of past
college presidents.
Textured, statuesque,
he's not uniformly smooth.
Buttons for nipples
in curly haired bliss.
It's hard to say what woman
hasn't felt similarly
unknown.
Except this,
a male medusa
already stoned.
No claim to his glory
his accomplishments
his reign.
He's displayed
naked
without a name.



Ronald J. Pelias

MAD COW DISEASE

The cow's tail
twitches
after giving
birth.
Rising up upon
spindly legs
the just born
struggles toward
sirloin
anticipating revenge.



María Balogh

ABOVE THE MILPA

As the sun insinuates its presence
we cut through cornfields called *milpa* by local farmers
Following our guide whose machete
devours intrusive weeds
to reach the water source which is to become
the base for a new water system

We are the modernizers who came
from civilization's headquarters to improve
the quality of life of the *campesinos* who managed
to quench their thirst for centuries
before we knew of their existence

Nevertheless they welcome
the system that will allow them water
without having to break their backs to transport it
to wash the few clothes they own
to bathe their children —
dirt not being their main problem

They will learn how to care for the system
how much to charge for monthly fees
what is fair what is not what is justifiable

They will be more civilized
They will beat their wives more often
for these won't have the excuse
for dinner being late because of having
to fetch water at the spring
once they take us above the milpa

they will have more free time
to mingle and drink in the town's cantinas
for they don't have to watch day and night
that their crops don't get too dry
When they take us above the milpa

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CARIBEÑA

I salute you Sister *Caribeña*
You're cloves & cinnamon
sweet & spicy at once
You move to the waves of the sea
& salty breezes on palms
& African drumbeats
& you have the tint
of coconuts & sand

I sing to you Sister *Caribeña*
You're cumin powder
& *melasa de panela*
at once condiment & *miel*
Your blood is raw sunlight at noon
You come from ancestral labor at the *cañeras*
& craftsmen of silver, *oro* & *nácar*
You sway to the tunes of native flutes
& you never deny your passion
innate & indomitable

I sing to you Sister *Caribeña*
You are *color de achiote*
& *mangos de azúcar*

I salute you Sister *Caribeña*
& your blended mosaic nature



J. Neff Lind

THE BRIDGE

Andy and I were seeking wildness
and wilderness
in a city of crew cuts
and please
and thank you.

We wondered
the same things
about
Saturday nights
so we skipped the bars
and climbed a bridge
reserved for trains.
We felt scared and brave,
I afraid of heights,
Andy of himself,
so he left himself
on the ground below.

Invincible on the bridge,
he produced a bottle
of Wild Turkey 101.
We took our clothes off,
all of them,
too cold to be embarrassed.
We were
invisible
in the shadows
as we watched cars pass below.
We shivered into the bottle
naked and alone on Saturday night,
perched above the women
that we hoped to hold,
wrote songs about.

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We wished they would
appear beside us
now
or tomorrow
or sometime soon.

The whisky turned our blood
to lava
and we resolved
to finish the bottle.
The last sips seemed holy
in our newborn church of self belief,
so they ended up
in Andy's hair
and mine.

And we reeked of whisky
in our hearts and hair
as we saw a police car appear below.
He'd been waiting in his own shadow,
twenty-five feet from us,
daring someone
to break the rules
on his turf.

We could have hit him
with the bottle
where we sat
naked
drunken
laughing.
The cop drove off
after a speeder
unaware he was looking for us.



Robert Luftig

THE WOMAN IN McDONALD'S

With her half-finished coffee she studies
each insert of the Sunday paper
as if sight reading her music for the week.
In quarter-note snips, she clips
any coupon that looks hopeful,
careful not to do damage to bar codes
and expiration dates, shrinking

the usefulness of each page down to size.
Then steadily, she sorts her prodigies
into their proper piles:
veggies, sauces, pasta, meat,
dairy, detergents, paper, pets,
and the always popular "other."
She writes in her notebook

in a tight, penciled hand each coupon's
impending date of death, their life's worth,
and if they can be doubled, then places
each survivor in a clear plastic folder
with expandable accordion bellows.
Later, while leaning her forearms
on her shopping cart, she will poise

her fingers like a concert pianist
and trace along the folder tips
as if playing a waltz only she can hear.
At checkout, she will perform
a masterpiece, counting off
her savings like an metronome,
filling her bags with accompaniments.

○

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Keith Russell

GRANDFATHER'S GARDEN

His roses burned for months
after his cardboard coffin
slid into a tin-roofed warehouse
crematorium in Schertz, Texas.

His grandson waddled
around granddaddy's patch
of tangled grapes, unripe tomatoes,
yellowing bamboo and roses.

Pinks crawled up fence posts
while whites and reds stood
in pots bleached ashen
by the San Antonio sun.

The child went from plant to plant.
He dumped mulch over his head,
clawed at the black dirt
of grandfather's garden and laughed.

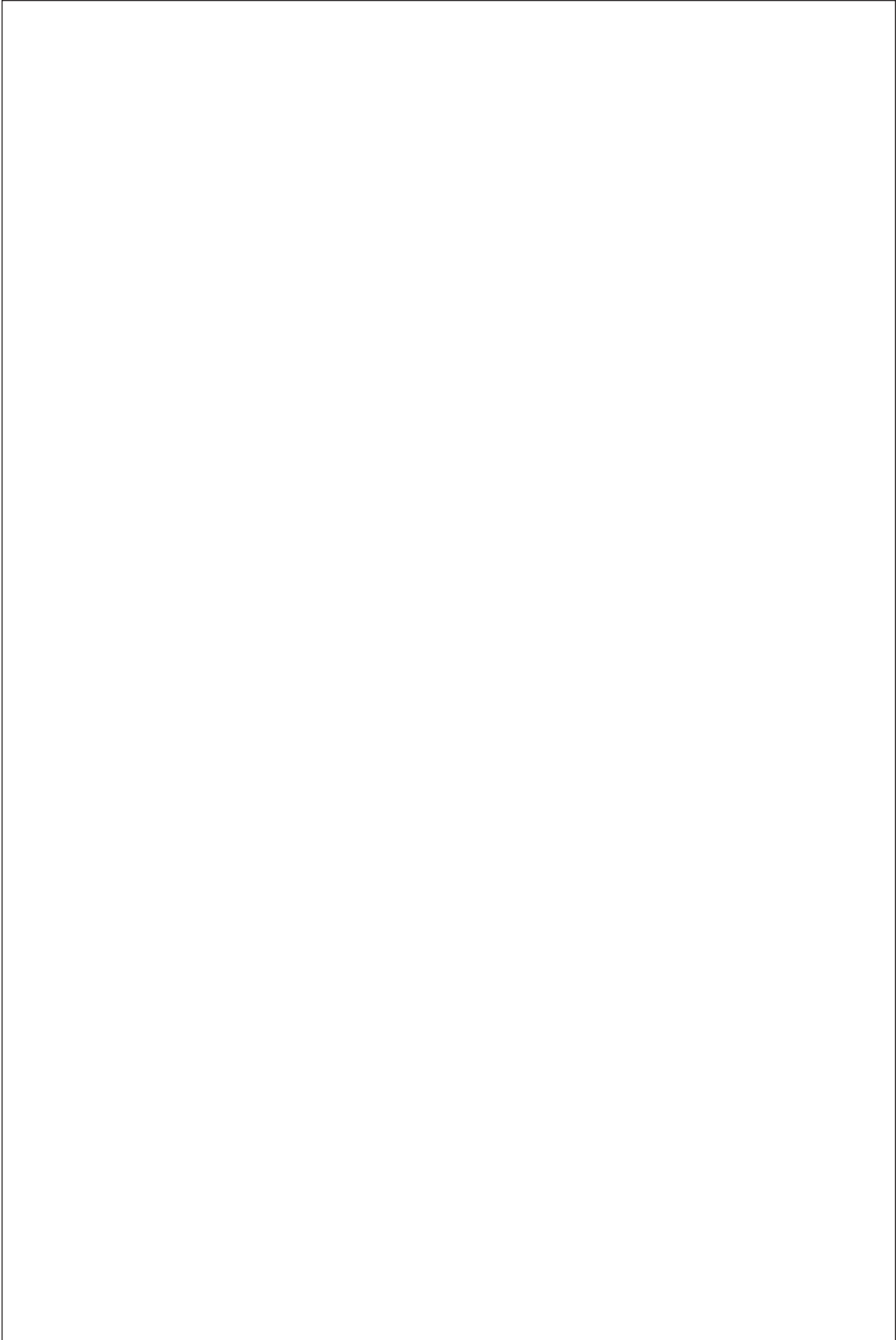
BLIND PIANO TUNER

Hard hands slide between pegs
tingling with the piano's tones.
He drifts to childhood tunes sung
by his frail father at the end
of drowsy days pulling cotton.
*Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord*
swells over oak floorboards
in a sharecropping shack.
The fields couldn't use him,
so he was shipped north
to Talladega for rough trades.
James Justice, jeered
other pupils, a superhero's
name in a school for the blind.
The music flooded his mind,
notes hanging softly in his ears
like magnolia blossoms.
Black pines and white keys waited
in Mobile, Bay Minette, Atmore,
the Gulf's waves' harmonies
swept him to snowbirds' nests.
He finishes, covers the keyboard,
and rises to hear his way home.



Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E.
Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein
W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian
Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento
Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe
Benevento Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji
Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller
Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E.
Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein
W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian
Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento
Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe
Benevento Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji
Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller
Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E.
Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein
W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian
Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento
Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe
Benevento Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller Tunji
Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E. Mueller
Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein W.E.
Mueller Tunji Ajibade Joe Benevento Adrian Hein

Fiction



inten-
tionally
blank

Tunji Ajibade

Government House

Toge stared at the large Government House complex. The huge iron gate was solid, intimidating, a symbol of the gulf that separated the masses from their ruler. No one went beyond it without being given a thorough search by the uniformed men who guarded it. Uninvited visitors were non-starters. Only two cars, expensive ones, had gone beyond the gate in the last two hours since Toge took up his sitting position here at the other side of the road. He thought about leaving now — dusk was fast turning to darkness. Where to spend the night was a problem. Toge's anger rose as he looked at the immense whitewashed building that was the official residence of the state governor. The man who lived within the confines of this fortress had stolen an electoral mandate, denied him his home and everything he had. The governor dwelled in opulence, feeding fat while the masses endured poverty.

It had been two months since the farce called “election” took place across the state. Or rather, an election was declared to have taken place by the election agency compromised of the ruling party. In Toge's ward and local government-council area, no elections had taken place. Chaos, violence and bloodshed did. The government had organized the chaos, and the governor himself, wanting a second four-year term in office, had funded it. Uniformed men had backed up the farce called election. Toge thought back to that morning of the election day.

People in Memolu, Toge's local government area, had gone to bed the night before the elections, determined to exercise their right to vote the following morning. But instead they were woken at dawn by the governor's men who had come to unleash violence on them. Other constituencies in the state were safe for the governor, but in Memolu the people were known for their independent streak. If the governor was to stay in the Government House, he would have to win in this area, which had the largest number of voters in the entire state. However, Memolu people wanted nothing to do with the governor who had done nothing to benefit them in the last four years. They desired a change. Every attempt the government made to buy over known community leaders in Memolu had failed. No one would exchange his vote for money. It was clear that if Memolu exercised its voting right, the game would be up for the governor.

More than 40 people died in the violence that occurred on the day of the elections that did not take place in Memolu. Two of the victims were Toge's relatives. One was his wife; the other was his two-year-old child. Both had been burnt to death in their house before dawn. Toge escaped death because he was away at his post as a night guard at the local council secretariat building. The very hour he had left work was the hour the

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mayhem in his ward was at its peak. He was told to stay away until things calmed down. When they did and he returned to his mud- and grass-thatched roof house at midday, all he had on earth was gone. By then, the stuffed ballot boxes and fake election results were on their way to the capital city where victory in favour of the governor and his party was announced.

Toge continued to stare at the governor's official residence which now glowed brightly under the nighttime light. His heart bled. His soul ached. He was pained by the injustice — the governor wanted power, and he killed to get it. He denied the masses he was supposed to serve the few things that they had on earth, including their loved ones.

Toge no longer had his few belongings or the mud house where he used to lay his head. He wondered what he would do next. He wondered if life held anything for him at all. With a new local government chairman in Memolu recently appointed by the governor, Toge had also lost his job as a night guard at the council secretariat building. Many other government employees whose sympathy was not for the ruling party would also lose their jobs soon, according to the latest bush news Toge got when he reached the capital city. He began to search for a new job, but nothing had been forthcoming, even after four weeks of searching. At the end of another fruitless day spent combing the streets for any available job, he had taken the road that passed in front of Government House. He was tired of walking and sat to rest on the sidewalk across from the governor's residence.

A siren suddenly came alive within the governor's residence, and a flurry of movements followed at the gate, where uniformed men stood at attention. The gate was thrown open and Toge could see a convoy of cars. At the gate, the escort car stopped. From the long, long convoy, Toge concluded that the governor was going out, and wondered what could be taking him away from home at this time of the night.

"Ah, yes. The gala night organized by the ruling party to celebrate its victory at the last 'general election.'" Toge remembered hearing it announced on the radio earlier that afternoon.

"Hey, you! — What are you doing there? Move away from there!" one of the uniformed men ordered Toge.

He stood up as the convoy began to move. The long line of vehicles continued to go by until that of the governor came side by side with him. He could make out the figure of His Excellency under the street light that illuminated the windows of his jeep. Then it went past.

Toge began to walk away just as the governor's jeep drove past him. But while one had a destination, the journey undertaken by the other was to nowhere.

○

Joe Benevento

Some Guy Singing ‘Mala Femmina’ Over Salvatore’s Computer

My colleague, Sal Ruggiero, he’s always dragging me over to his office to show me the latest thing up on his computer. Most of the time it’s something silly, like some clown trying to sound like Harry Belafonte singing an anti-terrorist song to the tune of “Day-O” (You know, “Tally-Man,” “Taliban”; it had to happen), but this time was a little different.

“Listen to this — it’s my Uncle Bruno. I’ve told you about him, no?”

“That’s the one who owns the bakery in Bay Ridge, right?”

“No, that’s my Cousin Edzio. Bruno lives in Sweden.”

“C’mon, how in the hell does a *paisan*’ end way up in Sweden?”

“He married a Swede. Anyway, listen to this. He’s an engineer, but he plays music in his spare time. Listen what he sent me on the computer.”

So Salvatore pushes the right buttons, and pretty soon I’m listening to some guy singing “Mala Femmina,” accompanied by a hokey keyboard with its own percussion. He hasn’t got a great voice, and he’s singing into a little microphone on a computer way across the ocean, but, somehow, he’s getting it right anyway.

“‘Mala Femmina.’ Boy does that bring back memories, eh?”

“Yeah. Jimmy Roselli, Jerry Vale — that was a big one for the both of them, no?”

“Sure. Hell, I even think Connie Francis sang it on one of her albums, which, if you think about it, is pretty funny.”

Anyone who grew up Italian-American on the East Coast, like me and Salvatore, (both of us in Queens, though we never met until he took the job as the other half of our Italian department here at University of Nebraska, Omaha) knows “Mala Femmina” — literally “bad woman” — was the most popular song from our youth, the prototypical lament of any poor *paisan*’ who couldn’t help falling for the femme fatale.

“You know,” I laughed, “the funniest thing is that at every Italian wedding I ever went to back home, even if the musicians weren’t Italians, they had to trot that one song out.”

“Yeah,” Sal agreed. “You couldn’t have a wedding without ‘Mala Femmina.’”

“Which, if you think about it, is pretty funny. Everybody, at least half drunk, singing along on the chorus, about how women are like vipers, how they’re just no damn good — even the bride’s singing up a storm.”

“Yeah. So, it’s not like the groom can say he wasn’t warned, right?” Sal

asked, with a rueful look that didn't seem to go along with the joke.

"Sure," I laughed, wanting to keep things light. "Though I guess that's the point. You know that *faccia d'angelo* is really up to no good, but that don't mean you're going to go without, right?"

Neither of us was going without. But my marriage was looking a lot more stable than Salvatore's and for reasons I understood all too well. I've been in Omaha almost 20 years. I brought a Brooklyn Italian wife with me, and she lasted all of three semesters before heading back to Bensonhurst. "No friggin' way am I gonna spend the rest of my friggin' life out here with the cows," was the pastoral way she phrased it during our last big fight. So about five years after that I married Brenda, a blue-eyed, blonde, a former student, someone who grew up in Fremont, Nebraska, so, to her, Omaha's the big city. We've got four kids, her parents think I'm colorful, and my kids get to visit New York for their big adventure every summer. Sure, Brenda's put on a few pounds over the years, but who wouldn't after four kids? Best choice I ever made.

Now, Sal — he's got himself a real looker, but Donna's also a real IAP, an Italian American Princess. Her father is big in construction out on the Island. I met the guy once, a real *cafone*, but they're loaded. Donna was Sal's student, back at NYU, where he was well on his way to a hot-shot career, till he somehow didn't get tenure, something about Dario Fo not being an important enough writer on whom to base a critical career (Sal got axed the year *after* Fo won the Nobel). So he lands here in Omaha, and I'm glad to have him, even though everyone assumes I gave the job to my cousin. We look so much alike to them, but that's mostly because they don't get too many tall, dark "eyetalians" out here in Cornhusker land, where they probably think De Niro and Pacino are the same actor, and both in the Mafia to boot. Then again, it isn't just looks — Sal and I have frames of reference like no one else in Omaha. Who else but Sal grew up with Vale and Roselli competing with The Beatles and Motown for time on the record player? Who else in Nebraska grew up with Christmas songs like Lou Monte's "Dominick the Donkey"? Who else but Sal remembers when biscotti weren't trendy, just one of a few dozen kinds of cookies our mothers made from scratch?

And Sal, he'd be adjusting pretty well, if not for Donna. She's still got that broad Long Island, Italian-American, nouveau-riche accent, which makes her the sorest thumb at every faculty party, especially when all she does is insult people, since after three years here she still can't accept that some people think Omaha actually *is* a city, and still can't believe in any land that doesn't have Bloomingdale's, ocean beaches and pizza by the slice. And she isn't even trying to adjust — she just keeps pestering Salvatore to "get a better job," so she can get back to her own people. But how many Italian departments are there in the whole country, much less in the greater New York area? It's not like he isn't trying. I mean, he's still pub-

lishing his ass off, going to every conceivable conference to present papers, but, so far, no dice. Plus, I get the sneaking suspicion he maybe even likes it here a little and wishes he could get Donna to stop thinking that anything west of Jersey is outside of “freakin’” Christendom.

Sal plays “Mala Femmina” for me a second time, and I’m getting the suspicion it’s not just because he thinks his uncle is a great singer. But, like me, he’s not a heart-on-the-sleeve kind of guy.

“Anyway, I’m glad you enjoyed hearing Uncle Bruno. I’ll tell him you liked it.”

“Sure, what’s not to like? He’s got that *napolitan*’ whine in his voice down pat,” I noted.

“Yeah, maybe I won’t put it quite that way.”

“Whatever’s best.”

“Oh, and listen, I got a little something for you here,” Sal said, as he reached behind his desk.

“What for? My birthday’s not till November.” I see he’s handing me a gift-wrapped bottle of something, but I can’t figure out the occasion.

“What for? You joking? I mean if you hadn’t been there for Donna during the fire, I don’t know what might a happened.”

“Don’t be silly, Sal, man. The fire never really got near the house — she just got a little panicky. I was happy to help.”

Just last Saturday I’m watching Bugs Bunny with the kids, when Donna calls, totally New York hysterical, ranting something about “the whole freakin’ woods” being on fire. There’s really not much in the way of woods in Omaha, but Sal and Donna live outside of town, which, if you think about it, is pretty funny, since she’s such a city girl, but, again, to her, Omaha is no city, and this house they bought had the one thing that was going to make her miss the beach a little less — a huge swimming pool. But now, apparently, there was a fire, and Sal, he was away at one of his conferences, and she didn’t know what to do. She hadn’t even called 911 yet, so I did that, and then raced over there to see if I could help. By the time I got there, the volunteer fire guys had it pretty much under control. It seems some dopey neighbor had been burning trash, a few trees had really gone ablaze, but just a few, and not really all that near Donna’s house. Still, there she was, dragging on a cigarette, in a bathrobe and slippers, with her make-up as artfully applied as ever, just like some TV situation-comedy actress in a crisis.

“Can you believe this shit, Frankie? I mean, it’s bad enough I gotta live here in the boonies — now I gotta watch a forest fire, and the only thing protecting the damn house is these Nebraska mooks who ain’t even got a real fire truck. Swear ta God I was expecting Smoky the Freakin’ Bear to show up any second.”

“Well, hey, Donna — it looks like the fire’s pretty much under control.

I think these guys know what they're doing."

"Yeah. That's a miracle in itself. I can't believe I'm stuck here by myself in the middle of all this crap. Swear ta God, if Sallie goes to one more a dem freakin' conventions I'm gonna, I'm gonna, I'm gonna make him pay, I swear ta God Almighty."

I stayed awhile to calm Donna down and then headed back for home. I didn't think what I had done was anything to go and buy me a present about. Especially a big, beautiful bottle of Fra Angelica, which Sal knows is my favorite liqueur.

It was now around four on a Friday; both of us were done with classes for the week. Usually Sal stays working in his office till late, even most Fridays, but now he was asking me if I maybe wanted to go for a drink.

"Oh, hey, sure. I gotta be getting home by, say, six or so, but, yeah, what the hell. I'm glad you're thinking of something besides work for a change. Let's go."

We went to "The Office," a cozy dive just a few blocks off campus. I'm guessing the guy that named the place thought he was clever as hell, since his clientele could tell their spouses, "I'm staying late at 'the office,'" and they couldn't exactly be accused of lying when they got home soused hours later. Somehow the name hadn't been enough though; the place was pretty empty for a Friday. But, hey, they have Guinness on tap and comfortably padded, red naugahyde chairs, so it was as good a place as any to take Salvatore Ruggiero, who seemed to need to talk.

After the third Guinness, he really got to talking: "Isn't it funny how just about every other famous Italian love song isn't really a love song at all?"

"How'd'ya mean?"

"It's like you were saying before — singing 'Mala Femmina' at a wedding — it's stupid — but somehow it makes sense. Think of all the songs there are about some woman who two timed or left the schmuck that's singing: 'Torna Surriento,' 'Core 'ngrato,' 'Tu che nun change...'"

"'Funiculi, funicula?'" I tried joking him out of it, but he wasn't having any of it. Instead, he starting singing some of the words from "Core 'ngrato," the *napolitan*' whine all over again, except louder than his uncle could manage over the computer, from way over in Stockholm.

"*Core, core 'ngrato, / t'aie pigliato a vita mia / tutt'e passato / e nun'nce pienze chiu.*"

"Bravo, bravo — you got that down great, man, but, hey, take it easy. For some strange reason they don't have that one on the Karaoke machines in Nebraska. Some of the locals are giving us funny looks, *capisco*?"

"*Io non capisco, niente, sai?*"

"What don't you get?" I asked, trying my best to be sympathetic.

"How is it you give a woman everything, but she's never satisfied?"

Americans think it's the man who's always the louse, and sure, men do cheat, but that's because the women, they're never satisfied. You can't win. All those songs — those guys knew. They understand. *M'hai capito, amico?* They understand."

"Ah, c'mon, Sallie, it's not always like that. Every situation's different. I mean it's just some songs and..."

"Some songs nothing. Donna's talking about leaving. She says she can't take living here anymore. She told me I gotta get us out quick or she's gone. Plus, I think she's already fitting me for some horns, *capisc*? I'm afraid to call the plumber for a leaky pipe 'cause she'd probably jump his bones just to shame me. But the crazy thing is — I still want her, I still love her, I can't help it. I don't know what I'm gonna do. Frankie, I just don't know."

Suddenly, Sal seemed like a lot more than a colleague. He reminded me of myself when my ex gave me her first ultimatum. And though the years and the new life I had made in Omaha had mostly dimmed that pain past where it hardly seemed to have ever really happened, now it was back like it was yesterday; I felt all Sal's sorrow. In my head I could hear his uncle, from way across the ocean, singing our mutual lament, voicing the brotherhood of our mistrust, our crazy need. And I knew just what I had to do.

"Listen, Sal, you gotta calm yourself a little. How about we go get dinner somewhere and talk things out better? I'm sure everything'll be fine. I think we'd better go easy on the Guinness, though, eh?"

"Really, yeah, that'd be great. But wait — I thought you had to get home."

"I'll make a phone call. Wait here. I'll be right back."

Sal got up instead to use the bathroom, which was even better. The phone rang four times before she picked up, which was so typical.

"Listen, looks like I can't make it after all."

"You mean you're gonna be a little late, right?"

"No, I mean I can't make it, not at all."

"But it was all set. That place you told me about — it sounded classy, for freakin' Nebraska, anyway. I can't believe you're standing me up like this, I..."

"Listen, sorry, I gotta go — someone's waiting on me."

"Oh, you found yourself another chippie, is that it? Another one of those corn-fed blondes? I..."

I just hung up. Who needed to listen to any more of that? Here she was getting all over my case, like she was my wife. No thank you. There's nothing uglier, or more pathetic, really, than the *mala femmina* scorned. Of course, here I was ditching her for Salvatore Ruggiero, which, if you think about it, is really kind of funny. I was still chuckling to myself when Sal came back and we went out together, two *paisani* navigating our way in the Nebraska night.



Adrian Hein

The Farm

Don't ask me why I harbored a murderer. There are mysteries. Some are inside jobs. I was on about day 200 of loneliness when he showed up on my farm.

My farm. Those words still sing. After decades of an uneventful average life, I was given a farm free, and clear. I didn't even have to pay taxes. My aunt thought of everything. The odd thing is I never really knew this aunt. I guess my middle name was her first name but there was no sentimental attachment between her and my mother. I got my middle name from a movie star, not a woman who left her husband in 1963 to work on a cousin's cattle ranch in Idaho. My uncle eventually drank himself to death and Aunt Doris never remarried and the place looked pretty much the same when I got there as it had in the '60s — meat grinders and tenderizers, a sundial clock on the wall, long faded curtains with geometric designs, and unemotional still lifes likely done by adult art students and sold at yard sales.

One thing I should clarify is that it isn't an actual working farm — it's 12 acres of land adjacent to an agricultural community down near Mattoon. Farming was never my aunt's intention. It was meant to be a rural getaway from Peoria but became the last stop on the way to the end of a 30-year marriage. Have you ever noticed that? How many long-term marriages move before getting divorced? Maybe Aunt Doris figured country life would sober him up. Wishful thinking. I found several dusty cases of Schlitz in the crawl space that must have been sitting there since the weekend she left.

Once she was gone, my uncle made his way back to Peoria, went on a two-week binge, fell down a flight of steps head first, slipped into a coma and died a day later. None of my family went to the funeral; we weren't close.

It was extraordinary, the day I was notified about my inheritance. I had just returned to my apartment after a long day of secretarial work. My boss, Geraldine, was being particularly bitchy that day, waiting for me at my desk when I arrived ten minutes late.

"You'll want to get to this first thing, Jean. I need it by 10. Which shouldn't be a problem since you won't be taking a morning break."

She meant my ten minutes late translated to used break time. That was pure Geraldine: petty, rude, critical, offensive, and ugly. There was an article in *Newsweek* once about people like her. They're born with a chemical missing in their brains, so they have no sense of someone else's personal space or body language, which in her case meant standing on my

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side of the desk, right over me, while I typed. I felt perpetual claustrophobia around Geraldine because she watched me all day long, left her door open and positioned her desk so she could see mine. I only stayed locked in that job because I needed rent money. That, plus some serious psychic lethargy I was suffering.

Well, after that especially long day of Geraldine, I bought a chicken breast and frozen mixed vegetables at the grocery, returned to my one-bedroom apartment in a 150-unit complex and got the call from the lawyer.

“May I speak to Miss Knolls?”

“Who’s calling?”

“This is Earl Lebovic of Lebovic, Hurston, & Klein. I’m an attorney representing the estate of Doris Carlson.”

It took me several moments to connect the name Doris Carlson to my aunt and more time to digest the news that she had made me one of two beneficiaries of her estate. I got the farm in Illinois, all taxes on the farm paid in perpetuity, and a small annuity that would cover basic living expenses for the next 35 years. The other recipient, a foster child she had taken in for six months when she and Uncle Ed were still married, would get one flat sum of \$15,000.

I had been living in Irvine, California and working for Geraldine a good three years. I originally moved there because I wanted to experience Southern California at least once in my life, but had grown weary of the demands of constant sunshine and freeways and recently considered moving back to my native Midwest. The timing couldn’t have been better.

The first month or two on the farm were like a bright shiny jewelry box of new experiences. I would walk across the fields in a state of awe, watching meadowlarks swoop down on glistening grasses. This is mine — this is all mine. I couldn’t believe it. There was a hopefulness, a glittery freshness, a sense of forward momentum: cleaning every square inch of the house, buying furniture at second-hand shops and Target. My sister sent a Krups cappuccino maker from Cedar Rapids where she lived. Her husband of 20 years had a brain tumor, so she and her grown children didn’t stray too far from home. I also received a housewarming gift of \$50 from my brother, the oldest. He had his own family in Pt. Hueneme, California, near the naval base.

You could say my brother and sister were startled, taken aback and perhaps jealous of my inheritance, but they were also relieved, since I had always been a worry to them, the youngest at 43, never married and never having anything resembling a career. Since our parents died, they probably dreaded the thought of being responsible for me at some future date. For whatever reason, I had turned out to be that type of person no one wants to be in this day and age: someone without ambition and plans and goals, someone quietly existing from paycheck to paycheck who has come to terms with the fact that they’ll never see the Eiffel Tower.

So you can imagine with what pleasure I told Geraldine I quit. I kept it to myself for a full week — that's how important it was to execute it perfectly. You see, I've probably glossed over my feelings about Geraldine. The truth is I hated her guts. Truly loathed her. Have you ever hated anyone? It's not a good feeling. When you hate someone, they've crept under your skin like a spider that lays eggs. They're a gray mirror to you, an air-tight bad picture of yourself you can't shake. Their certain contempt confirms every low thing you've ever thought about yourself. They've burrowed themselves so deep into your thinking that you can experience very few moments, even joyous ones, without their judgments butting in.

Why did I hate Geraldine so much? Because I was average, I was vulnerable, I was self-conscious, I was fearful, and she never let me forget it. I was so much all of these things that I didn't even have the wherewithal to find a new job after my life had become a daily misery, an indentured servitude, an ongoing perforated ulcer.

Geraldine was a short, squat woman with ill-formed bow legs. A toad really, which was my secret nickname for her. She had no neck, her round head sat on thick shoulders and she wore those shapeless business dresses off department store racks in the style that hides a fleshy, waistless middle. She kept her hair in a clueless late '70s perm around her head and blue wire rims sat on her featureless face. She gave the impression of someone who had never been kissed ever, not in high school, not even in college, and never would be unless she had the lottery good luck of meeting the male equivalent of herself. Her odor was repulsive, a sickly sweet combination of hairspray, deodorant and rose water. However, she did have one startling quality: translucent white, blemish-free skin, somewhat of a marvel, especially in Southern California where everyone has a freckle or two.

So how did I break the news to the Toad? I let her suffer in solitary ignorance for days before quitting. I began by telling a few co-workers who were sworn to secrecy about my good fortune, so that they'd come by my desk and congratulate me without letting on about what. Our conspiracy gnawed at Geraldine. She knew something was up but couldn't get information from anyone. After days of this, watching her spying on me from her office, in the halls and the lunchroom, I walked in one afternoon and dropped a sheet of 8½-by-11 bond on her desk.

"This is for you."

She glanced down at my one-paragraph letter of resignation which stated I would be leaving at the end of the day.

Bright red spots appeared on her white cheeks like matching stop signs. Her eyes bulged so bad she could have had Graves' disease.

"You can't leave without giving notice."

I smiled pleasantly, "Bye."

I walked out of her office to my desk where I collected the few personal items I kept there. She shadowed me, practically frothing at the mouth.

“I won’t give you a letter of recommendation — you won’t get another job.”

I stared at her for a long, drawn-out second.

“I can live with that.”

A couple of work friends came by to congratulate me. As we chatted, I saw Geraldine shrink into the background, like a hot air balloon slowly deflating, until her head twitched jerkily a couple of times, and she ventured out in a daze. She remained in the cafeteria until the end of the day after I was gone. I heard later that she took two full days of sick leave to recover and resigned from her own position within weeks.

If only my troubles had ended there. You see, there was one unexpected problem on the farm. There wasn’t anything to do on it. I suppose I could’ve planted my own vegetables and had chicken coops and such, but at the time it was all so new to me. It seemed like a place to escape to — not a place to develop. I had no vision of it, no basis for comparison. I took to taking long walks just to break the monotony. At that time of year the insects would buzz loudly in unison and you’d find an occasional stalk of corn. I saw a fox once, and raccoons, elk, deer, and beaver near the stream. But, honestly, I was bored and confused.

What was I going to do with the rest of my life? Now that I had this piece of security, how would I spend my days? I no longer had to earn a living or fight against those personalities you meet up with when you do. Without them, I was left completely to my own devices, and instead of feeling free, I sensed a growing panic and something else: anger. Anger at having worked so hard till the age of 43 that I had no idea who I was.

Sometimes I dreamt of Geraldine pointing a plump white finger at me and laughing. I would wake up in a sweat and hear clocks ticking all around the house. There were clocks in every room and a large grandfather clock in the den, and they all made different ticking sounds and several chimed the hour, so in this place, passing time was never forgotten, not even in your dreams.

The night he showed up, I woke to the sound of the clocks at 4 a.m. and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Standing there, I felt someone else’s presence. My senses became as sharp as an animal’s and in that instant I felt the thud of my heart — how a mouse must feel when a hawk freefalls and scoops it off the ground, lifting it high in the sky, so it spends its last seconds defying gravity, completely out of its natural habitat.

I looked out the window and a man was standing there, staring at me, and I know my face must have shown the terror I felt. I realized I hadn’t locked the kitchen door and looked at it and he did too. My feet felt caught in sludge as I watched him walk the several feet to the door and enter the kitchen.

In the dark, I could see he was carrying a sawed-off shotgun and, uncontrollably, I felt warm urine stream down my legs. His eyes gazed down to the puddle at my feet and his expression was curious and detached, like he had no connection to the occurrence and was a passing observer. He walked over to what I suppose was once my uncle's reading chair and sat. Still holding the gun, he slumped his head back and started moaning. It was a guttural groan of pain and gibberish. I just stared in disbelief.

He looked to be about 35, of average-to-homely looks, maybe 5'7", shorter than me, mousy matted hair. His eyes opened suddenly and he sobbed convulsively.

"I shot my brother. I killed him. He's dead."

He carried on like this for a good hour until I finally got the courage to inch over to the kitchen table and sit down. After awhile, the early morning light filtered through the window and I heard my stomach growl a bit. He had calmed down somewhat but when I got up to make coffee, his hand clutched the weapon and he glared. I froze in my tracks.

"You can't call out of here. I cut your phone lines," he said.

"What do you want from me?"

"I got to stay here. I got to figure out what's next."

"But why did you come here?"

"Everybody knows you live alone and don't have any friends, so they won't notice you're missing."

This deeply unnerved me, the implication that I would be missing, not to mention the fishbowl feeling of the whole town judging me from the outside. But in that situation, on the wrong side of a firearm, you don't ask too many questions. Instead, I offered him a cup of coffee and some French toast, which he accepted.

When I had to use the bathroom, he made a whole operation of it, first entering the room himself, securing the window and positioning glass vials on the sill. He waited outside, said he'd come in after a few minutes to get me, he didn't care how compromised I was. I knew he meant it and I didn't even think about escaping right then. For now, I just had to earn his trust and keep myself from getting shot.

I didn't ask him about taking a bath which I did every morning. When I came out, he pointed the gun toward the porch. I led the way and we sat on the two opposite swings, the same ones Aunt Doris and Uncle Ed likely bought at Sears 40 years earlier.

After about an hour of squeaking the swings up and back, I asked, "What's your name?"

He didn't answer. I thought he didn't hear me. He stared at the same invisible point on the ground, the shotgun slung across his lap, aimed my direction.

"What's your name?" I repeated.

“That’s none of your goddamn business, is it?”

“Right,” I said quickly. “I’m so sorry.”

He stared off again, this time at a slightly higher angle. I thought he looked familiar, but wasn’t sure. He had the kind of indistinct features that blend into the background, like mine.

I started thinking about how dumb I was for not getting a dog. I had considered getting a big dog not long ago, but I was always afraid of them, so I didn’t. I imagined a big dog charging in and saving me from all this. Where was my big dog? Why hadn’t I gotten past my fear once again, stupid, worthless loser? I promised my dead mother I’d get a dog if I survived this. Maybe a pure-bred family sort like a golden retriever or yellow lab. Or a mutt. Perhaps a mutt would be better. Mutts live longest.

Suddenly, he spoke: “He was five years older than me. He was missing two teeth.”

“Oh,” I said, almost in a whisper. I didn’t want to piss him off again.

We sat in silence again for a good half-hour.

Then, the phone rang inside. His startled eyes met mine.

“What’s that? What the hell is that?? I cut your phone lines.”

My stomach felt like an oversized brick was shoved square inside it.

“My cell phone.”

“You have a goddamn cell phone?”

He took two steps at me, dug deeply into my upper arm, and yanked me inside. I went to where I knew the phone was, on the folding tray with the plastic flowers next to the toilet. Lately, I had taken to calling the time number when I was in the john. Don’t ask me why; I’m not proud of it.

I led him straight to the bathroom I had used earlier and retrieved the cell phone, which was partly obscured by a box of Kleenex.

“Did you call 911, bitch? Huh? You better not have called 911!”

He was making no sense, since if I had called 911, he would have been in jail about an hour ago.

He grabbed the phone, hit redial, and listened. I knew what he would hear: *The time is 8:21 a.m., brought to you by Verizon, The time is 8:21 a.m. brought to you by Verizon...*

He looked at me queerly, walked out to the porch, whacked the phone hard on the railing and flung it as far as he could into the east field. Then he sank down on the steps and sobbed into his hands like a little kid.

I could have done anything right then — my god — I could have slammed him over the head with a skillet, I could have stabbed him with a kitchen knife or doused him with the pepper spray I carry in my purse. I didn’t do any of that. I sat on the porch swing a few feet away, watching him weep.

After a while, he sniffled. “I’m sorry I called you that name, ma’am. That was uncalled for. I don’t approve of language like that myself.”

“That’s okay, I believe you.”

“You should have called 911, you know.”

He didn’t even associate the previous ten minutes with another easy escape window. I could have walked right off the porch across the back fields to the road and he wouldn’t have noticed.

The whole day went on like that, punctuated by his outbursts of tears and groans, with me just sort of sitting around.

At one point he said, “Mama knows we’re not coming home now.” He rocked up and back and emitted an ugly visceral sound, like his deepest insides were being pounded soft by my aunt’s meat tenderizer.

After dark, I offered to make dinner and he said, “Go ahead,” and sat nearby while I broiled red snapper and baked low-fat oven fries and simmered frozen spinach on the stovetop.

He barely touched his plate but I found I was ravenously hungry, hungrier than I had been for a long time. We didn’t speak at all during the meal, or afterwards while I washed the dishes.

At around nine, I said I had to get some sleep and he said he’d be sitting right outside in the hall, so don’t try anything. That night, I dreamt about the sea lions I had seen in Monterey, California, the ones that float on their backs, warming their bellies in the hot midday sun.

I woke up with him staring at me in my room, in the chair where I drop my clothes. I yelled out and lurched up on my elbows, startled and scared to the core, and wondered with dread how all of this was going to end.

“You want to see the body?” he asked.

Compliance, I thought, the word appearing as a visual in my mind. “Yeah, okay, but I’ll need coffee first.”

When we started out across the field I could see it was a beautiful day, navy blue skies beaded with puffy clouds, the kind that trap moisture and float on. There was a sublime stillness to the long, golden grasses and low-pitched hum of insects. A red-tailed hawk hovered overhead and a jack rabbit skirted the brush.

Suddenly, he spoke. “I didn’t take you for the kind who would have a cell phone. I mean you seem so... unpopular.”

“Thanks,” I said.

He found this hilarious for some reason, got a good chuckle out of it.

“Everybody has a cell phone,” I said.

“Not people like you and me. Who are we going to call?”

We walked on in silence, probably a good two miles, covering much of the same territory I see during my daily walks, and eventually we crossed my property line. We continued into a wooded area astride a bluff, and his pace slowed. He made an abrupt detour past the trees, out a clearing, and then stopped. The odor was disgusting, a sickening rotting stench. I found a dead deer on the farm once and this was like that, decaying flesh and the contents inside the intestines.

I saw the flies first, a couple turkey buzzards, and a quick scurrying

scavenger through the weeds. The dead man's gym shoes, new white Adidas, were splattered with brownish flecks that I quickly realized were blood. Allowing my eyes to move up, I saw a regular looking middle-aged man in jeans and a t-shirt, of medium build, taller than his brother, beginnings of gray hair, and part of his face blown off.

The right eye was simply gone; there was a dark hole where it should have been and the dirty-dishwater-colored skin abruptly ended so it looked like what was left of his face had simply melted partway into the ground. That appeared to be his only injury, one mortal wound that undoubtedly took some of his brain with it. Eerily, his other eye was open and you could see his final expression was one of fear and surprise. His mouth hung wide as part of the same reaction and, sure enough, a couple of his front teeth were missing, one on top and one on the bottom. The flesh on the body hadn't decomposed yet but had patches of black in areas, which probably meant it was starting.

I stepped back, repulsed. His brother, his killer, walked around him, disregarding the odor and started yelling at the corpse.

"Look at you now! Why'd you treat me that way? Huh? What'd I ever do to you? All I wanted was a brother. Why couldn't you give me anything?"

Suddenly, I felt tears on my cheeks as I witnessed such raw agony and pain, such naked heartfelt loss at not having love reciprocated. I lifted the cloth of my cotton shirt and breathed into it to cut the dead smell.

Later, when we walked back to the house, taking a different course past a neighboring farm, he said, "He deserved it. He was just like the old man."

That night, I dreamt that the feet in the field were Geraldine's, only she wasn't wearing shoes and the nails on her fat stubby toes were painted bubblegum pink and her lumpy naked corpse was encased in goose aspic.

I woke up and vomited in the bathroom.

He got up from the chair and passed me a hand towel.

"You okay?"

"What do you think?"

We went back to view the body the following morning and the next. Every morning we'd go out there because it didn't smell as bad when the sun was low. Every day the body was further decomposed. It was sort of interesting, actually, from a biological point of view, watching a human being dissolve into matter. It made things seem connected... a man, soil, animals, weeds, insects.

I thought of my parents who were shelved like old shoes in a mausoleum up north and somehow it seemed preferable for them to be out here in a field of wildflowers in the open with nothing to hide.

"How old are you anyway?" he asked.

"How old do you think?"

"I don't know, older than me, 45."

“I’m 43, thank you very much.”

“Actually, you look younger than that. I didn’t want to be disrespectful.”

I told him about my previous life in California and about Geraldine and the way she treated me. He nodded with recognition. “Yeah, I’ve known people like that. People like that suck.”

Walking back that day, he spoke again.

“You know, ma’am, you ought to get out more. You could meet some people around here. Some of them are all right. Like Ethyl and Joe, they run the bakery. They lost their only son in Nam. If you get to their place at, say, 7 a.m., they’ll give you free coffee refills till noon — swear to god — they just like folks, they really do.”

“Maybe they like *you* in particular.”

“Oh no, they’re good in general.”

Later that day, he brought them up again.

“Did you mean it? What you said about Ethyl and Joe liking me in particular?”

“Yeah, you probably remind them of their son. You’re probably a big comfort to them.”

I could sense my words wrapping around him like a warm blanket, soothing him, easing his agitation, so that he almost seemed stable. I spoke the truth as I saw it and somehow got through to him.

On the fourth day, when we walked back from looking at the corpse, I heard dogs barking, not the usual neighborhood pets. He heard the barking too and flinched. That day had been particularly poignant. Standing nearby, I had seen him make a sign of the cross alongside his brother. He muttered something under his breath, and afterwards he picked yarrow and bull thistle and laid them at the dead man’s feet.

“What do you think heaven’s like, ma’am?”

I considered my answer for a while. I had thought about this a lot after my parents died.

“I believe in heaven you feel a strong sense of connection to everything else, a knowing you can’t have when you’re alive. In heaven you can never be lonely or sad because you’re smack in the middle of nature, from the tiniest single-celled protozoa to babies, animals, galaxies — everything really. You have a place and you know it and you’re not separate, not one bit.”

We walked about a mile before he said, “I like that. Yeah, that’s not so bad.” When we weren’t far from the farm, he spoke again, “You think it hurts to get shot?”

“Depends on whether or not you survive,” I said.

He laughed. He found me funnier than most people.

There were about ten police cars surrounding the place, cops in uniform all over the farm. We saw them from a distance. And suddenly they

were behind us too. Before I could think, he grabbed me around the throat and dug his gun barrel into my temple. I went slack from fear, felt my knees buckle, and his grip around my neck tightened so I couldn't fall.

This is it. This is it. Mommy, help. Instinctively, I reverted to infancy wanting my mommy.

The police were yelling through megaphones and positioning themselves strategically. "Let her go and drop the gun, Ellis."

They were right on top of us now, more guns than I had ever seen in my life. An older cop, a patrolman I recognized from town, stepped forward, "We're not going to hurt you, son — we just want to talk. Your mama's awfully worried about you."

Then we heard her, the bruised plaintive bleat of a mother enduring the opposite of birth. "Ellis...?"

He pressed his mouth over my ear, so close it felt humid, "See you in heaven." He shoved me to the ground and turned the gun on himself.

Later, the local papers called me a hero, grace and nerves under pressure. The story was picked up by UPI and people in places like New York and Alaska and London read about my ordeal. I had more calls in two days than I had in years, mostly offers for life rights.

I tried to meet his mother once, but she was too distraught over losing her sons and after the funerals she moved to Carbondale to live with her sister and died of complications from diabetes within the year.

You might say surviving brought me out, got me off the farm more, forced me into knowing some of the people in town — like Ethyl and Joe who ran the local bakery. They hired me part time behind the counter since they were getting on in years and could use the rest. And he was right about them. They'd give you free refills clear till noon, no questions asked.

○

W.E. Mueller

Hollywood and Vine

Charlie MacTaggart removed his brown felt bowler and placed it upside down on the sidewalk, just in front of the wooden box he stands on. The hat is part of the same outfit he wears every day. Laurence Olivier wore the ensemble in the movie *The Entertainer*. Charlie bid \$75 for the brown wool suit and hat at a Hollywood benefit. The box he stands on was used in *The Guns of Navarone*. He found it in a dumpster outside of Universal Studios.

MacTaggart looked at his watch. 10:35. The morning bus would arrive in five minutes. Tour buses were seldom late. He glanced around, looking for the hecklers and goons and prostitutes Levermann sent to disrupt his day. He didn't see anyone. In fact, he hadn't seen any of Levermann's crew for five or six days. Before that, they had harassed him for weeks. Maybe it was the heat wave, temperatures in the 90s or higher for a week — hot even for L.A. The weather might keep Levermann's goons away, MacTaggart speculated, but it won't keep the tourists away. They paid good money to come to Los Angeles. A tour of Hollywood and Vine and the Walk of Fame was an absolute must — especially for those over 50. They were Charlie's kind of audience.

Charles MacTaggart — Charlie Mac, as he is known on the street — was an ex-actor, if minor roles in a dozen films made you an actor. Once, he carried a SAG card, but hadn't seen the front of a camera for decades. MacTaggart's crack at celluloid fame was sealed long ago with each sip of Southern Comfort. He was a character actor, but his average features, average build, and average talent prevented him from reaching the level of a Jack Elam or a Slim Pickens or an Elisha Cook Jr. He had minor roles in *China Flower* and *The Caged Killer* plus three or four westerns before booze and a doomed marriage led to late arrivals on the set, erratic walk-ons and unscripted remarks during a shoot. Desperate, he auditioned at community theatres, but, even there, the character of Demon Rum destroyed any role he got.

MacTaggart was 68 and anorexic thin. At one time, early in his storytelling career, his physique perfectly fit into Olivier's suit. At first, he had dyed his hair black and shaved every day — his customers didn't want a scruffy-looking storyteller wearing Laurence Olivier's clothes. But lately — maybe longer than "lately" — he forgot to shave, and let his hair grow long and gray. His few clothes, including the Olivier outfit, now hung on his bony frame. Maybe his steady decline was the fault of Levermann's threats. Maybe it was the dwindling luster of Hollywood stars. Maybe it was the weariness of telling the same old stories, day after day. Whatever the "maybe" that confronted him, MacTaggart always sought consolation

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and enlightenment in a bottle.

Charlie got a small check from the Screen Actors' Guild, a few dollars from Social Security, and made the rest of his living by telling stories about Hollywood's famous actors and directors while standing on the Navarone box near the corner of Hollywood and Vine. Year round, tour buses disgorged thousands of visitors, all eager to amble the Hollywood Walk of Fame, where the names of stars are embedded in the sidewalk. Charlie could tell stories about each one of them, and about hundreds of other movie stars not fossilized in concrete. But he drew the line if they were living — all of his stories were about deceased Hollywood stars. The stories are the fodder of tabloids and scandal sheets — tales of infidelity, secret loves, a closeted gay life, double-dealing, casting couches, and other morsels of fact or fiction that sent the tourists away murmuring and shaking their heads. It was just what they wanted to hear.

Ned Levermann Jr., a young hotshot developer, is Charlie MacTaggart's nemesis. Levermann is pushing the L.A. City Council to tear down the famous intersection and let him erect a commercial and business complex that will be a "world destination." Even the Capitol Records building is to be bulldozed. Levermann's proposal is to "take the stars off the street" and put the Hollywood Walk of Fame indoors, inside a sterile museum, with a gift shop of movie-star bobble-heads. Levermann is in his late 30s, apparently backed with money from an unacknowledged source, and eager to redraw the face of Los Angeles, historical sites be damned. He slowly cruises the Hollywood and Vine area in his black Mercedes, its windows tinted, but its plates — NED-JR — leave little doubt about who was inside. Shop proprietors, street vendors and small-business owners near the celebrated intersection objected to Levermann's proposal, but the outlook is bleak.

It did not take long for Ned Levermann Jr. to decide that Charlie MacTaggart was an undesirable fixture on the Hollywood and Vine scene. Levermann wanted to bring potential tenants to the area, show them where this shop or that office would be located. He didn't want his clients to see Charlie there, dressed in that ridiculous vaudeville outfit, gesturing and telling off-color stories about dumb, dead, has-been actors. So, almost every day Levermann's hecklers showed up before Charlie's "story box" and upturned bowler hat. They shouted obscenities, jostled the tourists, kicked his hat over, interrupted his stories, and offered him booze, as prostitutes openly solicited his audience. Charlie's appeals to the police got nowhere. Ned Levermann Jr. was "connected," unlike Charlie Mac.

But today is hot, and the hecklers again fail to appear. Maybe it is the weather or maybe it is the fact that Charlie never caves in. He *has* to stand his ground. Every tour bus usually means five or ten dollars in Charlie's hat, and there are at least two buses every day. Without the meager income

from storytelling, Charlie's equally meager life would end.

The 10:30 Conway Tours bus hisses to a stop a minute early. It exhales again as the doors fold open and the tour guide steps off. Cupping their elbows, he assists each blue-hair lady and bald-pate gentleman off the comfortable air-conditioned bus, with its on-board toilet and coffee bar.

"It's 10:30, folks. You have an hour and a half to tour the Hollywood Walk of Fame, shop and enjoy the ambiance of the world's most famous intersection. We meet in front of Grauman's — you can't miss it — for lunch at noon. Then at one o'clock it's off to Beverly Hills. The bus leaves at one. Sharp." He repeats the announcement three or four times, until the bus is empty. The tourists head in all directions, some of them toward Charlie. He hops up onto his wooden crate. Thirteen of them stop and make a semi-circle in front of his hat.

"Hello ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Hollywood. I'm Charlie Mac. I've lived in this town all my life. I've played tennis with Jack Warner and been kissed by Greta Garbo. But you don't want to hear about that. You want to hear about Valentino's affairs, Gish's lovers, Jack Warner's temper, Spencer Tracy and Kate Hepburn. It's my pleasure to tell you a story about any star, provided they have passed away. No stories about the living, please. You won't read my stories in the newspapers, folks. They won't be in the tabloids, no sir. My stories are the stories you want to hear — the seamy side of Hollywood, the scandals that are so outrageous, folks, that nobody can print them. So who will it be — George Raft or Douglas Fairbanks, Maureen O'Hara or Ann Sheridan?"

"Elizabeth Taylor," a man shouts, a picture-book tourist.

"Sorry, sir. Miss Taylor is still alive. Can't tell stories about her, or she will sue me for the millions I'm worth." His audience laughs. "Someone else?" Charlie scans the group.

"Marion Davies." Tossed out by a blue-hair holding a small pink sun umbrella, her pudgy body stuffed into pale blue Bermuda shorts and a white stretch top.

"Ah," Charlie Mac sighs. "Marion Davies. A very thoughtful request, young lady." Charlie looks over his audience; thirteen is a good crowd. "How many of you know the name Marion Davies?" Two people raise their hands. "How many of you know the name William Randolph Hearst?" Everyone raises a hand. "Ah," Charlie sighs again. "Well, folks, Marion Davies was William Randolph Hearst's lover. His mistress. She lived with him. Hearst's wife — her name slips me for the moment — knew about Davies, but, hey, when you're married to a multi-millionaire, I guess you put up with a lot." His audience snickers and Charlie proceeds to tell the story of Marion Davies. In three minutes of rapid-fire verbiage, Charlie Mac has the thirteen mesmerized and then bursting into applause. The lady who asked about Davies drops a five-dollar bill into his bowler and her traveling companions toss in singles. Three minutes, fifteen bucks — not bad, Charlie says to himself.

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The next tour bus is due at 1:30, time enough for Charlie to grab a shot of rye and a cheese sandwich at O'Shea's, a narrow bar and grill west on Hollywood from Vine. Michael O'Shea is owner, bartender, cashier and standby cook. Charlie has never seen him without a soiled white apron circling his 60-inch waist. O'Shea's head is bullet shaped and bald. His misshapen ears, nose and scarred forehead are souvenirs of his middleweight boxing years. He bought the place when he came back from the Korean War. O'Shea has a hard time keeping out the prostitutes and reluctantly serves Levermann's goons. He and MacTaggart often debate which of them has been on the Hollywood and Vine scene longer.

Charlie Mac swings his leg over a stool at the bar. O'Shea is already pouring a shot of rye and peeling paper from the slices of cheese for Charlie's sandwich.

"How's that first busload?" O'Shea asks.

"Better than average, Mike. I might add fries to that cheese sandwich."

"Not good for ya."

"Yeah," Charlie agrees. "And they'll give me indigestion for the 1:30 crowd."

"Any sign of the Levermann crowd?"

"No, thank God."

O'Shea wipes the bar top in front of Charlie Mac. "I heard they're laying low."

Charlie takes a small sip of the rye, then throws his head back and tosses the rest down. "Why's that?" he asks.

"Don't know exactly."

"That's not like Levermann."

O'Shea slides a thick white plate in front of Charlie — his cheese sandwich, a slice of pickle and a leaf of wilted lettuce on the side. His arm hooks an array of condiments in plastic squeeze bottles and pulls them across the bar for MacTaggart.

"Rumor has it," O'Shea says, wiping in a circle by habit, "that someone put the skids to Levermann's proposal for the neighborhood."

"Who?"

"Ain't heard no names, but apparently the key backer for Levermann ain't too happy with some of his ideas."

"That won't stop Levermann," Charlie says, mouth full of sandwich.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"I know how Levermann operates. Nothing will stop him."

"But if he loses his key source for funds...?"

"Big 'if'," Charlie says, finishing his sandwich and tossing down a dollar tip for O'Shea.

The 1:30 Conway Tours bus pulls up precisely on time. Charlie glances around — still no hooligans dispatched by Levermann. Could be a good

day. The tour guide steps from the bus; it is Charlie's friend Christopher Todd, who has tried to get him to AA meetings. Todd gives his standard instructions to each departing group, adding "And there's Charlie Mac, ladies and gentlemen, the storyteller of Hollywood and Vine. If you want to know anything about any movie star, Charlie's the man to ask." Todd points down the street toward Charlie's *Guns of Navarone* crate. At least a dozen tourists head his way.

Charlie mentally prepares his usual spiel, feeling the rye eat at his stomach, the cheese coming around again in the heat.

"Who can I tell you about, folks? None of our living residents, please — they're too sensitive to my stories and will strip me of everything I own. I'd be standing here inside a barrel, just like in the movies." The audience chuckles.

"Peter Lawford." A man in the front row barks. "I want Rat Pack stories."

"Ah, yes... Peter Lawford," Charlie hesitates. "Almost as good looking as I am." The crowd chuckles again. MacTaggart launches into a three-minute biography of Peter Lawford — his relationship with the Kennedys, his 20-plus films, his English background, his buddies in the Rat Pack and shenanigans they pulled in Vegas. It is half truth, half fiction, but who cares? When he finishes, the man in front tosses some folding money into the bowler.

"José Serra," a lady in a large straw hat shouts, big-framed sunglasses covering most of her face.

José Serra, Charlie thinks, who the hell is José Serra? He needs a moment. He slowly removes his heavy brown suit coat — the one worn by Olivier — folds it and places it under his bowler hat. He can wing it. The more outlandish he makes it the more unlikely the lady knows otherwise. So he tells stories of José Serra's secret love life, how he seduced his first wife's sister — wondering if Serra had even married — and tosses in three more "affairs."

"It's been a long time since anyone asked about José Serra," Charlie says, in conclusion.

The lady's husband waves his hand to get Charlie's attention. "But José Serra is still alive," he says.

MacTaggart blanches. The rye shoots through his gut again, acid reflux burns his throat. "I didn't know that," he mutters, waving the crowd away although it is already dispersing.

Damn, Charlie thinks. He has never made that mistake before, not in 21 years. It is time to call it a day. He picks up his coat, hat and crate and heads for the Franklin Arms, a seedy fleabag apartment on Franklin Avenue, near the Highway 101 overpass. It is a converted motel, offering a single room, bath and kitchenette for a low, monthly rate. Charlie has been there eight years.

His room is stifling. The window air-conditioner sounds like a kid's rattle and pumps out a weak stream of cool air. Charlie quickly strips down to his underwear and pours a half glass of Southern Comfort. He turns on the small TV, not bothering to select a channel or adjust the volume. The TV is company, noise, a distraction, something in the room other than himself, its narrative floating unattended, its screen flickering in the room like distant lightning. Charlie immediately takes his shirt to the bathroom and begins to handwash it in the rust-stained tub. He lets it soak, and goes back to hang his coat in front of the laboring air-conditioner, hoping the cooling air will eliminate some of the body odor that is building in its worn fabric.

"In other news today," the announcer catches MacTaggart's ear, "veteran character actor José Serra died early this afternoon at the home of his daughter in Santa Barbara." Charlie stops so quickly the Southern Comfort spills over the front of his glass. His head and torso twist to face the TV. "Serra appeared in 16 films of the early '40s, mostly B-grade westerns, usually as a sidekick to the evil Mexican bandito. Serra was 96. Recapping our weather..." MacTaggart pushes the TV button to off.

He sits on the edge of the bed, staring at the blank screen, stunned. My God, he thinks, how weird, how bizarre. Nothing so coincidental has ever happened before in his life. He feels his neck and shoulder muscles tighten, a headache is sure to follow. He takes a pull of his drink and goes for a refill. He wants to shake the absurd coincidence from his head, but it is just too strange, too unreal. He will have to tell O'Shea about it tomorrow. O'Shea always has an Irish explanation for everything. But he empties the bottle of Southern Comfort before his mind manages to shove aside José Serra — he falls asleep, without eating, diagonally across his bed, in his underwear, his shirt still soaking in the bathtub.

MacTaggart is still disturbed when he sets up for the 10:30 bus the next morning. He has the jitters and sweats profusely, his head throbs and his stomach knots painfully. He feels rotten, but he knows it is a trade-off for the solace booze offers him.

The crowd is small and he sails through the morning with an extended story of Frances Langsford, a request from the oldest-looking tourist he has ever seen get off a bus. He takes off early for O'Shea's, debating whether to tell Mike the José Serra "coincidence" or not. He decides not to. He feels too miserable, too hungover to explain the whole thing.

He is glad O'Shea has other customers to keep him busy, rather than engaging Charlie, whose dry, cotton mouth needs liquid, not conversation. He asks O'Shea for his own "MacTaggart's Mix" — a large fishbowl glass filled with three raw eggs, salt, pepper, two shots of whiskey, and a half glass of milk. O'Shea whips it with a whisk and pushes it in front of Charlie. In three pulls it is gone.

Charlie feels better that afternoon. At 1:30, two Conway Tours buses empty almost 100 tourists a half block from Charlie's crate. At least two dozen stand before him; this could be an excellent afternoon.

"Who will it be, folks," Charlie barks. "Charles Laughton, Anne Jeffreys, Douglas Fairbanks...?"

"Tom Cruise." From a heavy-set blue-hair, up front, wearing a yellow T-shirt that says "I'm As Corny As Kansas." She wants something beyond what she reads in the tabloids.

"Please, folks, only those who are acting on the Big Screen above us. Mr. Cruise is still performing — on and off stage, I might add." The audience laughs.

"Amy Burke," shouts another blue-hair.

Amy Burke, Amy Burke. MacTaggart rolls the name around in his head, coming up with nothing.

"Give me a hint, young lady," he says.

"Child actress who married director Raoul Walsh when she was very young."

Charlie puts his hand to his chin in a thoughtful manner. "Ah, yes," he says, but he hasn't the vaguest idea of who Amy Burke was. But he does know that the bigger the lie, the more the tourists swallow it. In another rapid-fire monologue, Charlie constructs the life of Burke — child prodigy, often abused, abandoned by her parents to the major studios, and married before she is 19, yet already groomed in the dissolute life of Hollywood. Director Walsh, who Charlie did know about, tried to make a pleasant life for Burke, but she fell into the arms of his leading men, one after another. He makes it sound as illicit and salacious as he can — just what the lady wants to hear.

A little man in front of Charlie, fat and not dealing with the heat very well, waggles his finger at MacTaggart. "I thought you said no living people. Burke's still alive, mister, and she probably doesn't appreciate your stories about her."

Charlie swoons. Vertigo grips him as he stands on the crate. He feels the blood drain from his face.

"You okay, mister?" A voice from the crowd.

Charlie doesn't answer. He drops forward off the crate, barely missing his bowler, then staggers back, sitting on the wooden box. His eyes close and he doesn't see the dozen or so tourists silently drop money in his hat, then quickly turn and leave. MacTaggart stays unmoved for five minutes before heading home.

The shirt he had left in the bathtub overnight but hung up in the morning is now dry. Charlie decides to take a bath although he despises sitting in the stained tub. He pushes the TV's On button and undresses. In the bathroom, the running water overrides the TV audio and it isn't until he

turns off the water that he hears the female announcer.

“For the second day, Hollywood lost one of its underrated, seldom-heard-about actors when 93-year-old Amy Burke died early this morning. Miss Burke, former wife of deceased director Raoul Walsh, lived in near-obscure with her sister in Malibu...”

MacTaggart struggles out of the bathtub and takes three strides to face the TV, dripping wet.

“Yesterday, you’ll recall, we lost José Serra. Today, Amy Burke. The superstition in Hollywood, of course, is that these things happen in ‘threes’ and many here are anxious and apprehensive about the veteran actors they love. We’ll be back in a moment with Sports.”

Charlie Mac feels his body chill, despite the heat in his room. Still naked, he slumps into a chrome chair with a torn red plastic seat cushion. The Formica table in front of him is covered with condiments, paper plates, soiled paper napkins, an empty carton of orange juice, and a new bottle of Southern Comfort. He reaches for it, his hand shaking uncontrollably.

The next morning, he skips the 10:30 tour bus and goes straight to O’Shea’s. Once inside, however, he again decides not to tell Mike O’Shea the story of Serra and Burke. It is unbelievable to Charlie and it will certainly appear that way to a hard-edged Irish bartender. O’Shea will probably quote his grandmother: “Blarney, son — just plain blarney.”

Sitting in O’Shea’s, a wild thought races through Charlie’s mind. What if the Serra-Burke deaths are not coincidences? What if... Nah, his brain rejects the notion... still. Charlie takes the final pull of another MacTaggart’s Mix and heads for his corner of the world, determined to settle his confused mind.

By afternoon, he looks tired and disheveled. Restless sleep has deepened the bags under his eyes, and lack of attention to his clothes gives him a wrinkled appearance, perceptibly odoriferous. But Charlie hardly notices. He vigorously sets up his wooden crate, brushes the top of his bowler and sets it on the ground as the blue-and-white bus pulls up and spills out 50 tourists. More than a dozen head in Charlie’s direction. Then he notices them. Two of Levermann’s goons are following the group, ten paces behind. The tourists make an unorganized arrangement around Charlie’s crate. The goons stand back, their wraparound sunglasses hiding the stare Charlie knows is locked on him. Screw you, Ned Levermann Jr., Charlie thinks. Today, he is going to do something he has never done before.

“Hello... Hello... Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Charlie Mac... teller of tales about Hollywood’s famous and not-so-famous, living or dead. Yesterday I had a gentleman ask me about Tye Davidson, one of the current stars in the TV series *Rolling Tanks*. Charlie knows that Tye Davidson is a healthy, strong actor, in his late 20s, one of three male actors in the TV

drama about North Africa in World War II. No one in his audience objects and Charlie rolls into an unlikely biography of Tye Davidson, avoiding outright slander, but laced with “sources say,” “it’s been rumored,” and “friends tell me” allusions to Davidson’s private life. He finishes and the audience applauds, six or seven coming forward to drop money in Charlie’s bowler. He sweeps the crowd again, noticing that Levermann’s goons have left.

From the same audience comes a request to narrate a story about Ethel Barrymore. He replies with tales of the Barrymores, John and Ethel and others. He knows the Barrymores are idols to his audience’s generation, so he tells only favorable stories, anecdotes that show the Barrymores’ generosity and kindness, something not always perceived on the silver screen. The group applauds loudly when MacTaggart finishes. They surge forward, dropping Lincolns and Washingtons into his hat. The Barrymore tale nets Charlie more than \$30. He heads for O’Shea’s to celebrate.

By early evening, O’Shea’s is busy. Regulars fill most of the barstools and Charlie has to sit at the end of the bar, where it butts against the back wall and the TV is tuned to CNN.

“They were in here this afternoon,” O’Shea says to Charlie, again wiping circles on the bar top in front of MacTaggart.

“Yeah, I know.” Charlie nods. “They showed up at my afternoon gig. Didn’t do anything. But they wanted me to know they were there.”

O’Shea says, “I got up enough nerve and asked one of them why the polite attitude lately. Don’t worry, he says, it won’t last. Why’s that? I asked him. Levermann knows what he’s doing, the goon says. But it didn’t sound too convincing to me. I looked at the goon sitting next to him and I say, I think Levermann’s got a big holdout on the development here, and he looks at me and says, Yeah, where’d you hear that? I say that’s just my opinion. And he says, Yeah, well opinions are like your butt, buddy, everybody’s got one and they all stink. But you know what, Charlie, I think these guys know the gig is over. Levermann’s deep pockets won’t support it.”

“Don’t count your chickens,” Charlie cautions. O’Shea turns to his other customers.

All the TVs in O’Shea’s are muted. At this time of night, the ambient conversation drowns out any commentary from CNN or the two TVs showing sports. MacTaggart looks at the screen; only a few in his corner of the bar are looking at the TV. CNN doesn’t draw a big audience in O’Shea’s. The announcer, a woman, has long black hair and a slight touch of cleavage. Over her right shoulder a small screen shows footage of rebel fighting in eastern Africa, cut to a report by a male correspondent. Then a report on the Middle East, a region that leaves MacTaggart puzzled and angry. Cut back to a full shot of the female announcer, talking rapidly.

Suddenly the screen is filled with a picture of Tye Davidson, then a cut to some action clips from *Rolling Tanks*, then back to the announcer, then, over her shoulder, another picture of Davidson with the years of his life subtitled, then a cut to a still photo of a sports car wrapped around a huge tree, then a cut to one of his co-stars in *Rolling Tanks* being interviewed. The co-star, another male hunk, is crying.

Tye Davidson is dead.

Charlie MacTaggart looks down from the TV at his two hands tightening around a short glass of Southern Comfort. His whole body begins to shake and he falls unconscious from the barstool.

He is stretched out on a beaten maroon leather couch in O'Shea's backroom when they revive him. O'Shea looks down at Charlie. "Too much sun and too much booze, Charlie. Not enough solid food." Charlie nods weakly. Immediately his mind replays the 30-second CNN segment on the death of Tye Davidson. Over and over the story races through his head.

An hour later, he is on his way home. Unable to carry the Navarone crate, he leaves it at O'Shea's. His legs quiver with each uncertain step to the Franklin Arms. He is sorry about Tye Davidson, truly sorry. It had just been an experiment, a silly challenge to fate and an absurd coincidence. But it had gone awry, and the inevitable conclusion was there for Charlie and everyone else to see. But Charlie knows there is no one else to see it, no one else to believe it.

Once more he settles into his bathtub, the water generously filled up to his chest, his right hand holding a bottle of Southern Comfort. The TV is dark. Don't get drunk and drown in the tub, he tells himself. There is something he has to do.

For another night, Charlie sleeps fitfully. He forgets to wash his shirt. His wool vaudeville suit — after days of performing in the heat — emits a foul odor. He decides to work only the morning tourist bus, accomplish what he has to accomplish and then go home. For now, the Navarone crate can stay at O'Shea's.

The Conway Tours bus is eight minutes late. That means the guide will tell the tourists to hustle along, and not spend too much time at any one attraction. Charlie will tell one story and encourage the crowd to move along. Seven people stop in front of his bowler. He doesn't care what size the crowd is today, as long as Levermann's goons don't show up.

"Welcome to Hollywood and Vine, ladies and gentlemen. And how many are from our native state here, California?" No one replies. "Kansas, then?" Charlie asks.

"Four of us are from Nebraska," says a woman, a red golf visor pulled down on her forehead.

"We're from Illinois," a man says, pointing to the remaining three tourists.

“Great states... great people,” Charlie says. “Yesterday I had a gentleman from Iowa ask about a little-known Hollywood celebrity and the audience enjoyed the story so much I’d like to tell it again today.”

He immediately launches into his story, before anyone can object.

“Has anyone heard of Ned Levermann?” Of course not, Charlie thinks. “Well, Ned Levermann had the voice of Enrico Caruso and the looks of Victor Mature. He was educated at Dartmouth and married his high-school sweetheart. They both came to Hollywood, convinced that Ned could be a star. Trouble was, Ned Levermann was a decent, God-fearing man, and he refused to fall into the licentious lifestyle of Hollywood. He was able to get only bit parts. He got minor roles in five movies and then the studios got tired of his pious attitude and blacklisted him.”

MacTaggert’s voice rolls from a low octave into a crescendo, all the words building a Ned Levermann image that is loving, decent, kind and generous. It is a tale of unfulfilled talent because Levermann refused to participate in the orgies of Hollywood. It is the greatest piece of fiction Charlie has ever created. When he finishes, he is exhausted. The natives of Nebraska and Illinois applaud loudly and toss 13 singles into his bowler.

But Charlie couldn’t care less how much he collects. He has done what he had to do. He takes off his sweat-soaked jacket, picks up his hat, stuffs the money in his pants pocket and heads for Franklin Avenue. He stops for a pint of Southern Comfort — it will be easy to hold while he sits in the tub. Like last night, he tells himself, he will not turn on the TV.

Charlie MacTaggert wakes up the next morning, again without any recollection of the night before. The bedding around him is wet and he is naked. He realizes he passed out on the bed, straight from the bathtub. Awake, he lies on his back and lets his fingers roll over the pronounced ribs rising from his chest. He has lost more weight. His right arm is bent across the bridge of his nose and his wrist rests upon the heavy stubble on his face. His tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth and his lips are locked dry, sealed shut as if treated by a mortician. He breathes through his nose and the dryness burns his nostrils. It takes what seems like an extraordinary effort just to roll his head toward the TV. No, he thinks, I will not turn it on. On the floor in front of the TV he sees Laurence Olivier’s clothes, discarded and dropped without concern. He can smell them. When’s the last time he washed anything? When’s the last time he ate a decent meal? When was the last time he talked to anyone — other than O’Shea, and the faceless tourists that look at him through darkened glasses? He decides to go straight to O’Shea’s — if he can get himself dressed.

“Where the hell you been?” O’Shea shouts at him the moment he steps through the door. “I was down your corner this morning and you ain’t

there.” O’Shea is breathless.

With great effort, Charlie mounts a barstool, breathing heavily.

O’Shea is leaning across the bar, his face inches from Charlie’s. “God, you look like hell. And smell like my Men’s Room. How you gonna work today?” O’Shea stands erect to escape Charlie’s polluted breath and pervasive body odor. “You heard, didn’t ya? He’s dead. Dead, Charlie, and we’re all in a stinking mess.”

MacTaggart looks up at O’Shea but says nothing.

“You seen the TV, ain’t ya?” O’Shea is as excited as Charlie has ever seen him. “The old man’s dead. Who’d thought Levermann’s old man — Ned Senior — was still alive? He was the big money behind his kid. Last evening around six he keeled over, dead, massive stroke.” O’Shea vigorously wrings out the bar towel. He turns and pours a shot of rye and sets it in front of Charlie. “Here, pal — I can’t help you, but maybe this can.”

MacTaggart slowly lowers his head to the shot glass and slurps from it. His hands have severe palsy; there is no way he can hold the glass without that first sip reaching his stomach, immediately coursing to his brain, momentarily steadying his nerves.

“Did ya hear me, Charlie? He’s dead. Levermann’s old man is dead. He was the kid’s roadblock in screwing up the neighborhood and now he’s dead. Charlie, we ain’t gotta prayer.”

Charlie finds it impossible to say anything. O’Shea steps back and puts his hands on the bar, arms extended. “Do you even give a damn, Charlie?”

Charlie feels stable enough to pick up the shot glass and throw down the rest of the rye. He points to the glass for a refill. O’Shea shakes his head in disapproval and begins to pour but Charlie grabs it before O’Shea is finished and throws it down. Jesus, O’Shea whispers to himself.

The excitement leaves O’Shea’s voice. “The old man came to Los Angeles during the Depression. Wanted to be an actor. Got a few roles, but nothing leading to stardom. But he loved this town — that’s what the TV says — and he put some bucks into *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Robe*, *Ben Hur*... bunch of those feel-good flicks that made millions. Anyway, he backed his rotten kid in almost any venture the kid wanted... except messin’ with Hollywood and Vine. He wouldn’t put up with that, the TV said. But now he’s dead, Charlie, and the kid’s got all his money and the green light to tear us a new hole.” O’Shea walks away, shaking his head, his right hand pushing the towel down the bar, leveling wet rings on the varnished wood top.

The second shot of rye clears Charlie’s head. He did what he thought he had to do. Ned Levermann, Sr. Ned Levermann Jr. Two Levermanns: he never considered the possibility. What he has done is not what he intended to do. He has made a terrible mistake. Once again he has made a mess of his life. He puts some crumbled money on the bar and for the next

hour he drinks rye. His stomach feels like someone is kicking it, and more than once, the rye shoots back up his gullet, bringing tears to his eyes and a stabbing pain to his chest. O'Shea puts a cheese sandwich in front of him, but he just looks at it. When O'Shea moves aside, he sees a gaunt, beaten old man in the mirror behind the bar and realizes with only mild shock whose image it is. He locks eyes with his fatigued image, and then, with surprising ease, MacTaggert decides there is one thing left to do.

The 1:30 bus is twelve minutes early. No one will be hurried today. He hears the guide repeat to each tourist: "Bus leaves at three. Enjoy one of Hollywood's greatest landmarks. Bus leaves at three." A dozen people move his way, half of them glance at Charlie and make a wide circle around his bowler and continue down the street. A group of six stops in front of the hat. Three sniff the air and move on. Only three fat women stand before Charlie. Each of them has one leg of her shorts stuck unattractively up into her crotch. Rivulets of sweat curl down their layered necks and disappear between compressed breasts. Their fat cheeks and wide noses support sparkle-embedded sunglasses.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen." His voice cracks and he can smell his own repulsive breath. He sees his reflection in the sunglasses of one of the women, but he's not familiar with the image — it is a skeleton wearing a tattered brown suit. A sudden shroud of sadness falls over him. "I am the Storyteller of Hollywood, and you are about to hear a story of this town's greatest unrecognized star." He pauses; the fire in his gut pulls his stomach together. He's not conscious of crying but he can feel a tear roll down his cheek. "This is the story of Hollywood's finest talent — a man with the looks of Cary Grant, the ability of Richard Burton, the athleticism of Gene Kelly, and all the devilish charm of George Sanders." That improvisation makes him throw back his shoulders; he stands erect, straightens his suit coat, and elevates his eyes over the three women, as if addressing a thousand tourists. "If you walk around the studio backlots, ladies and gentlemen, and ask who is the greatest star no one's heard of, they'll give you one name. And that's the name of Charlie Mac. Folks, let me tell you the story of Charlie MacTaggert."

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• **Chris Mazauskas** has been writing poems and short stories since he was 11 years old, had his first poem published more than 40 years ago, with a number of others subsequently published in small magazines and regional anthologies. Over the years he has been employed as a factory worker, warehouseman, carpenter, contractor, homeless job trainer, affordable housing program developer/administrator, public housing manager, consultant and grant writer. He currently lives in central New Jersey.

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• **David Meltzer** a leading poet of the Beat movement, has published more than 30 books of poetry including *David's Copy: The Selected Poems of David Meltzer* (Viking/Penguin), a collection spanning more than 40 years of work, and *Beat Thing* (La Alameda Press), which won the Josephine Miles PEN Award. His website www.meltzerville.com features audio of him reading in front of a jazz band as well as selections from his Vanguard LPs *The Serpent Power* and *Poet Song*.

• **Jessica Moses**'s work has appeared in literary magazines out of Rollins College, Augsburg College, and Connecticut State University.

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• **Simon Perchik** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. *Rafts* (Parsifal Editions) is his most recent collection. *Family of Man* (Pave-

ment Saw Press) is scheduled for Fall 2009. • **Michael Rothenberg** is a poet, songwriter, and editor of *Big Bridge* magazine online at www.big-bridge.org. His poetry books include *Nightmare Of The Violins*, *Man/Woman* (a collaboration with Joanne Kyger), *Favorite Songs*, *The Paris Journals*, *Monk Daddy*, and *Unhurried Vision*. He is also editor for the Penguin Poet series, which includes selected works of Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, David Meltzer and Ed Dorn. He has recently completed the *Collected Poems of Philip Whalen* for Wesleyan University Press. • **Keith Russell**, when not reading or writing, enjoys watching baseball, college basketball and rock concerts. He teaches at Lindenwood University. • **Tabitha Russo** writes poetry and short fiction by day, while teaching martial arts and kickboxing at night. She edits the Lindenwood University undergraduate literary journal *Arrow Rock*. • **Glenn Sheldon**'s first full-length book of poetry, *Bird Scarer*, was recently published by Cervana Barva Press. • **Gina Tabasso** has three chapbooks in print: *From Between My Legs*, *Disrobing* and *Front Lines* (Pudding House Press). She earns her living as the corporate communications manager for a tire distributor and enjoys riding her horse, practicing yoga, belly dancing, teaching poetry workshops, and giving poetry readings. • **Laura Madeline Wiseman**'s chapbook *My Imaginary* is forthcoming in 2009 from Dancing Girl Press. She is widely published. Her awards include three Pushcart Prize nominations.



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Untamed Ink accepts original, unpublished poems and short stories under 5,000 words. Reading period for unsolicited manuscripts is from September 1 to December 31.

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Susan K. Salzer and *Untamed Ink* won a 2009 Spur award from the Western Writers of America: Salzer for her story "Cornflower Blue," and *Untamed Ink* as publisher in Issue #1.

Salzer's new novel *Up From Thunder*, upcoming from Cave Hollow Press in November 2009, is based on this story.

Up From Thunder is a story of Civil War Missouri featuring the young Jesse James. Based on events that occurred in Ray County in August of 1864, this novel explores the war in this state and the events and personalities that shaped the lives of young Missourians caught in the crossfire.

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Ordering Information:

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