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table of contents

poetry (the passionate stuff)

Sami Schalk	1
Eric Obame	2
David McLean	3
Brian Hosey <i>art</i>	3
Jack Henry	3
Martins Iyoboyi	4
Cheryl Townsend <i>art</i>	4
Sergio Ortiz	4
David LaBounty	5
Duane Locke	5
Benjamin Nardolilli	6
Sam Brown	7
Eric Bonholtzer <i>art</i>	7
Kenneth Pobo	8
Nicole Aimiee Macaluso <i>art</i>	8
Serena Spinello	9
Joshua Copeland	10
John Grey	11
Janet Kuypers	12

prose (the meat & potatoes stuff)

Kenneth DiMaggio	12
Eli Perlow	14
Junior McLean <i>art</i>	23
Timothy Wallace	24
Mel Waldman	33
Aaron Wilder <i>art</i>	32
Liana Vrajitoru Andreasen	34
David W. Landrum	38
Kristina Marie Darling	43
Peter Schwartz <i>art</i>	44

Scars art

6 (people wearing masks include Rachel, Janet, Joe, Eugene, Brian, Jay, Jocelyn and Diane), 9 (Army ROTC members repelling off an Urbana wall), 10 (a finch taking off from a cactus in the Galapagos Islands). Cover art of tree branches in the Galapagos Islands.

Modern Mary Magdalene

Sami Schalk

he wants to be so good
this missionary man
who tells me i should
not leave the church
just because when
i was an altar girl
the priest let me drink
left-over communion wine
and told me i was pretty

he wants to be so good
we have long conversations
over tall, dark beers
he tells me poetry can be prayer
he tries to save me
but when he walks me home
he whips it out and tells me
he wants to “do” me
i laugh and ask if
that’s what jesus would do
he cries and tells me
i make him immoral

he wants to be so good
this missionary man
i pity his failure
fake the orgasm
and cry out to his god
pretending to be converted

poetry
the passionate stuff

Pluto 2

Eric Obame

It turns out that my close-then-far turn around the sun
Might be the norm in the galaxy, instead of the exception
It turns out that big sister Jupiter is not that big
She is just the fattest on our block
It turns out that big balls of gas, like her, can spin around their fathers
From even closer than where our Mercury lives
It has been over a year since my demotion
It has been over a year since I was disowned
It has been over a year since plutoed became a verb
It has been over a year since 9 became 8
To avoid recognizing a 10 and an 11
It has been over a year since I was labeled a dwarf
An almost
A not quite
A thing between being and not being a part of the family
A child that no one wants to recognize
Because of my size
Because of my unusual lifestyle
Unlike my sisters, I actually have friends
Unlike my sisters, I did not push all my friends away, or eat them

Hot Jupiters and eccentric giants exist
My orbit only looks weird because my sisters are freaks
With their pretty revolutions around father
Since planets can be much bigger than Jupiter and not turn into stars
Should we not assume that the opposite is true?
That they can be just as small as me—smaller than some moons?
It turns out that the universe does not see us as the standard of solar systems
With my behavior foiling a perfect score
I have daughters like you
They are Charon, Hydra, and Nix
I am not a dwarf
I am your little sister Pluto

i was running

David McLean

i was running out of hearts
and memories, there were only
so many skeletons inside me
and i had assembled them all
here, on the verge of my grave
that steals each minute
to stir down in its loveless
fucking cup

i was running out of nightmares
so i replay the first of them
i downloaded from hell's
website. it is night already,
and our skins are too tight
around us, black and white
and the thoughtless bone
we hold for comfort

is memory, i was running out
of skeletal memories
enough – i was pretty
fucked



art by
Brian
Hosey

she can't call me no one

Jack Henry

we met downtown
late on a Tuesday
standing at a traffic light
wondering which way to go

she's got the kind of
tits you want to steal
and keep in a box under
the bed

i don't speak, my eyes too mean
words fail, my kidney just gave out,
livers about gone, but my heart
keeps thumping, i wonder about
my cock, but that went first

traffic cop drives by, she smiles
- at him, not me
he smiles back, thin lips part
showering his sabre tooth smile

light changes, she shuffles across at
the green, my eyes watch each step,
long legs climb to delicate curves
i suspect a twitch behind my
zipper, but it's just gas

maybe tomorrow, maybe not

There Are No Foes

Martins Iyoboyi

There are no foes but the leaders
who have assailed us with their bitter hate,
there is no poverty but the stolen wealth where
the nation bleeds to enrich foreign lands.
The leaders have tasted many a vice
and like vermin destroy the tissues of the land.



Cozy Cat, art by
Cheryl Townsend

At the Church of 80% Sincerity

Sergio Ortiz

it was no crime to be born a delicate
male, but reaching puberty
while you're opening up a frog
in biology class ruined
your sex life for good.
Games were another gray area.
No such thing as "hard" contact
during basket-ball practice was allowed,
and it wasn't because of the balls,
or the running style.
So, I took ballet three nights a week,
studied sincerity percentages.
It was not easy.
Everyone I knew hid 20%
of their life at the Church
of 80% Sincerity.

An Egalitarian Moment

David LaBounty

a Sunday drive past

the power
lines and ribbons
of freeway
out to the

farmless
show-and-tell barns
attached to
subdivisions
of chimneys and
gables and brick
where the
over-sized houses

are only slight
variations of
a perpetual theme.

the Chevrolet
misfires and
stalls and fires
again as his son

sits in his
carseat eating
French fries
and asks
if they could
move someday?
and he doesn't
know how to
tell his son that,

tire salesmen
and their children

will probably
never live in a
place like this
and he scans
the rows of
houses like
so many teeth
perfect and white.

no sign of
democracy

anywhere.

Yang Chu's Poem 456

Duane Locke

"Master, is it better to let go,
Or to hold on?"

"What are you holding?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know,"

"No, I don't know."

"Well, don't let go,
And don't keep it."

Tribal Art

Benjamin Nardolilli

My collection of masks is not hung
Up to illustrate a wall,
To show strangers where I've been,
Or how much I know
Of medical rituals and religions
I can only call primitive
With braces, a mask with two faces.

They are made from what is splendid
And easily at hand inside me
They are crafted by those I meet
And I receive them as a gift
To wear them when I see them again,
All trace of clouds in my eyes
And flames on my tongue hidden
But not smothered.

My masks hold together
The facets of this face, this heart,
They keep the lips in place,
To say the right word,
They do not honor the dead,
They only serve the living,
Ready and polished, they age
And mix well with my skin
And fading features, keeping
Strength in being distinctive.



Aluminum Beginnings

Sam Brown

Summer's past passed slowly
with needles dangling from our arms
like sparkling bulbs on a Christmas tree.
We forgot the joys of eating
raw blueberries in the fields of Hammonton.

We forgot how to be young and careless
with the urgency of dope sick hanging over our heads.
There were no more lazy days at the beach,
just expired milk for blood
and headaches instead of birthdays.

best friends gone bad
you, me, and this debauchery of our lives
The sun is melting mercury,
seeping into our eyes,
forlorn holes that cannot see.

We waited in that hot box car for hours.
Come on pusher man, push.
I pushed the spike and waited three seconds
until the golden brown joy vindicated
every spec of pain those tiny bags contained.

Living for those cool summer nights
when we'd smoke a whole pack
down by the bay
waiting for the rush to lose its charm.

But there was never any money left for tomorrow,
and I just thank God
it wasn't me in there
sucking his dick.



art by Eric Bonholtzer

No Other Way

Kenneth Pobo

By 18, Steve's stopped
praying to stop wanting
other men, but here he

is again, another Sunday,
his parents beside him.
When Pastor says stone
gays and lesbians, Steve
wants to stand up

and say "Start with me"
to those who babysat him,
gave him summer jobs,
fed him. He sees
his dad nod, how many

eyes latch on to the figure
behind the pulpit—mum Steve
imagines the building
crumbling into stones,
one for each believer,

the choir singing
"Trust And Obey"
as his bones crack,
his skull caves in,
and his parents invite

Pastor for dinner now
that there's another
place at the table.



Summery Angst, art by
Nicole Aimiee Macaluso

Soldier Awarded Purple Heart (and denied Cheerios)

Serena Spinello

He was fearless
proud of his country
went overseas to serve.

Predictably the tragic circumstances ensued.
Wounded in the line of duty, he was shipped back to the states.
Physical therapy is helping, though he's unable to sit or stand for more
than two hours.

I went to see him, as soon as he was released.
He had been neglected and was experiencing hunger pains.
I took him to *Bush's* Supermarket.
His stomach belted out the national anthem
as he placed his cheerios, milk, and banana on the checkout stand.
My heart wailed when they gave him the sum of his purchases.
He ran his red, white and blue credit card through the machine.
Denied!

Rejected!
You don't have enough to cover this sir-
milk alone is \$500 and you have chosen Skim..
That will be an extra \$50.
It's not covered under your plan, I'm afraid,
Nor is this banana-
The co pay alone for this fruit is \$40.
I see you have coverage under part 'United and States'
HOWEVER-
of America
is what you will need if you ever want Cheerios.



The Biggest Bird in the World!

Joshua Copeland

When I lived on the fourth floor
of the Cavendish
on the border of Shadyside
and Homewood the family
across the street
was the soap opera. Our doorman
hated them. A flag with the
eagle emblem hung
above our entrance. He made sure
to unhinge it, take it down, and vacuum it
daily.

Dollhouse,
Paper Mache Las Vegas,
Salvation Army puppet show.
The window stamped like
a cookie cutter
a 27 inch screen.

Brawls, public intoxication, laughing, screaming,
shrieking, toking, sobbing, paddy wagons, flashing sirens
like landed UFO's. Day and night. Especially night. The cops chuckled
and patted them on the back as you would
a younger sibling who
intermittently annoyed. The brothers left
the house and slipped into the alley
every time they had to
go to the bathroom. So how did
the sisters and mom handle theirs?

Across from them our trash bins.
I don't know how the family
put up with the smell. Rats ate
there nightly. House cats ate the rats.



If I pressed my face to the glass
I saw our fire escape peripherally
to the left.

A woman shouted and swung
a steak knife at a slowly
retreating man. He
made faces at her. Little kids poised on bikes, a rainbow kiddie sneaker
on the cement, the other on a peddle,
watched with half moon smiles.
Moons. Smiles. The woman turned to
yell at them and the man lunged
at her and ripped the knife
away. A little girl said, "Now you watch
what you do, Daryl. She's a
woman." She kept shouting
at him. I pushed my nose into
the window and saw

the largest bird in the world. A vulture,
but fucking huge (In the city?). Its claws wrung
the black metal handrail. A smear of thick gray feathers
like drunk water colors
hugged up to the sinewy head. I had never seen
a bird
that gigantic
before.
Not even on
a nature show. Its beak screamed
bloody canine yellow.

The Wind Picks

John Grey

Along the shore, sunset like
a cherry drink through a glass,
drawn out until it loses all content,
is thin as wind that flutters, twists,
almost braids, a young girl's brown hair.
Broken sea grass fences sway.
On a rooftop, a tin chicken spins.
And surf gyrates like a huge belly dancer.
People hike the esplanade,
squeeze sun hats tight to heads.
Even passing cars feel the tug of willful air.
White, gray, brown shapes drop to the sand,
sea birds giving up the fight of flight.

Knowing Kevorkian

Janet Kuypers

Oh, I knew Kevorkian
he used to be a pathologist
he used to do autopsies
for my precinct

what I remember about
Kevorkian
was that he'd go out
with us, for drinks, you know

and he'd get a gin martini
but he would always have
just one, and he'd never
join the conversation

I never thought he had
anything to say, never thought
he'd have a cause
well, I guess he did

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

The Shirt Kenneth DiMaggio

Sal and Naomi's relationship had already reached its first crisis: Naomi wanted to decide what her man should wear.

This was not a bad thing. Sal had only worn T-shirts. That was not so bad; well, it could have been better if Sal's T-shirts did not have skulls, bones, angry anarchist slogans, and the profiles of famous serial killers on them.

Sal tried to get around this great crisis.

"It's not like I have a job where I need any fancy clothes," Sal told Naomi.

"And maybe if you had some normal clothes, you would have a job," Naomi replied.

Sal gave in, and went with Naomi to a discount outlet of a famous brand name department store. Like many guys, Sal just wanted to walk into a store (especially one that sold clothing) buy what he needed, and get the hell out as fast as possible to do something more constructive, such as watching the Yankees kick the ass of the Red Sox.

Naomi, however, adapted to the men's department of the store like a bat discovering a new attic with a hundred little nooks and crannies. She prodded and poked bins, yanked off several coat-hanger hung shirts and just as quickly examined them in less than a nanosecond before deciding they were no good, and she even managed to carefully fold any carefully-folded piece of clothing that she quickly picked up and then quickly discarded. Damn, Sal thought with admiration, I can't even fold my own laundry, much less clothes that I am not going to buy.

“Let’s try this,” Naomi said as she held up a white and blue pin-striped shirt before him. Ugh, thought Sal; not just because of its business like appearance, but also because:

“It’s got buttons,” he whined.

“Yeah, well, it’s a shirt!” Naomi said.

Once she modeled it against Sal, she quickly pulled it away and re-racked it. Great, Sal thought. It didn’t match my sparkling personality, so we can go. Before Sal finished what he thought was a pretty witty thought, Naomi was already matching him with another button down shirt: a blue pastel.

“What?” Sal complained. “That’s what the clerks wear at Blockbuster Video!”

But Naomi was not hearing him. She was quickly un-racking, modeling, and re-racking shirts. By now, Sal was willing to surrender: he would wear a button down shirt. Even one that made him look like a clerk at Blockbusters. Unfortunately, his girlfriend was not easily satisfied. And Sal soon wondered if she would ever be satisfied at the way she went through shirt after shirt, when after all, it was just a shirt!

“This one,” Naomi said with satisfaction that caught Sal off guard. “You hold it up against yourself and tell me what you think. I think it highlights your eyes.”

“What?” Sal said as he laughed. But when he held the glossy black button down shirt against his chest and looked at his reflection in a nearby mirror, his eyes did seem to match the new fabric; his eyes did seem like the onyx stone of a ring he once got for his birthday and after one or two wearings, was exiled to a bedroom drawer.

The black also seemed to put “steel”--even “stiletto” into Sal’s usual slouch and slacker. Hell, Sal thought, half in jest, but half seriously, I could even pass for a gangster.

“Don’t fall too in love with yourself,” Naomi said, as she took the shirt back.

“What are you doing,” Sal said, as he reached for the shirt.

Naomi giggled.

“I was going to buy it for you, not put it back,” she said.

“I knew that,” Sal said.

“Sure,” she said, even though Sal knew that she was lying. But Sal felt good after Naomi paid for the shirt and they left the store, deciding to stop for ice cream at a nearby Baskin Robbins (Sal’s suggestion). Naomi did not decline; (unusual; for she was “always on a diet”). Naomi seemed happy and content.

If this was my first big crisis in our relationship, no big deal, Sal thought. Bring on some more.

“Great,” Naomi said as they approached the Baskin Robbins. “There’s a shoe store right next door. After we’re done, I’m going to get you some shoes.”

Fuck, Sal thought, as he sadly looked down at his black high-top Converse, wondering if he would ever see them again, along with his leather motorcycle jacket, his 2-dozen plus T-shirts, couple of Yankees hats, and six or seven pairs of jeans: the wardrobe of a “guy” before he was in a relationship. The wardrobe that only a woman--and only one kind of woman--could get a man to discard.

Of Tempests In Teacups

Eli Perlow

If it were up for contest, John Forsyth would surely be right up there at the top of the heap in the “most eligible widower” sweepstakes. A gentleman’s gentleman and a kindhearted dad, John had “catch” written all over him. The death of his soul mate, Jacquelyn, was not something that he or their daughter Cynthia would ever really fully get over; nor should they have been expected to. Akin to self-medicating, John had found himself going through a prolonged period of serial monogamy. Already some thing of a loner, his daughter Cynthia was unable to focus for too long on the memory of her mother; the tragedy was just way too painful for her.

Catherine was John’s latest vice; and it had been taking a heavy toll on his daughter. Chaos attracts chaos, and John’s scattered heart was nothing if not a clarion call of an invitation for women like Catherine to come a’saunterin by. He was blinded by her and failed at being able to ever view her for what she really was – a completely dysfunctional nut job, and this ignorance only served to add fuel to his daughter’s tortured fire.

“Wake up, darling,” John brushed the back of his hand by his Cynthia’s cheek. “It’s a great day out, whats say you get outta bed, have some breakfast, and go to school?”

The smell of John’s buttermilk pancakes wafted on and into the room.

“Awww...fuck school,” Cynthia blurted with a groan.

Cynthia had spent the better part of the school year at home. She could not be expelled, at least not yet. When she was fourteen, she had been molested by her history teacher, producing a bag of blackmail large enough to all but secure her spot in class no matter how absent she was. John did not have the time, energy, or patience right now to rig up some sorta ingenious scheme to get her daughter from point A, bed, to point B, school. He left the room with a frenzied sigh, finished getting dressed, and rushed out the door to work.

Cynthia gazed around her bedroom from the nest of her bed. She eyed the carnation pink walls, a color that she had chosen when she was just a small girl. Her mother had lovingly told her that since this would be her room for a good long while, she should be the one to pick out its color scheme. She slipped out of bed and took a shower sans shampoo. She tried to keep her shampoo use to a minimum due to the makeup of her kinky hair. “Its caused by a high concentration of a certain chemical bond found in all hair, but to a greater degree in curly hair, like ours”, her dad had once explained to her. “I’m sorry that you had to inherit *that* from me,” he would say.

John Forsyth snaked his way through the labyrinthine maze that was the mess of cubicles labeled Center One as quickly as he could to get to his back office. Paul, the security guard reading the paper by the entrance, let a g’morning crackle

through his two-pack a day larynx. John had been recruited a couple years prior by the Center to help with the development of new government technology. During the design process it was of course kept top secret; outside of John, none of the individual developers had a clue as to what it was that they were actually working on. Every engineer perfected his “piece” of the puzzle, but very few were actually privy to the finished masterpiece. John thought himself a white hat hacker - he enjoyed tinkering and getting to the root of things, eliciting for him the personal fulfillment that comes from knowing what makes them tick, and hopefully helping society at large as a by-product. When he first arrived as part of a new government team two years prior, before this project had been a wisp of thought in anyone’s mind, he had already stealthily infiltrated the entire government network that it was to be built inside of. He was on a short and exclusive list of those with seemingly unadulterated access to the entire program – with no one else on the list being the wiser. He had a copy of the program on a flash memory drive locked away securely in his house’s study. John booted up his office terminal, went through his inbox, and, before getting started on his regular work, logged clandestinely into the truly classified shit that he wasn’t supposed to be able to see. The “secure” inbox included a new memo at the top of the heap. John skimmed it quickly, skipping to the important part, which was hashed out in bold point:

“...they are alive, just like you and me - there is nothing fundamentally different about them; therefore, unless and until absolutely necessary, we must not make use of it.”

John could not help but laugh. Did the brass not have a clue as to what they were dealing with while the program was being built? Why build the bomb if it just might seal your own fate?

Cynthia Forsyth was different than the other girls that she knew. “Hyper-introspective” was the term that she had coined to describe herself. The full extent of her psychological complex was, well, complex, and hard to encapsulate and pigeonhole in some curt set of diagnostical paragraphs hashed out inside some thick book on a shrink’s coffee table. Of course her environment and biology played a role in what she currently was – people don’t just come out of the woodwork of a vacuum. Understandably, the loss of her mother at a young age and her later sexual exploitation was a terrible source of pain which her developmental reality had gradually ensconced itself around. But, aside from all that one could ostensibly see and understand about her upon observance, her issues still ran deeper than what might be considered rationally explainable; the sum of her collective trauma was somehow much greater than its known individual parts. An element of her neurosis might have been that, to some degree, she felt that she was more “real” than others. This was, of course, a recipe for disaster; as once accepting this notion as a given, her thoughts would take a dour pattern, a mental thread that by and large would run something like this:

“If I am more real than others, than where does that leave the said others? Can they “feel” any less than I can feel? No, of course that can not be the case. It’s selfish for me to think that I have some special element that is lacking in others.

But when I realize this, I feel that my life takes on an air of complete meaninglessness; no reason for me to be, nothing unique for me to offer the world.”

Of course, one might feel compelled to play armchair analyst with her and (logically) explain to her in a thousand and one ways the fallacies inherent in her thought process. But that does not much matter - rest assured, she would, in the end of the day, “out logic” the said analyst and return to her state of depression, as objectively illogical as it might have been. Seemingly endless amounts of her time would be spent scrutinizing herself in front of her mirror.

“I’m too fat,” she would think, when the reality was that she was far too thin.

“I’m ugly,” this line of thought would continue; when in fact she was quite an attractive young lady.

Her wishes and aspirations were quite often related generally to death and specifically to a painless and near-future demise; a sure but steady vanishing into nonexistence. A return to the pre-organic; a plea from entropy to inflict itself on her at near-light speed, this was what Cynthia was looking for. Life, she felt, had been hard on her; she had already given up and was now more or less just running on auto (and empty).

She had installed a demo version of *OmniSim* (a recently released universe-simulation game) months before, and after enjoying the experience, had since retrieved a pirated complete addition from some shady corner of cyberspace. A diversion at first, she was quickly developing a keen addiction to it. “Millions” of years passed in quick succession as she carefully guided her universe into some sort of order. She was not *that* adept at the program yet, so she decided to take it slow and focus on just one area of her creation; and for now to at least allow the rest of this universe to function more or less on auto pilot. The area of space she favored most contained a planet that was very favorable to the conditions that foster life. For now, at least, this would be her focus. She enjoyed watching single cell organisms scuttle about in the planet’s big, blue, primordial pool. There was a broadband multi player capability to the game, but she did not make use of it - the wireless signal to her room was moody and could be slow at times, besides which, she just felt much more comfortable using her bedroom terminal than the family room hub. She was a very singular person. She liked being that way. The virtual “years” went by, up to the point that she had primates evolving into thinking persons. She was having a blast.

The *real* days and weeks fluttered on by. On a beautifully calm autumnal morning, bad news arrived in John’s inbox. He was given the pink slip as government spending was being tightened, and it was decided all around the upper echelons of the powers that be that his entire team could, should, and would be liquidated. Their research was important, and so was a million other scientific, medical, and technological endeavors, but what was *really* imperative was spending a disproportionate amount of the national budget on destroying other countries.

Priorities.

With each passing unemployed day, John felt more and more emasculated. It made Cynthia’s day that John also received *Catherine’s* pink slip. Going days

without taking a shave, he was becoming a hard-core mess. He continued tinkering around with the classified program that he had retained from day's yore. It had already been beta-tested to death though – on some level he knew that he was merely chasing his tail. Starting to get shoddy about keeping it secure, he got into the habit of being too lazy to keep it under constant lock and key.

Out of curiosity, Cynthia loaded it up one day when she saw it sitting around on the breakfast room table. She noticed that its executive functions were compatible with *Omnisim*. So she did what came naturally to her and loaded it up, applying its source code to her universe. No noticeable changes occurred. She forgot about it, returned the flash drive to the aforementioned table, and continued to gently goad the development of her world.

Cynthia went through the never-ending ups and downs of her daily teenage life, at times finding herself completely deflated, and, at other times, absolutely elated.

"Cyclothymic", she had once been pronounced by a psychiatrist as being.

She had bounced around from one antidepressant and mood stabilizer to the next without any of them being able to help her out too much; antipsychotics were all but ready to be tried in the next round on the carrousel of her mentally-ill life:

"Hey, dollface, Lets just adjust a few neurotransmitters here, some receptors there - we'll make a star outta ya!"

Unbeknownst to her, the game she had been spending a great amount of her waking hours playing had ceased to be just another one dimensional escapist diversion; in truth its inhabitants were just as real as you and I – credit for that goes indirectly to her daddy, of course. Her sole gratification in life was increasingly coming from her creation. When angry, she would have her way with them; when moods of tranquility would set in, she tended to lavish kindness. The viewable reactions of her subjects would placate her the way opiates might the narcotic addict.

She was dimly aware of the fact that her growing preoccupation and infatuation was removing her more and more from the real world. She had pretty much completely stopped going to school. She had very few friends. She was vegging out – "growin roots", you might say. She started to think that her brain mass was slowly and subtly – she felt mentally lethargic. She decided at one point to try and fight - albeit weakly - against the tide of isolation that she had created for herself by going for walks (alone, of course) in the public park. There she would take in its beautiful floral gardens, ruddy paths, and all the other visceral and visual delights that nature could provide her with. Her mind would be empty during these daily dalliances. She eventually tired of going to the public park - too many people around. Instead she would drive her dad's car into some rustic neighborhood, whose inhabitants were all sure to be at work, and walk along the sidewalks hypnotically, taking in the rhythm of sun followed by shade followed by sun, ad infinitum. Becoming more and more detached, she started going to a saccharine psychologist out of her heightened concern regarding her mental state's growing decline. It did not do very much good for her, so she dropped it after maybe a dozen sessions.

Things finally reached a grand low point when Catherine arrived impromptu at the Forsyth residence to pick up some of the stuff that she had left behind. It was the perfect storm for Cynthia; she had just started cutting herself for the first time earlier that day. After Cynthia went on a manic tirade, spewing all sorts of threats and slurs Catherine's way (not to mention destroying some of Catherine's prized shit), her dad rushed her to the hospital. Disheveled himself, he was on alert for suicidal behavior from Cynthia. He started to cry from behind the wheel - seeing that his daughter had cut herself up like that, it was just too much for him.

"Why are you crying?" she listlessly asked

"You failed me, Cynthia; you failed me," was his only muted response.

She spent the night in the emergency room. A tall, dark psychiatrist abruptly awakened her early in the morning, and asked her a barrage of questions. Absurdly, the important ones were peppered in between the silly ones. They were:

"Do you intend to inflict physical harm on others? Do you intend to harm yourself?"

"No, I do not intend to harm others; myself - that much I just don't know right now," she answered honestly.

"Ok, I'll be back in five, ten minutes."

By the twenty minute mark, he had still not returned. Cynthia stepped out of her room to check out the sitch...she walked over in her gown and traction-equipped hospital socks to the nurse's station to ask about the doctor's whereabouts.

"Oh, I don't know about that hon, but your transportation will be here within the next few minutes," the nurse distractedly informed her.

And just like that she was carted out of the ER. She spent the next eight days in a mental institution. It was there that a sweet and scary deepening of her self-awareness set in. She found herself questioning the true essence of her sexuality. In a plain and superficial sense, she was sure that her sexual attraction belonged to men, but on an emotional level, she began questioning herself upon meeting a foreign girl, Yael. Something about her...Yael's eyes screamed with a searing empathy. With one look, they spoke right into her soul, saying, "Cynthia, sweetheart - I understand you, let me hold you, let me protect you." When she looked into them, she could swear that she was being enveloped within the Divine. To Cynthia, Yael was a stunning beauty, possessing those sky-blue eyes that seem to continue right on to and through a warm and nurturing infinity. Cynthia was entranced. They would sit together and talk and talk. She felt alive...electric around Yael. She wanted to put her arms around her, hold her tight, kiss her entire face over and over, stroke her hair, and remain in such a protective cocoon forever. Tremendous separation anxiety erupted inside of Cynthia whenever they were not together.

On one of the mornings during her stay on the unit, Cynthia found herself playing a board game with another patient after breakfast. Cynthia was clearly losing. A hospital employee went over to her to ask her about some trivial sub-

ject matter, like the weather or something, and Cynthia turned it into a whole topic of debate. The employee found herself a little non-plussed at the dialectic she had been drawn into.

“Very intellectual – you’re a very intelligent young lady, huh?” the employee dumbfoundedly offered after their one-sided give and take.

“Oh ya, well if I’m such an earth-shattering intellectual, how come I can’t win a board game against this fucking schizoaffective degenerate dickwad over here?” she thought. She just nodded politely and emptily at the employee instead.

She remembered how the first therapist she went to – they met for a total of one session, mind you – commented early on in her session that she was an intellectual. Her face had noticeably blushed upon hearing that statement.

“I never said that you are smart, although you may be, all I said was that you are an intellectual – more than anything else, it is simply a personality type”, the bearded therapist had let her know. Whatever *that* was supposed to mean.

During that session, the therapist asked her about her deceased mother.

“What is the earliest memory you have concerning your relationship with your mother?” he asked.

“Well I have lots of scattered stuff in my mind from when I was three or so, you know, like her trying to tame my unruly hair, or her pretending like I was actually helping her bake a sheet of cookies, stuff like that. My first *clear* memory of my connection with my mom is probably from something that occurred when I was maybe five years old, not all that long before she died,” she answered.

“Please, go on and go through the event for me, if you can,” the therapist prompted her.

“Ok, well, it was after school during the early part of summer. It was a nice day out. My mother took me in the car with her to the playground. She gave me some starter pushes on the swing set, and I started pumping away on it like crazy. I went as high as possible – to the point where the chains of the swing can’t take you any higher because the structure of the swing set is not tall enough, so the chains give some slack and you go into a temporary free fall and feel almost weightless for a couple of seconds. Anyway, it was euphoric for me, and my mom was standing and watching with a big smile on her face, like she was so proud of me – all I was doing was swinging, mind you. The chains of the swing were old and rusty, and after a few minutes of this the left set of chains snapped, sending me flying. My head hit the ground with a thud. I was rushed to the emergency room and received a whole bunch of stitches on my forehead.” She pointed to her scar. “Anyway, when my mom was taking me back home after the doctor finished putting me back together, she held my hand while driving; she looked right at me, and she told me how much she loved me, and how she would never leave me.”

“So, do you...do you feel abandoned?” the therapist asked.

Cynthia was misty-eyed and could not produce an answer.

Cynthia’s father would come and see her pretty much on a daily basis during

the hospital's visiting hours. She really did not have all that much interest in seeing him, as she felt completely betrayed by him.

"Why did *you* do this to me, daddy? Are you completely unaware of the harm your current and previous flames have caused me? How fucking stupid are you?" she hissed at him during one of his visits.

Her father did not have much to say, he just stay there, silent, with a pseudo-introspective look painted on his face.

Looking at her now, all he could think of was his dead wife; and how he did not want Cynthia to meet the same fate. Not now, not in his lifetime. It had been almost twelve years since Jacqueline had taken her own life. She had drawn a bath in their black cast iron clawfoot tub – a nice frothy float of bubbles crowned the water with a thick and foamy head. Jackie lit some soothing aromatherapy candles all around the tub. She sank in and perused through that month's issue of Elle. She read it in its original French. She had ninety pills of something or other inside of her, quieting down her central nervous system to a low hum. John came home from work and couldn't process the asymmetrical scene: blood everywhere around the tub, a razor blade resting on the tiled bathroom floor; and Jackie with an angelic, peaceful look on her face. Cynthia had been told that her mother had died in a car accident.

Somehow he knew he had to reach out to his daughter, but he was still so wretchedly filled with misery over the deep losses of his own life - he simply did not have the language to connect with her right now in any way, shape, or form.

"I brought you some food, Cyndi," John offered. "It's all wrapped up in paper plates taped together - they wouldn't allow me to bring anything here inside a bag; safety measures, all those people on suicide watch and all."

Cynthia rolled her eyes and looked up and at the ceiling.

"I'm, sorry Cyndi, I did not mean it like that," John said.

"I know dad, I just don't have anything to talk to you about right now," she mumbled.

John's body language displayed an attempt at digesting this *entire* situation that he and his lone daughter had found themselves in. After a couple minutes of mutual silence, John stood up, stalled for a few seconds, and left the premises.

When going to sleep that night, Cynthia started witnessing creatures of the night appear in her hospital room, telling her that it's all over, that she should take a proactive stand against her miserable existence. Sleep arrived at some point, and brought with it a vivid matinee.

Cynthia was sitting at the head of a table, with two long tables on either side of hers, forming a big U-like shape, in a great white ballroom. She appeared older looking, early twenties or so. Was this an engagement party - for her? Graduation party? Celebration for recognition of some other sort? Various people got up to speak, she was not sure what they were saying - it was like it was all in some other language or something, but it seemed as though she was on the receiving end of lavish praise. Sometime during the speeches a beautiful woman walked in from the lobby with a flask of liquid in her hand. She walked straight

up to Cynthia. Cynthia recognized her for what she was: some kind of a bastardized hybrid of all her dad's flames, past and present. She spoke warmly to Cynthia, shook her hand and congratulated her ambiguously. She offered her a glass from her antique crystal flask. Cynthia declined.

"Oh but you must try some," the lady insisted.

Cynthia just shook her head. "No thanks, I'm good," she said.

Very quickly the lady's expression turned from one of kindness into one of contorted malice. Cynthia at once was cognizant of what was contained in the lady's flask. Her urine.

"Drink it, you fucking bitch!" the lady yelled.

Before Cynthia had a chance to react the lady had already taken the flask and spilled its contents all over her.

Cynthia woke up in a cold, terrified sweat. She looked at her watch: 4:10 a.m. She desperately needed the bathroom. Once she was at it, she decided to just get out of bed and start her day. She jumped into the shower. It was the standard mental hospital issue stall: just to wash one's arms a button has to be pushed four or five times – probably something like twenty seconds of water per push.

After the hospital's team - which included nothing less than two psychiatrists, two social workers, and a psychiatric nurse - came to the conclusion that Cynthia was ready to go, she returned home. Home is not always where the heart is, not if the heart is so vague that one has to physically feel it and remind oneself that it is in fact still intact, that there is actually a faint but ticking pulse somewhere there. Cynthia did not take Yael's phone number with her upon her departure. She felt, rightly or wrongly, that she had somehow repelled Yael towards the end of her stay, and whether or not that was actually the case, she just wanted to put this whole phase of her life completely behind her, thank you very much.

When she returned to her carnation pink bedroom, Cynthia witnessed the progress that had occurred on her "world" while it had been running on automatic. Generations had lived and died, hated and loved. She watched how the planet's inhabitants had organized themselves into various tribal groups of hunters and gatherers. Before long isolated cities had begun to spring up. It was at around this point in time that Cynthia started playing around with one of the more high-tech components of the game, something that she was starting to familiarize herself with. Due to the advanced artificial intelligence that the developers had imbued their game with, she was capable of singling out particular people in order to communicate with them in dialog form. Cynthia found it a little pathetic to fill up the void of her lacking social life by interacting with what she perceived to be no more than strings of ones and zeros, but that sense soon evaporated as she became more and more entranced with the game's intimate nature. She would hand pick people to communicate with, some of the bold and charismatic born leader types. She was attracted to their style and drive, and became intimately close with them. This pattern repeated itself at various different epochs of her game's timeline.

The adverse effect of these relationships with her "favorites" made itself known

through violent global tragedies. Cataclysmic wars were waged and hundreds of millions were killed throughout the centuries because of one of her intimate's ideologies clashing with another's. Cynthia viewed this with a mix of bemusement and horror; it also served to lift her sense of self tremendously – even if it was only virtual beings fighting each other in her name. I don't know how she would have taken it if had she known that these creations were in fact quite real.

The game had a sort of built in language buffer between the outside, real world, and its own virtual world. Key strokes on Cynthia's part had to be translated into the machine language that the game's inhabitants could "understand", making it that in a certain way the people on the "inside" did not exactly intuit Cynthia as *Cynthia*, but as something or someone similar, but subtly different. The reverse also applied. The names – and understandings - that Cynthia appended to some of the people, places, and things on her world did not quite reflect the machine language that the inhabitants themselves would use to "communicate" with each other.

Maybe Cynthia's new meds started to reach a hiccup, as she shortly began to regress deeply back into her formerly depressive states. She now isolated herself completely, even from her electronic game. Running on its own, her world eventually reached a point where it was swept up by a period of stark enlightenment, producing an explosion of social change amongst its inhabitants. Rational thought enjoyed a stunning and striking renaissance. A mustachioed man, writer of lucid philosophical thought who attracted a potpourri of great thinkers, got up to declare that "God is dead."

When Cynthia emerged from her catatonic-like isolation to take a look at her world, she was shattered. This world; the system that she had become so attached to, the one she fostered from before the cradle of its existence, denied *her* very existence. That was the last straw for her. Her last connection to any reality had become utterly and completely unhinged. She went into the garage and hung herself. As her body was violently writhing, her arms slinging frantically back and forth, she saw Yael in front of her, and she tried swimming in the air towards her until she finally fell limp. **Cynthia** was dead.

I have been in the Springdale Geriatric Center, a three hundred bed nursing home in greater Chicagoland, for the past six years. In my early fifties I suffered a stroke that took away a lot of my range of movement on the right side of my body. It also stole the vision from my right eye, and reduced my left eye's sight to what I can only call grainy and strained. Not two months ago, I was sitting in the unit's dining area, immersed in arts and crafts. A tattooed and goateed volunteer with a terrible scar on his left arm sat across from me. He had very few upper teeth and a gentle demeanor. I do not believe that he knew me or anything about me – I certainly had never seen him before. He did not introduce himself to me. I tried scanning the volunteer identification card that was appended onto his shirt, but could not quite make it out. He started to look at me with a spacey countenance, and his jaw began moving up and down, the words of the story that I have just related to you tumbling out of his mouth. I have done my best to recite what he told me as faithfully as possible. When he was done with his extended monotonous soliloquy, his face returned

to something resembling a normal visage; his normal human appearance and mannerisms seemed to reemerge. I asked him where he heard this story. I asked him how he knew the thoughts of its characters so clearly and surely. He did not answer me. He just said that I looked as white as a ghost and asked me my name. I could barely speak.

"Please, who told you that story?" was all that I could muster.

"Sweetheart," he said, "it's only a story, that's all." He finished the little container of apple juice sitting in front of him on the table that we were sitting at, got up, and walked down the hallway. I never saw him again. I inquired the staff about who he was, but they hadn't a clue as to what I was talking about. I felt the cold sense of missing out on some thing so crucial to my very essence.

My name is Yael LaMonde. I do not think I will ever overcome the debilitating sense of the love that I have lost...a love I am not even sure that I have ever even had.

Later that evening, once the lights were out and I started to drift off to sleep, Mystery Man returned, standing by my bedside. He whispered in my ear, ostensibly to avoid waking up my roommate.

"I know full well who you are," he said with a terrible smile. "I know the name you may go by, those four syllables – but you know deep, deep down that that is not quite the truth, we both know that your true name is Good, just as we both know that my true name is Evil. Now, I am going to kill you just like I killed sweet Jacqueline and Cynthia." Mystery, or Evil, sat in a chair opposite my bed, serenely chewing a wad of tobacco. "Of course, please be my guest and finish off your journal entry; I can wait a little," he said.



Alien AI Tube Machine, art by Junior McLean

Laughter Of The Children

Timothy Wallace

Every year, just before school let out for the summer, the fourth and fifth grade classes of Elliotville Elementary took a field trip to Camden Park. Camden Park is a small amusement park in Huntington, just on the eastern side of the Kentucky-West Virginia border, about ninety-minutes from the school in Elliot County.

The children had had a lot of fun while at the park this year, as they always do. They rode all the rides and played all the games and ate all the concessions that their bellies would hold. Out of all the children, David and Lee Blake almost certainly had the most fun because they'd never been to an amusement park before; this was the first time.

The Blake boys probably had the most under-privileged home life of all the children in the fourth and fifth grades; except, of course, for the children that didn't get to go on the trip at all. The children that didn't get to go to the park were stuck back at the school playing games on the playground with all the children of the lower grades. Because of either lack of money or religious purposes, their parents would not sign their permission slips. The only reason the Blake boys had been able to go to Camden Park this year was because they had been mowing lawns after school and had saved every dime they could get their hands on in anticipation of the trip. The brother's parents agreed to sign their permission slips, but refused to supply them with any spending money.

On the way back to the school from the park, the children would've loved to have laughed and joked with one another about the days events, but to their dismay, their monitors for the day—Mrs. Crawford, the fifth-grade teacher and the school's principal, and Mrs. Collins, the fourth-grade teacher—were very strict, and would not allow such conduct. The children, especially the Blake boys, did not agree with their teacher's decision, but had no choice but to obey the monitor's wishes; otherwise, they may have to suffer a paddling when they finally got back to the school.

Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Collins may have let the children chat a little on the trip back, if it weren't for the fact that the day's events under the hot June sun, and the almost impossible task of keeping track of fifty or so grade-schoolers, had given them migraine headaches of grand magnitude. Not only did the teachers not want to hear a peep out of the children for their own sake, but for the bus driver's sake as well. They were firm believers in the ever-important "do not distract your bus driver" rule.

David and Lee were not the unruliest of children, but after the excitement of the day it was very difficult for them to undergo the entire ninety-minute bus trip without talking, if only a little bit, about what fun they'd had. So, as quietly as possible and with their heads below the seat in front of them, they talked about how scary the rides had been and how they thought they were going to puke after eat-

ing all that cotton candy. When David expressed to his younger brother his frustration about not being allowed to talk, by calling the bus monitors “mean old geezers”, Lee nearly busted his gut trying to keep from exploding with laughter. When it came right down to it, the pressure was just too much for Lee, and with his forehead pressed to the back of the seat in front of him, his hand over his mouth to conceal his laughter, he emitted a single giggle that the driver of the bus could not have heard; Mrs. Crawford, not surprisingly, did.

“Lee Blake. David Blake. You boys sit up where I can see you, this instant,” Mrs. Crawford shouted, with the first and second finger of her left hand massaging her temple, and the same fingers of her right hand pointing at the Blake brothers, as if casting a spell of discipline. “Lee, was that you laughing back there? I better not here another peep out of either of you boys, or there will be a paddling with your names on it when we get back. Now that goes for the rest of you children as well.”

The brothers shrank back down into their seats when they realized all the other children were staring fixedly at them—scowling. The brothers didn’t want a paddling any more than the rest of the children did, so they were quiet—at least for the time being.

The driver of the school bus was Gerald Pugh. He normally drove a school-bus route to and from the elementary school in the mornings and afternoons, and was known to the children on his route, and everyone else for that matter, as Mr. Pugh. He had decided to drive the bus on this trip for the over-time pay he would receive. Lord knew he needed the money, and he had nothing else to do between routes that day.

Mr. Pugh was a large man, and well...a fat man. At about six-foot-one and two hundred ninety pounds, he was round, with a round belly and a round face to match. To accentuate all this roundness was the too-large-for-his-body round head that was always shaved bald and topped with a ball-cap. His ball-cap always sat perched on the very top of his bald head, as there was not one made to fit the monstrosity. Visible from the back—the angle from which most people, especially the children, were accustomed to viewing him—and starting where his neck meets the back of his clean-shaven head, Mr. Pugh had fat rolls that undulated the length of his neck—much like the rolling Appalachia foothills through which the school bus now traveled—before curiously disappearing beneath the collar of his familiar green t-shirt.

About a third of the way home, Mrs. Collins happened to glance up at Mr. Pugh. She noticed that his usually pallid complexion was now flushed, and small beads of perspiration had appeared on his forehead; she was concerned. In her dry and raspy voice, Mrs. Collins said, “Oh, Mr. Pugh? Are you all right, Mr. Pugh?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said tremulously as he pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dabbed his sweaty forehead dry. “I’m fine Mrs. Collins. Just a little warm is all.”

“Okay, Mr. Pugh,” said Mrs. Collins, who had to be eighty. She was a tiny, humped-over woman with radiant white hair, and skin as dry and wrinkled as a sheet of notebook paper, crumpled and discarded in a waste-can. “I thought I should ask Mr. Pugh. You are rather flushed, and perspiring; it worried me somewhat. Drive on then, Mr. Pugh, if you’re positive you’re well,” said Mrs. Collins’s colleague, Mrs. Crawford. The two women, side by side, occupied the same seat.

Mrs. Crawford, proud of her accomplishments as a teacher and principal, was a tall, slender woman, and although she was almost as old as Mrs. Collins, her hair didn’t contain even a single streak of gray or white. Neither was her skin near as dry or wrinkled. She had probably slowed the aging process of her skin with lotions and moisturizers, and likely disguised the natural color of her hair with dyes. Mrs. Crawford was a feared woman in Elliotville Elementary School, chiefly because of her age-hardened visage. She had a stern chin, cold eyes, and her bottom lip protruded slightly and appeared to quiver incessantly with resentment and irritation; virtues withheld for the discipline of disobedient, disruptive, and boisterous school children.

Mrs. Collins whispered something to Mrs. Crawford—something inaudible to the children, as well as Mr. Pugh. After the silent exchange between the two teachers, Mrs. Crawford half-stood from her window seat and directed her firm voice toward Mr. Pugh. “Mr. Pugh,” she said. “We will have to skip our mid-trip rest-stop. We’re already running late as it is, and I’m afraid if we stop we won’t make it back in time for the children to catch their buses home.”

Mr. Pugh’s shoulders and head sagged slightly as he said, “Okay.” He sighed incredulously. He had been looking forward to the stop.

Mrs. Crawford, sensing Mr. Pugh’s umbrage regarding her decision not to stop, cocked her head to one side; straightening her porous spine, she stood erect. In a more callous and piercing tone than before, Mrs. Crawford said, “Is that clear, Mr. Pugh?”

Mr. Pugh resumed his normal, though still hunched posture. He knew that Mrs. Crawford, as principal, could most unquestionably affect the security of his job with one effortless phone call. This in mind, the vibrato had left his voice as he said, “Yes, ma’am, Mrs. Crawford, ma’am.” He again dabbed the sweat from his crimson face, brow, and neck.

With indifference Mrs. Crawford said, “Good. Drive on then, Mr. Pugh.” She resumed her seated position against the window, and the two teachers again exchanged inaudible words.

Mid-way through the trip back to the school, a rest-stop had, of course, been scheduled. Mrs. Crawford had obviously not thought it sensible to make this stop, as it may delay their scheduled arrival back at the school. The children, as well as Mr. Pugh, moaned under their breath as they sped past the rest area—the building itself a blur. All of the children, particularly the ones with full bladders, had been looking forward to the stop, if only to stretch their legs.

Mr. Pugh, unbeknownst to everyone, including himself, had required the stop

more than anyone. Mr. Pugh was a diabetic, who suffered from frequent bouts of hypoglycemia. He wished, now more than ever, that he had something sweet to eat; something easily obtained from a vending machine at a rest area. It turns out that Mr. Pugh was just as intimidated by Mrs. Crawford as the school children; children only one-fifth his age. If only he'd had enough nerve to stand up to Mrs. Crawford and insist that they make their scheduled rest-stop; if only Mrs. Crawford had been selfless enough to think of anything but her reputation as a disciplinarian—a tragedy may have been avoided.

II

David and Lee Blake were both the image of their father: curly locks of strawberry-blonde, pale-blue eyes, a freckle here and there. David, the older of the two boys, was the image of their father as an older man, while Lee was the image of their father as a younger man. Both boys were intelligent beyond their age, and their father had taught them to always stand up for what they believe in. As the school bus passed the rest area, Lee believed in only one thing; he needed to use the restroom, and in the worst way.

Lee's legs bounced furiously up and down and side to side. His knees knocked together in rhythm, sounding much the way two hollow, empty maracas being rapped together might sound. He groaned in agony as his bladder continued to distend. When David shushed him, Lee responded in a tone loud enough for everyone on the bus to hear, including Mrs. Crawford.

"But I hafta peeeeee," Lee said restlessly.

David shushed Lee again, though more earnestly this time, as he looked warily about to see who had heard. To David's mortification, he noticed Mrs. Crawford turn her head in the direction of the seat in which the boys sat. She looked, to David, infuriated and exasperated. In actuality, as the brothers would soon discover, Mrs. Crawford was livid.

Mrs. Crawford was too respected a teacher, principal, and authoritarian to stand idly by while anyone disobeyed her direct orders; especially when it was one of those troublesome, unruly Blake boys—but above all else, when she had a headache.

"Lee Blake!" Mrs. Crawford snapped. Lee peered hesitantly over the back of the seat. "Just for that little outburst, not only will you receive five licks from my paddle when we get back to school, you will *not* get to empty your bladder until I'm finished with you. And if you so much as *think* about urinating anywhere but in the proper place, you'll get five more licks. Is that understood?"

Hesitant, and with trepidation, David attempted to stand up for his brother, but his audacity was of no avail and only served to get him in trouble along with his little brother. "But, Mrs. Crawford, He didn't mean any—"

"Oh. Have something to add, do we David?" said Mrs. Crawford. "Very well. Three licks for you as—"

"But—"

“Interrupt me will you?” she added. “Five licks then. And they won’t be love taps, mind you. One more word out of either of you, and it will be ten apiece. Is that clear, David?”

David nodded.

“Lee?” she said.

Lee nodded.

“I will not say it again, children.” She was addressing the entirety aboard the bus now. “One peep out of any of you, and its five licks. I commissioned my husband, just last week, to drill holes in my paddle for less resistance. Keep *that* in mind.”

With an evil-eye she seemed to single out every child on the bus, before her malevolent gaze came to rest at the seat occupied by the Blake boys. She shifted her cold, dark eyes from one brother to the next, her prominent lower lip trembling. She seated herself, facing forward once again, but glanced back over her shoulder on occasion, just to make sure the brothers were behaving themselves.

Lee continued to dance in his seat, only now he trembled uncontrollably with fear of the paddling to come, while David stared into the driver’s rear-view mirror at Mr. Pugh. Mr. Pugh’s face was blood-red, and his head seemed to loll about as he struggled to keep his heavy eyelids from falling shut. Concerned about Mr. Pugh’s condition, David thought he must alert someone at once. He was hesitant, though determined, nonetheless.

“Um, Mrs. Crawford—”

Mrs. Crawford gasped. Her head snapped around so violently, David thought it might keep turning right on around and around, unscrewing itself from her neck. But it didn’t, and Mrs. Crawford’s face was as red as Mr. Pugh’s, only with rage rather than infirmity. She was again livid, and when she gasped it seemed every person on the bus gasped simultaneously, flinching in expectation of Mrs. Crawford’s reaction.

“David Blake!” she shouted incredulously, as she bound from her seat into the aisle. “I cannot, *absolutely cannot*, believe that you would deliberately disobey me like that.”

“But, Mrs. Crawford?” David said, pointing at Mr. Pugh.

“No buts about it mister,” she said as she stomped down the aisle toward David, wagging at him her long, bony finger. “When we get back to school, you are going to get a paddling the likes of which has never been experienced by any student, ever in the history of paddling.”

Almost in a panic now, because it appeared to David as if Mr. Pugh might fall unconscious at any moment, David said again, “But, Mrs. Crawford. If you would just—”

Practically on top of David now, Mrs. Crawford screamed at him incoherently as she reared back her open hand. “Backtalk me, will you?” she shouted, this time with more clarity.

Mrs. Crawford slapped David hard across the face, leaving a deep, red imprint of her hand on his cheek. The profound smacking sound of skin on skin reverberated throughout the bus. David was appalled, and in pain. Tears welled in his eyes as he rubbed his burning cheek, though he did not make a sound. Mrs. Crawford, surprised by her own actions, recoiled from David as she realized what she had done.

Mrs. Collins shouted in disbelief, “Mrs. Crawford! That’s enough!”

All eyes, except for David’s, were now on Mrs. Crawford. David stared intently at the bus driver, pointing his tremulous index finger at the seemingly ill man, as he rubbed at his stinging cheek. No one but David noticed Mr. Pugh slump in his seat as he lost all consciousness. Horrified by the forthcoming consequences certainly imminent of a speeding bus full of school children, with no driver behind the wheel—David fainted.

III

The bus veered sharply toward the shoulder as Mr. Pugh’s unconscious body sprawled over the steering wheel. Everyone on the bus shrieked with terror. Mrs. Collins gawked in disbelief as Mrs. Crawford was hurled across the Blake brother’s laps; her head connected with the lower pane of the emergency window, cracking the glass as well as her cranium. Then, Mrs. Collins leapt for Mr. Pugh and the steering wheel, desperate to gain control of the runaway bus—her effort was of no use. Mr. Pugh fell out of his seat, shoving frail Mrs. Collins feebly into the stairwell. She hit her head on the folding door, knocking her unconscious, and Mr. Pugh’s bulk slid down the steps, coming to rest precisely prone on top of Mrs. Collins.

David, after fainting, had been knocked to the floor in the aisle between the two rows of seats, and now lay supine, parallel with the aisle. Mrs. Crawford, after breaking the window with her face, fell limp astride Lee. With every ounce of strength in his nine-year-old body, and with a display of unorthodox strength, Lee lifted the teacher from atop him and shoved her aside, just as Hercules might have lifted and shoved aside a boulder that rested in his path. Mrs. Crawford sat slumped in the seat next to him, while Lee gripped the back of the seat to his front, bracing himself for a crash. Every adult aboard the bus was now incapacitated, and the many children aboard were left to fend for themselves.

A boy in a seat near the front of the bus, with a display of great audacity, made an attempt at getting into the driver’s seat to perhaps brake and steer the out-of-control bus to a stop. His bravery was of no benefit to him, or any other passenger, because just before he reached the driver’s seat, the bus again swerved sharply in the opposite direction—this time away from the shoulder and towards the road, tossing the helpless boy back into the seat opposite the one in which he formerly sat. The jolt threw Mrs. Crawford out of the seat in which she slumped; she landed face-down, squarely atop David.

The bus slid ninety-degrees and skidded along broad-side, half on the shoulder and half on the road. The bus's rear tires chirruped and barked repeatedly as the wheels bounced up and down. The bouncing and barking stopped when the rear wheels slid into the gravels on the shoulder, but when the tires made contact with the grass-line; they bit deep into the soft dirt. The force was too great for the top-heavy bus, and it flipped violently onto its side in a wake of cascading earth before rolling onto its top. Children screamed, yet their cries were muffled by the thunderous roar of twisting and heaving metal. It was bedlam as the children were flung about, much like the way clothing is flung about the drum of a clothes-dryer. Twice the big bus rolled; a myriad of slender, fleshy limbs flailed.

The bus, after rolling once again from its top onto its side, slid only a little further before its mangled bulk came to rest. It lay in a ditch on its side, about twenty-five feet from and parallel to the road—the very road the bus had traveled calmly along, only moments before. For a couple of seconds, everything was as still and silent as the vacuum of space; after that, turmoil. Young boys and girls moaned and groaned, cried and pleaded for mommy and daddy, God or someone, to please help them. “Ow” and “it hurts” and “I want my mommy” were the most common of phrases heard; then there was a voice—not an adult's voice, but a child's voice, a boy's voice—the boy could be heard, beseeching the children to calm down; please everyone, calm down.

The boy was David. He had regained consciousness just before the bus rolled. He'd had time to attempt forcing Mrs. Crawford from atop him before unseen forces pitched him about the rolling bus. He'd held fast to his fifth-grade teacher, who only a minute ago had smacked him across the face. She cushioned his impact as he came to rest on top of her. Just before he struggled to his feet, straddling her, he looked into her open yet fixed, unseeing eyes, and noticed how her head was cocked at an impossible angle; he realized she was dead. He recoiled in revulsion from her still-warm cadaver, just as she had recoiled from David after smacking him. He was not quite yet able to grasp the fact that he had gazed into the eyes of a deceased woman: the first dead person David had ever seen.

David snapped out of his terror-induced daze and shook the remnants of cobwebs from his addled mind. He thought of his brother. Where was his brother, Lee? He called Lee's name, searching frantically about his immediate area amongst all the crying children. He saw one of his best friends, Joe, sitting cross-legged on what now served as the floor of the bus, nursing a minor scratch on the palm of his hand.

“Joe,” he said. “Joe, you seen my brother? You seen Lee?”

Joe looked up at David. Snot leaked from his nose as he said, “Hey Davey. Yeah. Lee's over there, with Amanda.”

“You all right Joe?” David asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

David looked in the direction of Joe's indication and saw his brother lying

on his side in the fetal position next to a girl from his class. David went to his brother, and when Lee saw him he sat bolt upright and smiled.

“Davey,” cried Lee. He jumped to his feet and was standing on grass; it protruded through the window that Mrs. Crawford’s head had cracked, and the subsequent crash had burst out.

David and Lee embraced. They smeared tears and snot on one another’s t-shirts.

“You okay, bub?” David said.

“I’m fine, Davey. Just scared. You okay?” Lee said.

“Yeah. I’m okay too, now that I know you’re okay. I’m scared too Lee; everybody’s scared. We just gotta get outta here, somehow.”

David scanned the bus and the faces therein; he saw neither Mrs. Collins nor Mr. Pugh. He knew Mrs. Crawford was dead, and was pretty sure that Mr. Pugh was either dead or out cold; it had been his passing out that had caused this lethal accident. David had no idea what had happened to Mrs. Collins.

If only Mrs. Crawford woulda let us stop, David thought, this never woulda happened.

David understood, still hugging his brother, that had Mrs. Collins been all right, she would already be attempting to calm the children, as well as tending to the injured and devising a way to get everyone out of the bus. Recognizing that no one else had taken control of this situation, David knew that he must now take matters into his own hands. It was the instant of this realization that David had pleaded for his classmates to calm down.

“Davey,” Lee said. “We can go out the emergency door.”

“Yep,” David said. “But, I think me and you are the only people that know that, bub. So we’re gonna hafta to open it ourselves and help everybody else.”

Lee knuckled the tears from his eyes and said, “Well, whadda we waitin for? I wanna get outta here.”

“Me too, bub. Me too,” David said.

As David and Lee waded through the bus-full of frightened and anxious, crying children, the brothers asked each individual child if they were okay. Most replied that they were, in fact, okay. The ones that didn’t were only banged and scratched up, save for one little girl, who appeared to have a broken arm. Lee knew her, as she was in his fourth-grade class, and as he knelt beside her to comfort her, she cried uncontrollably and repeated over and over again that her arm hurt. Lee hugged the girl, told her that she was going to be okay, and helped her to her feet as she cradled her busted forearm with her uninjured one.

As Lee tended to the girl, David returned to Mrs. Crawford’s corpse. He did not look forward to doing what he knew he must do; he had no other choice. He stooped over his former teacher and closed her lifeless eyes. He had not the strength to move her, but wished that he did, because the other children would wonder, as they stepped over her corpse, why their principal and teacher was

lying on the ground not moving; most would know the truth. But David felt better knowing that by closing Mrs. Crawford's eyes, taking off his shirt and covering her head with it, he would spare a lot of kids the horror he had endured as he looked into her unseeing eyes. He reminded himself that he, in no way, had done what he'd done as a favor to Mrs. Crawford—the mean old lady that had smacked him nearly senseless for no reason. He'd done it for the other children, and for his own peace of mind.

David left Mrs. Crawford and returned to his brother's side. On his way, a boy asked him if Mrs. Crawford would be okay. David told him that she'd be just fine; she was only sleeping.

By this time, Joe had joined the brothers and the little girl and the four of them continued toward the rear of the bus and the emergency exit; Lee leading the group with his busted-up friend in tow.

People that had been following the bus in their cars, or had bore witness in some way to the crash, were now gathered outside the bus and shouting in, asking if everyone was okay, and if anyone was hurt. They shouted at the children instructions about what actions to take, not knowing that a couple of courageous boys already had the situation well under control.

When the brothers and their friends reached the emergency exit at the rear of the bus, Lee stood aside, comforting the girl with the broken arm, while David and Joe struggled with the red-levered handle that opened the emergency door. When the lever finally gave way and turned ninety degrees to its open position, the boys shoved on the door but it would not budge. Men pulled on the door from the outside, while a couple more boys volunteered to help David and Joe push from the inside. The warped door finally popped loose—it creaked and jerked and complained as it swung open. To the men outside, Lee handed off the girl with the broken arm; and then David, Lee, and Joe helped all the rest of the children out the door.

The adults outside looked over every individual child meticulously for injuries as a state-police car and an ambulance arrived—sirens blaring. Most of the children were only banged up, with a few bruises and scratches here and there. The rest, astoundingly, seemed to be entirely unharmed. The worst injury, aside from the either dead or near-dead faculty members still inside that nightmare of a school-bus, was the little girl's fractured ulna.

As Joe, the last of the children besides the Blake brothers, was ushered off the bus and into helping hands, David and Lee stared at each other from either side of the emergency door, and with a deserved sense of accomplishment, they smiled. They stepped from the bus together, arm in arm. A paramedic came over to examine the boys for injury, and as he looked them over, Lee gazed up at his big brother.

“Davey?” Lee said. “You think we’re still gonna get a paddlin? Cause I really gotta go.”

David laughed. Lee ran into the woods.

A House Divided

Mel Waldman

A House divided will not survive or thrive, will not create or procreate. A House divided self-destructs, disintegrates, dissolves, disappears like snowflakes wafting through the fog and misty air, drifting down the Tower of Babel, vanishing without fear or premonition, passing through the whirling whiteness into darkness.

Well, that's the way it is-the flow of politics rushing through giant waves of destruction. That's the sin. For a House divided is not a glorious home-just an ancient tomb dissolving in the flood outside Noah's Ark, covered with the blood of chaos and confusion, vanishing in the dark. And that's a sin.

A House divided is a shrinking, shriveled schizophrenic House, a disconnected psyche, a snowstorm sweeping across the political landscape, a million discordant voices shrieking in the Waste Land-cutting swaths of division. And that's a sin.

A House divided cannot inspire or unite, can't reveal the light ensconced in the darkness. Buried in the deep snow, within a furious fog, it is a kingdom of lost words, on a secret blog, discovered serendipitously by a search engine but discarded by choice-not by chance.

A House divided must vanish unless unity is restored. But now, we weep on this elongated night of loss, listening to the endless ululations and deafening cacophony, searching for clarity, perhaps, in a vast silence that surrounds us. And we wait. A House divided must vanish. Still, we wait. In the distance, one voice longs to speak.

Back to the
Drawing
Board, art
by Aaron
Wilder



Just Another Day

Liana Vrajitoru Andreasen

It is close to noontime. I casually press on the key to lock the car and I leave my square blue box on wheels to bake in the Texas sun among other colored boxes. I don't notice anything unusual about the school. The large façade greets me in silence, as no one but me arrives this late. Of course, that is only because I teach a college English class to advanced high school students, or what they call a "dual enrollment class." I am here only as a temporary presence – a little like a visitor from another planet, one might say. I step underneath the looming metal structures that curve over my head and I take the door on the left, for variation. Inside, I hurry along the chilly hallway and come out again into the bright, square patio, where students congregate before the flood takes them into their classrooms. If they are still outside, I can't be that late. The door, as always, is too narrow for all the incoming bodies bumping into each other. Not much respect for the college teacher going on, either. But that's all right, as long as I teach what I came here to teach. I wonder if I brought all the handouts that I Xeroxed back at the college, so enlightenment can descend smoothly upon my temporary students.

I come into the classroom as a plastic baby flies across the room. It's for a class where it's supposed to teach them responsibility, or something of the kind. I've been seeing these babies for weeks now on campus. Landing, the baby doesn't cry and doesn't die, and now it seems to appreciate being held in its blankie by another set of arms.

The students aren't all here yet. My dual enrollment analog, Miss Gondolyk, waves hello from across the room. She's known the students longer, while I still can't be sure sometimes if I call the wrong student by the wrong name. She laughs with friendliness as they hand her their papers, and my mind registers the bell but the students are still buzzing about like bees. Unlike bees, I can't quiet them with smoke, and I hardly qualify for a queen bee, so instead I initiate the string of shushes that travels around the room like a rumor. Desks are quickly filled to capacity and the chorus of murmurs slowly quiets down. Miss Gondolyk is heading for the door, and she says something in passing, to which I struggle to pay attention, but at the same time three students hand me little slips to sign, and others are asking if I brought their papers back. I do think I heard Miss Gondolyk say she's going to be picked up by a helicopter and I think I either misheard, or it was a joke I didn't fully hear. "Hope you don't miss the last one," she says just before she leaves, and I wonder if she is talking about helicopters or papers.

"She's right, Miss," says Karista from the first desk. "The students cross the bridge but teachers who finish early are lifted off by helicopter. But we can't go yet because seniors go to the bridge first, so we have full class today."

"What? Other classes are cancelled?" I ask. I know there must be some school rule there that I don't quite understand.

“Why does the kid in the story talk funny?” Christian distracts me. “What, what,” he protests to the push he gets from Lizeth. “I don’t get it.”

“Yes, they do talk funny in the story,” other voices confirm.

“No quiz today! The story was hard!” they inform me.

“It wasn’t that hard,” says Valeria. I can give her a quiz any time.

I forget all about the helicopter and look at the clock to see if there’s time for a quiz.

“Miss, can I go get my bag from the library?” asks Anahi. “I didn’t make it to the cafeteria before it got blown up so I didn’t get to eat lunch.”

“Oh, can I go too?” says Mariana. “I have food in my bag too.”

“What do you mean blown up? The cafeteria?” I say. I certainly think I heard wrong.

“Yes, the cafeteria’s gone,” explains Valeria pointing in the general direction of the cafeteria. “Three buildings are gone now, so if you parked your car on that side...”

“No, I parked next to the library building.”

“Oh, then it’s probably still there.”

“But what happened to the three buildings?” I ask for more explanations.

“They announced it this morning,” Erica explains patiently. “That’s why they put the bridge there for when the students go home. Later they take down the building we’re in.”

“So what happened? They demolished them? They’re a pile of rubble now? I didn’t notice anything when I came in.”

“No, no,” says Karista, “they have new technology. There’s a giant vacuum and everything is sucked in so there’s nothing left on the ground. There’s only a big hole. Be careful, Miss, you can’t drive around it.”

“Yes,” confirms Manuel. “That’s why there’s a bridge for pedestrians. They don’t have a separate one for teachers.”

“All right,” I say, and I’m sure it all must make sense but what do I know. “Let’s go back to the short story.”

“I know what it’s about,” says Josh.

“You do?”

“It’s about discrimination. Can I go to the restroom?”

“Ok, go.” I say.

Steve, who is a good baseball player, says Josh is not coming back.

“Why?” I ask.

“He has to cross the bridge to go to the bathroom,” says Steve. “It’s far.”

“We’ll have to see,” I say. “Maybe we can make bets if he’s coming back or not. So what characters in the story are discriminated against?”

Just then, the door opens and a middle-aged woman peeks in, waving a little slip.

“Yasmin is going home,” she says.

“Which Yasmin?” I ask. “Aguilar or Gutierrez?”

“Both.”

What can I do? I let the Yasmins leave. Naturally, going home is something that can happen during my class.

“Oh,” the woman remembers after I thought she’d left. “Rosie and Priscilla have to go too. They’re with the ghost trackers.”

The woman leaves, and Rosie and Priscilla make their way to the door:

“Bye, Miss!”

“Bye, Miss!”

I look at the class:

“Ghosts?”

“Yes, yes, Miss,” says Christian throwing his arms up. I suppose that’s an imitation of a ghost. “That’s what happens when they take buildings down, we have some ghosts so there’s a team that goes after them.”

“Last time there were twenty five,” Manuel informs me. “I counted them.”

“Oh, ok. Back to the story. Tell me the names of the characters, so I can put them on the board. Who’s the main one?”

“The guy who speaks funny,” says Steve with a broad smile.

“Steve hasn’t read the story,” says Valeria.

A voice in the ceiling interrupts the class. That’s also technology we don’t have at the college.

“The administration needs Denise and Maury to check in with them to sign the abduction form. It will only take five minutes.”

The class issues a long “Ooooh” and I ask why they pick on Denise and Maury.

“The advisors want to know if they were abducted as a couple because the spaceship abducted several couples yesterday.”

“Spaceships?” I say and I’m sure there’s an explanation for that too.

Mauricio looks embarrassed as he heads for the door.

“We weren’t abducted, Miss,” he says. “Don’t listen to them. I was the one who reported a spaceship above my house, that’s why.”

“Ask Shawncy, Miss, she talked to them!”

“To the aliens?”

“She was picked to give a speech about our class.”

Shawncy smiles modestly.

“You know who really was abducted, Miss?” says Christian. “Guillermo.”

“Oh,” I say – and it figures, because Guillermo hasn’t been coming to class for a while.

As Mauricio and Denise leave the room, Karista’s head suddenly detaches from her shoulders and hops toward the door, following them. It just happens that Josh is returning to the classroom and catches her head before it rolls uncontrollably down the hall.

“Give her head back, Josh,” I say with authority.

“I was, Miss,” he says and sounds insulted.

“Karista, keep your head on your shoulders,” I scold her.

“Ok, Miss.”

Just then, Ana’s head starts spinning around its axis, making a “whoosh

whoosh” noise. Two or three heads around the room follow her lead and start spinning as well.

“Ana!” I shout. “Stop that.”

“Stop what, Miss?” she says, but her head has already stopped spinning.

From the corner of my eye, I notice that the plastic baby has moved on its own and I hear it give a cry, though I can’t be completely sure.

“Did the baby just move?” I ask.

“No, Miss, what do you mean?” the class protests.

“Jose,” I say, because the baby is close to his desk and I trust him. “Did the baby move?”

He smiles and I’m not sure if that means yes or no.

“How can the baby move?” asks Manuel from the front and, as I look at him, I see again the baby move from the corner of my eye.

“It did move!” I say, but the baby is still as a rock when I look at it.

Everybody denies it, and I see Laura look at the others and roll her eyes, as she sits quietly at her desk. She must have seen it move too! The baby is passed to the front and Sandra has it now. She gives it to Alice, whispering something, and Alice starts laughing hard. What is the joke now? They are trying to get away with something! But I don’t get to ask more questions about the baby, because a great rumbling noise begins outside the classroom. I don’t want to look too scared, especially since everyone seems unconcerned. Then a deafening “booom” is heard and the ground shakes. Maybe there’s some kind of school activity going on somewhere...

“Oh, there go the other buildings,” says Karista.

“Your car is gone for sure now,” says Valeria.

“Miss, how are you going to leave now?” Josh shows his concern. “The helicopters are gone.”

“Can I use the bridge?” I ask.

“Yes, yes,” Christian assures me although he has at this point lost his head too, and he is groping for it on the floor. Ana has it, and throws it back to him and he arranges it back on his shoulders.

“Stop that!” Lizeth admonishes him.

From the back, Kevin struggles to make himself heard:

“They said the teachers can use the bridge, but only those for fifth and sixth period. They announced it this morning.”

“So who’s going to pay me for my car?” I ask, because I’m sure there must be a system in place for that.

“Ask Miss Gondolyk,” some students suggest.

“Ask Miss Navando,” says Kevin, talking over their voices.

The door opens again and a big flock of black birds rushes in. The students quickly tell me that we have to wait for them to leave. Yet another distraction! Are we going to finish this story or will I have to leave it for next class? I wait patiently as the birds fly three times around the room in perfect coordination, then leave as fast as they came in. Valeria shushes everyone and I pick up the marker. I will write on the board the characters who experience discrimination. The marker isn’t work-

ing, so I decide to ask instead: “can you define discrimination?”

And then the bell rings.

The baby flies up into the air, while all the students instantly leave their desks.

“Discrimination...” I say looking defeated.

“Miss, you’re going to have to come with us now,” says Erica.

“Josh, you owe me a paper,” I say to him as he heads for the door.

I struggle to put everything in my bag and follow the flow of students. To my surprise, the hall is gone. Starting right from the classroom’s door, there is a very narrow suspended bridge that swings wildly to the sides as students walk across, one by one. There is no trace of the school left, but no one seems too worried. Underneath us, lava is flowing at the bottom of a canyon, and I worry that my shoes are a bit too close to the heat below. The bridge leads to the other side of the canyon, and there is smoke in the air. Above, two or three spaceships throw a strange blue light, making the smoke look pretty. “Josh, don’t forget to bring the paper!” I shout over the heads of moving students and I think about my poor car. I must have left something important in it that is gone for good. I’m sure Miss Gondolyk will explain all of this to me next week, and I wave at Laura and Valeria as they pass me on the suspended bridge to reach their friends in front of me. We certainly go by a different system at the college.

Suddenly, I realize I forgot to give them the handout for next class, but by now it’s really too late.

Quantum of Solace

David W. Landrum

Sossity Chandler tried to clear all of her former husband’s things out of her house in the first month after her divorce, but now and then she came across items that belonged to him. She found articles of clothing, tools, magazines, once a pack of condoms, once of a pack gum she knew the woman he had formed a liaison with, Kathleen Farisi, liked; but more often she found books. David taught English and owned hundreds of books. Like most literature teachers, he hung on to every volume he bought no matter how remote the chances of his ever reading it again. Almost daily Sossity came across his books on shelves and in drawers, stacked in corners of closets, fitted in boxes in the garage and basement.

Seeing these relics of his presence upset her. After four months she ordered her housekeeper to do a thorough search and purge of the house and garage of all books belonging to her ex-husband. Mary was efficient and in a very short time rid the place of the leaven of David's reading material. One night, though, after the children were asleep, Sossity noticed something between the mattresses and box springs on her bed. She reached under and came up with a paperback, corners turning up, pages brown with age. It was *For Your Eyes Only* by Ian Fleming.

She remembered this particular book because she had teased David about it. He often read in bed, but it was always some great work of literature. When she saw him absorbed in a James Bond novel she laughed.

"You're really slumming," she said.

He did not look up from the book. "This is good stuff," he said.

This happened on one of their last nights together before the blow-up, before she discovered he was having an affair, before her life unraveled close to a year ago. It would have been the last book he read in the house while they were still married.

She looked at the volume and then sat down on the bed thumbed through it. It was a collection of short stories. Her eyes fell on the story, "Quantum of Solace." She tried to remember her high school Latin. *Amount of care? Sum of peace?* She racked her brain and then her eyes lit on the term in the story itself, on page 093: "James Bond said, Quantum of solace—the amount of comfort. Yes, I suppose you could say that all love and friendship is based in the end on that."

She flipped back to the first page and read the story.

After she finished the story she could not sleep. She resisted the urge to drink. Reading this tale of a marriage gone sour stirred the muddy waters in her soul. Avoiding memories would not do, she had learned painfully. You had to go through them. Alcohol did not help you navigate those treacherous waters. She thought of getting her guitar out and playing—a thing she often did when stressed—but she did not want to wake the children. She simply lay there and looked into the darkness.

She had noticed inconsistencies in his explanations of where he had been and how he spent his time. At first she wrote these off to his tendency toward carelessness in keeping a schedule or knowing the precise details of his day-to-day routine—David often confused things in this manner, an attribute she put down to being a right-brained literature professor. But the stories became more disjointed and she caught him in several outright lies. This troubled her. It troubled her even more when she discovered that most of inconsistent accounts related to Kathleen Farisi, one of her closest friends.

It seemed impossible, but when she set up some stratagems to test the truth of his statements he failed every test. She perceived he was lying. Again, his lies always involved times he might have spent with Kathy. Sossity grew frantic. She called Daya, her closest confidant, and asked her what she should do. Because it might involve his getting her money, Daya advised, she should have him trailed by a private investigator to get hard evidence if indeed he was being unfaithful.

The private investigator only needed two weeks to accumulate all the evidence she needed for conclusive proof. She tried to hold back tears as he showed her photographs of David and Kathy. She filed for divorce the next day.

As she lay on the couch and in the same room in the same darkness, she remembered the aftermath. David asked for nothing in the settlement. He made a good salary as a tenured professor. He had enough money to live comfortably. After they split, he and Kathy moved in together. Sossity and David settled on a no-fault divorce and let it go at that.

But she thought about quantum of solace, the amount of care she had given him. In the Ian Fleming story the main character ruins his wife, undermines her finances, leaving her with debt, depriving her of even the smallest among of comfort. A grey light showed in the sky outside. She stepped through the front door. The air felt chilly. She shivered and looked around her front yard. Dew lay thick on the grass. Four rabbits hopped warily twenty feet or so from her. Birds sang their first song of the day.

In the early aftermath of the divorce she went on drinking binges, flared up in public, and made statements she wished she could retract. The news agencies loved it. The gossip columnists reveled. Her promiscuity became legendary. She plunged into the celebrity circuit of New York, LA, London, giving concerts and going to bed with whatever rock singer or movie star came on to her—and most of them did. When she flew in to San Francisco to begin to concert series she got a call from Daya.

“You need to come to my home,” her friend said.

“Why?”

“You need to get your life back on course, Sossity.”

“Can you do that for me?”

“No, you can only do it for yourself. But I can give you a good environment to do it in; and maybe I can help you too.”

She consented. After a short tour of California, three weeks of performing, drinking, and screwing, she came to Daya’s place on the north coast.

She lived with Daya and Mark two weeks. Her children were with David and he would only allow her the contact with them that had been stipulated in their separation agreement. She could call them once on weekends and that was it. Daya said Sossity needed to focus on her inner self. She needed to get in contact with the inner person.

“Daya, I’m not into New Age talk. I don’t pray and I don’t meditate. How can I get in contact with my inner self?”

“Silence,” she answered.

Sossity began a regimen of silence. She slept in the family house, had breakfast with Daya, Mark, and their children. After that she and Daya would go to a near-by yoga class. By 10:00 Sossity would end up in a small cabin on their property where she would spend the remainder of the day.

The silence drove her to distraction at first. Her mind raced. She talked to herself. She could hear the sea in the distance. *The only thing this is doing for me*

is boring me, she thought the first day. The next day was better. By the fourth day she had leaned to enter the silences.

At first memories cascaded into her awareness—painful memories of her mother’s religious fanaticism as a convert to fundamentalism; the strife in her home as family members took sides on the issue of religion; she recalled the ugly scene with her father when she announced she was dropping out of college to become a singer. She remembered her friend Cheryl’s murder (she had named her daughter after Cheryl). When Daya came to get her at sunset, Sossity was in tears.

“This is what happens,” Daya said. “You’re getting past your ego and all the pain you hold inside is flowing out. But it will all go out soon and you’ll connect.”

“Sounds like a lot of New Age claptrap,” Sossity replied grumpily.

“Stick with it. You’ve got another week.”

Sunday she began to understand. The memories did not overwhelm her. She felt still, settled, and peaceful. She understood what Daya meant by being in contact with herself. It did not mean she would communicate with an inner voice and encounter her inner child. It simply met the clutter—thoughts, emotions, pointless self-talk—cleared and she felt once who she was and what she wanted and believed in. She called Daya on her cell phone and told her she did not want to come back to the house that night.

“I’ll bring you some blankets and a sleeping bag,” she told her. “I’ll leave them outside your door.”

Sossity slept peacefully that night. In the morning she went to the house for breakfast.

She spent the next three days in silence. She began some simple meditation techniques. When she came back to the house at night she played guitar.

And she wrote songs. She felt the creative impulses that seemed to have gone dead return. Later, those same songs would skyrocket to the top of the charts, selling more than any of her previous hits.

The last day she and Daya walked on the beach and watched the sun set—the most beautiful show of color and light Sossity had ever seen.

Since then, she remembered, standing on her front lawn, things had not been perfect. She had broken down at times, got drunk, felt desolation and despair—but never for long. Her life had started to come back together. She had done a successful tour. Her new albums and new single releases were selling in the multiple millions. Her album of ecological songs was topping the charts not only in the US and Canada but also in Europe and the UK. She had added Jergen and Lydia to her band. She could even cope with memories of David.

The book made her remember him. And the story gave her pause.

Two days later she got a call. The caller ID identified her former husband. When she answered she heard his voice for the first time in months. He was angry.

“Sossity, what the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to explain yourself.”

“Don’t get pissy with me! You know what happened. They came and towed

my car this morning.”

“*Your* car, David? I think they showed you whose name is on the title.”

“You gave me that car! It was mine!”

The car in question was a vintage Volvo 1800S. He had seen one in an old movie with Roger Moore, remarked how cool he thought it looked, and Sossity had sent her agents out to search for one and buy it for his birthday. He loved the car and took meticulous care of it.

“I own it,” she said. “It’s in my name and I’ve decided I want to drive it a little bit. You have your own money. Go buy yourself a new car.”

A long silence came. She could feel his anger.

“So this is what you’re going to do now?”

“It’s just the beginning. I knew you would call after they took the car and that’s good because I wanted to tell you this myself. I want you out of the house by Friday. You’ll find the house is also in my name. It belongs to Sossity Chandler Productions and not to you, and I’m taking it back.”

Again, a long pause came.

“You said I could live here.”

“I did but now I’ve decided I don’t want you living in my house.”

They had bought the house before their marriage and stayed there until the one she lived in now was finished. They had kept the old place and used it as lodging for band members and people from her business organization. After the divorce David had moved back into it.

“You said I could live here. That gives me some legal rights to the place.”

“It gives you absolutely nothing, David. I don’t quite remember saying that to you. And even if I did say it, I own the house and I want you out. You can take me to court—but I can hire better lawyers than you can and I can keep appealing and keep paying them and let’s see how long you can pay a lawyer on what you make teaching at State. Maybe Kathy still has the lease on her apartment. Maybe you guys can move back there.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked after a moment. His tone was flat.

“I read a story in a book. It’s by Ian Fleming. The title is ‘Quantum of Solace.’ Do you remember it?”

His silence told her he did remember it.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I own the very clothes on your back. I’m not going to take your clothes, David, but Dustin will give you a list of the things I am taking. We bought them all through my management company, I own the company, and so I own all that stuff. And I’m coming for it. And there’s not a damned thing you can do to stop me.”

She waited for a reply. He did not speak, though she could hear him breathing.

“You know, David,” she said, “you really shouldn’t leave your books lying around.”

And with that she hung up the phone.

Fevers & Clocks

Kristina Marie Darling

I was seventeen the night of my first breakdown, sick with the opiates they had forced down my synaptic clefts. The lithium that flowed from my physician's white-lidded pill bottles was water poured into a broken glass.

By then I knew that the doctors' offices each have an inimitable smell: an airborne concoction of disinfectant, pills, powders, and tissue paper.

And after awhile you notice that there are clocks sitting quietly in their place, keeping time like locusts waiting in the underground.

Then there are clocks that ring out crisp and clear on muggy August nights, or loud and paralytic in the office of a wealthy doctor. I'd known both types of timepieces, the click-click of the second hand marking my future in a language of red and blue capsules. I'd never known a doctor to notice the distinction between one clock and the next, but once I'd seen a little timepiece smashed by the girl before me, her hands wringing the neck of a round oval, pieces of the second hand descending in the office with the slivers of sticky glass.

The questions begin the same way – height, weight, birthday. I'd say *Yes, the lawyers came for me. I was at school. I'm on medical leave now.* It became a refrain I'd sing for unwilling audiences. I'd been cracked wide open, a screaming pregnant girl who'd finally burst.

And the doctors will tell you to follow the instructions on the bottle no matter what. Even if the pills begin to gnaw a hole in squishy fabric of your stomach, they will tell you to do as told. After taking the seven bottles of pills as they'd said to, the place between my heart and my hips caught fire: before my breakdown I lay awake five nights on end, thinking I'd let the devil inside. That was when the electric light inside of me misfired, a bottle rocket caught in the crevices of my spine.

And on the way to the doctor that night, I remembered when I was a middle-school kid and my mother brought me small things to remember her by as she recovered from the years of drinking SKYY and bottled seltzer. There was a tiny plastic duck on my dresser and a little toad on my bookcase. I saved books and jingly trinkets from the mornings she woke me up and left. I saved the glass tumbler that she drank her bubbly mix from, knowing I'd someday find myself as hollow as the bones of a bird.

* * *

Years trickled away with pills, and some things became clear. I called my boyfriend, singing lullabies on his answering machine, begging him to come home. My dad prayed that I'd have direction, his hands pointed

upward like the steeple of the last church on earth.

And my heart had become something of an anorexic, a hungry little schoolgirl crying out for more. I'd hoped to grow old and pill-addicted with the man from Gambier, whose answering machine had become my confessional. I called and was redeemed by his automated greeting; I was lifted by the empty white space of the cassette tape waiting after the tone. The light on my own telephone shone red like a poker chip. No one would call.

Ask anyone off the street, they'll tell you someone knows their secrets. My uncle knows his wife shoplifted from Strauss & Jeremy Department Store when she was eighteen. And as the youth ministry treasurer she can only hope he doesn't go public. Everyone has a story like that, something they hope never gets out: I'd let a man twice my age anesthetize my thinking brain with sweet talk. Try wanting to change the speed light travels at, or bending every clock's skinny arms toward your own self. See how you feel in the morning.

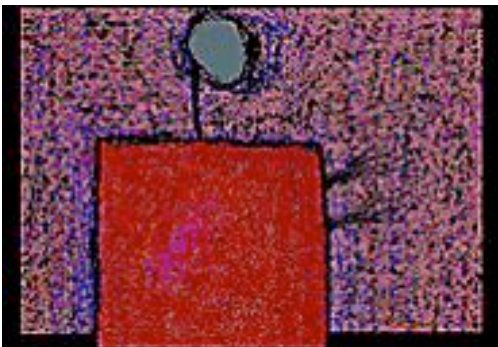
Before I'd told Pembroke, high priest of the dial tone, about the years I'd spent in a velvet underground, plagued by black-suited men with briefcases, I'd noticed that on his mantle was a watch that he never wore. He just left it there, and as he made me sit through "Indochine" for the fifth time the tock-tock began to fill the room. He just kept watching, and ogling Catherine Deneuve.

His face was the last thing I remember seeing when I woke up in a hospital bed. And that was the last time I saw him, enamored by a fictive blonde.

The answering machine must have recorded my entire life story after I'd gotten the doctors to let me out again. I remembered when he and I talked about having a family, and being disconcerted by what a lovely pregnant girl he thought I'd make. And the tape clicked off.

There are some girls who never drink but often wish they were drunk as a frat boy on a Friday night. I'm one of them, planning a dark iron-lidded stupor. Pembroke, the owner of the answering machine, didn't remember me when I called three years later. He was finally home, an amnesiac with a Brooklyn accent. I remember the light being sucked out of everything.

The lists I'd kept were never written.



Orphanage, art by
Peter Schwartz

