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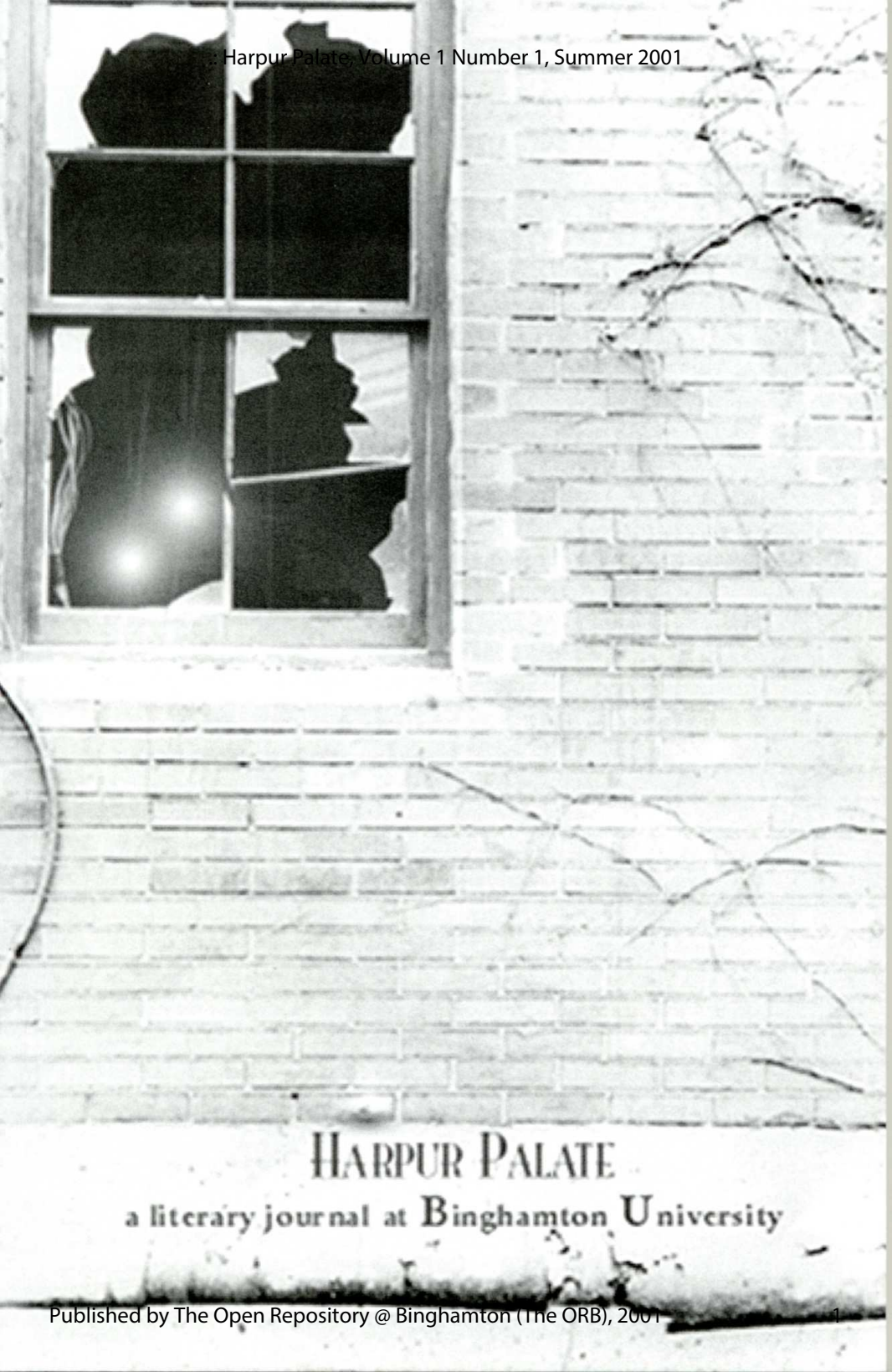
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Harpur Palate, Volume 1 Number 1, Summer 2001

HARPUR PALATE
a literary journal at Binghamton University

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Submissions

We consider all genres of fiction from 250-8000 words and all forms of poetry. We are not interested in violence for violence's sake or the usage of four-letter words for shock value. To submit to *Harpur Palate*, please send an SASE, cover letter and 1 story or 3-5 poems (no poems longer than 10 pages) to:

Harpur Palate
Dept. of English
Binghamton University
PO Box 6000

Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

READING PERIODS: January 1-March 15 (Summer); August 1-October 15 (Winter). Submissions received outside of reading periods will not be evaluated.

For more information please visit:
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Since *New Myths* ceased publication several years ago, Binghamton University has been without a national literary journal. When I first came here in the fall of 2000, there was considerable enthusiasm to start a new journal, not from just graduate students, but undergraduates as well. By the end of the fall semester, *Harpur Palate at Binghamton University* had a hard working staff, eager to put out the first issue.

It seems that every publication is expected to define itself, to establish some criteria about what it feels about art. Well, for us, we choose not to put limitations on what "art" is or can be. We will wait to be surprised by the submissions we receive. We also will try to provide our readers with a variety of selections and to expose them to new genres and styles. In this issue, you'll find imagist poetry ("the newly drowned" and "Pattaya Beach, Thailand"), forms ("Streetlight Pantoum"), and prose poetry ("VIEW FROM THE RECTORY"). The fiction is fabulist ("The Whitefish Eating Contest"), mainstream ("Lizard Jelly") and experimental ("Black Box Recording"). For those who are interested in submitting to us in the future, we encourage you to experiment with different types of genre and welcome your submissions.



We are pleased to announce that David Varela's "Theft of a Good Man" has won our inaugural John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction. Pending funding, we will continue to have contests for fiction and poetry in the future.

I'd like to thank the *Harpur Palate* editorial staff for working so hard throughout this first year. Our staff is made entirely of undergraduate and graduate students, and although they were incredibly busy with other work at times, they always did what was asked of them. We received university-wide support, but I'd also like to give special thanks to Thom Brucie, Liz Rosenberg and Dean Jean-Pierre Mileur for helping us get off the ground, the officers of the Graduate Student Organization for letting our staff use their Mac, and Ruth Stanek for putting up with all of my questions.

We hope you enjoy the first issue of *Harpur Palate*,
Toiya Kristen Finley
Managing Editor

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The Whitefish Eating Contest

by Josh November

As the hot summer days hit hard upon the citizens of Bunzha, young and old alike knew that such a brutal sun could only portend one thing: the final Whitefish Convention—the end of a lustrous chapter in the town's history. For one-hundred consecutive years the convention had hallowed the second Sunday of every July; this would be the last time. And so it was that at midday, two weeks before the event, men in woolen pants and tank-tops began to assemble numerous tents and kiosks at the large clearing in the center of town. The canvas tents and booths had grown dusty and spiritless where they slumbered in the town storage facility since last year's convention, so that when they were first removed, they appeared lifeless and flaccid. But as the constructors hammered the spikes into the ground the air gave breath to the cloth and the tents asserted their old glorious forms.

Much meditation and planning went into the following weeks; committees debated over scheduling and whitefish lecturers, councilmen allocated governmental funds to whitefish scholars, and secretaries contacted representatives from the largest whitefish retailers in the county, who in turn made their pilgrimage to Bunzha. In a way, all this planning was unnecessary, as the same guests, speakers, and whitefish businessmen patronized the same convention every year; and the same scholars received the same stipends every twelve months. Even when the founders and beneficiaries of the event had died or grown too weary, their descendants—their children and grandchildren—took hold of the reins and continued to reap the fruits the convention provided. So, in essence, it was the same crowd every year—a matter of lineage. Nonetheless, the town never tired of the extravaganza, particularly the main attraction—the whitefish eating contest. As with everything it was an affair of inheritance. A first born male of the Lapidus family had come away victorious every year since the championship's inception over a century ago. Accordingly, the Lapidus family trench coat was passed down from father to son, worn only on this destined day in mid July. Over the years they preserved the blue fabric well and the coat became a highly regarded heirloom—a reminder of great grandfather Lapidus's initial triumph and the legacy that followed.

So too, the first born male of the Bubbadika family had solidified his position as runner-up since the very first tournament and the Bubbadika's had grown to loathe the blue trench coat—an emblem that manacled them to their infamy. Despite their history of shortcomings—never scaling the hump of second place—with every approaching competition the whitefish athletes of the Bubbadika family renewed their hope. And with the 101st and final competition almost upon them, they were keenly aware that a victory in this match would erase generations of failure. With this hope,

Josh November

flooded in a wave of immense pressure which took its toll on the stomach of Morty Bubbadika—the eldest son of Max Bubbadika and the family's last chance. There he lay in his stiff bed, in his cramped one-room dwelling in the butcher's attic— which had no window, but the portraits of his whitefish-eating patriarchs. He had been waking each morning for the past month with a terrible weight at the center of his abdomen. His sanity was pushed to the brink. A loss meant eternal disgrace for all those who bore the Bubbadicka name.

His vocation as a tweezer-maker offered a scant income, so that Morty had lived on nutshells and kasha for the past months in order save up for the barrels of whitefish he consumed for practice. He knew that in the tournament's allotted time he could easily devour at least ten fish. It was around the twelfth that his stomach's machinery tightened. He remembered feeling woozy at last year's meet as he had approached the double-digits, when he glanced up and beheld Lapidus in his customary position—his face low to the fish plate, his arms shielding his head, his blue trench-coat draped around his slender shoulders—victimizing his thirteenth fish with no visible exertion. Morty assured himself that this time things would be different.

Finally, the morning of the competition arrived. Morty rose early and said a prayer before the portraits on his wall. He descended the stairs past the room where the butcher's son lay sleeping, and headed into the streets of Bunzha in the direction of the fair. The summer air penetrated his nostrils and sank deep into his aching belly, so that each breath seemed to tighten the clamp on his oxygen supply. Eventually he made it to the whitefish fair grounds, which empty in this early hour, took the shape of a vast skeleton hungry for flesh. With more than four hours to the first round, Morty lay his burden down under a tree behind a small booth, nearly eighty yards before the very end of the fair grounds, where the unroofed bandstand—surrounded by numerous fans—would soon house the legendary tournament. Morty tried to rest. But like a fish that pounds its sides into a dock after it has been caught, the pain in his stomach hammered away until he drifted into dreamless sleep.

He awoke to a bustling convention, the solicitation of vendors, and children's voices which expressed their cravings for whitefish souvenirs. The sun was exuberant and the clear sound of a Kletzmer band playing whitefish favorites pierced the fair. Morty quickly lifted himself and headed toward his fate.

As always, Lapidus and Bubbadicka torched through the qualifying rounds, past the dilettante challengers, on a collision course. And then there was only the final round left. The crowd had swollen to immensity. Morty had saved himself for this last lap, never eating more than eight fish in the initial or semifinal matches. Lapidus, hungry as ever, sat to his right, the trench coat draped on his shoulders. History was upon them. The whitefish lay before them. The judge shot his old-fashioned pistol into the air. It had begun. Lapidus lowered his face to the plate and surrounded his head with his arms—his family's perfected formula. Only the dark curly hair on the top of his head was exposed, shaking with his every

The Whitefish Eating Contest

bite. He consumed at a rapid pace, lifting the fish tails in his mouth, plopping them into his pail to be counted. But Bubbadicka's stomach did not fail him, he had never eaten so well. Fish after fish crossed his plate and found it way into his pail. When the meticulous judges had tallied their contents everyone was amazed. Seventeen fish; he had realized a new convention record. He beamed in elation. There was no way Lapidus had topped that. Even if the pistol had not rang for the second time he could have kept going. Yet when it was over, by means of some inhuman form of perseverance, Lapidus had smashed Morty's new record; twenty-two whitefish picked clean to the bone. At the judges announcement, Morty sank into utter dejection. Brazenly, Lapidus dipped a cracker into one of the many jars of whitefish salad that the fans began to lovingly shower him with. Then he looked to Morty and smiled the most crippling smile that one could fashion.

The fans surrounded Lapidus and tried to lift him on their shoulders. He checked them in an attempt to grab the family trench coat he had just carefully rested on the back of his chair. It was no use; in this riotousness a tall man had lifted Lapidus; his coat was beyond his reach. The parade had begun. All Morty could see were the backs of the mob as they hoisted Lapidus away, his name chanted in deafening unison. Morty slid deeper into his chair until he actually lay beneath the table. His forefathers crossed the threshold of his thoughts. They stared at him in desperation and disbelief. He had let them down. Deep in the gut of this despair he heard a rustling. He wondered why even in his agony he could not have quiet; he could not be alone, when again he heard the rustling. It infected his ears, taunted his last semblance of reason. He glanced out from beneath the table to distinguish the source of this tormenting sound that had gone from a rustle to a high-pitched squeak; there it was, the blue trench coat and something moved inside. Morty gathered himself off the floor and in his delirium, threw the coat to the ground as if to wrestle with it. Again the squeak. He lifted the garment from the ground only to discover that behind the inner-lining of both breast pockets there lay two hidden compartments. And snug within these two compartments were two rats with the smell of whitefish heavy on their breath. He now understood all too well the Lapidus tournament posture: of course they hid their heads in their arms; they had to conceal the rats who under a century of Lapidus arms had crawled forth from a century of Lapidus breasts to claim generations of championships. All those years his family had been betrayed, the lamentations that overtook them were unwarranted, brought on by the stitchwork of crafty Lapidus hands.

As if reborn, Morty clutched the coat in pursuit of the mob, in pursuit of the rectification of his family name. As he burst through the cloud of dust the fans had kicked up in their boisterous celebration, a sense of justice and pride pulsed through his frame; he would reveal the Lapidus dynasty for what it really was. He closed in on the crowd and bellowed out Lapidus's name. Every one turned to Morty, who stood proudly with the retribution in his arms.

"Everyone look here," he called out, unfolding the jacket, unsheathing

Josh November

the two pockets where the rats resided. “These are the rodents that have won Lapidus all his titles.” And sure enough there were the rats. Their greasy heads poked out of the inner-chambers, their hair spotted with tiny pieces of whitefish. The Mayor stepped forward and grabbed Morty by the shoulders. He cleared his throat, silencing the crowd.

“We know, you fool. How clever of the Lapiduses; for over a hundred years they have defeated the Bubbadickas with two rats.”

HP

Lavabo

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

Lavabo n. 1. *RC Ch.* a. the ritual washing of the celebrant's hands at the offertory of the Mass. b. a towel of basin used for this. 2. a monastery washing-trough. 3. a wash-basin.

I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about thy altar, O Lord,
singing a song of thanksgiving.
—Psalm 26:6

wellspring illuminated
by wheat-colored light
these pages of water
such geometric beauty
of ultramarine blue
the mother lode of secrets
potent crossroads

how madonna lilies float
sudden flowers that shiver
atop the water's face
like a soul side-stepping
death or the mysterious
corpus of sin, its viscera
like a bed of thorns

in starry feather-swirls
the long curve of silence
scars can be drowned
their desolate summits
given one more chance
renewed strength of its origins
here in the eternity of foam

Streetlight Pantoum

by Danielle L. Gutter

Why should I stay here alone?
Watching somber streetlights
reflect sharp diamonds of snow—
Wrapped in a blanket, it's almost midnight.

Watching somber streetlights,
the lone father (next door) kisses his daughter on the cheek,
wrapped in a blanket. It's almost midnight,
the moon has just reached its highest peak.

The lone father (next door) kisses his daughter on the cheek
while he's simply listening for someone to ring.
The moon has just reached its highest peak,
waiting to start its long descent, on a crane's wing.

While she's simply listening for someone to ring,
the ancient lady (across the street) sips her dark tea.
Waiting to start its long descent, on a crane's wing
her dying life never whispers a plea.

The ancient lady (across the street) sips her dark tea
finishing a book she found the other day
(her dying life never whispers a plea.)
Gentle water slips into the bay.

Finishing a book she found the other day,
the teenage girl (a block away) writes her last journal entry.
Gentle water slips into the bay
as dusty stars, and powdered snow, reflect off the watery surface and gleam.

The teenage girl (a block away) writes her last journal entry:
"All the nights I've stayed awake wondering if this is it."
As dusty stars and powdered snow reflect off the watery surface and gleam.
"Is this all I have? I ponder as I sit."

All the nights I've stayed awake, wondering if this is it.
Lonely nights waiting for sunrise—
Is this all I have? I ponder as I sit,
clinging onto my sheets, wondering if anyone else cries.

Lonely nights waiting for sunrise—
reflect sharp diamonds of snow.
Clinging onto my sheets, wondering if anyone else cries...
Why should I stay here alone?

A Correspondence Course in Bird Watching

by Leigh Kirkland

A bird flew across the hood of my car as I drove to class on Thursday. Most likely a mockingbird, from the white on the undersides of the dark wings.

The school was in the basement of Lord & Taylor, which anchored one end of the deadest mall in Atlanta, with Saks Fifth Avenue at the other end. Mall management wasn't ever going to fix the lights on the Mint Parking level reserved for us. Georgia was here in a two-year drought while dark puddles on the Mint Level were breeding blind cave fish under the scum of algae on their surfaces.

The handle on the glass door into Hoffman Fashion College was broken, and the hinges were stiff. Students—girls, only four boys were enrolled this year—cuttled along the narrow hallways, vaguely off-balance.

When I got back from teaching my second class, there was a note on my desk from the Director of Education: Jane—Could you come by my office? Donna. I walked down the middle bar of the H-shaped arrangement of the school to Donna Stone's office.

The windows in the school faced into the hallways from the classrooms. Students were paged with notes taped to the glass. Once a week a black man with a squeegee cleaned and disinfected the windows.

Donna's secretary, Ann Broxton, was short and bug-eyed. At least once a week she cornered me as I struggled not to collapse a styrofoam cup of coffee in shaking hands, to tell me about her dog's exercise schedule. She sent me into Donna's office without a word.

Donna said, "Have a seat, Jane."

I said, "So what's up?"

"I just wanted to talk to you." Her mustard-colored pantsuit matched her hair.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, since we're a career-oriented school, we have a little different dress code than you're probably used to."

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"So, I'd appreciate it if you'd dress a little more professionally."

"What kind of profession do you mean?" I said, forgetting that a semi-professional fascist like Donna wouldn't have a sense of humor. My joke fell into dead air.

"You mean more professionally than I'm dressed today?" I said finally, dumbfounded.

"Than the last couple of times I've seen you. I'd appreciate it if you'd dress a little less casually." Donna smiled warmly across the desk, her eyes wide and friendly as a basset hound's. "Everything else going okay? Girls behaving for you?"

Leigh Kirkland

"Sure," I said, and got up. The last *couple* of times? Apparently revealing vestiges of a personality constituted some sort of sartorial sin. So I was back to the outfits my mother sent, and hand-me-downs from my 80-year-old aunt.

"Let me know if you need anything," she said. "I'm always here."

"I know that," I said, and left. Why did they make it sound so personal—I'd appreciate it—as they tried to institutionalize me? And why did I never say that?

In every staff meeting (withholding the 'faculty' title was a deliberate indignity), Donna stressed that the use of performance-oriented grading criteria was helpful to our students.

"And it makes your job easier," she would say, "if you don't muddy the waters, you won't have girls questioning their grades." At one meeting she told us not to encourage students to apply to four-year colleges because it damaged Hoffman's placement record.

"We consider ourselves a terminal institution," she said firmly.

Pre-counted ballots for student elections were distributed by the Director of Student Activities to each teacher, to be passed out in the first class of election day, filled out by the students, taken up by the teacher, and handed back to the Director by the teacher, along with a list of any students who had been absent and who had therefore not voted—yet.

As I passed out the ballots in my 8:30 class, irritated, I commented that mandatory voting seemed odd, even in a student election.

In the back of the room, Kate Battersby raised her head. God, how did that child look like that at this hour? She must eat the flesh of unborn children. That shouldn't be hard to arrange in the Hoffman dorm. I had a hard enough time remembering to bring the lecture outline I prepared the night before, with the notes to remind me of anecdotes and one-liners to use. Kate, whose dark hair was always perfect, whose mascara never smudged, whose clothes were always pressed, made me feel like my slip was showing, and I was wearing pants. In the third grade, I got up every night after my mother turned off the lights, got dressed, and slept in my clothes to make sure I had enough time before the school bus came the next morning. I should do that now. I couldn't have been more rumpled then than I was now.

Another girl, Patti I think, said that people didn't care enough; hardly anyone would vote if voting were optional.

"That's the point," I said, "even student officers shouldn't be elected by people who don't care who wins."

From the back corner someone said, "They have to do what Mrs. Kramer tells them to anyhow." That was probably true.

Kate and Jill Brown, whose hair was probably naturally that daisy yellow, looked at each other knowingly. They didn't agree. They'd heard about this kind of undermining of traditional values before they came to college.

"The United States is one of the few places in the world where voting is not required." I counted the row and the ballots before I went on. "And

A Correspondence Course in Birdwatching

one of the few places where it counts. Unless you believe in the Trilateral Commission."

None of them responded—but it was so early. Usually enough of them laughed at my jokes or looked up at provocative stories. My talking wouldn't teach them to write, but I might be able to make them more conscious of the world. Hoffman didn't encourage that; conscious students were more difficult to control. Of course, I'd been three weeks into the semester before I noticed that Sarah Bailey on the front row of Group 1 was eight months pregnant, so who knows what else I'd missed?

They filled out their ballots diligently and passed them back up the rows, and I wrote down the names of the absent students: two Michelles and a Shelly. I was glad this was over. The second class was always a little stale because my ad lib lines were not only scripted and rehearsed, but repeated. By the third class, I was walking through a maze, a comic whose routine never varies. I cringed to hear myself repeat major points, much less jokes, for the third time. The students were watching the window for news about jobs, dates, and rides home; I didn't blame them.

"Okay, today we're starting *The Great Gatsby*," I announced. "I hope you've all read it at least once."

Two blondes on the middle row opened their pink mouths and mascara-ed blue eyes in melodramatic but not altogether fake terror. One of them raised her hand, glancing at her cuticles before she did.

"When did you assign this?" she asked. She sounded serious.

I turned toward the blackboard, pretending to be sure she was talking to me. Something un-mockingbird-like about those wings crossing my windshield. But what? I looked back at her.

"It's on the outline. I've warned you for the last week."

"Well, I never heard it," she said.

"Oh, come on, Joanne," another girl said, "you heard it."

A dark-haired Jennifer raised her hand. "I mean, I read the book and all, but I don't understand why we have to read it."

"Why you have to read *Gatsby*, or why you have to read *any* fiction?" I asked.

"I mean, I mean, I just don't understand what we're supposed to get out of it," she said.

"You won't earn more money because of it, if that's what you're getting at," I said. "I think it'll enrich your lives and all that. But if you want a quantitative result, I can't tell you what it is." When I prepared for class, I would visualize the girls, try to anticipate questions, and write down appropriate answers. I had missed this one.

"So what's the point?" another girl asked. For some reason, all the African-American girls sat at the back and along the sides of the classroom, never in the middle.

"Here's one," I said. "You've got a 40-point paper on *Gatsby* due in two weeks, and if you don't do it, you'll drop a letter grade in this class. Does that make it seem more worthwhile?"

Apparently it did. Sammy, the only boy in this group, although I had one more in Group 3, shot up his hand and stuttered, "Miz Brandon, I've

Leigh Kirkland

been trying to read this I really have but I'm having big problems. Like I've never finished a whole book before in my life?"

I rolled my eyes and laughed. "This is going to be a first, then, isn't it?"

Sammy said, "I guess that's not very good is it?" He was a sweet-voiced kid; he watched me attentively throughout, but he never seemed to understand anything.

"Right," I said.

"Are there *Cliff Notes* on this?" the brown-haired Jennifer asked, leaning against the back wall.

I looked at the door. "Probably. Probably."

As I talked—droned on, even to my ears—about Nick Carraway's function as narrator, and point of view, it occurred to me that they weren't going to see the irony of it, even if I told them. They weren't going to believe it applied to them. Maybe they were too young. Most of them came to Atlanta from Ohio and Indiana, where evidently people believed they could set goals and control their own destinies. People are imported to Atlanta to develop real estate and such because we don't believe that in the south. And it's nothing—or at least not just—to do with the Civil War.

After class I took the ballots and the list and handed them all over to Maude Kramer, who received them suspiciously, as though I might have filled the ballots out myself. Maybe she didn't recognize me as a teacher. I was tired of apologizing for that.

♦ ♦ ♦
My best friend Jill says I'm the luckiest person she knows. Today she said it because our wacko English teacher (she's leftover from the sixties) assigned *another* paper and I did a paper on the same stupid book in high school. And I still have it, because my father taught me that saving stuff would keep me from having to do many things twice. But that's not luck. I deserve to have whatever I want. I have a gift. Otherwise I wouldn't look the way I do; I wouldn't have the mind that I do. My parents brought me up to choose what I want and go for it. That's why I'm at Hoffman. It doesn't hurt that I've been modeling since I could walk. If I was three inches taller, I could go to New York, but no one will be able to say I got where I'm going because of my looks.

When my mother and I came to Atlanta to look at the school last spring, we ate lunch at Nava. I knew instantly this was where I'd meet the people I wanted to meet. You don't run into unsuccessful people at Nava. The crowd isn't there to party; they know what they're doing in the world, they're established, and they're already where I want to go. My mother's got an eye for those kinds of places. She helps me with self-marketing and sophistication. She suggested I change my name from Kathy to Kate when I moved to Atlanta. That's a lot for someone from pre-Disney World Orlando.

I met William the third weekend of fall quarter. He sent a bottle of Moët champagne over to the table where Jill and I were sitting. This was at Nava of course. Jill was totally freaked out. He'd been making eye contact with me from a table of gentlemen across the room. When Jill went

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to the ladies' room, I stayed at the table and he came over. He introduced himself—I was glad he didn't call himself Bill—and gave me his business card. He's the president of his company. If Jill had been there, she would have said 'wow' or something like that. I'm working on her sophistication level. I told William I was Kate Battersby and gave him my phone number, and he wasn't shocked that it was my dorm number. Many men I'm attracted to don't realize at first that I'm a lot more mature than most 18 year olds. I'm mature enough to know that a difference in age doesn't mean anything when the people communicate on other planes. And boys my age don't know how to act; they get drunk and throw up, and I like men to act more dignified.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was scheduled to proctor Linda Mueller's retail math midterm. Twice during the test period I looked up to see Donna watching me through the window, her breath forming a light cloud on the glass.

That the bird wasn't gray at all; it was black and white. It wasn't a mockingbird, but I didn't know what it was.

The third time, Donna appeared in my face, standing toe on toe with me.

"Pay attention to them," she hissed, glaring with those hound-eyes. She left.

The students were smiling. There were no secrets here. I shrugged my shoulders and got on the treadmill up and down the aisles, stepping over books and purses. If they were cheating, I couldn't catch them at it. I wanted to stop the motion of that bird across my windshield so I could name it. No wonder they cheated, if they did.

In the narrow locked office where all the Fashion Merchandising instructors were housed in shaky cubicles, Janet Strong was adamant about the veracity of an official memo that said some of the seniors were complaining about the lax attitude of the freshmen towards the dress code (which I seriously doubted). Instructors and staff were to take more responsibility for enforcement.

"Those seniors are serious about the image of this school," Janet said. "They hate these kids looking like slob."

Amanda Crisp said, "Well, I know I've been appalled at what some of my students have been coming to class in, and it's only March. I can't believe it!"

Linda Mueller said, "Isn't it the truth. Kerry France came into math yesterday with half her stomach showing, and I sent her home."

Janet said, "Is she failing your class too?"

Linda said, "Yeah—I don't know where they get some of these girls."

"Well, midriff tops are definitely against the code," Amanda said, "but are we expected to mention to them that it's too early to wear spring clothes?"

"That's a good point, Amanda," Janet said. "You might bring that up to Dinah or Donna. I have no idea how the administration feels about that."

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"But it's 85 degrees," I said. "What should they wear—wool suits?"

"Don't look at me," Janet said, "I'm from Ohio."

"What is the rule in Georgia?" Amanda asked. "I know in Virginia, the rule was you didn't wear white shoes or summer clothes until after Memorial Day."

"Absolutely, that was the rule in Ohio," Janet said. "You wouldn't dare go out in white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day."

"Well," Linda said, "I don't know how much it matters anymore."

"I don't either," Janet said. "I don't wear white shoes."

"Me either," Linda said. "They make my feet too obvious or something."

"It was Easter to Labor Day here," I said. "Of course, that's a variable, since Easter isn't the same day every year."

"It isn't?" Janet said.

"So how does that work?" Amanda asked.

"How does *Easter* work?" I asked as Dinah, the Fashion Merchandising Department chairman, who would be chipper commanding a firing squad, came in, all wide smile, pink cheeks, and cheer.

"What y'all talking about?" she asked, planting her plump elbows on the dividers on either side of the passageway.

"We were talking about this darn dress code memo," Janet said.

"They *are* getting a little out of hand, aren't they? Warm weather and all," Dinah said.

"Well, that was part of what we were talking about," Amanda said. "What are we supposed to do if a student is dressing too summery? Or does that matter?"

"Hmm, that's a good question," Dinah said. "Let me think on that one for a minute and get back to you."

"What is the rule on that in Georgia?" Amanda persisted. "In Virginia we couldn't wear white shoes before Memorial Day or after Labor Day."

"Hmm," Dinah said. "In Birmingham, we could wear white shoes anytime after *Easter* but you're definitely on the right track with that Labor Day cutoff."

"Do you think anybody still pays attention to that?" I said. No one was anxious to accept my fashion advice.

"You know, I think it might *be* a good idea to *mention* it if you think somebody's dressing unseasonably," Dinah said. "Don't not let them into class, but you might take them aside after class or in the hall and kinda mention, 'Hey, this isn't the beach.'"

"That's a great idea," Janet said, "because if we don't do something quick, there's not going to be any reason to even *have* a dress code."

"Now, the stockings or socks requirement is definitely still in effect," Dinah said, "so be on the lookout for that."

"Isn't that the truth," Linda said. "The other day I gave Wyn Thorington a note to go and see Donna about—something, and she looked right at me and said, 'I can't, I'm not wearing hose.' So they haven't forgotten it, they're just not doing it."

I visualized myself as the students' only advocate against the admin-

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istration, but that was flatly untrue. The system was just too good; there were too many students. It was likely my own failure, but I couldn't find a crack in it. I couldn't even remember the students' names. I couldn't keep my hair combed. Some days I wanted to lean my head on the podium and cry.

Caroline Taylor from Group 3 was standing in the hall when I came back from my next class. There was something architectural, or mountainous—something unmovable—about Caroline. I had never seen Caroline speak to another student, never seen her walk down a hall with anyone. She was close to six feet tall, and broad. Something about her was offhandedly rebellious, so she seemed to be doing something she shouldn't.

"Mrs. Brandon," she said in that low even voice. "I'd like to talk to you. If I wouldn't be bothering you."

"Sure, Caroline, come on back," I said, fumbling in my pockets for the key to the departmental network of cubicles.

"I've been thinking about Daisy and Myrtle," Caroline said as I tried two keys that weren't even shaped like the office key before picking the right one. "They're both named for flowers. Do you think there's any significance to that?"

"Wow," I said, finally opening the door. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I know what daisies mean in the language of flowers," she said, following me to my cubicle, "but do you know what myrtle looks like or what it symbolizes?"

"Um, no," I said. God, I finally got a question and I didn't even know what daisies represented.

"You see," Caroline said without transition. "I have this obsession." And stopped.

Yes, I thought, I bet you do.

Caroline smiled. "I have an obsession with the printed word."

I tried to look warm, and smile. "Yes," I said, "me too," but Caroline didn't wait.

"I have an obsession with the printed word in any form from great literature to comic books." She paused again, but this was for drama, not a response. "Most people don't realize what fine illustrators work for comic books."

My shoulder blades tensed and drew together as Caroline loomed across the divider.

I said, "Yes, I know, Frank Frazetta is . . ."

"Actually he's just one of the best-known," Caroline said. "There are others who are better." She seemed to have practiced this in front of a mirror.

"I have this poster over my bed. I think it makes my roommates nervous. It's the only thing on my wall. It's of a woman, in incredible, exquisite detail."

Caroline became taller and more shapely. Her hands became graceful as they moved to describe her poster. "She's got black almost blue-black

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hair, long, flowing down her back. She's wearing a red bodysuit—strapless—that doesn't seem to be made of an earthly material, it seems—molded to her body. Long gloves over her elbows. Also red. Of the same material as the bodysuit. Black, over-the-knee boots. She's standing on a cliff, looking out. The sky is black—no stars. I think the location is not on earth. I can't tell if it's on another planet, or on the moon, or in another universe."

Caroline paused again. My rib cage bent against the handle of the desk drawer as she expanded before me. That voice was familiar: the flat, deliberately controlled tone and eyes like a loaded gun: the chance file tape catching the mass murderer just before—the muscles around my mouth stiffened like drying plaster.

"The background of the painting—you can't tell if it's what's really behind her or a dream—the lines move out of her hair or down from the sky or both, but you can—if you look carefully—you can almost feel the illusion—of wings. Her right hand is on her hip. Her left hand is held up"—Caroline raised her left arm above her head—"and she's holding up a broadsword."

"Ah," I said. "Wow."

Caroline re-formed—transmogrified—her face blankening and broadening, the thick glasses distorting her eyes into a language I didn't know.

"I'm sorry I took up so much of your time," she said. She bumped her head as she gathered her notebook.

I laid my face on my desk and covered the back of my neck with my hands, protecting the base of my brain like they taught us to do in grade school in case of atomic attack.

As I graded Gatsby papers, an odd similarity of tone surfaced; one ended mid-sentence at 500 words, the assigned minimum.

Taking the escalator through Lord & Taylor's makeup department and onto the carpeted mall to the bookstore amplified the feeling that life had been decimated by nuclear war without causing the concrete in our cellar classrooms to quiver. Five or ten other people were wandering past the stores, dazed, their arms hanging by their sides, not buying, not really looking. The school and the mall had a quality of an unpleasant dream, a reminder that any failure of the synapse between acts and words and reality was a personal failure.

Waldenbooks had two copies of the *Cliff Notes* for *The Great Gatsby* left. As I paid for it, the clerk, trying to be jovial—he probably hadn't seen another soul all day—said, "We've sold a lot of those lately."

"So I've gathered," I said grimly, folding the bag into my purse.

Nine papers had been copied directly from the *Cliff Notes*. I marked them with big red null marks and wrote, *I have the Cliff Notes*, on each one. Caroline's seemed to be the tenth. I couldn't understand why she'd cheat, but I'd read the paper before. The passage wasn't in the bumblebee-striped booklet. I went through graded papers, trying to remember if Caroline had any friends. She made me nervous. I did have to look twice at her every day to be sure she wasn't wearing jeans. Sammy's paper

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matched. Hers was better than his, but it was without a doubt the same paper. I changed Sammy's B to a zero, gave Caroline a zero, and wrote 'Did you or Sammy/Caroline write this?' on both of them.

When I gave the papers back in Group 3, Caroline said in a shivering voice that she couldn't take a zero, that Sammy must have copied her paper, but she didn't know how he could have. But she'd written the paper. I believed that, but she could be good at this.

The next day I handed the papers back in Sammy's class. He wasn't smart enough to lie well, and he couldn't grasp why I didn't return his paper. As we walked desperately back to my office after Group 2, he didn't seem to understand what I was saying and it was not my intention to yell with the halls full of girls. Caroline hadn't told him they'd been busted.

♦ ♦ ♦

On our third date, William and I wanted to hang out all day Saturday in blue jeans and tennis shoes, not put on any kind of front. I bought a big white shirt at Banana Republic to wear with my jeans, put my hair up in a high ponytail and just wore mascara and no lipstick.

He picked me up at 10:30. He looked great in dark jeans and a denim shirt and Reeboks. He doesn't worry about labels because he's the kind of guy who doesn't have anything to prove to anybody. He says people who judge you by labels don't know quality unless you put a sign on it; they wouldn't know a nice restaurant if there wasn't a fresh bottle of cat-sip on the table. And real quality costs more than designer labels anyway.

I told him I wanted to go to the zoo; I knew anything I wanted would be fine. We ate popcorn and snow-cones and cotton candy and ran and giggled-like children. William liked the monkey house best because he liked to think of how close man might be to the big apes—yet so far away. He said I should think about that. About how little makes the difference between being in control and being in a cage.

I liked the birds, not just because they were in the newest part, which is what William said (he was kidding). I'd never seen a hawk that close and I didn't know that the female birds of prey (I thought that was spelled with an A) are larger than the males. But it was incredible, I was staring at this hawk and she was looking right at me. You could tell she'd have no problem ripping into some poor rabbit—but for a few minutes I completely forgot about William, until he started tickling me, and we ran holding hands to see the flamingoes with their heads in the water and the swans, sliding across the lake.

This other thing happened that really flipped me out. I'd gone to Lindbergh Plaza to Binder's to get supplies for a visual merchandising project the first time I saw the man in his old red Datsun hatchback. As soon as he drove into the parking lot, a bunch of pigeons came down off the phone lines by the street, swirled around, and surrounded his car. He had to practically wade through birds to open the trunk. The trunk was full of broken-up hot dog and hamburger buns that he threw out in handfuls and the iridescent gray birds moved around him like waves on the ocean, grabbing for the bread, flying into swells as he circled wider and

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wider across the asphalt with the birds.

When the bread was gone, he stood in the eye of the storm and the pigeons didn't fly away when he closed the lid. They spiraled slowly out from him with that beautiful rolling movement, as he watched and I watched.

When William called that night from Toronto, I couldn't explain it right on the phone.

He said, "Was it an Asian guy?"

I said yes, and he said, "He was probably trying to bag them to serve in a restaurant. They do that. So never order squab in an Oriental restaurant."

I told William the pigeons trusted the man, and from what I've read about Eastern culture, the guy wouldn't hurt the birds because they really respect life, but he said, "Pigeons are filthy. Really, Kate. They're nothing but rats with wings."

He didn't understand how this had made me feel, but I didn't explain it right. He told me he'd been thinking of me all day in the black dress I wore the Saturday before. He relaxes from being in meetings with high-powered business men by getting a clear picture of me in his head. So I know he loves me.

♦ ♦ ♦

Maybe it was Dinah's phrasing in the staff meeting, about the 'moral question' of whether a student could appeal her failure because of absences . . . but for some reason asking Dinah's advice about Caroline and Sammy seemed like a good idea. So I did.

"Oh, they'll have to be brought up before the board. No question. That can't be tolerated," she said, and I felt control slip from my outstretched palm.

"Well," I said, "I don't want . . ."

"Whatever happens will be up to the board," she said. "I'll tell Donna to call a meeting. They won't necessarily be kicked out of school, but we can't let this pass unpunished—it's worse than if they were doing it individually."

I steadily returned her competent smile. I was out of the process. Dinah was running to catch Donna to decide what happened next. Control, like an egg cracked whole into my open hand, was sliding away, the yolk falling round off the ends of my stiffening fingers like the cold yellow sun.

In a rare moment of camaraderie, all of the instructors were standing with our backs to our desks, eating Chic-Fil-A sandwiches that Janet had brought in. When we saw Donna's hairdo appear around the corner, every mouth tightened around bites of brittle chicken.

"Who was it you had the problem with, Jane?" she asked. "Sammy, and who else?"

"Caroline Taylor," I said through pickle and mayonnaise.

Her face warmed like an electric burner. "I'm not surprised."

"Well, I am. A little," Linda said.

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"What is this, now?" Amanda asked.

"She's never fit in here," Donna said.

That egg yolk was lying whole on the floor. That Caroline had plagiarized a paper was just a convenient tool Donna was going to use against her.

"Well, I'll locate them. Ann will let you know when we're going to meet," Donna said. "You'll need to be there. And don't worry, you've done the right thing."

"I know that," I said. I was sure about punishing them for cheating, but I was sick.

Donna leaned officially across her desk, her big yellowish hairdo rigid as furniture. Caroline crossed her arms around her waist. She was pressing one scuffed loafer across the instep of her other foot, staring at her knees. Sammy was white, gripping the arm of his chair with one hand and biting the fingernails of the other.

"Well, you know why you're here. Don't you?" Donna said confidently. No one spoke. She shot a look at me where I sat, nauseous, like she'd expected this. She turned up the heat. "*Don't you?*"

"No ma'am," Sammy whispered into the recirculated air.

"Well, I think you do. You turned in the same paper for Ms. Brandon's English 112 class," Donna said. "Isn't that right? Do you want us to believe that happened by chance?"

"That would be nice," Caroline said under her breath, pushing her glasses up on her nose. She slumped slightly in the chair, making herself shorter than Donna.

"What was that, Caroline?" Donna barked. The air was vibrating. Caroline shook her head in contrition. Their defensiveness was resonant.

"I want to know which one of you wrote it." She was a fool; she expected an answer. "Well?" Her voice got shrill. "If I don't get some answers, I'll have no choice but to kick you both out of school. Is *that* what you want?"

"I wrote that paper," Sammy burst out hoarsely. "I *wrote* that paper."

Nothing in Caroline's face reacted.

"And you had no idea that Caroline had seen it?" Donna set her teeth in.

"No ma'am," he said. "She must of got it out of my apartment. She lives—we live in the same apartment complex."

Caroline shook her head. Nothing in this room could touch her. She was protected by transparent lacquer.

"And you wrote it?" Donna said.

"I wrote that paper," Sammy insisted.

"Do you think that's true, Ms. Brandon?" Donna said. It didn't feel like a question.

I inhaled. I couldn't bring up the picture of that bird again. Sammy hadn't written that paper without help. He reconsidered. He'd probably looked at Caroline.

"Well, she said she would help—" he stuttered. "Because I hadn't done

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good in English and I really needed a good grade—and Caroline's—Caroline's a real good writer so she said she'd check it for grammar and all that. But I didn't know she turned in the same paper. I swear to god I had no idea she did that."

"You did know she'd seen it. So you're not entirely innocent in this," Donna said. It didn't seem appropriate to say I didn't consider helping each other with grammar a punishable offence.

Sammy looked at Caroline and she glared coldly from behind her glasses.

"No ma'am," Sammy said.

"What do you say to that, Caroline?" Donna asked. Caroline shook her head, a refusal. "So what do you think I should do here? Should I kick you both out? That's the only solution you're leaving me."

"No ma'am," Sammy said.

"No," Caroline said, choking on her allotment of air. "I'll admit something. But Sammy's got to admit something too."

"Will you do that, Sammy?" Donna was radiant with the fuel of their pain. Her eyes were clear and frenzied. And happy.

"I don't know," he said, with some arrogance. Caroline looked at him in disgust. She understood this enemy and Sammy did not.

"You know what I'm talking about," she said.

He looked at the arm of his chair. "Okay."

"Well," she said, "we had this paper in English. And I had—we had—all these other projects due. And I've had a lot—a lot of things have been happening this quarter. I was up in Sammy and Vince's apartment and Sammy said he was working on his *Great Gatsby* paper. And I asked if I could see it. It looked like a pretty good paper but it had a lot of grammar-errors in it. And I told him I'd fix it for him if he'd let me base my paper on his."

Donna glared. "Is that true, Sammy?"

"Yes'm," he said, nearly gagging.

"Does that sound possible to you?" she said to me.

"Yeah," I said. "I knew—I had the feeling—that the paper started with Sammy." They were both looking at me. "Because—I'm sorry, Sammy—but if you'd written the paper, Caroline, it would have been a better paper."

"Well, why did you do this?" Donna asked. "Did you think we were so stupid we wouldn't catch on?"

Caroline looked like she was about to die from exhaustion; still, I watched the space behind her head for the illusion of wings in this airless room. "No ma'am, we didn't think that—I don't know."

"We know we done wrong and all," Sammy said, hoping for a quick out. Caroline was more familiar with the necessary self-abasement.

"We know now—we knew then—it was wrong, but—we just had—I don't have any excuse," Caroline said. I wanted to slap Donna for this.

"Well, I'm going to let your teacher, let Ms. Brandon decide what to do about your grade," Donna said. "But you're both on probation for the next quarter. If you do one thing, *anything*, you're out. Do you hear me?"

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We will not tolerate this.”

They nodded and looked down again.

“And letters *will* go home.” The final stroke. They nodded again.

When they left, Donna looked at me. “Well. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes” seemed like the quickest exit line.

In the mangle between the makeup room and my office, Caroline caught up with me, wiping tears as they passed the frames of her glasses. “I’m so sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to let you down. I mean, I know I did, but—” This was a response she hadn’t practiced before. She’d never expected to need it.

“You didn’t let me down, Caroline, you just—you don’t have to cheat.” That sounded stupid, even to me.

“And I just think you should know,” she said, “Sammy didn’t write that paper either. He paid fifteen dollars for it and let me use it because I fixed it up for him.”

“Well, you should have written it and charged him for it,” I said.

“And—I didn’t mean for this to go this far,” motioning weakly towards Donna’s office. “I just didn’t know what to do.”

“I know,” she said.

I said, “I’m going to give you a zero on that one paper; I’m not going to fail you for the quarter. I’ve overheard enough to know y’all have had a hard time this quarter. At least y’all were trying to help each other.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. I didn’t believe that, but it made the moment easier.

Standing up in front of the classes had become painful, something I hadn’t anticipated. After the fiasco of *Gatsby*, I couldn’t summon energy to make notes, much less a class outline. It showed. It was embarrassing. I had no idea what was going to happen when I walked into a classroom. I didn’t even know who would be there. The time and room for each class changed with every period, a deliberate disorienting tactic.

At night I flipped through *Peterson’s Guide to Eastern Birds*, trying to match those wings. This was ridiculous. It was just a damn bird. I’d seen it once, weeks ago, but my talent for seeing anything other than birds in front of my eyes was diminishing. I was pretty sure it was a woodpecker of some kind, but it hadn’t seemed big enough to be the pileated that I see a couple of times a season around the neighborhood, so the smaller red-headed was more likely. I hadn’t seen one of those since first grade where we colored paper cut-outs of indigenous birds, and glued them onto rustic scenes we’d crayoned of their natural habitats.

Dinah came back to my cubicle and said, “You know, I don’t expect you to dress like I do, but the outfit you’re wearing looks like leggings and a tee shirt.”

I lifted my head from the paper I was grading and looked at my bulletin board. “It does?” I said. I knew it did.

“Yes it does,” Dinah said, “and if we’re going to enforce the dress code for students, the instructors have to live up to it too.”

“Sorry,” I said. Dinah didn’t see me turn back to the paper. She was

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halfway to the door.

The clock approaching the half hour, when class started, brought on a physical pain across the tops of my shoulders, and a weakness in my arms that made the roll book and whatever notes I had accidentally accumulated difficult to lift.

♦ ♦ ♦

William bought me a beautiful John James Audubon book after the last time we went to the zoo. Jill went upstairs to Waldenbooks and the guy told her it cost eighty-five dollars.

I've never seen most of the birds in this book. The part about the artist says he lived in Key West most of the time; maybe these birds only live there. I have seen a couple of them around Orlando. In Atlanta I only see big black birds that are scary and mockingbirds (they're gray anyway) and blue jays, and my pigeons at Lindbergh. They're not my pigeons; they don't come because of me. But I like to think the man feeds them so I can see them.

Sometimes I imagine that William has been paying the guy to feed the birds because he knew how much I'd like to see them, and that he said they were rats with wings to throw me off the track after he asked about the guy being Chinese, which might have given him away. But I don't believe that; I only think things like that when William's been busy closing deals. I understand how important his business is because I want to be a success too. Success takes concentration and single-mindedness; he's not ignoring me; he *should* be able to expect me to understand and I really do. I really do.

I never knew Audubon killed the birds before he painted them. But the ones that are extinct aren't extinct just because of him, are they? I couldn't believe Jill told everybody in the lounge how much that book cost. The girls couldn't believe it—of course, you have to consider that these girls didn't even know how much a dozen roses cost until I told them. Or that the book's not important because of what it cost, but because of what it means William noticed about me.

♦ ♦ ♦

As I left school with my tote bag of papers, Caroline was outside, sitting on the damp carpeted steps leading up to the Blueberry Level, her elbows balanced loosely on her knees, a cigarette casual in her hand. A new tattoo was still puffy, a string of yin-yang symbols around her upper arm. Well, I guess around here any statement you make to clarify your position, short of leaving, had better be permanent or they'll make you take it off. Caroline waved and dragged on the cigarette. Unbalanced by my bag, I waved back. I wouldn't have spoken to me, if I was her. I thought, What's the tattoo? An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace?

♦ ♦ ♦

I don't understand what's wrong with me. I should be so happy with William. I'm acting weird for no good reason. I've been driving to Lindbergh Plaza after classes get out two or three times a week to see the pigeons gather shoulder to shoulder on the phone wires and cluster

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around the lamp posts waiting for that man. I park somewhere where there won't be a reflection on the inside of the windshield and lean on the steering wheel, waiting for him to get there with his trunk full of bread.

♦ ♦ ♦

Before I left Hoffman, Caroline came by to tell me she wouldn't be back either. She was transferring to Oakhaven College in her hometown in Pennsylvania. And she was changing her major.

"To English," she said.

I was supposed to respond in some way, and I did better than I'd done when she came to talk about *Gatsby*. But not all that much. Not all that much at all.

"Oakhaven is another girl's school," Caroline said. "The usual token guys, but it has an 88-acre campus with trees . . ."

I imagined her on the phone to her mother or father, wanting to come home because everyone thought she was weird, and everyone hated her, and I really hoped things would be different for her, but I'd bet it wouldn't be, except that she'd have a couple of friends, so she wouldn't walk the green campus alone.

This morning I saw the red-headed woodpecker clearly enough to make a positive identification. For what it's worth. He flew into a bank of pines and landed on a tree. Then he skittered around to the back of the tree. They are really quite shy; you have to understand how to look for them.

HP

VIEW FROM THE RECTORY

by Gabriele A. Rollé

His Eminence was wondering one late evening, one VERY late evening last May, month of Mary and of merry. He pondered something that he didn't really understand completely, but felt that as a man of God he ought to have a clearer, perhaps better, knowledge of this matter before he condemned what he couldn't really grasp or fathom. (Or could he?)

There had been this morning at breakfast "all the news that's fit to print", and it was this morning that it said a

man had been picked up by police in one of the West Coast states as suspect at the end of a string of murdered prostitutes. A series of killings. Hookers. Young ones. Nineteen whores strangled. Teenagers. Street-walkers. Nineteen. How does that work? Intendment, inspiration or afterthought? Who could know?

He'd seen them at night a lot, in the dark outside and in, flickerings in the shadows of eternal light.

Summery organic odors outside the open leaded window of his study, he breathes in deeply, and also the car fumes malingering sweetly in the dusk-warm streets. "You called. I answer."

In My Mother's Room

by Joyce K. Luzzi

In my mother's living room the plants all hang
around like striped-shirt prisoners, been on a
one way ride to execution even before they left
their pods, and the curtains seem to be waiting,
sagged and reluctant, for a blast of heat to blow
live air into their nylon ninon lungs; the rug
looks like dead roses, in fact the color's called
dusty rose, popular forty years ago and now come
round again; my mother spends a lot of time there
making wretched gurgling sounds in her throat,
grunts, groans designed to coax a stupid bird
to sing but I don't think his species ever knew
how to sing in the first place nor in all the time
I've known him even tried to learn.

A Day in the Life of a Quantum Cat by Ilsa J. Bick

Stories begin and end with a lie. Whether this is bad or not is relative. For a writer, lies are tools of the trade. For example, endings: Stories never end. A story is a Möbius strip of infinite possibilities and tangential associations, roiling around and around in your brain. Whether or not there's an end all depends upon where you pick up the thread. Open to page three, and presto! Hamlet's alive and kicking. Thumb ahead, and poor Ophelia's off her nut, or flip back a bit, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very decidedly *not* dead, thereby giving Tom Stoppard a bit of a headache.

Writers lie. The end is never THE END, not only because your brain's been irrevocably altered by the simple act of reading, but because writers are just itching for you to pick up the damn thing and read it all over again, or recommend it to a friend who will then tell her friend, and then her friend will tell Oprah, and *well!* Those royalty checks are a testament to the unending nature of it all, aren't they? And we won't even talk about sequels now, will we?

And so it is with a very queer animal called a quantum cat, an animal defined by lies, an oxymoron through and through. Now, the cat doesn't have to be a cat. Why physicists insist upon picking on cats is obscure; for all the difference it makes, the cat could be a canary, a gorilla, or a woman. Consider the predicament of the quantum cat: trapped in a box containing a radioactive source, a detector, and a hammer poised over a glass bottle filled with poison. Cyanide gas, perhaps, though there are some physicists who insist that the dirty deed be accomplished with a gun. (Honestly, physicists are fascists.)

Back to our box. Radioactive things, like humans, decay, energetically spitting out little electrons and protons and what-have you and, in general, flying apart at the seams and making a riot of the place. Like people, radioactive things hurtle headlong toward supreme, maximal, glorious entropy; like people, they might muck up the rest of us along the way. Anyway, detectors detect, and so, as our radioactive source decays, there's a chance a particle will be emitted at the precise moment the detector has been switched on. There's just as strong a chance—fifty percent, actually—that the detector won't detect a thing at that moment because the source *hasn't* emitted a particle just then, these things being random events, as likely to occur as not. (You with me on this?) For our unfortunate feline—or woman—life, or death, boils down to a probability, the whim of a submicroscopic bit of energy. All of existence hinges upon observation. If the particle strikes the detector, the detector trips the hammer or the gun; the bottle goes bust, or the gun goes bang, and the cat is reduced to a lifeless lump of fur (splattered or no, depending upon the weapon of choice). Of course, the particle might not strike the detector,

in which case the cat—or woman—lives another nanosecond in which to contemplate the fact that there's nothing remotely interesting inside this box, not even a television.

But here's the real fly in the ointment. Schrödinger said we couldn't know a thing until we look in the box. Seeing defines truth. The cat might be alive or dead, but we can't know the reality of it all until we collapse probabilities in the instant of observation. So, as long as we don't look, our quantum cat—or woman—lives a lie: existing in a half-dead, half-alive state, as a mass of probabilities and of superpositions, as the prevailing reality in the box. A sample both decaying and not, a bottle of poison both broken and not, a gun fired and not. A cat, or a woman, simultaneously alive and dead. A quantum cat is a mass of after-images blurred around and overlapping their margins, never quite coalescing into something recognizable: a picture snapped with a defective Polaroid.

The headaches of such a world-view are enormous. No wonder poor Schrödinger declared he was sorry he'd ever had anything to do with it. He and Einstein had quite the tiff about the whole thing, the randomness of quantum mechanics putting Einstein off his food.

But we were talking about lies and endings, not-endings and quantum cats. Am I a quantum cat, you ask?

Oh, most definitely.

I fulfill all the conditions. First, the setting: north corner room, in a two-story, yellow and white trim clapboard on Edgemere Place, nine long blocks southwest, on the outskirts of Oberlin College, Ohio. Middle of February, requisite bleakness, piles of snow, frozen sparrows, the winter of the soul, that sort of literary tripe. My quantum box is my little room here, crammed with books and memorabilia and my computer and the sheaves of my writings, such as they are. My self-dissections, I call them, but more on self-dissection in a moment.

As for poison. . . well, that depends on your definition. Some call it bile—that green stuff that's supposed to come of a bad liver but is a metaphor for envy, greed, unfulfilled desires, bad karma, a crummy marriage. I'm married—to Francis Fairbridge, a transplanted Brit and film professor at the college, but ours is not a crummy marriage. It's just a marriage, and in any event, that's not the poison or the weapon, or rather he's not one or the either. At least, I don't think so.

(Ah, the tag line, the tease: I brought it up, you say, there must be something to it, yes?)

Poison can be bad memories, unconscious conflicts, bad breasts, penis envy—oh, analysts live for that stuff. Still others call poison and weapons for what they are: alcohol, pills, sometimes a knife, sometimes a gun. A belt, a rope, a tie. Now you're talking. The first two, the alcohol and pills, I've got: booze aplenty—very good wine, thank you, Gundlach Bundschu here, a Chateau Cheval Blanc there. And Valium, Serax, Ativan, Prozac, Lithium, pills that look like Skittles, a few masquerading as vitamins, a couple handfuls of Haldol, some other stuff left over here, souvenirs from years past. Other venues—guns, knives, garrotes—well, the clean-up's a bitch. So there's condition two for you.

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And am I heading toward maximal entropy? Am I falling apart, splitting at the seams, losing my marbles?

Well, that's what they say.

So, there's just the last condition to be met. Is there a detector, that Almighty Observer to determine, with a glance, if I am alive or dead?

Why, absolutely. I wouldn't be caught dead without one.

That's Francis. Film professors are professional watchers, so passivity's second nature, observation a snap. In fact, he's standing right outside the door—the lid to my box—just itching for a peek. I feel him. Marriage does that to you. Habits coalesce, thoughts merge, words—those things we sling at one another in a feeble attempt at making ourselves understood—go by the wayside. I've heard his creaking up the stairs, the groan of the loose board as he's turned left and slouched down the corridor to the bedroom, then the returning creak, the hesitation, the pause, the slow shuffle, like an old man with Parkinson's disease. And, most especially, I've heard that pause and his breathing. The wood of the lid to my box pushes in by imperceptible degrees beneath my fingertips: retreats, pushes in, retreats, in perfect synchrony with the tidal ebb and flow of his breath. And he's probably counting the bottles I've set out in the grey hours of morning: empties for the milkman. And I think that I like this imagining of my own half-dead, half-alive quantum man, reassuring myself that he's still there, probably. (Though why I depend upon such blocky solidity is a little bit of a mystery, what?)

Oh, that language, that contagion. That little "what" at the end—that's what Francis would say. Poor Francis. He's never quite managed it, you know, that transition from English vernacular to American slang. Oh, he'll get it right sometimes. Now and again, he'll call the stove a stove instead of a cooker; a nap isn't always a kip, and, in recent years, he's gotten down "elevator" for "lift," but just barely. Language gives definition to the world; words and labels are the things into which we bump or around which we jostle our way, and language, so intangible, is so potent. He's a brat, she's a ninny, he's my father, she's my lover. Language is ingrained into consciousness as indelibly as a tattoo. So language is Francis's stigma, an identifiable marker of person and place, and Francis can be counted on to come out with the implausible, like slapper, straight on, or bangers and mash (sausage and potatoes to you).

My favorite? Brilliant. *Brilllllllliant*. The word just rolls off the tongue, a trilling cascade of consonants falling out of the mouth, like water spilling over rocks. *Brilllllllllliant*. We think it means wondrous, a stroke of genius, marvelous, what a guy, what a gal! People who don't know how Brits speak positively glow. They assume Francis is acknowledging their intellectual prowess, their moral acumen. But he's not, you know; he's simply giving them the English equivalent of great, wonderful, good idea, what say, now heave off, old chap.

That language. Well, he wouldn't be Francis otherwise. Nor would I be I. It's amazing, how he's rubbed off, giving me shape and definition: guilt by a long association of thirteen years. I think in his accent sometimes. We have lengthy discussions, he and I, in my head most of the time, argu-

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ing this issue or that. Most of them are monologues—his. Lengthy diatribes about film, or polemics about campus politics. Francis waxing eloquently on the new department chairman, or the absolute abomination of colorizing old movies. They are of equal weight upon Francis's mental scales. No, that's not fair; he cares about colorization more.

Yet he's so hard to imagine as real, and I suppose you'd say that, all homage to Schrödinger, I'd have to crack open the door and take a peep to observe just what's there. For the sake of argument, let's say that just beyond that door is another world, a parallel universe, the obverse of my own, the opaque backing to my mirror. Man to my woman, inquisitive physicist to specimen quantum cat. And where there was only the void a bare minute before, now there's Francis. And yet he's just a phantom, something to which I've given shape in my mind, relying on memory and past experience. You see, I can imagine him as any Francis I choose—the Francis as I know him now, or the Francis of nine years ago, ten days ago, a month ahead, a century past. Francis is an amalgam, a kaleidoscopic panoply of frozen instants and inscribed sensations. When words fail, as they so often do, and my mind cannot recall, my body summons. So I remember our first kiss, not as a setting or time but as a thrill of expectation stirring in my gut, as a catch of breath at the back of my throat. Or I can summon up the first time we made love as a liquid ache in my thighs and the remembrance of how exquisitely my nipples hardened beneath the rough flesh of his palm, the musty smell of sex, the salty tang of sweat and semen.

At times, however, Francis might as well be one of my hallucinations. There have been moments, hours, days when I've doubted his existence, his solidity, this life. Like childhood — you can never recreate it, and once it's past, it's irretrievable. Of childhood all you can have are what you call memories but are really verbal infections and sensations.

The first time I crashed through the lid of my box was the time I shattered the sliding glass door of a neighbor's house and slashed open my elbow: the unconscious forerunner of my later preoccupation with self-dissection. What I remember is the riveting sensation of a complete and utter astonishment. Perhaps this is what I have been trying, in vain, to recapture, or perhaps its adult transmogrification is eroticism, that wonderful pleasure so pointed as to be both utter self-absorption and total dissociation, codified in the moment of orgasm, like Bernini's St. Theresa stabbed through the heart. I remember the obdurate solidity of the glass giving way before my imperious, headlong progress. I remember the sound of splintering glass. I remember the absolute stoppage of time; I remember standing in place, shocked by this sudden turn of events, this traumatic rupture in my hitherto young and unmarred life. Of pain I remember not a thing. My body mercifully swathed my mind in a sort of mental bandage, shielding me from what my mother tells me she saw: the torrent of blood spattering the concrete at my feet, the bits of flesh dangling from the open wound, like pieces of meat inexpertly hacked away from a carcass, and, peeping through, the pinkish-white gleam of the exposed bone. She says that I was very brave, that I cried not at all, but

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I remember none of this. She says that I sat, perfectly calm, in the back seat of the neighbor's car while she held towels to my gushing arm; that I walked without tears from car to emergency room. That I watched with old eyes and almost preternatural calm the progress of the doctor's meticulous fingers probing the wound. That I was unflinching in scrutinizing the application of needle to flesh and thread through muscle and skin, through fat and bursa.

Of the repair, I remember the smell of iodine, and there is the briefest of images in my mind—a snapshot—of a bespectacled physician with sandy hair and gloved fingers so white they looked like grubs. But what I do remember finally is that after the doctor had finished stitching me up—my right elbow, that is—a nurse blindsided me on my left and jabbed me with a tetanus shot just as I was sitting up. I remember that I was giggling little giggly bubbles. And I remember that shot. The shot wasn't just the point of a needle; it was like being stabbed through with a rapier, as shocking as the moment I erupted in a shower of glass from kitchen to the hot yellow air of a summer's afternoon. Only this time it hurt.

I shrieked. I thrashed. I think I scratched someone. It took the doctor, my mother, and three nurses to hold me down. They mummified me finally, in this cocoon of burlap. I remember being shoved onto a board of some type, and then I remember the feel of leather straps being cinched down around my middle, my arms, my legs. I tried biting a nurse, and then they strapped down my head with a gauze bandage and tape, trussing me into total immobilization. I remember the smell of my own fear, and the smells of the accumulated sweat and fear from dozens of children before me. The straps reeked; the material was stained with blood and sweat and my own pee. A papoose they called it, perversely. The horrors of the world pressed upon my consciousness, and suddenly the doctor and nurses, my mother, were disciples of Mephistopheles: demons with pink eyes, yellow teeth, and bad breath.

My analyst was of the opinion that I dissociated. Stepped out of myself, to one side, at a moment of high anxiety, at a time when I perceived, in my six-year-old mind, that I was on the brink of death. Such a phenomenon was, he assured me, quite normal. Trauma is ubiquitous, he said. You can't avoid it. It grabs you unawares, and everyone has been traumatized at some point in his or her life. Trauma causes the mind to snap shut, clamp down, swing a steel barrier into place. That's why there are gaps, flaws, bubbles in the globes of our brains, like balls of imperfect glass. But there's still memory of a sort. You can't forget something you haven't already known. So our dangers come back as premonitions, ghosts, boogey-men floating in the black of the bedroom. Trauma returns as flashbacks of uncanny clarity, and, in extreme cases, as multiple, alternate selves, each with a life and accumulated memory of his or her own. Trauma is the bedfellow of pain, and pain is the stylus in the book of our memories. As long as there's pain, things never really end.

And pain: I'm not sure when dissection, as an occupation or as an art, first occurred to me. The revelation wasn't one of those indelible experiences, like the time I had my first migraine, or lost my virginity (not at

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the same time, thank God). But this journal—this one last attempt at self-observation as I sort out whether or not this cat's had her day—is yet another example of self-dissection. I write not in the hope of exorcising demons but to catalogue the things inside me, all the hidden goodies stuffed in this package, and because while I write, I'm still alive. No one's penned my end, and history fascinates me. I'm not after truth *per se*, though reality would be a start. But just as I am composed of hidden orifices and miles of invisible tubing, so the histories inside my head, those voices imagined and experienced, form a narrative of a certain type of world. This world envelops the various manifestations of myself in all my different guises and shapes, from fledgling sprog in my mother's womb, to gangly adolescent with raging hormonal imbalances and budding breasts, to the woman Francis—that man breathing outside the door, that hulking academic in a Panama suit who just happens to be my husband—thinks he knows and with whom I retain a dim association. So this narrative is for me and for him and for those multitude of others, the observers of my progress through life, the principal players in my internal drama.

Taking the plunge into a literal self-dissection must have come to me during one of those times when I'd stopped taking my medications. I've gone off and on over the years, a physician's compliance nightmare. At present, I'm off, have been for a long time. Going on thirteen years, ever since I met Francis, a new epoch into which I was stamped, sealed, delivered, I'm yours, I'm his, I'm not sure I'm really my own. I've spent years teasing apart fantasy from memory and memory from reality. (Some of it I've put into books, those other packages, those neatly typed tomes gathering dust in the closet: second shelf from the top, far right, beneath the burgundy cardigan, if you're interested.) I've grown used to close analysis of the stuff spewing out of my mouth, those words which taken together form life narratives, under the misapprehension that such fabrications count as true representations for the goods inside the package. At least that is what analysts, counselors, do-gooders, priests, nuns, and scream therapists want you to think. No, I've not gone to them all. Though I know longing, I've no taste for religion, and as for screaming, that's not my style. But I have produced all that rote Freudian verbiage. Guided tactfully by my analyst, I've discovered that I lusted after my father, hated my mother, lusted after my mother, hated my brother, bitten the bad breast, suckled at the good, wanted a penis, and taken it up the ass. In a way, analysis is a religion. You have to understand and learn to repeat over, like catechisms or Hail Marys, the watchwords.

Want to see if your analyst is awake? Say *penis*. Better yet, say something like *I remember my father giving me enemas*. No, no, even better—I want YOU to give me an enema. Nothing gives an analyst more titillation, more self-congratulatory warm squishies than when you verify that he is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, important and right. What counts in analysis is that you produce a story the analyst regards as your truth. Such a story invariably gives him a starring role. Acknowledge that, play it out, and then you're cured.

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It is, of course, all a bunch of shit.

So, packages. Well, we're all packages: a framework of bones, over which a tent of skin has been stretched, the relevant orifices produced, the tubes and twists we call guts starting at the pucker of the mouth and folding, end upon end, until they terminate in that other little pucker immortalized in *Breakfast of Champions*. Other organs, other systems, more or less in harmony, each with complementary halves, like dipoles maintaining a curiously balanced tension.

Nothing new or novel in that, you say. For Christ's sake, if she hasn't got anything else more illuminating than that, what say we switch the channel?

But wait. The point is that what you see is not what you get. Keep in mind that we're talking probabilities here. What you see is a nicely done-up package, all sugar and spice, or snails and puppy dogs' tails (how phallic, wouldn't you agree?). But it's the inside that counts, how it's all connected. Ideas. Superpositions. Complexity at the margins of chaos. So, am I merely an idea, the summation of how and when and if I'm observed?

Well, we could debate that. The phenomenologists, the philosophers, the postmoderns would have a field day. I mean, some of them write whole books on the subject. Merleau-Ponty, Baudrillard, Jameson . . . the list goes on. Words, words, words, all amounting to their own little universal truths, which dutiful graduate students must master if they're to get on in the profession, the world of academe being much like the world of the psychoanalyst or, for that matter, the priesthood.

But we all hunger after substance, not words; it's the feel of the book we remember, the touch of a lover's tongue, not words. Of words we retain only a general impression, which fades as time passes, until all that's left is a recollection of rumpled sheets, or the color of the book jacket, and one's own marginalia, scribbled in No. 2 graphite. What matters is what can be taken between one's fingers or experienced through the senses and registered as real.

Here's an example for you. Water is made of hydrogen and oxygen, but can you tell me why it's wet? What *is* wet? All this talk about constructed selves and atomized selves and eruptive selves and deconstructed selves . . . believe me, I've heard it all. What you learn about academics is that what passes for knowledge depends upon how abstruse it all sounds. The automatic assumption—if it's obscure, it must be important. If your brain aches, so much the better. No pain, no gain. Academe is nothing but turgid passwords, banded about from one academic to the next, each operating under the self-satisfying delusion that university-speak elevates them above the common rabble they're analyzing. From first-hand experience, I can tell you that there's nothing so smug as a coven of academics sitting out reality while the rest of us duke it out in the muck of life.

Anyway, back to that bright idea of dissecting myself, properly, anatomy text at my left elbow, scalpel grasped like a conductor's baton between the fingers of my right hand.

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I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *oh-ho, one of those. A suicide.*

Wrong-o. A suicide has no finesse. A suicide's all cut and slash, blood spurting, slow death by degrees in a warm bath, like Marat/Sade, or Seneca in that Monteverdi opera. Now I know that Seneca committed suicide, forced into it by Nero, but I'm not at all sure that he did it so pristinely in a bath. But if I recall my Roman history rightly, suicides tended to fall on their swords, or got their slaves to ram daggers into their throats. That's the way Nero bought it, that coward. Tacitus will tell you. Tacitus was a vindictive sort, sure to point out when a certain so-and-so had wounds in his back: Roman code for the guy was yellow. Back then, suicide was about honor.

Modern-day suicide has a certain crudity. Suicide is designed to be that one indelible image seared into the retinae of the ones who find you: the husband, the wife, the mother, the son. A nice *Take that, and won't you be sorry when I'm dead, ha-ha?* A suicide is all black, black rage.

A dissection is something very different. The specimen is treated with respect, and so there was nothing of self-loathing in my decision: more a sort of curiosity, a wish to see just how I'd been made. I'd exhausted other avenues, having at the end of my seemingly interminable analysis no more idea of how I'd come into being as the person I was and am than a mushroom. So I got a basin, the scalpel, the blunt tweezers (the better to blunt dissect and not harm the muscles), the gauze, the gloves, the steri-strips and ace wrap (the better to put myself together for the trip to the emergency room), and the anatomy text. Carmine D. Clemente, *Anatomy: A Regional Atlas of the Human Body*—leather-bound, forest green with gold letters.

I locked myself in the bathroom. Silly, I'll admit: I was pre-Francis, so there wasn't the remotest chance anyone would burst in and stop me. But there was something almost sacred about it all, like a sacrifice, and it seemed tawdry to do it in the kitchen, over a sink filled with yesterday's scummy pots. So I had made myself comfortable, with a sturdy chair, a pillow behind my back, a wad of towels to catch the drippings.

I remember staring at my left wrist a long time, noting the thin tracery of blue veins that emerged more starkly the longer I gazed. I had already studied the anatomy in some detail, and so knew that the radial artery, the one on the left, was the more difficult of the two to get at. I also knew that the ulnar artery was much closer to the surface, with the ulnar nerve nestled right alongside, directly beneath a thick fibrous membrane called the flexor retinaculum. The membrane was supposed to be tough, but even so I was careful. As I said, I didn't want to die. I just wanted to flay myself open and lift the lid, take a peek, poke around, observe that moment of reality, probe my corporeality.

Two things surprised me. The first was that cutting through skin takes work. It doesn't just happen no matter how sharp the scalpel. I had decided to lay open the tendons first, and so had my sights on the synovial sheath of the flexor carpi radialis, the big bulge the left of center. So I laid the scalpel over the skin and tried making a longitudinal incision,

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starting at the bend of the wrist and working straight down.

Note for would-be suicides: Be firm about it. None of this scratching shit; you'll be there all day. And listen, if you want to do it right, make your cuts lengthwise, not across. Go one better: the radial artery is most superficial on the back of your hand, in that little hollow you can make by crooking out your thumb at a right angle to your fingers. The anatomical snuffbox, they call it—a handy little place where, in years gone by, men held their snuff and pinched.

Secondly, all that blood you see, regardless of where you cut, that's all from superficial arteries and veins, unless you nail the ulnar artery doing it straight across, the old fashioned way. So you'll bleed like stink, but you're not going to die that way.

Another tip: the way they do it in the movies, having the would-be throw her hand back? Horse crap. That protects the arteries. They disappear behind tendons and bulging muscles. To avoid this problem, pull your palm toward you, as if you were imitating a rapist going for your breast.

Fourth tip, and absolutely the last, I swear: Cutting straight across is for wimps. Easy to join up again, like a plumber puts in joints to shore up a fractured pipe. Cut lengthwise, and you're likely to slash the sucker to ribbons. If you want to do it right, I mean.

I got through on the fifth try. Red blood welled up. I dabbed with gauze. I used the tweezers to tease the skin open.

As we used to say then, far out. I felt absolutely no pain. I was prepared for pain, expected pain, and yet there was virtually none. It was as if I had risen above to view myself from an observation lounge, the type they have in surgical suites. I saw a right hand with a scalpel, slicing; I saw white synovial sheaths, I saw red meat and yellow fat give way beneath the blade and shiny tendons revealed by the tweezers. I saw blood. And it was happening to me, and it wasn't me at the same time. That old dissociation again. Some trick, huh? Get battered around enough, and you'll get it, no time flat.

The artery surprised me. I found the radial artery right where it was supposed to be: beneath the tendons of the abductor pollicis longus and the extensors pollicis longus and brevis. I remember staring at it, stupefied. The artery was a dull white burnished with pale pink nerves webbing over the course of it. And it really did pulse, a fraction of a second behind my heartbeats, which had grown extraordinarily loud in my ears. The artery pulsed like a faint afterthought. So the hidden throb of my heart which, as I shifted my gaze from wrist to left breast (for I was quite naked), caused my breast to lift and fall, was mirrored, a split second later, in the beat of that tiny tube. Perversely, my nipples hardened beneath my ravenous gaze, as if caressed, bitten, scoured by hungry lips. My thighs ached, my hidden lips moistened, became engorged, throbbed for fulfillment. I trembled.

It was one of the most potent, erotic moments I have ever known. Sensation generated by thought, sensation made manifest in that bit of plumbing. The body as architectural triumph, as ego-eroticism, as hallucination, as subject to an iron will.

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Now and again Francis will touch the scars. He never asks, but I can feel the questions through his fingertips. That is, I have the impression of feeling; I inadvertently trashed a few nerves. Nothing major, but over the size of a half dollar from wrist to mid-thumb there isn't sensation so much as the ghost of remembrance. That is, I know how skin ought to feel when touched and so when I see his touch, I manufacture the illusion of sensation. (That old sight as truth thing again: I've been playing the quantum cat for decades.)

Now the analyst who constructed his version of my reality was a very wise man. At least, I think he was wise. Analysts cultivate an air of world-weariness, of portentous ponderousness. That particular analyst smelled like Altoids, and the backs of his hands had liver blotches. The skin was thin, like expensive parchment. And he was old, *really* old: pushing ninety, I think. He died two months after completing my analysis, perhaps from the exhaustion or out of sheer relief. *Thank God, she's gone; you can beam me up now.*

So maybe he was right, and I dissociated. But if it's true that, at the brink, we can step away from ourselves, dis-inhabit our flesh and our minds, and obliterate terror, does that mean we can be and not be at the same moment? And does that mean that, dead or alive, we're all just a bunch of mewling quantum cats? While we're waiting for someone to see us, does time always stand still? Are there always those moments we pivot about in an eternal orbit, like trapped moons, waiting for the hammer to fall, the pistol to go off, the booze to finally drain away, the pills I've been swallowing as I write this, one by one, to dissolve?

Like Francis? Like stolid, dependable, stoic Francis? Francis who is still out there, on the other side, waiting, anchored in an endless ellipse between his soul and mine?

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *oh, an anguished, unfulfilled artist, she's playing at Vincent Van Gogh.*

Get real. (Oh, God, look who's talking.)

I understand that my behavior, my *depressions* might appear that way, as if I've turned totally inward, self-absorbed, oblivious to everything. What total shit. I've never felt things more keenly than now, and this pain that convinces me I'm still alive and makes me want to die at the selfsame moment is an anchor. Better yet, pain is a belay to a sheet of icy mountain, something so tangible that I'll bet you I can clamber up this solid rope of agony faster than angels ascended Jacob's ladder.

And, God, what an awful word. *Depression*. I'm in a *depression*, they'd say. What do they know? It's like saying life is all hills and valleys, and I've taken a wrong turn and gotten lost in some canyon somewhere—a deep, dark gash in the earth, with high walls of sheer granite. And there's that rope of pain, daring me to grab it because, you see, it's a rope of memories, and each strand, every inch means continual confrontation. So when I do “climb out,” as the pharmaceutical companies say—the doctors say, your friends say, they all say—my hands will be scarred and rubbed raw from hauling myself up on all that pain, all those memories.

And you'll notice that the goal isn't to climb the highest mountain. No,

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no euphoria, no feelings of grand achievement, no wind in my hair, song on my lips, no images of Julie Andrews cavorting around the Alps. (That was pretty pathological, you know. By rights, they ought to have nabbed her, put her back in the convent, yanked out her ovaries, forced her to her knees, and gotten her to say a few dozen Hail Marys. Or better yet, scrub the kitchen floor, eat dry bread, and wait for all that wild abandon to go away.)

No, what you've got to settle for, what passes for mental health is that thin little strip of even terrain in between mountains and valleys. Not too bumpy, not too curving. Just right. Euthymia, they call it. *Eu*, from the Greek for good or well, but also implicated in *Eucharist*, that sacrificial meal of Holy Communion. There's religion again. More blood, more flesh, you see, except *eucharistia* means gratitude, thankfulness. Thank you for your blood, O Lord, thank you for letting us chow down on your flesh, like famished cannibals.

I wish I could pray.

Eu-thymia. *Thymos*, meaning mind, spirit, soul. Hence, *euthymia*: good soul, grateful mind. Only gratitude has nothing to do with it, and it's not a question of goodness. What you're aiming for is evenness, the open plains, the unbroken prairie of life.

That's so dumb. Since when did any road, anywhere, not have potholes?

But I was talking about memory, wasn't I?

Maybe. I'm getting a little fuzzy. I'll bet if I looked in the mirror, I'd be unfocused, blurry around the edges, a penumbra. Maybe, in the measuring of myself, I wouldn't even be there. Oh, God, remind me to tell you about Heisenberg before we're all through.

Memory . . . well, all right, might as well, now that I'm here. The most vividly pleasurable memory I have is of Frances: the evening he asked me to marry him, to be precise. I knew something was up. We were living together at the time, and I had this habit of checking his bank balance, and there, scrawled in a cramped handwriting approaching hieroglyphics, was something which had cost him a cool thousand. A ring, I thought, though I didn't dare hope. A ring. I'd be legit. My parents had been haranguing me for what felt like a decade about our sinful relationship, though we'd been living together a bare two years. Like the color comics, I could count on my mother's phoning every Sunday, and upon her avid receptivity should I choose to say anything the slightest bit critical of Francis. *Him*, my mother called Francis. Never *your boyfriend* or even *Francis*. And you'd never catch her even thinking the word *lover*. My God, for three years, she thought I slept on the couch.

Oh, he agreed to put you up on his couch for the weekend. How sweet. Oh, you bought groceries with him and had supper. How nice. Oh, you and he are moving to where? Well, isn't that nice of him, isn't that sweet, isn't that charming? And tell me, dear, where will you sleep?

I always wanted to scream, where do you think, you old bat? But I heard myself mouthing her words right back. Yes, mother. How charming, how sweet, how nice. How *him*. (My best lessons on how to be a quantum cat

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came from my mother. If you refuse to see, whatever you're not seeing doesn't exist.)

We set off for Montreal, Francis and I. Before we'd gone, I had searched the apartment inside and out, looking for anything remotely diamond-like which might have set Francis back a thousand dollars, but no luck. We stopped in Vermont and Maine, climbed mountains. I do remember that the view from Stratton was spectacular, and I remember, too, that I expected this to be the very best spot for any man worth anything to propose to a woman worth everything. The setting was ideal, cinematic in the extreme, certainly up Francis's alley. So I waited. I took my time cutting up cheese and handing him crackers. I looked away coyly, allowed him time to dig furtively into his knapsack. An actor couldn't have had more cues.

Nothing happened. We ate our cheese, our crackers, our apples, our M&Ms, and drank a bottle of white wine. I think it was a chardonnay. Australian, as I recall. My hopes sank as did the wine in the bottle. The wine made me fuzzy; the chocolate made my tongue stick to the top of my mouth; and it seemed a long way down to the car.

Of all things, Francis popped the question at a bar, in Montreal. We'd had dinner, and Francis had ordered champagne. Aaahh, I thought, champagne. The drink of special occasions. The fizzy of champions. And Francis had insisted that we go to a fine French restaurant, only we were on a tight budget then and had to settle for the cheapest of everything. Even so the waiter hovered, like an anxious bee. The poor man darted here and there, pouring cheap champagne so astringent it tasted like nail polish remover, while keeping up a running commentary, in a heavy French accent, on *ze ladee's buuuteee*, on *how luckee eh mehn* Francis was, and on and on. The restaurant was hot, and the champagne gave me a headache. Cheap champagne will do that, you know; they infuse it with carbon dioxide to get the fizz.

Anyway, muzzy-mouthed, with a timpani playing against my temples, I staggered out of the restaurant and down the boulevard alongside Francis to, of all places, a bar. But they don't call them bars in Montreal; they call them taverns. I didn't want to go to a bar, much less a tavern. I wanted Tylenol, I wanted a shower, but Francis was insistent.

So we're in the tavern now, and it's hot as hell because there's this fireplace going full out, and Francis asks for the table at the hearth. I've ordered ice water, something that extracts a nasty look from the waiter who senses a bad tip coming. I've excused myself to go the ladies' room and wash my face and paw through my bag for aspirin, finding one intact and the other in crumbs, which I blot up with moistened fingertip and suck off, all the while trying to figure out what I'll say to my mother to whom I've stupidly, stupidly hinted what might happen. I come back, and there's Francis, perspiring: a picture of misery in a navy blue coat and white shirt, a paisley tie garroted about his neck.

He shoves a black felt box toward me. Open it, he says.

My heart leaps into my throat. The thousand clams. This could be it. I act all agog with surprise and reach for the box.

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You remember, Francis says as I'm fumbling, those garnet earrings you liked so much.

Earrings. I falter. He's bought me earrings. I can hear my mother already. *How nice, dear. How sweet. And how many years has it been with him?*

Weakly, bravely, forcing my lips into a smile while thinking about what I'll say to my mother next Sunday, I open the box, and there, nestled in the middle of black felt, is a single, glorious solitaire.

Will you marry me? Francis asks in the same instant.

All of a sudden, Francis's cinema is reality. A strange sense of vertigo overwhelms me, and we are transformed: Francis's Scotty to my Madeleine. The fire blazes with renewed vigor in the tavern's brick fireplace. The frame: a close-up of teacup, blanket, the accidental brush of fingers. Hitchcock couldn't have choreographed it better.

But that's not what I remember most. This is: After we made love in our hotel room and were lying naked next to one another atop the sheets, while Francis slept, I gazed at my ring, for hours. To me, it seemed the largest diamond I'd ever seen. In reality, it was microscopic, more like a diamond shard than a real gem. But for me, it was incandescent, glowing like a miniature comet blazing across a dark sky. Maybe something primordial, maybe something . . . radioactive.

Ah, I can see you nodding with satisfaction, there it is, the source of her decay.

Right on, bro. Go to the head of the class.

With marriage, I lost self-observation. Maybe I never really had it. But just as we ask what is the measure of a man, we acknowledge that we do, indeed, measure against some standard. And here's where Heisenberg comes in. Heisenberg said we could never be certain of our measurements: that the more accurately we know one aspect of some thing, the less accurately we know about another aspect. Example: I stopped being me as soon as I took Francis's name. Trite, a bit simplistic, but I sense that I'm running out of time here. I became known, very accurately, as Mrs. Fairbridge, and what I was before retreated, as a sea anemone senses danger and withdraws its tentacles. I became measured alongside that standard. Yes, yes, what you see is what you get, to a point. But the hell of a quantum cat's world is that the act of measuring a system—of observing a world, a cat, a woman—forces the system, the world, the cat, the woman into one reality versus another. The observer makes a choice of what and just how to measure, irrevocably altering the ability to measure anything else, and then what the observer chooses becomes what's real. My analyst saw me this way, my mother that, Francis still another, my lover a fourth way, the grocery clerk a fifth, and where, oh where, am I?

But quantum cats retain a modicum of free will. There are times when I've left this box, when I've crept out of here and made my way to the bed, is it mine? Ours? The bed is large, square, the goose down quilt silvered with moonlight. On our bed, at night, when it's still and white, I see, instead of a quilt, a tombstone marking that temporary abdication of consciousness, with Frances posed precisely down the middle, like those

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graying effigies in old English churches carved atop granite sarcophagi.

Sleep isn't oblivion, you know. It isn't peace; it's a box, and sleep is the closest we come to being and not being simultaneously. Sleep is a side-long habitation: a universe into which we slip our minds and our emotions, in and out, like legs into sheer silk stockings. And when we dream, our limbs twitch and jerk, as if we were just aching to jump out. Francis jerks quite a bit. I've never been able to sleep comfortably next to him all curled up in that spoon-like way in all those movies he adores. For one, his hair tickles, and he's much too hot. He's like an octopus, all arms and legs flung over mine, pinioning me in place, and his breath roars in my ears. The room reeks of his masculine odors, and I don't need to see him at all to find him. In the night, I'm like an ant or a butterfly, sensitive antennae all aquiver, or like a lizard, tasting the air with my tongue, seeking direction by senses other than sight. When he sleeps, his breathing is very slow and deep; his chest is a bellows fanning the tiny spark of his life. The quilt rises and falls. I stand over him, pitying his fragility. One day as I'm taking his measure, perhaps I will force the reality, and the bellows will simply cease, the flame will flicker and die, the quilt will fall never to rise again, and his last breath will be that sigh, that release of spirit everyone writes about. If you think I gloat over this power, you're mistaken. No, I've concluded that my nocturnal ramblings are a form of reassurance. I prove to myself the content of the form; I fill in the black outline; I perceive that something inhabits what I suspect is on the other side of the door. The quantum cat turns the tables.

And he's there now. I press my cheek against the dark wood of my box. The wood is surprisingly cool, not at all warm or yielding. You expect that, you know. You read about it in books, though not mine, because I'm judged too eccentric, too odd to warrant a hearing, my say, that proverbial go.

Something's happening to me. Ah, he's moving, he's going to observe. How to describe this . . . it's amazing in its physicality. But I can feel him reaching now, his hand on the knob, the moment of indecision, that flicker of hesitation, and I am screaming, silently, please, please, wait, what will happen if you look, what will happen . . .

♦ ♦ ♦
He turns the knob and pushes in the door. The hinges squeal, and he makes a mental note: *WD-40*.

A gust of cold wind rushes against his face. He's turned the registers off in here long ago, ever since Joan had the temerity . . .

Well, no use thinking of that now. He sniffs and pulls a face. The room smells musty and disused, and there's a stale feel to the place, like that scene of Miss Haversham from *Great Expectations*. Brilliant film, one of Lean's best. His eyes wander the room, searching for clues as to what's disturbed him, what's niggled at the back of his brain, like an itch he can't quite scratch. A stack of books teeters precariously on the corner of the writing table, shrouded by a thick layer of dust. Her computer still hums away, and there's her journal, open to that last entry, the pen alongside.

He's kept it that way; he's kept everything the same. And he can never

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quite get himself to close the book. It seems somehow wrong, like an artificial ending to something unfinished, or as if by closing the cover, he shuts a lid somewhere, and then the reality of all that past is lost.

"Coming?"

Francis starts. It's his wife, at his elbow. He'd quite forgotten. They were on their way to a party. New department chairman, usual rot. Bloody bore.

He smiles, a little quizzically. "Of course, darling. It's just that . . ."

"Yes? What? Something's troubling you. Ah, my poor dear, is it Joan again? I do wish . . ."

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Of course."

"You had no control, you know. Her leaving . . ."

"Yes."

"So selfish, so precipitous."

"Perhaps."

"To inflict . . ."

"Not her fault."

"Ah, my sweet Francis, you are so forgiving, you know, had it occurred to you that there were *choices* . . ."

"Of course."

"No, you're thinking that perhaps *you* might have . . ."

"I can never lie to you, can I?"

"No, you can't." She stands on tiptoe and brushes her lips against his right cheek. "I know everything you're thinking, everything. We see things exactly alike. The world is how we make it."

He smiles. So intuitive, so very much with him, knowing his thoughts, sensing his moods, so *one* with him. And so different from Joan: Joan he could never know, never grab hold. Joan was so mercurial, all sharp angles and odd corners, a chameleon shifting before his eyes. He never knew her, and now, well, all he has are her words, those volumes and volumes of thoughts he can't understand anyway.

"Yes, you're right. And no, I'm fine, it's nothing," he says, as he pulls the heavy wooden door shut. "It's just I could have sworn that, for a split second, there was something here."

♦ ♦ ♦
He's closed the door. He's seen nothing.

The End

Liar.

HP

David Hockney Explains Silence by the Swimming Pool
by Virgil Suárez

With a Polaroid camera you can shoot pictures as you walk by the garden, by the pool cabana where there is a bloomed orchid, the cusp of light strangled in its meaty petals. Snap after snap, in disorderly sequence, how water peels off the pool's surface, chlorine vapors rising up with the afternoon breeze. Fractured mirrors underwater, convex, complex, perplexed, like so much quiet, all around, truth in the gaps: one moment you are standing there by the hibiscus the next you have taken its bud in your mouth; next the plant explodes its color inside you, smeared in x-ray like radiance. A red-throated sparrow perches on your fingers, whispers the secret of wind, how if you dream of fluttering underwater, you will forever abandon all hope, all longing for color, hues of opal, mother of pearl, lapis lazuli, patina, a heavenly mixing going on beyond you, out of sight, in the silence of so much waking, so much thinking, something gives away, something is taken, then a flash of genius, how one straight line infects another, crisscrosses the expanse of blue horizon, right there, where a man catches his own reflection on a broken window of a pool house, a dead sparrow like a bloodshot scream. His mouth fills with the sounds of so much living.

La Cruz de los Caidos, or Self Portrait with Cross
by Virgil Suárez

What traces
does wood
leave on water?
This abundance

The dying
close their eyes
to the light.
Right here

of bouyancy
in the stillness
of night,
a sorrow moon,
too, a spirit
Lorca knew
its name,
like words
mouthed
but not spoken,
a hiss
of tumultuous
thoughts

a burning cloud,
a river ablaze
with corpses
"Verde como
la espina."
Green thorns,
a necklace,
a fist tighter
than the heart,
feel it pulse
now,
right there.
Pulsing.

WINNER OF THE INAUGURAL JOHN GARDNER
MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

Theft of a Good Man

by David Varela

I can't remember what's happened since my last visit. No doubt I drank a fair deal, had a few thoughts of which I should be ashamed, lost my temper once or twice. I stole a pair of boots in Treviso. Near Valdagno, I ran away from an inn before I'd settled my account. I've angered women. But these are things without substance, a matter of a few pater-nosters. This year I took a good man from the world. This year I have sinned.

I was called to the monastery of St Jerome, above Garda, to cut the hair of the Abbot. He's a bad-tempered old goat, in case you ever meet him. He's also very particular about his tonsure and has it trimmed each Tuesday after matins. I sharpened my blades and made my way up there, knowing that I'd be in for a hard morning regardless of whether my work were faultless or not. Sometimes I'm tempted to chop out a wad of hair at the back, to see if anyone will tell him. I doubt his brothers would dare. When you're locked up with a cockerel like that, it's not wise to criticise his plumage.

It's a shame the Abbot is so objectionable because I enjoyed my visits to his tower. He sat himself in a straight-backed chair by the window, overlooking the fields, and watched the monks plough their soil and plant their crops, weed the hedgerows and pull firm, ripe vegetables out of the ground. They rolled up their sleeves and hitched up the skirts of their robes, sweating in the sun like ordinary labourers. I wonder if they knew what they were in for when they first signed up. Prayer and abstinence are what they'd expect inside the monastery walls. Perhaps they were shocked when they joined as boys and were handed trowels instead of Psalters and told to muck out the pigs. Or maybe it's a blessed relief after all the time they spend in those cold grey cells. After a few years of confinement, maybe they think of starting a farm of their own, and religion becomes a nuisance as they kneel in vespers, worrying about the beet-roots.

I can hardly imagine the Abbot up to his knees in swill. A right man of letters. Every time I went up to his tower I'd find him poring over some text or other. I have an interest in that kind of thing, so when he stood and brought his chair to the window, I took a look at what he was reading, saw if I could make it out. Wonderful pictures. Sometimes it was a devout text and I could pick out a few phrases, other times there would be drawings of places around the world and battles from history, kings and queens, animals in gardens, men on horses chasing through the forest. The last time I visited him it was a stag being torn apart by hounds.

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I always felt he was annoyed at my arrival, before I'd even cleared my throat. The Abbot didn't like to talk when I was cutting his hair. I leant in front of him once, blocking his view of the window. He raised his right hand and waved it across, as if he were giving half a benediction. Half a blessing is a curse, my mother used to say, and I jumped back behind him before he could threaten again. It made me twitch and nick his scalp with the blade.

'You idiot,' he growled, 'next time I'll call for the butcher. Clean it up and go. Out.'

I was already wiping the blood off with a cloth. Clerics can be very peculiar about blood, but I suppose if it weren't for that I wouldn't have a living. They get so irritable. How can a cut on the head affect the way they perform communion? You'd know the philosophy better than I do, Father. Tell me the Church's version later. I learned the lesson in my own way.

I was wrapping my instruments in their roll when a monk appeared in the doorway. He was out of breath and he stood there without a word while he panted, wiping his hands on the sides of his cassock. He must have run up the stairs from the field. He had trouble composing himself in front of the Abbot, but he lowered his head and spoke in swallowed words.

'Father Abbot. Accident. Shepherd . . . western hills. His son is here . . . help. Old man . . . kicked in the heart. With your permission . . . immediately.'

The Abbot caught the threads of his words and stitched them together. 'I see. The wound is grave?'

'The boy is unsure. I could examine the old man, perhaps administer a poultice—or absolution, if the situation warrants.'

Both monk and Abbot crossed themselves and whispered into their hands. It might have been a good moment to make myself scarce, but the monk was standing in the way of the door.

'Barber. Go with him.' The Abbot was glaring at me. 'He may need a surgeon. Take your knives and make yourself useful.'

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was a way out of the room, and that's what mattered. I pulled my bundle to my chest and followed the blustering monk down the stairs. I only realised afterwards that the Abbot hadn't mentioned money. This wasn't the moment to bring it up.

I'm not a good businessman. I confess that I'm not a good tradesman in many ways, and forfeiting payment is the least of my weaknesses. In my youth, I was a weak student—easily distracted, my masters said—and by the time I reached the age of twelve my choices were already limited. The Church didn't want me. I'm no singer. Farming was hard work, and my family had no holding to speak of. A military life was denied me when I fell out of a tree and broke my ankle, so I was pressed to settle for a trade. My mother had always been friendly with Beppe, the local barber-surgeon, and he agreed to take me on in exchange for a stick carved with the pattern of a serpent. I wish to God she'd given him a quilt instead. By the

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time Beppe died, that stick had the shape of my head stamped into it too.

I wish he'd lived longer, though. Beppe had been both barber and surgeon to our village for thirty years, and he traveled for miles to help surgeons and physicians cure their patients. He had books. There was so much knowledge in his head that it took him three years to teach me what he knew about hair. I would watch him cut and twist and tie the locks of the rich women, and even if I didn't grasp how he did it, I knew that he had turned his trade into a craft. It seemed to be a good living: his artful hands could run up and down these ladies' necks, touch behind their ears, bend their heads down and up again while their husbands left them alone in the house. Beppe would sometimes tell me to go back and fetch something from the village, 'to save his old legs,' he'd say. Not that old. When I returned, he'd be on the road home.

'Never mind,' he'd say, 'I managed without it.' Sly as mist.

The monk's name was Fra Paolo Rini and he was a lean, sober man who had taken on the colour of his turnips. I'd seen him before from the window, and I remember the way he had once slapped a brother on the back and laughed. The noise had reached the tower and the Abbot had arched an eyebrow. I don't know what monks can joke about. Nothing, by the look on the Abbot's face.

'What's your name?' Fra Paolo asked me at the bottom of the stairs. 'I can't call you Barber all the way to the hills and back.'

'Marcello Veronesi,' I replied. I saw no reason to lie. He looked like an honest sort and, if the Abbot was the man I knew, I could consider my work for the monastery to be at an end. There was also the matter of the shepherd to be taken care of, which was no small concern. With luck, he'd be dead by the time we got there and I could come straight back and salvage some of my customers before word from the Abbot got round.

I know how rumours start, you see. I'd found out a lot from Beppe about barbering, and I'd even worked on men myself—never women—but most of my days were spent cleaning his kit, cooking meals or honing blades on the wheel behind his shack. I enjoyed that in the evenings, watching the sparks kick up and die. So three years into my apprenticeship, I was barely a barber and nothing of a surgeon. One night we argued. I said he was a slow teacher, he said I was a slow learner, and he settled the argument with my mother's stick.

Beppe said that he had had many masters, but all I had was Beppe. In Salerno, he said he had learned from great teachers called Constantine, Galen, Hippocrates, Celsus and Avicenna. I remember Avicenna because one of the books had his name on it—not that Beppe thought I was ready for it. So when he was asleep, I used to pull down the books and look at the diagrams of men, red wires running through their bodies. Fat dots marked points on their limbs like ports on a map, and I'd prod myself to trace the route from my Rome to my Constantinople. The trouble was, each part of the map remained foreign to me. It was like Avicenna's description of his home in Arabia. I could see where each point was, there on my skin, but as to its inhabitants, its customs, its relics, its imports and exports—I was a stranger in every town. I could only discover so much. I

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knew that without Beppe as a guide I would never be able to explore these secret cities, and that's why I had to stay.

Once, he woke up in the middle of the night and caught me. As he ambled up to the candle, I realised that I'd been speaking the words aloud and he would have heard me stuttering through the text if he'd been sleeping in the next village. He said if I didn't like my bed, I could go outside and work on his blades until dawn. Then he went back to his bunk. I started sharpening the knives.

When I woke up in the morning, the shack had burned down and Beppe was dead. One of the neighbours woke me as I sat slumped over the wheel and asked what I had done, which is typical of the way people think. I'd been asleep, how did I know? They made up their own minds. That's how rumours start.



Fra Paolo guessed that we could reach the shepherd's hut by sunset. There were no horses to be had and it looked like a rough climb, so we gathered some food and the monk's essentials and set off along the track. He was a fit fellow, sure enough. He fairly galloped up that trail, determined to reach the dying man before his Maker beat him to it. In the end, though, his legs could not stretch as far as his ambition and we were still hours away when night arrived and the winds picked up.

I don't like to be caught outdoors in the mountains—and mountains they were, I can tell you, even if the slopes did look green and gentle. When it came to finding shelter, we were lucky to trot right by a cave before my legs gave out. I scraped together some kindling and worked up a fire. Then Fra Paolo and I had our first real conversation.

I could see why he made the others laugh in the field. He was an awkward man, his arms and legs too long to sit cross-legged on the ground, and he was only a few years older than me, his early thirties, he said. Twenty years with the monastery, and he'd never wanted to be anywhere else. His only problem was that he assumed the rest of us held God in the same regard. The two of us undid our packs and laid out our meal, and I was glad to see that he'd brought along a flask of wine, which would go down nicely.

He saw the look in my eye, though, and smiled.

'I thought we could take communion before we dine,' he said, and poured half a cup.

'Don't be shy,' said I, and he made it a cupful.

He murmured his way through the rites and I tried to nod in the right places and say 'Amen' when he did—I'm not a heathen, Father, but my Latin isn't the best. So, when he was finished muttering he stood up and banged his head on the ceiling. I've never laughed so hard in my life. He howled and hopped around clutching his shaven skull, telling me not to laugh at a man's pain, then looked at me kneeling there and put his straight face on again, the one he used for widows and greenfly.

'Don't—' he said. And that's all that he said.

A growl prickled up the back of my neck, then a breeze whistled over

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my head. A lynx had pinned Fra Paolo to the ground. It was a good scrap: Paolo pushed the cat's head to arm's length, but then it tore away at his stomach with its back paws, shredding his clothes and his flesh. Bloody gobbets of hessian spattered the walls. I scrambled over to the fire, grabbed a burning log and threw it. The cat skittered back the way it came. So fast. I still don't know if I was brave or not.

But there was Paolo, heaving and gurgling in a puddle of brown blood. It was gushing out of him like water from a pump. I pressed my hand to his side but the blood ran between my fingers and into the sand, turning it the colour of pots and roof tiles. But as the ground got darker, the monk got paler, until his face was like vellum.

I remembered Beppe treating a wound once. Robbers had stabbed a pilgrim as he passed near our village and Beppe had cleaned the cut using a piece of cloth and some wine. Paolo's injury would need a lot of wine. So I grabbed the goblet, poured it into the wound and bound it tight. Surely consecrated wine would be even better medicine? It stopped him moving anyway, and whatever the reason, there was nothing more I could do. I sat by him in the cave with a branch burning in my hand.

♦ ♦ ♦
He woke up early. The first thing I heard was a yelp as he rolled over onto his side, then slumped onto his back again with a sharp breath.

In winter, the children sometimes lie in the snow and drag their arms round in arcs, and when they stand up it looks like there's the shadow of an angel behind them. Paolo hadn't moved from the spot where he'd fallen, and all round him was the shadow of his blood, wide as the length of his arms, black.

'Dead,' he rasped. Parts were coming back to him, but the whole was still elusive. He opened his eyes and squinted at the stone ceiling. 'Hell.' Then he turned his head and saw me. 'No.'

I couldn't tell what he meant. His words were too quiet to carry expression, as night is too faint to carry colour. Maybe seeing me there had jolted him back to Earth, or maybe he was terrified at the prospect of eternity in a cave with me. But that's what he said.

He bent his legs and sat upright, shook his head and put a hand on the dressing I'd bound to his waist. I could see that yesterday was returning to him. He looked at me. Then the cave entrance. Then the fire. Then the bandages. And then the dark circle in which he sat.

'The cat. How did you . . . ?'

'It ran away. You fainted and I fixed your wounds.'

He gazed down again, like a boy sitting on top of a tree, scared to look and scared to move.

'This is all . . . mine?'

'Lie down and rest. You're hurt and you need to let your body balance itself. Take some meat, you've run dry and cold.'

His attention was still elsewhere, even when he was chewing on a corner of cured beef. He tore off a sliver, gave the rest back to me and stood up—he stood, when the night before he should never have stood again. It

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wasn't right. Maybe he was deluded, so dazed he couldn't feel the pain.

'No, no, I'll be fine. I don't feel too bad. How far was the shepherd's shack from here?'

His eyes seemed clear enough, he was steady on his feet. I've seen newborn foals look worse. For a while I thought that it must have been me who'd banged my head the night before and my imagination had got the better of my reason. Paolo brushed his teeth with a twig and a mouthful of water and was waiting for me to join him on the road. We walked on.

As we went further up the track, the monk's gait became more relaxed. He stopped holding his bandage. His stride lengthened. He drew his shoulders back and walked upright, eyes level with the horizon. Potholes became challenges, not obstacles. By the time we reached the top he was kicking stones and jumping to catch hold of branches, like a farm lad trying to impress the girls.

'You must tell me what you used in this plaster.'

'Oh, pine resin, vinegar, oil of roses. Nothing unusual.'

He leaned to one side and stretched, as though he was just waking from a solid night's sleep.

'Perhaps it's the letting then. It's left me rather light-headed.'

I grunted and kept my mouth shut, hoping that we'd find the shepherd soon, preferably beyond help.

♦ ♦ ♦

As it turned out, we were just in time. The door to his shack was open and there he was, lying in his cot, feverish but breathing. His white hair was matted and dirty. He didn't move or speak when we approached him, just opened his eyes and sighed.

'Greetings, old shepherd. Pardon our manners. Under which constellation were you born?'

He was in a delirium, there was no talking to him. The monk started his babbling while I opened the shepherd's shirt and had a look. There were dark liver spots on his body. I could see the purple hoof-print on his chest, over the heart, but the flesh around it was discoloured too, blue and black. Round the bruise there were fine red lines and a swollen gash full of pus. I didn't like it at all. Fra Paolo was peering over my shoulder, waiting for a verdict.

'He has an excess of blood in this quarter here. Find me a bowl.'

While the monk tipped some crusts from a dish, I prepared my instruments. Scrapers, rasps, spatumina, probes, scalpels, drills, tooth trephines. I tested the point of a skewer against my finger. The shepherd's skin was thin and weak, it wouldn't need to be too sharp. With the bowl on the floor, I jabbed the skewer between his ribs and a jet of blood splashed onto the flags. The shepherd turned his head and looked into my eyes, swallowing hard, twisting his body. I had to put a hand on his chest to hold him down and the pressure just made the blood flow even faster. He was losing his breath and starting to panic.

I've never made great claims for my skill. If he died, I could easily say it was too late for him when we'd got there and his son and the Abbot

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would be none the wiser. Paolo couldn't be much of a physician if he couldn't see through my performance. He knelt beside me and took the shepherd's hand, praying fast and hard with his head lowered. He didn't notice the change in the shepherd's eyes—it was as though his eyelids had shrunk back into his head. The fear was in him and his body went rigid. The blood slowed to a trickle then dripped to a stop. All I could hear was the monk mumbling on and on, praying in circles, squeezing the old man's hand in his own, until he noticed that he couldn't hear the blood any more and looked up. The shepherd was motionless on the bed. Paolo let go of his hand and then we heard his voice.

'Thank you.'

He smiled at us both and Paolo got to his feet for a second, then dropped to his knees again. In that moment, I realised that Paolo had changed. He'd become more than what he'd once been—more than a man.

'You have a great gift, Marcello,' stammered Fra Paolo. 'It is a wonder few ever witness. I—I—' He bent and kissed the hem of my cloak. 'This is a wonder.'

♦ ♦ ♦

'Are you certain?' the Abbot said, scrutinising me in his study.

'With my own eyes,' Paolo replied. 'As sure as I stand here. And this, look—'

He reached into his shredded habit and unwound the bandage from his waist. He handed me the dressing, which was caked like a slaughterhouse apron, and uncovered the wound. I couldn't see it at first. Where last I had seen a hole the size of my hand, there was now only a scar, clean as the flesh of a salmon. 'He is a healer of great power.' Fra Paolo shook his garment back into place. 'I dare say no more.'

The Abbot sat by his desk and studied me. I don't like being looked at, Father. I tried to keep my eyes lowered, but I couldn't help seeing a picture full of gold in one of his books and he shut it sharply.

'I trust your word, Fra Paolo.' I didn't trust him, mind. I knew what was coming. 'The Death is still strong in the north-east. You know the village of Callucci, barber?'

Indeed I did, and I dare say you do too Father, even at this distance. Nobody had been allowed in or out for months. Every man, woman and infant touched by disease.

'Our finest men of medicine have tried to help, but physic is of no use—cure one man and his brother taints him again. Perhaps you can change things.'

This Abbot was condemning me to an early grave, and I wasn't about to go quietly. So I took desperate action. I told him that the monk and the shepherd were just fortunate, that my skill was nothing, that I wasn't even qualified. The Abbot just waved his hand, half-blessing me again.

'I'm sure you'll be fine,' he said.

Damned. I'd never been more honest and now he was punishing me for it. Maybe he knew. But as I said, I wasn't going without a fight. I asked for Fra Paolo to go with me.

'Fra Paolo is very important to the life of the convent,' said the Abbot.

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'I'd rather he stayed here.'

That bastard Abbot. I'd cut more than his scalp next time.

'Father Abbot, if I may, I'd be glad to accompany Master Marcello. Callucci is some distance off and the journey difficult. He'll be of no use if he gets lost along the way.'

I knew I'd be able to count on Paolo. He was a man of true faith, even if it was misguided.

♦ ♦ ♦

The Abbot gave in and allowed us to travel together. We were given full provisions and a horse this time, which is a comfort not normally afforded me. Paolo had exaggerated the severity of the route and the miles slipped past in warm green meadows and vineyards on the higher slopes. The day was clear but so was the night, and we stopped at an inn before the heat escaped back to the stars.

Paolo was reluctant to spend the evening with the drinkers, so we adjourned to our bunks upstairs. He made a joke about feeling safer in a bed than in a cave. It was funny. Still, he insisted on us both taking communion again, and the very mention of it turned my stomach. In his bag he had the same set of cruets and chalices as he had taken on our first journey, and he set them out on a bench before pouring the wine, holding a wafer up to the ceiling, and going through his usual ritual. He was very precise, fingers tipping and picking up the vessels with delicate speed, like a conjurer switching cups in an effort to hide the pea.

He lifted the cup as an offering to the ceiling joists and continued to recite his Latin. The ancients used to believe there were spirits in everything—chairs, stones, trees, the sky. Maybe Paolo was placating the gods of this building, keeping the roof from crashing down on our heads, shoring up the walls with his prayers, keeping wildcats away from the window.

He closed his eyes, tilted the little silver chalice and took a mouthful. He spat it across my bed and dropped the cup on the floor, sputtering and staggering back towards the door, reeling, speechless. The boards were covered in the same sticky, thick substance that had soaked the floor of the cave. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'I'm sorry. The wine. It must be off.'

'We'll live without it.'

'Yes.' He felt his way round the walls to his bed, like a blind man, and sat on the thin blanket. 'I think I'll turn in. I'm sorry for being such poor company, but it's been a tiring day.'

'Yes.'

We each pulled the covers up close. Neither of us slept, just as neither of us spoke of the tiny shoots sprouting from the floorboards in the morning.

♦ ♦ ♦

In a way then, reaching Callucci was a relief. The main street was empty when we arrived, but within a minute there were ragged shadows standing and staring. We were watched with suspicion, as though we were thieves looking to steal their relatives away to the next life.

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It felt like I hadn't seen children in weeks. These were odd, though. Too old for their bodies. Broken children. They were scared to touch anyone, avoiding the diseased hands of their parents, realising that solitude meant survival. The adults were as filthy as their offspring. Their sleeves were tattered, their hose were split or torn, and not a one of them had their head covered, not even the women. Some were still in bedclothes. A gaunt fellow with oily grey hair and stonemason's hands addressed us with the solemnity of a gallowman.

'Do you know where you are?'

'We do,' Paolo replied, defiantly. 'We are here to cure the dying. Can we find a bed for the night?'

'More beds than people in Callucci now,' said the gaunt man, turning away, 'many more.'

We set ourselves up in the tiny chapel near the well. Fra Paolo had been treated once in the monastery hospital at St Jerome and was acquainted with its methods, so we pushed back the pews and brought in a dozen of the now-vacant beds.

The chapel had not been used for almost a year. There was no cloth on the altar, but white dust sat like silk on every surface. A pair of doves were nesting in the roof and their year's worth of mess painted one of the columns.

When the plague hit Callucci, attendance at the chapel was higher than ever. With so many people being struck down by the hand of God, the villagers were suddenly very keen to salve their consciences. But before long, they began to see a pattern. Even the most devout parishioners were falling foul. Especially them, in fact. First the Datinis, then the da Folignos from the pew in front of them, then the smith and his wife and their three daughters. The village elders realised that gathering to pray each week was not an effective way of fighting the pestilence. They began to hold mass outside the chapel, praying to the cross above the door, but the congregation still thinned out. Scared of the air, the water and the neighbours, families barricaded themselves in their homes, only gathering supplies when they had to, keeping the heavy drapes drawn fast across the windows.

Between funerals, the parson made calls at each household, looking after the sickest of his flock, carrying the Good News and the gossip round the village. He didn't last long. And when he died, the number of deaths began to drop. That was when the villagers realised what had happened. God had forsaken Callucci, and it had all been the parson's fault. Jumping to conclusions again, you see, Father.

Our little hospital was very ordered and more successful than any infirmary before or since, I'll wager. Fra Paolo quizzed each patient about their astrological disposition and assessed the balance of their humours, examining the nature of their pulse and the extent of their affliction. He'd take confession if they looked in a serious state. And then he called me in to deliver one of three treatments I had devised: there was a herbal concoction which we'd brewed up, and that tasted foul enough for the patient to feel it was helping; there was the letting, of course; and for variety I

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introduced a lozenge of worms and goat's cheese coated with urine, which was probably more vile than the disease itself. But after each treatment, Fra Paolo took the hand of the sufferer and spoke a brief benediction. By the morning, the pustules under their arms and their rancid sweats had disappeared. We kept the healthy ones separate from the rest of the villagers, but after three days, there were more cured than sick and we had to keep the ill in quarantine while the healthy returned to the village outside. A week and Callucci was cured.

The villagers were an embarrassment. The gaunt old gentleman, whose name was Luca, led a service in the church to honour me. They threw themselves to the ground in front of me, offered me food, livestock, and any number of wives. Then I noticed that on the ground, worshipping with the people of Callucci, lay Fra Paolo Rini. That was the end.

Paolo knew I was troubled and offered me counsel either as a friend or as a cleric, whichever I preferred, but the friend and the cleric were both Paolo and I couldn't face either of them. I couldn't face anyone.



The day that the village was safe, I saddled the horse and left for the mountains. But damn that Paolo—he wouldn't let me go alone. He started by walking alongside me, trying to talk me into staying. After a few miles he gave up and simply insisted on coming with me. I told him I wasn't going anywhere near civilisation, but he assumed that I was going on some divine retreat into the wilderness. Jesus must have got sick of those disciples following him round, Father. I can see why the desert must have seemed so appealing.

So I headed deep into the forest, leaving the track as soon as I could, and there we stayed, setting up camp under a giant spruce. That first night, Paolo spotted a badger snuffling round our bags. I've seen a badger bite the leg off a bloodhound, they're no joke, but Paolo didn't worry for a second. He sat there and calmly trimmed the twigs off a branch, stood over the badger, took one swing, and snapped its neck at the nape. That was another thing I hadn't expected from the monk. Maybe he and the Abbot had more in common than I thought. The badger's carcass lasted us three days. Paolo skinned it and removed the entrails, left the fur to dry out in the sun and carved the body into portions, which he rationed out. He insisted on eating the less appetising organs, sparing me from the eyes and brain.

When there were only bones left, he boiled them down into broth, which he thickened using nuts and roots he found in the forest. He told me the names of all the trees in Italian and Latin. There was food everywhere he said, if you knew where to look. He could lift the bark off a tree trunk and reveal smooth-skinned grubs, sap that dripped like honey, mushrooms that grew in layers as though they were building their own shaded city. It was as if Paolo had planted all this years ago, knowing he'd return one day to gather his harvest.

The night we ate the broth, Paolo sat cross-legged with his difficult limbs and smiled a trusting smile at me. It was maddening. I jumped up

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and kicked the fire into the trees, scattering the flames outside Paolo's careful stone circle.

'Marcello—what's wrong?'

'What do you want? Why did you follow me? Go! Take the horse, I don't want you here!'

'Marcello?'

'Do you think you'll hear the music of the spheres in my voice? Are you waiting for great secrets to be revealed? Here's a secret—it's all a sham. I'm nothing. You're the healer, not me. I'm a barber. I pull teeth and cut hair and lance boils, but you heal. The shepherd, the villagers—all you. Even that cat'

Paolo just looked at me, puzzled, then shook his head.

'Your parables and your mysteries . . . you're teaching me many things. I'll try to understand.'

This is what happens to people who swallow too many fables. They can't take a straight answer anymore. It's all about 'faith' and 'trust'—they lose their sense. I remember Paolo saying that everything on Earth was pointing towards eternity, everything carried some secret spiritual message, like a book written in an unknown language. The trees had branches that stretched upwards because they were reaching out to Heaven. Flowers were the Virgin Mary, caterpillars turned into butterflies because of the resurrection. I tried telling him that a tree was just a tree but he wouldn't have it. There was no talking to him.

At least he realised that I wanted more time on my own. The next morning, I headed west into the forest, keeping the sun behind me and treading a straight line, trying not to put names to the trees, walking through bushes and across a stream filled with leaves.

After an hour, I came to a cluster of cabins but nobody saw me. Though I'd been wanting to avoid people, they suddenly seemed like the perfect distraction. I climbed a tree and watched them all. I pretended I was the Abbot in St Jerome, looking out over the fields. There was a carpenter working on a heavy elm bench. Two others were fixing a roof. A woman with a baby went into one cabin and an hour later came out and went into another, then another. Probably showing off the new-born. A girl walked right under my tree and into the clearing, carrying a basket.

I stayed in the tree until I noticed the sun had overtaken me and begun to lower itself over the forest. Paolo, I knew, would worry if I wasn't back by dusk. I was happy to go. People were still being people, work was still being done, the sun still set in the west. The world had not been shaken by my absence. I could stay in the forest and life would continue without me. It was as though I had never existed, and that was the best I could wish for.

It was almost dark by the time I got back to our camp. At first I thought Paolo wasn't there. Then there was a flutter of wings and I realised he was exactly where I'd left him that morning, lying by the ashes of the fire. Only his face had changed.

He was stretched out on the forest floor, shocked by death. Next to him were two damp circles in the earth: one brown and clotted; the other crim-

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son. The two fluids had separated out like vinegar and oil, spilling from his side like a bag full of secrets. Thirty-two years had brought him here.

I wasn't the first to discover his body. The insects had got to him long before I had. Flies were wading through the molasses of his blood, breeding in the sticky resin. They'd laid their eggs inside the warm, open wound. The heat would help them hatch all the faster. Beetles ran through his hair and pushed balls of thick, scabbing blood across the soil towards their nest, picking up dirt and leaf mould as they went. Before my return, the birds had been revelling, dipping their beaks first into the massed insects then into the rich, subtle, forbidden corpse.

I've seen bodies before, of course. Disease-ridden ones with abscesses and bones poking through at the elbow. Drowned men, swollen with salt and green with seaweed. Babies strangled by their own cords. But I've never been good at handling them, closing their eyelids, ferrying them home or to the burial pits. Touching them feels like desecration. Beppe always showed more respect for the dead than for the living. He said that all dead men deserved to be treated with honour because they had faced God.

Paolo's body was desecrated enough. I brushed away the insects and swept the dirt off him, lifting him onto a blanket. I bound the caked wound shut again, then pulled the blanket tight around him. It was dark now, and I had to keep his body off the ground, away from the swarming bugs and anything larger that might be attracted by the smell. Even the horse was straining on its tether. All I could do was tie each end of the blanket and hoist him up using one of the thick spruce branches. He was light, and even in that sheltered spot, he swung from side to side in his woolen hammock like a silkworm in its cocoon.

♦ ♦ ♦

Morning again. Paolo had made it through the night without shifting from his branch, and the wildlife had been unable to penetrate his new woven skin. There was a dark patch midway along the blanket though, so I lowered him down, worried that the gash in his side had started leaking.

He'd soiled himself during the night. Another lesson of Beppe's I'd forgotten. Maybe that's what happens when you face God. I used the last of our water to wash him down and rinse the patch in his smock. His eyes didn't move. He stared through the trees, reading secrets in their leaves, letting me scrub around his body, undisturbed. He was as cold as the air now. When he was clean, I hoisted him up to the branch and went to collect more water from the stream, taking the thirsty old horse with me.

I reasoned with myself, made calculations. Paolo hadn't moved from the spot where he'd lain down to sleep, so he could have died at any time that night. That meant he might have been dead for a day and a half already. I'd have to look after him for a while yet.

The horse nosed around in the water, the leaves sticking to his snout. I let him walk unbridled while I splashed my face and refilled the two bottles. Water. The stuff of life. Avicenna said that even in the Arabian desert, you could cut open a parched, brown plant and find water. Paolo could have drawn a lesson from that, could have delivered a sermon on it. Now

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his body was as dry as a stick, leaking its fluids and stiffening up from the outside inwards. I wondered if he was soft and dark on the inside, if his humours remained in their houses, if there were parts of his body that didn't even know that the whole had died.

Which part of him died first? Did it start at his fingers, curling them up with pain? Did his skin bristle and quiver all over his body? Or did his chest suddenly contract as the organs convulsed, rebelling against their cage, rattling his ribs? And the soul—if he had a soul—did it flee the quaking body as its timbers collapsed, or was it the departure of the soul that made the body writhe?

Paolo always knew these things.

I tied the horse to the spruce and lowered Paolo to the ground. Taking his head in my lap, I pulled the blankets from round his face. His mouth was open, but now instead of hanging there, his jaw was fixed and rigid. I uncorked one of the bottles and poured a little water into the gaping mouth. I could hear bubbling as it found its way down into him. He drank without swallowing. I stopped before his mouth overflowed. There were a few drops on his lips, and the cracked skin was pink and smooth again. I rolled the blanket back further and poured water onto his fingertips. The skin softened, but his joints remained as unyielding as ever.

His lips dried out and died a second death. Water wasn't enough.

I kept Paolo by me during the day, only lifting him up into the tree when I went to find wood and food. I looked in the places he had shown me, and soon found enough mushrooms and berries. I kept the fire going all day, keeping us both as warm as I could until the moon rose and it was time to heave him back into his hammock.

I heard wolves during the night—not howling, just padding round the camp, staying outside the light from the fire, patient as midwives.

♦ ♦ ♦

Beppe taught me about hair, and hair has taught me about people. Long hair is for maidens, thinkers and madmen. Youths with white hair have secrets from their parents. Curling locks belong to emotional people, fighters and lovers. Women with red hair were all friends to Beppe. Beggars always surprise me with their strong, thick hair. Hunters and yeomen prefer it closely clipped. Monks don't have a choice. Fashions come and go, but hair remains honest.

Paolo was growing a beard. I noticed it when I unwrapped him that morning, and it made him look tired. His hair was unruly too, so I shaved him and tidied him up. I nicked his chin twice. The bone was getting closer to the surface, and his skin felt so dry that the blade rasped. At least he looked respectable now.

My mother always set so much store by appearances. Hands and hair, she said, were the measure of a man. I wonder what she'd think of me today with all these scars on my fingers. I don't look like the artisan she wanted. I look like a cut-throat. A murderer.

The last time I had spoken to Paolo was just after sunset three days before. Out in the woods, it was difficult to measure time, far from church

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bells or sundials, and we had taken up the habit of rising and setting with the sun. He had prayed on his knees before turning in, thanking his Lord for the day, the food, the shade of trees, the birdsong, the mild breeze, the comfort of dry soil rather than mud, the grace by which He prevented branches from falling on our heads, and the company of his great friend, Marcello.

I told him to be quiet. I told him that his jabbering was disturbing my prayers. He took me at my word and went silent.

So when the sun set on the third night after his death, I prayed—for myself and for him. They were selfish prayers. I prayed because if Paolo could live again, my sin would be less. Nobody would call me murderer.

I sat by him until the fire burned down and I was left in the darkness you only find in the forest.

♦ ♦ ♦

I didn't see the sun rise. Light seemed to whisper through the leaves, falling in shafts like rain, trickling onto the forest floor, then filling the gaps between the trees.

Paolo's face hadn't changed. He had his eyes closed, like a man remembering things long past, but that was where the resemblance to a man ended. The wood had claimed him, turning him brown and green, drawing his spirit away and into the bark and the mushrooms and the creatures that had once fed him. The body lay lank in the dirt, flesh made meat.

As I squatted there on my heels, on the soil, under the trees, under the sky, I realised why I'd failed. A sinner's prayers carry no weight. I could never have hoped to save Paolo while his death rested on my conscience. So I lashed him onto the back of the horse and brought him here. It's the first time he's ridden that nag. He's waiting for me outside, his hands and heels dangling above the ground. Do you think I've confessed enough?

HP

3 PHONE CALLS
by Dimitri Kalantatzis

The telephone rang it
was my mother she's
dying she said I can't
live like this
anymore my mother and daughter are
killing me I'm sorry I
said but I have other things
to do.
The phone rang again it was
my brother I'm going to cornell good
for you I said you've got it
made I said who's better than
me he replied.
The phone rang once more the
third time
I might've wept bitterly then
it was you i love you
you said when are you coming home again
soon I said I love you
I thought how empty my heart-is.

Instructions for a Summer Date
Based upon "Inventory of Places Propitious for Love" by Angel
Gonzalez
by Lindsay Kennedy

Well, I'm stumped.
I think quiet rooms are good, however
you say the open air is more favorable.
On second thought, the green canopy made by
the trees in Central Park on a Saturday
or on those dirt paths
which bloom with coolness
are just as good.
The heavy heat leaves few choices:
not the crosswalk,
cars,
or crammed subways.
Corners inside
cavernous museums
are always useful
as long as there is no one looking.
However, we must be realistic: there
are always pushing crowds and
a voyeur ruins a moment completely.
And conventional standards
squelch embracing (except for
the ever-boring chaste kiss
on the cheek
—that won't do in this case—
emphasized by the modest and proper lover)
and **don't lean like that there are children present**
is reflected in every mother's angry gaze.
Where do we go then?
We cannot escape
the blatant
longing, the shame
from all sides,
the arrow-sharp looks
are most deadly of all.
You were right in saying they did this once,
they all felt this once,
But believe me, I know that I'm right too.
Maybe we should just give up our remote corners,
and sit in separate seats
as the train car clacks
and the lights flicker triumphantly
down the line, one after another, all the way home.

Black Box Recording

by Jarret Keene

Flight 648 is at 25,000 feet and headed for the ground at 300 miles an hour.

Copilot: Oh, shit.

Captain: Oh, God.

Cabin: [*Stick shaker vibrates, warning of imminent stall.*]

Copilot: Oh, shit.

Captain: This is the end, Lord, isn't it? According to your plan, then.

Copilot: Help me. Help hold it.

Captain: I *am* holding it.

Copilot: Hey.

Captain: I'm not blaming you. I blame the machine, the guts of Lucifer.

Cabin: [*Public address recording: "Attention, emergency descent. No smoking."*]

Copilot: Total system failure and I can't even light up?

Captain: God help us.

Cabin: [*"Put the mask over your nose and mouth and adjust the head-band."*]

Copilot: Speed me to my death and then offer survival tips? That's sadism.

Captain: Lord, not the mask.

Copilot: I'm pulling like crazy but nothing happens. It just continues to vibrate. Fuck!

Captain: [. . . .]

Jarret Keene

Copilot: I can't hear you. Switch on the mike.

Captain: [. . . .]

Copilot: Switch on the mike, Alan. On the mask.

Captain: . . . wants me conscious at the point of impact.

Copilot: There you go.

Captain: Pray for your wife and kids that they might carry on without you. And pray for your soul.

Copilot: I will. As soon I'm through telling God to eat me.

Captain: I had a wife once. But she was under the influence of satanic forces. She liked seedy bars and loose talk and big black guys. So I moved in with a karate instructor. She didn't work out either.

Copilot: I don't comprehend the Asian philosophies.

Captain: Women constantly strive to contaminate my relationship with Jesus Christ.

Copilot: All of us are just so much dead meat.

Captain: They're not spiritual creatures. It has something to do with menstruation, I think.

Copilot: I want to kiss everyone on board full on the mouth. If we weren't wearing masks, I'd do it. I'm not kidding, Alan. Hell, I'd kiss you, you Republican! But none of these things matter anymore. I pardon humanity.

Captain: They're bound to the earth and moon. Prisoners locked in the material realm. They can never grasp the concept of heaven.

Cabin: [*Public address recording: "This is an emergency descent." Muzak begins playing.*]

Copilot: I think I've forgiven my mother for throwing away my comic books. Do you know she trashed my favorite series? *Kamandi: The Last Boy On Earth*. It wasn't the most original idea, sure. In fact the series was highly derivative of *The Planet of the Apes* movies. But Kamandi went places Charlton Heston never dreamed. In one issue, I remember, Kamandi stumbles across a secret and powerful cult of talking gorillas who've taken over the post-apocalyptic ruins of Washington D.C. They worship what they call "The Spirits of Watergate." These spirits were

Black Box Recording

nothing more than the Watergate tapes, which the gorillas used as a basis for building their society. When played loudly and at high speed, the tapes create a terrifying sound and can be used as a weapon. After thrashing the cult, Kamandi slows down the tapes and listens to Nixon saying things like, "I want to make this perfectly clear..."

Captain: They love to talk you into a state of lethal violence. *Talk talk talk talk talk*. Perhaps they're designed that way. To test a man.

Copilot: My mother claimed that comics were destroying my eyesight and turning me into a delinquent. Now here I am, a peaceful airline pilot with 20/40 going peacefully to his grave.

Captain: I was always comfortable with death and dismemberment. I tortured animals for many years. Then I grew up and auditioned for the CIA, and they made me read a manual called *How To Kill*, and if you asked me to compose a blurb for it, I'd write something like "thoroughly engaging." It's essentially a comic book that shows you how to club, knife, hack, hang, ignite, and shoot a person. It even shows you how to kill unarmed, like driving your thumb and forefinger into the throat of an unconscious subject and applying pressure. But the most disturbing chapter explains how to electrify the grid of a urinal basin. It freaked me out a little and eradicated my interest in joining the CIA. I mean, killing a guy as he's taking a leak? That's like blowing away a deer while it's giving birth. There's no honor in that. At my age, honor is all I have to go on.

Copilot: Have I ever been in a fistfight? No. I attended private school, where aggression consisted of ridiculing a student for possessing an off-brand tennis racket. I was abused by students from other, less privileged places of learning. I never fought back. I had a scholarship playing the vibraphone in the jazz ensemble, so I needed my mitts. Damaging them against some Cro-Magnon's brow would've left me at the brutal mercies of the public-school system of Oakland, California. The vibraphone is a warm, appealing instrument. It has a certain smoothness that attracts women of all shapes and sizes, hues and colors. The young girls of Oakland were dying for something like the vibraphone to emancipate them.

Captain: My most profound encounter with the Savior? I had this job as a teenager, you see, working for a gardening supply store. It involved the perpetual unloading of trucks out in the back of the store. The trucks would bring in huge loads of manure packed into plastic bags, each bag weighing forty or fifty pounds. But what I want to say is that there was a red brick wino hotel across the street from the back of the store. Once upon a time the hotel had been the YMCA where as a kid I learned to swim and shoot pool. The YMCA had moved uptown, and now the winos sat in their windows and yelled at us and threw empties while we

Jarret Keene

unloaded all that manure. One morning I was loading a truck for a delivery, it was fall, the wind was blowing hard, and I was bringing out a bouquet of balloons when a string broke and a balloon with the words "GET WELL SOON" escaped from the bunch and went flying. It flew up over the razor wire and floated past the hotel. The winos and everybody in the yard stopped what they were doing and looked up. "GET WELL SOON." The balloon sailed into the clouds, growing smaller, its string tail waving like a hand. Then it was gone.

Cabin: [*Snack cart thuds. Passengers scream.*]

Copilot: I knew a young woman in college who later committed suicide. She was the 100th person to jump off the Dumbarton Bridge, and this made her somewhat famous. I never had any romantic interest in her, but for a few months I felt it was my job to put flowers on her grave every weekend. The graveyard was always empty, sort of peaceful. The rich were buried on the hill, the poor down below. The different religions didn't mix; the Catholics were buried among themselves, the Jews, and so on. The city of the dead was the same as the city of the living except that everyone was dead. When I was too busy to put fresh flowers on her grave, I'd feel guilty all week. Once, on my way back to my car, I saw a homeless guy stealing the flowers and selling them at an intersection. After witnessing this, I got drunk and never visited the cemetery again.

Captain: Smokestacks. I'd sit in the car during my half-hour lunch break and look at the smokestacks on the factory roof. Watching the smoke pour out like clouds, I sometimes lay on the hood of my car, soaking up the sun like a cat and listening to the birds in the banyan trees. Doze off, wake up to the factory whistle, and go back to work. Yes, that was good, honest work. Kind of work the unions in this country have done much to undermine.

Copilot: Not long ago I had a dream in which you appeared, Alan. You're standing naked at the foot of my bed. You turn, look out the window, gently parting the white curtains. I'm staring at you through a hole in the sheet. There's a photographer in the next room. What do you think this means?

Captain: Is this really the best time to hurt my feelings?

Copilot: It was wrong. I apologize.

Captain: Please don't mock my efforts at meditation. Along with the Bible, I've read and read and read again *The Silent Life*, by Thomas Merton. I was fascinated by these accounts of monastic life; the Carthusians, particularly, with their isolated hermitage, were brilliant men who found the right answer to the complexities of life, and as a young man I was saddened by the knowledge that I could never be one of them.

Black Box Recording

These holy monks had a curious mixture of humility and vanity I could never hope to achieve. They believed that if they were humble enough they would see God when they died—and you can laugh and call this a naïve vanity—and they were so innocent and touching that the tears well from my eyes even now. But back then, in my twenties, I knew God would never look at a wretch like me.

Copilot: I love you, man. In spite of your brainlessness.

Captain: I believe in and accept your love. But what do all these things mean now—these ideas and memories, these things we wanted to be?

Copilot: It's perfectly simple.

Captain: Lord, we just lost engine four. 'Simple' you say?

Cabin: [*Glass object—perhaps a coffee pot—shatters against the cabin door.*]

Copilot: Yes, Alan.

Captain: Tell me.

Cabin: [*Low-altitude siren.*]

End of tape.

HP

Near Cherepovets, Russia
by Kake Huck

Near Cherepovets
the Sheksna River
rainbows in our wake.

Vivid iridescence marks
a leader's lust to break the Past,
the Church, the Land—to build the New.

Sterile spore of smokestacks
grays the bank beside the boat;
grease and acid tinting sky and stream.

Behind, the shining green veneer
of Rybinsk Reservoir is sky to
seven hundred suffocated towns.

Rain dribbles through metallic fog,
spattering the deck, our hands, our thoughts
like syphilitic spunk.

Covering my head, I watch
a crouching fisherman hunt
swimming wounds
his cats will never eat.

Hypertext, Daw

by Eileen Tabios

Ngani karon giandom ko si Grasya

Even now I remember Grace
as a sepia stain collapsing my ancestors' photos
to reflect faces honestly
without uncertainty of environment, thus, context

Sampagita nga mosalingsing sa kinatas-an

And the jasmine climbs the trellis
while Marta raises her rayon skirt
to stamp out the flamenco before she dies

Winter liwan rugya

It's winter again
for the soup of carrots and orange rinds
I shall spoon for you between smooches
after your limp up Madison Avenue

Ginpapa ko ang luy-a

I crushed the ginger

Daytoy iti lubong nga mangar-aracop

This is the earth that holds us
where you grabbed for "rough sex" the intersection
I share with Courbet's "Origin of the World"
I nodded for I wanted more sugar torched
after you taught me "moonshine" is not liquid but light

Mangege ti tak-tarak-tak ti sangaribo a cabalyo

I hear the thunder of a hundred hooves
as pictures fade to compromise the sounds of text
there is no <ars poetica> but <arse poetica>

Never mind

with good health

you can eventually go home to Antique

pabay-e lang

mayad lawas

Footnotes: In the title, "daw" is a Tagalog word used as emphasis to emphasize the point previously made; the emphasis is often made in a tongue-in-cheek, joking, or ironic manner. In stanzas 1-5, the first lines of Filipino words are followed by their English translations; in the last stanza English precedes the non-English phrases. The Filipino dialects used are: Cebuano in Stanzas 1 and 2; Kinaray-a in Stanzas 3 and 6; Ilocano in Stanzas 4 and 5.

Lizard Jelly

by Candi Chu

I don't know who called the police and I don't know if it was even all that necessary—she would've wound down in her own good time. But I do know Myrtle Plunk didn't come to the office that Monday morning with the intention of going berserk. We grew up together here in River Falls, Alabama and I know for a fact that not once in Myrtle's 58 years on this earth has she ever done anything that would brand her as a crazy. She's flat shoes and cotton panties, Redbook magazine and one beer a week on Saturday night.

"The incident" (as Penny Panderkin later called it in her company-wide memo) was really nothing more than a sneeze to Myrtle's mental health. But if Myrtle had insanity's head cold, I had its plague. It wasn't working at Aunt Penny's Homemade Jellies and Preserves that drove us nuts; it was the daily waiting: waiting for a promotion, waiting for a man to take care of us like our mamas said would happen, waiting for a thank-you note written by our children and signed by the world. We—Myrtle and me—dreamed of rewards for our longtime loyalty. "I've Worked All My Life" was the bumper sticker on our pension-paid Cadillacs headed for the golden years. But on that Monday we realized we had no air in our dreams. We were driving the High Hopes highway on four flat tires.

It started like this:

Friday at noon we sat in the employee cafeteria eating lunch, watching Jimmy Bowen make a fool of himself at the candy bar machine.

"Look at him," Myrtle said. "He's dropped in five quarters already for a fifty-cent Hershey bar." She took a bite out of her sandwich—Bama peanut butter and Aunt Penny's peach jelly. She always brings her lunch; she doesn't believe in dropping quarters into a candy bar machine.

"Do you believe that?" she said. "He's just gonna walk away from that machine without a fight. It's easy come, easy go with these young people."

Jimmy Bowen approached a table of young guys and slapped one on the back. "Thank God it's Friday, huh?" he said, loud and confident.

Since my husband passed on, I've never really cared much for Fridays, even though most people live for them. They feel too much like when the movie screen goes white after the final credit.

Myrtle reached inside her pocketbook and pulled out a red change purse. "I bet I've got more in here than he has in his savings. That is if he even has a savings account."

"Look at this." I pulled a ham biscuit and an apple out of a white paper bag. "Ninety-five cents. Should've been a dollar twenty but I got a Senior Citizens Discount over at Roscoe's."

"Twenty-five cents." She tilted her chin up. "A whole quarter for admitting you're old."

"I asked the girl did she want to see my driver's license and she said, 'No, I can tell.'"

"Roscoe's got some nerve. Went to school with us." She opened a sin-

gle-serving carton of milk and stuck a straw in it. "The man owns a convenience store and now he's telling the world who's fit for full price and who's not."

"That girl could've at least pretended to want to see my driver's license." I unwrapped my biscuit; it was cold.

"Ow!" Myrtle dropped her sandwich.

"What's wrong?"

"It's my tooth." She rubbed her finger across her back molar.

"I told you about all that sugar." She loves Aunt Penny's jelly. I swear, if it wouldn't kill her, that's all she'd eat every meal. "You ought to go see somebody about—"

"Naah." She took her finger out of her mouth and pushed up her bifocals with her pinky. "I don't need to go see somebody. Don't tell me what to do."

I ate the rest of my ham biscuit and waited until mid-apple before I spoke. Sometimes it's best to give Myrtle a window of quiet to cool down. "You hear from Jessie lately?"

She smiled. She always picks up when she talks about her daughter.

"Finally found an apartment," she said. "I must've promised God a year of Sundays for that one."

"I don't see how you survived. Her all the way up there in New York City and no place definite to live, why, I'd've been out of my mind with worry. At least my boy stayed in the area, if you call an eight-hour drive to Atlanta in the area."

"Did you know she's been up there two years now and she's already on her fourth job? Her *fourth*." She finished drinking the milk and folded down the top of the carton. "Now like I told her last night on the phone, she's got to find herself a place with a good pension plan and stay put."

"Amen."

"Young people don't stick with things anymore, not like we did. Look at Floyd and me, thirty-five years. I married him and I buried him. I didn't go looking for the next best thing."

Jimmy Bowen and a fellow from Shipping started roughhousing over at the other end of the cafeteria. Jimmy playfully shoved the fellow up against the wall and knocked loose a framed picture of Elmer Panderkin, the company's founder.

"Watch it!" Myrtle jumped up and stretched her arms toward the picture, her two-foot reach pitted against the forty-foot distance across the room.

Jimmy caught the picture by its corner and slapped it back on the wall. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket and tapped it on his palm. On his way out the screen door, Jimmy said something to the other fellow and they laughed.

Myrtle smashed the empty milk carton with her fist. "They don't plan ahead I tell you, he doesn't even think about getting a tumor the size of a grapefruit but I know what'll happen—" She wagged her finger at the screen door. "Go on Jimbo, smoke that coffin nail, just wait and see—"

"Sit down," I said. "He was only playing."

"That's the problem with Jimbo Bowen. He's always 'only playing.'"

Candi Chu

She sat down. Her double-knit pants pouched at the stomach. Two years ago, she went to Fabric City, bought a half dozen See 'N Sew patterns and introduced pants to her closet of dresses and skirts.

"Elmer Panderkin was a fine, Southern gentleman," she said. "Remember when this place was Uncle Elmer's Homemade Goodies?"

I nodded.

"Mr. Panderkin really didn't want women working here at first, he was old-fashioned that way," she said. "He thought it would make us hard and mean. I've been here thirty-nine years." She placed her hand on top of mine and squeezed. "It hasn't made me hard and mean, has it?"

"Not a bit, honey." Her grip tightened, welding my fingers. "Not a bit."

She stared across the room at the picture of a white-suited Elmer Panderkin standing in front of his 22-room antebellum mansion.

"You know," she said, "I wish with all my heart I could jump inside that picture and begin living my life alongside his."

On Friday afternoons the factory smells like a fresh-baked peach pie. We focus on and produce a different flavor each day of the week: Mondays, apple; Tuesdays, grape; Wednesdays, raspberry; Thursdays, blackberry; Fridays, peach. I don't need a calendar anymore, just a taste of the air and I know what day it is.

We keep four 500-gallon galvanized steel vats running at a full rolling boil all day long. It's so hot in the factory I tie a bandana round my forehead to keep sweat from dripping into my eyes. Walking into the factory is like walking into a clothesline full of hot, sugary sheets; the harder you twist to free yourself, the more you get tangled up in the juicy heat.

It's about a hundred times hotter in here than it is outside and on dog days in Alabama, like today, the inside of this factory could make the fire-and-brimstone of hell feel like an air-conditioned room at the Holiday Inn. I've never killed anybody or stolen anything but here I am in the jelly factory.

"Cordy, put that down."

Myrtle snatched the book out of my hands.

"You're supposed to be peeling peaches right now." She studied the book's cover. "'Advanced Biology'? What's this?"

"It's Jimmy's," I answered and cracked open a crate of peaches. "He's taking night classes at the junior college, working on a business degree."

"What's biology got to do with business?"

I dragged over an empty gray garbage drum for the peels. "You know, I understood what's in that book, I really did." I slit a peach, peeled off a hand-sized layer of skin and dropped it in the garbage drum. "I'm not such an old dog, I've got a few new tricks."

Myrtle snapped on a pair of plastic gloves and began peeling peaches alongside me. She didn't have to do this; she was promoted to Quality Control Supervisor four years ago and even has a desk in the main building.

I've been working here 37 years and still haven't risen above the factory. "You're too valuable on the vats," they keep telling me at my annual

Lizard Jelly

employee evaluations but over time, I've realized "too valuable" is code for "ain't going nowhere". Myrtle keeps telling me to hang on, they'll promote me one day and I've followed her advice. I followed like a blindfolded child at a birthday party, spun by a friend, reaching out and pinning my hopes on a disoriented donkey.

"I wish I had more school." Myrtle brushed the corner of her eye with the back of her plastic glove. "I always thought Jessie might come back, might even want to get hired on here—I could've put in a good word for her—but do you know that girl never once considered moving back here to River Falls?"

"My boy neither." I tossed a peel in the garbage drum.

"Didn't even *consider* it." She crushed a peach in her hand. Yellow-gold clumps of pulp dribbled down her plastic glove, leaving a shine like Quik-Wax on a car. "Four years of tuition payments -"

"Six for me."

She peeled off her gloves and slapped them on the table. Pulp spattered her glasses. "Sometimes I feel like I worked so I could pay that college to kidnap my child. And lord have mercy, I don't have enough years left in me to pay the ransom."

A lizard skittered across the floor.

"How did that thing get in here?" I tossed a peach peel at it. The peel skidded across the floor collecting a sheet of gray dust on its underside.

Myrtle chased the creature over to the temperature control panel but it climbed up a water pipe, going round and round like a red line on a barber's pole. "Got away."

I filled a hamper with peeled peaches and carried it up the safety ladder rigged to the side of vat #2. Cool rivulets of juice dripped through the wicker slats.

"Heard anymore about the sale?" I had to holler over the whirring of the motorized burners.

"National's put in the highest bid as far as I know," Myrtle yelled back.

I dumped the peaches into the bubbling mixture of sugar, pectin and lemon juice. "I thought all they did was dog food and cereal," I hollered and climbed down the ladder.

Vat #2 rumbled. Myrtle jumped. She glanced at the temperature control panel: the heating gauge's red line registered 15° above boiling; jelly should be kept at 8° above boiling.

Myrtle worked the control, waiting to click back in to the safety zone. She reminded me of us when we were kids, when she would take control of the radio dial, twisting it, working it until she found *The Shadow*.

"Another close one," she said and unclenched the control dial. "Eight degrees above and holding steady." She climbed the safety ladder on Vat #2, unclipped a four-foot metal spoon from the rim and dipped it into the boiling brew, stirring a whirlpool of peach chunks and sugar. She lifted the spoon and dangled it over the vat.

"Sheets off the spoon o.k.," she called down to me. Drops hung off and glided together at the spoon's tip. "Thought we might've scalded this batch but it looks fine."

Candi Chu

Jimmy Bowen, wearing a red short-sleeved shirt and khaki pants, danced into the factory. He held a clipboard against his hip. "Good afternoon, ladies," he said.

"Hi, Mr. Bowen," I said. Jimmy is only 24 years old but the minute he was promoted from the jelly vats to Assistant Manager, he insisted we all call him "Mr. Bowen". Frankly, I think Myrtle should've gotten his chance but who knows, maybe if this place sells, the new owners will see what's what around here.

"What brings you all the way down here, Jimbo?" Myrtle asked.

He bristled. "Penny wants to see you and Cordy in her office first thing Monday morning." He removed a pen from behind his ear and wrote something on the clipboard.

"What for?" Myrtle asked.

"How should I know?" He turned his back to her. "Why should I care?"

The lizard skimmed along the windowsill behind Vat #2 and jumped off, wag-taggling across the bare concrete floor.

Jimmy spotted the lizard and chased it. "Whoop, whoop!" He waved an imaginary lasso overhead and bucked on a wild dream-stallion, turning the factory floor into a backyard playing field for a game of Cowboys and Indians. He snagged the creature, held it by its tail against his red shirt and approached Myrtle in an exaggerated bowlegged strut. "Hey look, it's turning red," he said.

"Put that lizard down," she said.

"It's a *chameleon*."

"My, my, my. Chameleon's a mighty fancy word for someone named Jim-bo."

"Cut it Myrtle." He dropped the lizard. "I'm Mr. Bowen."

"Not til you've earned it you're not."

Jimmy tapped the pen on his clipboard. "You want me to earn it, I'll earn it." He kicked the garbage drum full of peach peels toward Myrtle. "Go out and dump this," he said, "it smells."

She glared at him. He hitched his pants and rubbed his thumb over a belt buckle the color of fool's gold.

"Don't make me write you up," he warned.

In the pecking order of Aunt Penny's Jellies and Preserves, an Assistant Manager can peck the hell out of a Quality Control Supervisor.

Myrtle heaved the garbage drum onto her back. Her knees buckled slightly. "One of these days, Jimbo," she said, "you're gonna learn to say 'lizard' like the rest of us."

Monday, 8:00 a.m., Myrtle and I sat waiting to enter Penny Panderkin's office.

"Ow."

"Your tooth?" I asked.

Myrtle nodded.

"Why don't you go see someone?" I did a double-take sniff; she had Aunt Penny's apple jelly on her breath.

"I don't like those x-ray machines." She pulled a lace handkerchief from

Lizard Jelly

her pocketbook and touched it to her jaw, below her bad molar. "Why can't they just poke around in there and feel if something's loose or rotten? Doc Henry used to—"

"Doc Henry's dead."

"I know that." She twisted the lace handkerchief until it looked like a knotted bedsheet thrown out the window of a burning building.

The door opened. "Myrtle? Cordy?" Penny Panderkin, a young, stylish woman who walks like the river runs, invited us into her office. Next to her, I felt like I was riding a bicycle with square wheels. She graced the room like a perfumed mist; I blasted in like steam from a kettle of collard greens.

"I'm sure you've heard the rumors," Penny said and invited us to sit down in two straightbacked chairs facing her desk. "And since you two have worked here longer than anyone else, I thought it only decent to tell you face-to-face." She cleared her throat and settled into a leather chair behind her desk.

"We've been sold?" Myrtle asked.

"National Food Corporation offered top dollar." Penny leaned forward, braced her forearms on the desk. A diamond tennis bracelet glittered on her thin, tanned wrist. She picked up a pen and worked it through her fingers like a majorette's baton. "Bottom line: National's bringing in their own people. Naturally, they'll downsize current staff."

"Downsize?" I said.

"Get rid of people," Myrtle explained. "Last hired, first fired." I thought I saw the tremor of a smile on her face. "That Jimmy Bowen could get on my nerves," she said, "but I really hate to see the kid get the ax."

"Jimmy won't be leaving," Penny said. "You will." She touched the pen to her diamond bracelet the way a percussionist tings a triangle at just the right moment.

Myrtle half-rose from her chair. "But I worked for your grandfather, your father...Cordy here did too."

"That's no guarantee of anything anymore. Times have changed and business has changed to keep up."

I sat in shock, afraid to speak, afraid my words would spill from an incontinent mouth. Myrtle and I had been passed along by the Panderkins, generation to generation, like a couple of loyal field hands.

"A professional employment counselor will be here this afternoon to speak to those employees who've been terminated." Penny looked above our heads and spoke to the back of the room as if she were speaking to a large audience. "We really do have your best interest at heart."

"Terminated..." Myrtle slumped in her chair.

"I know this is unsettling." Penny stood and silently commanded us to stand also. "I'm sure you'll find opportunities. I wish you the best of luck."

Myrtle grabbed Penny's thin arm. "Please don't do this to us, please, you have the power to—"

"The decision is final." Penny freed her arm. "The deal has been

Candi Chu

made.”

“I can’t go out there.” Myrtle said, “What’ll I do, how’ll I get on? This is all I know.”

Penny firmly ushered us outside. “Jason Johnson will help you this afternoon,” she said and closed the door.

“Wait!” Pound, pound, pound. “Miss Panderkin, please . . .” Myrtle scratched on the closed door like a dog begging to be let in.

In the space of our twenty-minute meeting with Penny Panderkin, Myrtle had gone from a woman too skittish for dental x-rays to a woman fearlessly exposing herself to emotional radioactivity.

On the way out of the main building, we passed Jimmy Bowen’s sunny office.

“I need to stop at my desk,” Myrtle said. I followed her to her cubicle. I accidentally knocked over a cup of pencils, their erasers chewed off, their points unsharpened.

“I can’t remember what I came in here to get,” she said.

“It’s all right honey.” I rubbed her shoulders. I looked down at the gray-haired head of my best friend. Thirty-nine years she had worked here and not once had she felt the afternoon sun spill in across her working hands.

I understood it all now, just as I had understood that Biology textbook, and I didn’t know how to change it. Windows were reserved for the strong and in the Darwinian cage of office politics, Jimmy Bowen had evolved into a canary and Myrtle Plunk into a day-old newspaper lining its cage.

“Maybe Penny was right. There’s bound to be opportunities out there for us. We’ve got experience, know-how.” Myrtle spoke our qualifications with the dogged assurance of a woman who, having found a lump in her breast, slowly convinces herself no doctor is necessary. “Maybe this employment guy can really help us.”

We sat in folding chairs with a crowd of co-workers in the employee cafeteria. Jimmy Bowen and Penny Panderkin stood like sentinels in the back of the room.

A slender, well-dressed man in his late twenties, stepped up to the podium and adjusted the microphone. “Good afternoon. My name is Jason Johnson.” A feedback buzz whined round the room then died out. “I know you’re all aware that National Food Corporation has acquired Aunt Penny’s Homemade Jellies and Preserves,” he said. “National Food has contracted me to act as an employment counselor on its behalf. I’m here today to help facilitate your transition from this working environment into a viable job market.”

“See? I knew he was going to help us find work,” Myrtle whispered to me.

Jason Johnson certainly sounded like he knew what he was talking about. No fat, no wrinkles in his suit, no sag in his posture, no hesitation in his words—even his name sounded snappy and efficient.

“ . . . matching your skills to the needs of employers,” he said. “Who in

here has been with Aunt Penny's the longest?"

All heads turned and looked at Myrtle. She proudly raised her hand.

"And how long have you worked here?" he asked.

"Thirty-nine years. Dependable as the sunrise." A few of us applauded her. She smiled and didn't break eye contact with Jason Johnson; she awaited his compliment of her lifetime of service.

The "Thank you" was on her lips when he sneered at the microphone. "I wouldn't hire anyone who's stayed in one place for thirty-nine years," he said. "You're obviously not a motivated worker."

"Motivated?"

"In today's workplace, you've got to go, go, go to get anywhere."

"Well in my day—" her fist trembled—"you had to stay, stay, stay to get anywhere."

"Your day is over."

When the talk ended, Penny Panderkin thanked Jason Johnson for his time.

She never thanked Myrtle or me.

♦ ♦ ♦

Hobbling at first then breaking into a frenetic stride, Myrtle ran to the factory and turned up the temperature control dials for Vats #1, #2, #3 and #4 beyond the Danger level. The vats roared.

I chased her. "Wait!" I tripped over a crate of apples, fell and banged my chin on the concrete floor. I tasted blood on my tongue.

"Stay away from me!" Myrtle grabbed a metal dipper and lumbered up the safety ladder on Vat #2. The jelly overheated, boiling into slimy waves of mush.

"Come down from there, you're gonna get hurt!"

"Going to get hurt?" She waved the metal dipper overhead, left to right, left to right, as if fine-tuning a television antennae. "How can you hurt what's just been killed?"

Penny Panderkin and Jimmy Bowen breezed into the factory.

"What's going on, what's she doing up there?" Penny asked me.

"Hey Penny!" Myrtle plunged the dipper into the vat and slung about a gallon of scalding jelly at her.

Penny screamed and sidestepped the blazing arc of liquefied sugar and apples. Beside her foot, a puddle of burnt jelly sizzled on the concrete floor.

"Myrtle, *calm down!*" Jimmy yelled up at her.

"*Calm down?*" Myrtle barked out a laugh. "All right, I'll calm down." She climbed to the ladder's top rung; her body teetered over the vat's seething, molten mixture.

"Somebody needs to call the police," Penny said.

At that moment, a lizard skittered along the windowsill behind the vat. Myrtle leaned unsteadily toward it. Billows of steam burped up from the vat, matting her hair and marbling her skin in streams of sweat.

"Myrtle, please!" Penny yelled. "Try to understand—"

"I *do* understand," Myrtle yelled back. Then she grabbed the lizard, raised it overhead and threw it down into the vat of spluttering jelly.

Candi Chu

"Did you see that?" Penny shrieked. "She threw a live animal in there!"
"This has gone far enough, I'm putting a stop to this," Jimmy said.
"So, little Jim-bo wants to be a he-ro," Myrtle singsonged.
He moved toward the safety ladder.
Myrtle leaned over the steaming, roaring vat. She filled the dipper with
hot jelly and slung it at Jimmy,
He fell backward.
His body landed across my feet.
The searing liquid nailed me in the face.
"Oh God Cordy Oh God Cordy Oh God Oh God!"

They didn't have to call the police. I could've told them Myrtle was
never out to hurt anyone. And besides, if they were arresting for hurt that
day, the police should've arrested Aunt Penny's Homemade Jellies and
Preserves.

I lost the right side of my face and almost my right eye. Like I told
Myrtle, I look like a movie star now: The Phantom of the Opera. I'd
rather look like Elizabeth Taylor, but wouldn't we all?

Myrtle checked into Bryce's, the mental hospital. I went up to
Tuscaloosa to visit her; it's real quiet there, all white coats and soft talk.
They give her medication to calm her down. She doesn't like the food.

I hope while she's there they make her go see a dentist.

HP

the newly drowned

by Matthew Moses

their heads turned down,
shoulders slumped forward,
arc-like;
there is no more rigidity
for them: they are like toy parachutes
holding the power
of the hundredpound-heavy air.

a child on the beach with toy
—man, string, chute—
amazed by the power of nothing;
the power of the nothing. in the physics.
of the plastic man. floating down
so gently. to the sand. this nothing.
laying him down so gently.

the drowned man,
won't touch
the ocean's last stair
for a week. the air
will slip
from his body . . .

Pattaya Beach, Thailand

M. J. Pallotta

The pole dancer at the open-air bar
is undulating her long thin body
among uninterested beer drinkers.
Shiny thigh-high boots spin.
In her bored mind
she is home sleeping.
There is no moving air
to clear the dank coalblack evening.
Down the street
a child sells Chiclets.
Fried bugs are for sale
in three greasedirt woks.
The dancer is now topless,
her skin smooth and dark
from the June wetsteam sun.

CONTRIBUTORS

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EILEEN TABIOS is a poet, fiction writer, critic, publisher and editor. Her books include a poetry collection, *Beyond Life Sentences*, which received the Philippines' National Book Award for Poetry. She is the publisher and founding editor of Meritage Press (a literary and visual arts press based in St. Helena, CA).

RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE is the Anastasia C. Hoffman Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Creative Writing. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Arts & Letters*, *Quarterly West*, and *Ploughshares*. His most recent books are *Say Hello* (Pecan Grove Press, 2001) and the anthology *American Diaspora: Poetry of Displacement* (University of Iowa Press, 2001). He currently is working on a poetry textbook due out in early 2002 from Allyn & Bacon/Longman.

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