

CC&D

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table of contents

poetry (the passionate stuff)

Michael Ceraolo	1
Peter Bates <i>art</i>	1
Claire Aubin	2
Janet Kuypers.....	3
Andrew H. Oerke	6
normal	7
Lorraine Levin	7
Marissa Schwalm	7
Paula Ray.....	8
Edward Michael O'durr Supranowicz <i>art</i>	8
Ashok Niyogi	8
Brian Hosey and Lauren Braden <i>art</i>	8

prose (the meat & potatoes stuff)

Edward Rodosek	9
Dennis Vickers	20
Brandon Kamins	22
Aaron Wilder <i>art</i>	26
Danielle Stirling.....	27
Joseph Jude	30
Chris Butler	31
Edith Parzefall	36
Marina Rubin	37
Paloma Robles	37
Adam Graupe	41
Cheryl Townsend <i>art</i>	44

Scars art

3 (Katie), 4 (an airplane flying overhead in Miami and a downed airplane in Joliet), 6 (plants at confucius Temple in Shanghai China, and building - including the Hancock building - in Chicago).
Cover art of the rusted side of a barn storage building in Pennsylvania.

Video Killed the Radio Star

Michael Ceraolo

Space is the ultimate radio archives
But how was one to access it?



Vermont Landscape,
art by Peter Bates

Iridescent Eardrums

Claire Aubin

Sycophantic similes and masochistic metaphors,
organic chemicals, crashing against each other
as the taste of kerosene
and the scent of sinful sorrow
brushes past semblances of some sort of
grief.

Garbed in black, mourning the loss
of innocence, in all its severity,
the moanings of a fallen comrade,
our world is
crashing down.
We've nothing to live for,
have we grasped something to die for?
It's not as though the once-great patriarchs
will notice
with their greed-clouded eyes.

We're alone in a time where distance is closeness
and electric fences are
the best way to hold
hands.

The world is whispering its last
death-rattle and we still cannot hear,
deaf to all that is not spoken
directly into iridescent eardrums,
pulsing in frenzied time to music
not recognized by anyone other than ourselves.

Couldn't Reach It

Janet Kuypers

I know I was loved
I've never thought I wasn't
but

but I think that by the time I came around
And all the other kids were grown up
all the love was up in the air
for those adult kids to catch
and feel
and reciprocate

and I grew up
with all this love
up high in the air

I could see it up there
I knew it was there
but I couldn't touch it
I couldn't feel it
I couldn't reach it



Wondering Why

Janet Kuypers

in the movies and on tv
you see them close the eyes of the dead
but those eyes won't stay closed, you know
that's why they put pennies over your eyes
in early america

when Katie died
her tongue even fell out of her mouth
and it wasn't like she was sleeping
her eyes were still staring at us
giving us that vacuous stare
wondering why

Why I Didn't See God

Janet Kuypers

I would be walking home from school
and the next thing I'd know
is that I was flying an airplane again
the weather was really awful this time
and I had to take a terrible turn
to try to get through this air maze
I could feel the controls shaking in my hands
but before I had a chance to land
I would be walking again
almost at my friend's house
same clothes, no school books
and I'd wonder how I got there
and where was that plane



I remember walking through the fields
behind my parent's house
and seeing a missile flying through the sky
I stood and watched
as the missile landed across the field
and the mushroom cloud
from the nuclear explosion
started to rise
I just watched in amazement
as I could feel the shock wave
race through the field, push through my body
before I felt the first wave of heat
rip through me
I can't remember seeing the foliage burning
but I remember feeling my skin burn
looking down at my hands
I'd feel my skin singe and start to disintegrate
and the sickly sweet smell
I couldn't shake it
till I finally closed my eyes

I opened my eyes
and my friends were in the field with me
I didn't know why they were all looking at me
till I looked down and saw the ball in my hand
and knew they were waiting for me
to pitch the ball

###

I was medicated for years
and couldn't even get my driver's license right away
because of seizures

but I could smell my skin from the nuclear blast
feel the shake from the plane controls
course up my arms

I watched the nuclear blast

felt my plane nose dive

I knew they happened

and the doctors would ask me
if I hear voices in my head
or if I'd hear someone calling my name

and the answer was yes

###

but things have changed since then

the doctors deduced that I wasn't schizophrenic
I didn't have a psychological disorder
(I guess that's their way of saying I'm sane)

and I no longer got those hallucinations

###

but recently, learning from a philosophy book
discussing visions the saints saw

I always thought they were hallucinations
of those who fasted for weeks

but were allowed to drink only beer
but this book credited a number of scientists
who hypothesized that these saintly visions
were products of temporal lobe seizures

many small seizures

but I think of these visions
that preceded men's sainthood
I think of my memories of brushes with death

it just makes me wonder
in all of my memories
why I didn't see God

the Cycle of Life

Janet Kuypers



when my mother died
that's when the forest fire started
and the whole forest burned down

i know, i know, the cycle of life
i get it
but since then i've collected plants
i can't let things die
my office is like a rainforest
& these hanging growing creatures
have taken over my home

i know, i get it, the cycle of life
but now that she's gone
i want to make sure
that everything lives



Chicago

Janet Kuypers

I see these pillars
taller than New York
after driving through
one ethnic neighborhood
after another

I try to get closer
get in the middle of it

and all I can think
is
something important
is happening here

Absence in the Greek Isles

Andrew H. Oerke

In the Greek isles, the sea lays its head on
the shore n snores softly, rhythmically, dreaming
of its lover the Moon till its dream rises
out of the water, ascends the rungs of its ladder
of light and leaves for the sky while still glittering
on the surface here in the Greek isles.

The houses in their whitewashed gowns are dreaming
also. They dream of calcium surprises
inside the mute walls where nothing happens
without you, except for those dreams that
are thin as the whitewash of appearances.

bumperstickers

normal

neighbors

for 8 yrs

he & i never spoke to each other.

i'd walk my dog shuku by & he'd be waiting for the schoolbus to bring him his oldest kid

then his middle kid

& now finally his youngest kid. he'd sit in that rusted smokefilled '65 k-woody & listen to the country kits.

one day

i pulled my car up next to his. he was scraping birdshit off his windshield.

"beautiful day," he said to the birdshit.

"yea," i said to his birdshit.

"noticed your sticker" he said "the one that says 'make love, not war'".

"yes, my wife gave it to me for my birthday" i said. "she was trying to tell me something". then i looked at his sticker. it said 'bring home the pows'.

"ya know," he said "i went to war so guys like you could have the right to say what ever you say".

"yea," i said. "i know. i fought my own war so guys like you could stop getting shot at for guys like me".

we both were quiet for a bit.

i scraped some birdshit off my own windshield.

he looked at my graybeard

i looked at him --

"some shit," he said

"some shit," i said

"i like your dog," he said

"thanks," i said

& we both nodded our heads.

Legacy

Lorraine Levin

Dad was mostly an idea.

Weekly, he came and went.

I saw him disappear

down the hill,

fading into a blurred vision of hot energy.

I buttoned the scattered days into measured form

and waited for his return.

Dad supposed, suggested, hypothesized.

He floated pale thought

into dim corners

and left a wide swath of blank days

pierced with streaks

of shining idea.

The Weekends

Marissa Schwalm

Ever y other Friday we would make the long drive for our short weekend together.

By Sunday I wouldn't hate him anymore returning home to my mother surly, jittery.

Years later she would tell me she hated watching me leave one child, return another.

Laying it Down with Pegasus

Paula Ray

There's a stale beer moonrise over the bar.
I'm alone on the stage with my sax, Pegasus.

It's slow-hand-love
when dead bodies have been swept away
and trash has been emptied.
There's no spotlight drilling my brain,
no fog of bad breath,
no chainsaw laughter drowning drums.

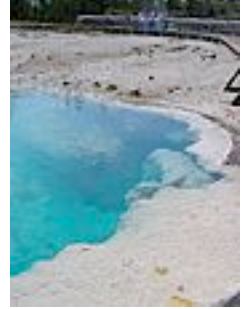
Pegasus and I are laying it down
in this dirty jazz coffin,
laying down the foundation
for something better than this bar.

He remembers his glory days
back in WWII
and I remember life,
before my own war.
We let the memories ooze
and seep into this pine box.

I got the recorder turned on
and life is good, when you play
until the sun gives you a standing ovation
and the moon refuses to leave.



the Lady
Vanishes,
art by Edward
Michael
O'durr
Supranowicz



Water Scene,
Wyoming photography
by Brian Hosey and
Lauren Braden

Fluid

Ashok Niyogi

it's the phone number
that steals my heart

this sequence
danced on paper
will be birds in trees
and mornings
all in motion

the moving sun
will distribute somewhat
love will blush

and kisses will be thrown
into telephoned winds

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

The Mountaineer

Edward Rodosek

A vivacious polka blasted Jim out of his bed. He slammed the button of the radio alarm clock and yawned widely.

Through the small plastic window of the Mobil Home, he admired the first dark-red tinge of the morning sky above blue-gray silhouettes of toothed ridges jutting above a valley. Night silence was disturbed only by the subdued buzzing of a petrol generator set, which supplied the Mobil Home with electricity.

Jim regarded himself a real mounaineer, so he decided not to shave himself and to renounce his sandwich, too. So he'd be a third of the way up the ascent before the first aircrafts came. If everything goes according to his plan, he might perhaps reach his goal, the Wright's bivouac before twilight.

He put his old, worn-out rucksack on his back. He inherited that rucksack from his grandfather, one of the last eager alpinists of this district, and several curators of museums had offered him good money for it.

Then he put on old-fashioned knickerbockers, two pairs of thin synthetic socks and the many-times-washed brown pullover made from genuine mohair, inherited from his old uncle.

He tried to walk on the perforated metal steps as quietly as he could. That wasn't easy because of his clumsy boots with rudely cut soles, which he'd bought a long time ago in a shop that sold film props. From his parked off-road car, he took a long rope, a bunch of pitons, a hammer, the crampons, and his pickaxe with a real wooden handle. The pavement of the parking lot was strewn with empty beer cans, little cellophane bags, paper boxes with remainders of jelly and ice cream sticks.

When he passed the plastic fence around the Mobil Home campsite, he turned away from concrete path, where various colored lines invited tourists to various interesting places.

Everybody knew the yellow line brings tourists to the hovercrafts pier for water trips, the blue one to VTA—Vertical Takeoff Aircraft, and the alternately green and brown lines to a combination of a lift and air-conditioned ropeway gondola.

Instantaneously, a cleaning machine arrived on the path with a loud buzzing and the driver suspiciously glanced at the mountaineer, probably because of his funny costume.

#

When the first slanting sunbeams shined on the mountaineer, he leaned on a ledge, gasping for breath a bit. He wasn't tired from traversing the steepness, but from countless fences, barriers, walls and hindrances intended for the guidance of

numerous herds of tourists.

Lately, this valley has become one the most visited starting points for cozy trips in the Rocky Mountains—which had been nearly inaccessible in times past. Many people began to look for intact exotica here, since the booming tourist progress ousted it from everywhere else.

The mountaineer recalled with bitterness when the peak of Mount Rushmore was leveled so the biggest casino out of Las Vegas could be opened there. Nowadays everyone with enough money could attend a performance of live sex on the huge rafts that navigated along the Grand Canyon, or watch the final game of the baseball cup in the amphitheater of Yellowstone National Park, or await New Year's Day on the huge concrete platforms of Mount McKinney that, for this special opportunity, has been changed into an enormous firecracker.

He felt his nostalgic recollections of the Wright's bivouac trip from his childhood. Those unforgettable feelings the mountains had been given him long ago, when he'd climbed on them for the first time.

Then the slopes, covered with snow, had filled him, a nine-year-old boy, with a humble admiration, like he'd sensed in church. After the tiresome, all-day-long climbing, they told him to crawl into his grandfather's sleeping bag. It seemed to him he'd just closed his eyes when they awoke him again.

At the first gray-bluish daybreak, his grandfather pointed to the opposite slope and gave him his binoculars. The boy searched a long time among the indistinct, delusory shadows, before he succeeded in finding a small herd of animals. Four or five females, two cubs and the single, high on the dark ledge, motionless figure of a proud ibex, suspiciously sniffing air and looking somewhere in their direction. The binoculars began to tremble in the boy's hand and he felt a quiet shiver all over his body. The scene in front of him became vague, and when he returned the binoculars to his grandfather, he felt tears in his eyes from incomprehensible delight.

#

The mountaineer walked along a narrow path that must have been abandoned for decades. Only the fluorescent advertising panels were regularly kept. The most of them were recommending 'Foam', a new, fashionable drink, which could be ordered in three flavors: peppermint, whiskey and orange; all three sorts contained a gentle stimulant.

Just when he came to the rocky scree, the first of the motor hang-gliders noisily flew above him: about half-dozen of them, the usual youngsters, who have enough physical fitness to fly directly after a rowdy night. They were hanging on crosspieces in couples or singles, dressed in multicolored fluorescent suits, teasing one another.

They gathered in a tight group and whirled round in dangerous curves to impress the girls with their skill. They were shouting something, winding up the gas at full throttle and roaring with laughter. After a while they got tired and flew away; the mountaineer needed some time to hear normally again.

After he traversed the scree, he had to remain in a groove just under the aerial ropeway. Somewhere in the middle of the groove, one of those big, two-storied gondolas slowly went by, about twenty yards above him. The mountaineer could

see a great number of astonished faces through the windows, and a few passengers worriedly waved their encouragement to him. But most of them hurried to take pictures of that incredible wonder—a person who was climbing! The mountaineer diverted his head to avoid the lights of their many flashes.

Then the rock wall became more and more crumbled and in the next half an hour, he needed to use his ice axe. All that time he heard the annoying buzzing of a helicopter. Inwardly, he cursed the pilot for showing the mountain beauties to the tourists so effectively. When he, finally, swung himself on a narrow ledge, he looked in the air and noticed on the bothersome helicopter the marking of the MRS—Mountain Rescue Service.

Through the open gate of the copter, the uniformed legs of the guy were hanging. He shouted something nearly incomprehensible though the megaphone: "... informed. Hey, are you ... unded? Do you need help?"

With gestures, the mountaineer tried to make him understand that everything was okay. A violent wind from the copter's rotor was lifting annoying whirls of dust, which penetrated his mouth and nostrils, and at last he had to bend double, because his wind jacket fluttered too strongly.

He noticed a tiny object hanging on a string, swinging to and fro in the wind, slowly lowering to him. Finally the string let off so the mountaineer could pick up a vinyl bag in which a small cell phone had been wrapped up.

He pressed the proper button; holding the phone close to his chin, he started to yell into the tiny holes.

"I'm just on a little trip here and everything is okay with me. I don't need any help; I'm an experienced mountaineer."

For some time he heard just a crackling, and then a men's voice asked: "What did you say you are?"

"A mountaineer; a very well trained climber."

It seemed the man who was speaking with him talked to someone else, for there was no answer for a while.

"Hey you!"

"Yes, I hear you well."

"Try somehow to come to the plateau by the next column. There we could lower the rescue basket from the copter and then we'd try to pull you up. Did you understand that?"

"Yes, I understood you, but *you* didn't understand me! I repeat—I do not need any help from you. I'm not tired at all and I have all the necessary equipment for climbing. Thank you very much for your concern. Please, return to your duty somewhere else. Over and out."

The copter crew continued to raise dust for a few seconds and then came a warning through the loudspeaker: "All right, pal. This is *your* funeral."

The helicopter made a roaring semicircle and flew away. The mountaineer wiped the dust from his eyes, sat down on a rock that was covered with lichen, and unscrewed the lid of his cantina containing a fruit tea.

#

For the next half an hour, the mountaineer walked along a narrow zigzag path, which wasn't suitable for dizzy people. Some time afterwards he arrived to an almost vertical chimney, a few hundred yards high. It was narrow but still large enough for his body. He took a deep breath, widened his legs, leaned his back against one side of the chimney, and began cautiously to climb.

After some dozen yards he decided to pass over on the right hand slope, which seemed more promising than the left one. Except for a little muddy water from the melting snow drizzling on him from above, he had no other inconveniences.

Just when he allowed himself some rest on a ledge, no much broader than his foot, he suddenly felt the slope begin to tremble. At first, the throbbing was so slight he believed that was only his imagination; but later it persistently increased. What on earth was this? Could it be possible that was an earthquake, or—

The mountaineer hadn't time to finish his guessing for the tremors grew swiftly to a thundering like from a huge waterfall. Some gravel fell from above on his shoulders, and now he started to worry, for the bigger stones also began to crumble, bouncing from the walls of chimney and loudly rattling into the abyss. Suddenly, his rucksack, hanging on a rocky edge, unhinged and slipped downwards. He pressed himself to the slope and tried to become as thin as possible, his cheek sticking on the cold, wet rock, his eyes closed. Now he felt the origin of the thunder was moving from below upwards, the rumbling became nearly unbearable but then quickly died away somewhere above him.

During the lessening clatter of rolling stones far under the mountaineer he could explain what had happened.

Certainly. How was it possible he didn't grasp it at once? On that spot only a few yards of rock separated him from the enormous shaft for the SFME—Super Fast Mountain Elevator.

This was the newest and the greatest achievement of modern technology, made under the pressure of countless. Since the SFME had been built, the traffic to the local peaks was tripled. That magnificent device had two parallel shafts. The slow one was designed for those tourists who enjoyed intermediate stops on the view platforms, where it was possible to order some refreshments. The express one lifted the tourist in a single magnificent tug of twenty-three hundred yards to the peak of the mountain in only six minutes. Every passenger got with his ticket a warning that dissuades the use of the express variant to anyone with heart problems.

The mountaineer, thanks to his own caution, carried his rope across his chest and on the loops of his belt were hanging his grandfather's crampons and a bunch of pitons. Some other outfit, like a sleeping bag, a flashlight, drink and food he'd try to buy in the shops on the nearest of the platforms. To reach the nearest of them—Platform Four—he had to diverge from the earlier intended direction of his climbing and had to cross a large glacier.

For that he'd need at least two hours, if everything went well, or some more time, if anything went wrong. In that case he'd be too late to reach the Wright's bivouac before night, and he'd be forced to stop overnight in the hotel on the Platform Four. The mountaineer put on his crampons and made the first step on the smooth surface of the glacier

After about an hour the mountaineers had nearly arrived at the base of a gigantic latticed construction that supported a light advertisement for Magic, a miraculous cream against baldness. He recollected that the light of this advertisement could be seen at cloudless nights of a hundred miles. The four concrete foundations were unevenly high because of steepness of the slope. Still, even the lowest one was as high as a multistoried building.

A tubular construction above the foundations formed a three-dimensional lattice, which carried the separate letters of the advertisement. Each was nearly as big as the platform for a space missile. Every letter was composed of many searchlights, to which bundles of thick isolated cables led.

The mountaineer heard a silently buzzing transformer, which would be enough to provide a whole residential district with energy. By the foot of the construction, the ice was melted tens of yards around, and the bare rock was an evidence for the uncommon heat the advertisement emitted at night-time, when it was lit.

After a short hesitation, he bent down on the ice-free part of the ground and took off his crampons. Without any trouble, he managed to pass over almost the entire rocky part, and now he was able to see, far on the hillside, the utmost left part of the supporting wall of the Platform Four.

Tiny streams of muddy water were trickling in cracks under the mountaineer's feet, and the wind was dashing through the steel construction. Still, in the last few minutes it seemed to him that he heard something else. An indefinably, unevenly rustling, as if someone was tearing paper to pieces. When he came to the other part of the glacier, he crouched and fastened the crampons on his shoes again. The wind was stronger here, so it drowned all the other sounds. He made a few steps on the ice sheet; when he suddenly felt a cramp in his left leg, and a second later in his right one. Puzzled, he lifted his left foot from the ground and when he kneaded the muscles of his calf the cramp disappeared. But as soon as he made another step, the cramp returned, this time much stronger, so he unintentionally moaned. At the same time, that mysterious sound returned with doubled power.

The mountaineer lifted his glance and now he realized what it was.

Barely thirty steps from him a black snake of freely dangling electric cable squirmed in uneven jerks and sharply hissed every time it touched the dirty surface of the ice that was criss-crossed by many rivulets of muddy water.

He just gazed spellbound at the cable like a rabbit at the nearing rattlesnake. At times the cable stood still, singeing on its end. Then, without any visual cause, it instantaneously rolled and hit a couple of times to the left and to the right, like an enraged cat with its tail, which intensified the sparking.

The mountaineer felt an icy sweat, which was trickling downward his spine. He knew all the ground around him was under high tension, which wasn't equable, so each part of the ground was under different voltage. The cramp in his legs was the first warning of the current flowing through his body. He had to leave that spot as soon as possible. Yet, he mustn't move in such a way to touch the ground with both his feet at the same time. Shortly, there remained nothing else but leaping only on one leg.

On this icy steepness and with these clumsy crampons on his feet, that seemed almost impossible. Still, he had to try it. He decided to make only three consecutive jumps with the same leg, and then to stand still, with one foot lifted. After a short concentration he'd repeat the same procedure with the other leg.

For the first and the second series, that tactic proved successful. But the third series began badly. Probably he pushed himself off from the ground a bit less; he slid sideways and in a fragment of a second he realized he'd lose his balance.

He fell and rolled downhill, with his head down between his shoulders, but then he crashed to the icy ground so hard that his breath was taken away. He spread his arms and legs, instinctively grabbing at anything firm; he got muddy slush in his mouth—and then he felt a brutal thump on his head.

The mountaineer hadn't any idea how much time had passed before he regained his senses again. His mouth was full of blood and that he was shivering because of severe evening frost. He was soaked to the skin, numb with cold and his left leg was torpid and powerless. It was night but the light from the many searchlights helped him to see his surroundings.

#

The mountaineer didn't know how much time he was spent during his painful, exhausting creeping out of the ravine and up the hill. A smarting strain to rise the upper part of his stiff body with his right foot and both arms, then a spasmodic pull forwards and, finally, a descent—nearly a fall—on the ground. He had repeated that sequence a few hundred times, for he no longer felt his torpid, injured cheeks, lips and chin, although he still tasted the salty flavor of his blood in his mouth.

He was surprised when he finally arrived at the foot of the nearest supporting wall of Platform Four. He considered the irony of his situation: the same huge advertisement, which had almost killed him, later rescued him—for without its glittering light he couldn't have found the proper way through the darkness.

The mountaineer was dripping with sweat, and he knew he had to reach some help by calling, before he froze in the night's cold. He looked upwards. The main building of Platform Four, which was luxuriously lit up, was encircled by a wide, covered terrace. By day, it was surely crowded with the nature-lovers, who fearfully looked at the magnificent steepnesses they had conquered a little while ago. But now, by night, nobody was there. Of course, inside was much warmer; it was bright and agreeable, filled with smoke. Waiters served various chosen foods and fine drink, there were tumultuous multimedia shows for everybody. Who would be so stupid to take the risk of catching cold outside on the frosty terrace?

The mountaineer leaned against the vertical concrete wall, shrinking his right leg, and adjusted his left leg with his hands. Then he started to call. He yelled as loudly as he could, then waited for a moment for a response, and repeated his shout. But the roaring wind carried away his calls, and nothing moved on the empty terrace.

The nape of his neck was stiff from looking upwards. Still, he kept roaring as penetratingly as he could; until he noticed his voice became hoarse. He hadn't much hope left that anybody would hear his calling, when he looked upwards once more.

A face was staring at him from the terrace.

In the lights from the façade, the mountaineer saw the face belonged to a teenager. The boy was leaning against the fence with both arms, his chin on his hands, and stared at the mountaineer as if he'd observed a rare animal.

"Hey, you! Please call for somebody!"

The boy remained motionless.

"I need help, do you hear me? I'm wounded and I'll freeze to death if somebody doesn't help me—do you understand? Call your mother, or father, or some waiter—just tell somebody inside that I'm here. Quickly, please!"

The boy moved to the left and bent down over the fence as low as he could. It seemed he didn't believe what he saw. Perhaps the boy was afraid of him? Maybe he'd begun it wrongly. He had to encourage him, to entangle him into conversation.

"Listen, pal, my name's Jim. And what's yours?"

No answer. The boy only inclined his head a bit and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"How old are you? I bet you arrived up here by a hang-glider or a helicopter, didn't you? The elevator is only for small children and older people, don't you agree? Come on, call somebody and afterwards I'll buy you a nice, big cake."

The boy's head disappeared.

The mountaineer sighed with relief. Finally, he'd succeeded in finding the right way of communication. Now the youngster was probably talking with his parents and they will at once—

A drop of tepid liquid dripped on his arm, then three or four drops more on his forehead and cheeks. The sky was cloudless and the stars were shining—so where had the rain come from? He glanced upwards again and saw a thin trickle ripped from wind, which originated from an opening between the fence's banisters. The boy was urinating on him.

The mountaineer was numb with astonishment. For an instant, he wanted to laugh—but then a blind fury grasped him and he roared so inhumanly the trickle stopped. A moment later, he heard the door on the terrace open and then close again.

He collected a dozen stones and started to throw them upwards, one after another. Because of the steepness of his throwing, the most of the stones rebounded from the fence and fell without any effect. Some rolled over the terrace's pavement and only two or three of them weakly rattled on the glass façade.

After he rested for awhile, he tried to gather a new stock of stones. For this purpose, he had to creep several yards around in spite of the pain in his wounded leg.

He continued with the throwing, feeling his strength was weakening more and more. When he'd almost given up, one of the stones luckily hit something metallic, which must be loaded on a window ledge. He heard the loud clank of a tin salver, and then a magnificent bang of a loaded hip of glassware. After a while, he heard the door on the terrace open and several subdued voices uttered. He saw two or three astonished faces, waved his hands to them and succeeded in grinning weakly before he slipped to his knees and fainted.

His bed was heavenly comfortable; the sheets smelt of the fashionable softener 'Fluff', and all the lights in the bedroom were subdued.

“Oh, you’re awake now,” a woman’s voice stated.

A young woman dressed in a nurse uniform stood at the head of the mountaineer’s bed and cheerfully nodded to him. “You know, you’re my first real patient.”

The mountaineer looked around. “Is this the first aid station? On Platform Four? And you are a nurse in here? Was I unconscious for a long time?”

“Yes, yes, yes, and not too long,” she answered with a hearty smile. “You’re asking a lot of questions at the same time. Fortunately I’ve an excellent memory.”

He lifted himself on his elbows and slightly moved the toes on his left foot, just for a test. Then he bent it with trouble and found out it was stiff but still movable. His thigh was bandaged, and on his forehead he had a big plaster.

“Easy, Mister Stone. You’ve had a shot against pains and the ‘flying doctor’ ordered me not to let you out of bed for the next day or two.”

“Where do you know my family name from? And who is the flying—” He recalled her remark about his way of questioning and hushed.

She burst into laughter, showing a row of tiny teeth. “Yesterday we had to undress you and the representative of MRS wanted to see your documents. He said you’d caused them a problem twice in the same day.”

“Mountain Rescue Service? Now I understand. You called them and they then brought that doctor, didn’t they?”

“Of course; that’s one of their basic duties.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t expect to see them again so soon. Did they pull me up on the terrace?”

She shook her head. “No such thing! These dandies have just been buzzing around with their dazzling lights. Then they landed on the flat roof of the building and declared they couldn’t do anything.”

“But how—”

“That tiny chap climbed down to you and tied a rope around you. Early in the morning, when you were still asleep, he was already here to look see how you are.”

The mountaineer was a bit confused. “I can’t follow you. Why weren’t those specialists from the Mountain Rescue Service able to come down those meager fifteen yards to fetch me?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Those specialists said that kind of rescue hadn’t been in their training programme. They only dealt with machines.” Her voice was full of contempt. “The man I’d mentioned before, Mister Collins, volunteered his services in that matter.”

“So he was the one who dared to climb down to me? An ordinary guest in an evening suit?”

She shook with her curls. “Why... I wouldn’t say he was in an evening suit. No, he was dressed almost as oddly as...” She paused, hesitatingly.

“... As oddly as I?” he helped her.

“Well—yes, if you say so. He climbed like a goat; I’ve never seen such thing before. And meanwhile he shouted some orders; half of them nobody understood, but everyone obeyed him.”

He nodded. “I see. And after that you found my credit cards and put me in

this expensive room.”

“Yes; the manager said he wasn’t worried about the payment.” She laughed again. “Now, I’m about to bring to you a restorative soup, and after that you must sleep for a while. Otherwise both of us will be blamed by the flying doctor, you know.” She fluffed his pillow and hurried away with quick, tiny steps.

The mountaineer must have been dead tired, for he awoke not before eleven o’clock. Then he ordered an abundant meal—breakfast joined with lunch. After that he pressed several nicely written numbers on the phone set. At the second ringing tone, some firm male voice uttered, “Collins.”

“It’s me, Stone. That awkward fellow who you pulled up last night.”

“I see.” After several seconds Collins added: “Listen—just now I’m about to go out for some errands, and you probably need to get as much rest as possible. So, we could meet ... say, about four?”

“Perfect. Where shall I come to?”

“Well, I hope in the piano bar there’s the least noise.”

The mountaineer felt his leg almost didn’t hurt at all and he was longing for some exercise. He put on his clothes and went for a walk. Two or three floors of the Platform Four were stuffed with many small shops, where all sorts of trumped up souvenirs and useless but expensive stuff were on sale.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t find a rucksack anywhere; so he had to be satisfied with a plastic bag for golf clubs, which he could put across his shoulders. Although it was still early in the afternoon, many mountain-fanciers were already dancing in a big hall, which was filled with the heavy smoke of marijuana. Somehow the mountaineer managed to push his way through the crowd and return to his room. There he comfortably showered and shaved himself and then, much too early, headed to the piano bar.

When he felt somebody’s tap on his shoulder, he turned around. Although Collins was short and slender, he seemed tough, and his shake was as firm as a vise. His skin was sunburned in a manner that solarium could provide.

Collins nodded toward the stage, on which a few youngsters carried a series of baseball bats, enormous hammers, and even a big, toothed cudgel, from motion pictures about ancient Rome.

“As you see I was wrong about the relative silence, which ought to be here. If you don’t mind, it’d be better if we move on.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Don’t you see them? They are preparing the stage for the ensemble ‘Mad Blaster’. After each of their afternoon performances they smash all the guitars and the keyboard into pieces, and in the evening performance, besides that, the whole podium. The tickets are costly, but yet they’re sold out for several weeks in advance.”

Both men passed the terrace on which a many group of mountain-fanciers crowded around the bet collector. The subject of the bet was who of the four competitors would manage to shape the best human face out of the mountain slope in front of the terrace. The tool for the shaping the face was a huge military laser. For the present, the slope was already demolished and several wagons of rock fragments

in the hollow testified the efficiency of the artistic tool.

The both men went round a corner just at the moment when some cleaner pushed a heap of litter—paper napkins, tin cans, plastic cups and containers, broken glasses and other rubbish—with a huge broom into a big square niche in a side wall of the corridor.

Collins stopped and whispered to the mountaineer, “Just watch this.”

The cleaner pressed a key on the wall; a hatch in the niche opened and all the trash disappeared downwards with a rattling. For just a moment, both men caught a glimpse of a remote mountain slope, wrapped with a translucent haze.

“For heaven’s sake!” muttered the mountaineer in astonishment.

“I agree,” said Collins. “Officially they cart off all the waste down to the valley on the public dumping ground. But the transport costs a lot so they cut the expense in that way.”

“But—but all this trash falls on the side of the hill!” The mountaineer was irritated. “Such an illegal move destroys the natural environment, the biotope!”

“What environment?” Collins’s voice was embittered. “All the mountain animals have been exterminated long ago; nowadays, stein bocks and chamois can only be seen in the zoo. And the vegetation survives to some degree; at least the ones that stay unburied.”

They went to the empty club room and sat down on the armchairs near the window

“What about the people walking around? Certainly there are several tourists who sometimes go on foot and they could be hurt by that dirty mess.”

“On foot?” asked Collins sarcastically. “For what reason would anybody take pains on foot and ignore all that marvelous opportunity to move in all three directions? All the normal tourists are safely enclosed in the hovercrafts, gondolas, elevators, planes ... The words ‘mountaineer’, ‘alpinist’ or ‘climber’ are queer notions. And, of course, nobody has to think about such fools.”

Collins persistently gazed through the window panes. A huge helicopter crammed with tourists, starving for pleasure, was just lowering on the landing surface of Platform Four. Its two roaring rotors were so noisy that conversation became impossible.

When the mountaineer spoke again, his voice was a bit hesitant. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Shoot. ”

“Look—I’m deeply obliged to you for risking your own neck to save me. Those fools from MRS would have probably held a consultation for so long that I’d have been frozen to death.”

Collins tacitly waved his hand.

“Obviously,” insisted the mountaineer, “you wouldn’t be able to do it if you were ‘a normal tourist’ as you said. Mister Collins—are you a mountaineer, too?”

“Huh,” said Collins. “Do you really mean you may ask anyone about that? Do you believe anybody—when sober—would confess that he’s, for instance, a kleptomaniac, a pyromaniac or a pedophile?”

The mountaineer looked annoyed. “You can’t be serious with such a compari-

son! All those ... how should I say ... inclinations are mental sicknesses and they're forbidden by law!"

Collins glanced at him ironically. "How long would it last, in your opinion, before climbing will be among the forbidden categories? You see, people like you disturb the set up order; you stepped out of a good, ordered line. And, above all, you don't buy any tickets, you eat your own food and drink, you prefer to sleep in a tent instead of paying for a room. In short, you cut the profit to all the other participants in tourism. You're a dangerous example for the other consumers, so climbing will be forbidden by law—very soon—maybe in the next few months. I bet in this moment somebody in the government is preparing a draft of a bill, which would settle this matter for good."

The mountaineer stared at Collins. "I wouldn't insist further. Still, I don't believe you *really* mean what you're saying."

Collins turned from the window and made two steps toward the mountaineer.

"Do you see this scar?" He strained the skin on his forehead with his fingers and the mountaineer noticed a scar a bit paler than the skin around it. The scar extended from above Collins' eye to his temple.

"This is a mark from a broken bottle or maybe from an open can—I'll never know—out of a garbage heap, which was dumped on me from a height of a couple of hundred yards, out of Platform Seven."

The mountaineer shook his head in a quiet compassion.

Collins' face was gloomy when he stepped close to a drink dispenser, and put a coin in a slot. For a moment, he stopped his forefinger over the knob for vodka but then he changed his mind and pressed on the knob for orange juice.

"Where did you intend to be last night?" asked Collins. "You had a rope and a bunch of pitons on you."

"Wright's bivouac, and the next day over the ridge to the Green Valley."

Collins' eyes beamed in admiration. He nodded, took a seat in front of the mountaineer and leaned forward.

"That's a fairly good tour, man. By the way, call me Steve."

"Jim," said the mountaineer, smiling.

"Well, Jim—have you been up there before?"

Jim nodded. "Sort of. I was only nine when my grandfather and my great-uncle took me with them. In those bygone days the route was marked quite well. Last week I studied it thoroughly and I believe I'm capable of getting through it. Although I'm aware it'd be a little hard here and there."

Steve Collins looked thoughtfully through the window.

"I've closely examined that route, too," he said. "I even have several 3-D snapshots of the hardest slopes; although I'm a little embarrassed that I'd bought them. Do you know that under the west side of the ridge there are twenty or thirty pitons left on the slope? I've noticed them with my binoculars from Platform Seven."

Jim eyed him for a while. "Well, Steve—who of us will say it first?"

Steve grinned widely. "Shell we tackle this job together, Jim?"

Jim stretched out his hand and Steve shook it firmly.

Tinkerbell

Dennis Vickers

Lois always sat with Alice Wingard when she took the bus to work. Alice lived three houses up on Carlyle. They never talked much, only a word here and there, mainly noticing other passengers. “His face looks like my hoohah,” Alice said one Friday morning referring to a triangular-faced man three seats up, “only scruffier.” The man stroked his wispy salt-n-pepper beard and read his newspaper. “Market seeks new bottom,” the headline read.

Lois considered how to respond without launching a hoohah conversation. “It’s like Tinkerbell,” she said. The wind blew dry snow against the bus window. Lois wore her long navy coat, wool and double breasted. Alice wore her slate colored, Michelin-man coat.

“His beard?”

“The market.”

They rode in silence while Alice considered this. “Because it brings luck?” she asked after a long pause.

“It dies when people stop believing.”

Alice looked skeptical. “That fairy in the movie...”

“Peter Pan. When everyone believes and claps their hands the stock market goes up; when they stop, it dies.”

“Lucky me, I don’t have any money. The market can rot in its grave so far as I’m concerned.”

The brakes squealed as the bus lumbered to a stop on Hamilton Square. Lois adjusted her coat collar around her throat, pulled her hat down over her ears, stood up. Alice was already pushing into the column of riders moving to the back door.

The wind was quieter on the square and the snow had been pushed off the sidewalk into a pile at the corner. The two women headed up the street without speaking, their breath escaping in thin clouds that disappeared almost as soon as they formed. Half a block from the bus stop they fell in behind a man moving slowly up the middle of the walk. His coat was frayed and oily at the elbows. His pants were ballooned with newspaper shoved underneath. As they split to pass him on both sides, he let out a low moan and fell to the ground, rolled onto his back and lay looking up with small, pale blue, glassy eyes, unblinking.

“God damn it,” Alice said turning.

Lois knelt over the man and looked into his ashen face. “Call an ambulance,” she said. “He looks bad.”

“Battery’s dead,” Alice said. “Can’t remember to plug it in.”

Lois took off her gloves and found her phone in her purse. She punched 9-1-1.

“Emergency dispatch,” the phone answered.

“I’m not calling for me,” Lois said. “There’s a man on the sidewalk, on the Monroe street side of Hamilton Square.”

“You’re with him?”

“He’s homeless, I think.”

“An accident?”

“He just fell over.”

“He’s breathing?”

Alice looked around uneasily. People milled by the obstruction; a few stopped to watch.

Lois looked carefully at the man's nostrils. His head lay awkwardly on the sidewalk, right ear down. Seeing it made her own ear cold. She unwound her scarf, folded it into a small pillow, slipped it under the man's head, turning his face up as she did.

"Don't think so; Better hurry."

"Poor bastard," a man who had stopped next to Alice said. "I see him here every day. He's got nothing."

"Our units are all on assignment," the phone said. "Accidents all over town. Do you have a way to get him to the emergency room?"

"Me?"

"Is there anyone?"

Lois looked up at each face in the small crowd that had gathered. Shrugs, raised eyebrows, turn away. "No one," she said into the phone.

"He'll freeze to death there," the man next to Alice said.

"If he isn't dead already." Alice knelt beside Lois and nudged her with an elbow.

"Try to keep him warm," the phone suggested. "We'll send someone soon as we can."

Lois put her phone away. "We need to move him someplace warm," she said.

"He's a goner," Alice said. "Look, he peed his pants."

Steam rose from the prone man's thighs. A yellow puddle formed on the sidewalk between his legs.

"That car in the unloading zone is unlocked," the man next to Alice suggested. "Just parked, too; probably warm inside. We could put him there."

Alice nudged Lois again. "Not our problem," she suggested.

Lois considered the parked car. "We can't leave him on the sidewalk," she said.

Lois, Alice, and the man who suggested the parked car dragged the homeless man to the car, opened the door, pushed him into the passenger seat. His head lolled onto his shoulder. Lois adjusted his arms and put his hands together in his lap. The car's horn began to honk in a heartbeat pulse. "That'll keep him warm enough 'til the ambulance gets here," Lois said. She slammed the door shut. The horn kept honking.

"He's a goner anyway," Alice said. "Let's get out of here."

"Smells like he'd been drinking pickle juice," the man who'd suggested the car said as they hurried up the sidewalk.

A block away the honking horn faded into the background city noise. Lois and Alice slowed their pace. Alice began to giggle.

"What?" Lois looked at her scarf. She'd held it in her hand since retrieving it from under the homeless man's head, now folded it into a tight square, slipped it into her coat pocket.

"Bet he won't leave his car unlocked after this. Dead man soaked in pickle-juice pee! Surprise!"

"We don't know he was dead."

They stopped at the entrance to the phone company where Lois worked.

"I didn't hear anybody clapping."

Lois pulled the door open and went inside. Alice pulled her collar up and continued up the street.

J U M P E R

by Brandon Kamins

Julie Wills was the first to notice the young woman in the blue dress standing by the side of the bridge. She was a pretty thing, not more than nineteen or twenty, and with no winter coat! Julie laughed...that old maternal instinct. Besides, what did she care if a stranger wanted to walk in the cold? But this girl wasn't walking. She was just standing there. Maybe there was something wrong?

But when traffic slowed to a crawl and she spotted a pair of blinking yellow lights, Julie realized what must've happened—the girl's car had broken down.

She felt sorry for her but checked her watch all the same. It was quarter to seven.

Julie kept an eye on the girl as traffic on the bridge inched along and then stopped, dead.

The right lane—the one she was in—had been blocked by what she assumed was the girl's broken-down vehicle, while the other lane had been closed because apparently men were working.

All around her commuters quickly began to lose their cool: tapped on their steering wheels, loosened their ties, unbuckled their seatbelts, or nervously, compulsively played with the radio dials.

At least, Julie thought, they hadn't started honking.

As her old red Honda Accord came bumper to bumper with a sky blue Chevy Impala, Julie turned her attention back to the stranded motorist. *What a bad day for a breakdown*, she thought. Not that there was ever a good day for one. But today, especially—a cold day, even for December. And what a terrible time of day! If only it had been after work: a pretty young girl stranded by the side of the road? Men would be crashing into each other to lend her a hand. But during the morning commute?—Not even Jesus would stop for her.

Julie rolled down the passenger side window, unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned toward the cold open air. "Miss," she called out the window. "Miss, do you need some help? Do you need a phone?" she asked, waving her cell phone and smil-

ing. The girl didn't answer. *Maybe she was hard of hearing*, Julie thought. She continued. "Is there someone I can call for you? AAA?"

Again, the girl didn't answer. She just stood there, hands on the railing, peering down at the water below.

It was one part kindness, the other curiosity that made her do what she did what she did next.

Julie put the car in park, buttoned her coat and adjusted her scarf. She got out and slowly approached the motionless girl with her cell phone cupped in her gloved hand, like a peace offering. "Miss," she said coming forward. "Miss, I've got a phone for you to use...if you need it." She was just a few feet away when she spotted a pair of inexpensive-looking black pumps placed neatly side-by-side.

It was then that she realized this girl was a jumper.

Julie stopped for a moment then slowly backed away.

The man behind her in a blue jeep Cherokee opened his window. "What? What is it?" He must've seen the look on her face.

"I think...I think she's going to jump."

"Jump," he repeated.

Within seconds every car in sight had a window down and a head poking out to make inquiries.

"What? What's going on?" asked a voice from the far lane.

"She's going to jump," said the man in the jeep.

"Oh, my God!" gasped the woman in the Impala.

"Not another one," uttered a man in a black SAAB.

After a moment of frantic, confused conversation, all eyes were on Julie. She didn't understand. It was as if she had somehow, unwittingly been elected group leader. That made her nervous.

"What-what should we do?" she asked no one in particular.

There was a strange, unsettling moment of silence before a woman in a gold minivan offered to call the cops.

Julie turned back to the girl. She was shivering now, every inch, with her eyes still fixed, trance-like, on the water below. How long could it take?

Julie thought for a moment then added, "I'm going to try to talk to her."

Heads turned as commuters exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said the woman in the Impala.

"Right," the man in the jeep agreed. "Let the cops deal with it."

"And what if they don't get here in time?" Julie asked, looking him square in the eye.

He didn't have an answer.

Julie nodded her head several times before she realized she was doing it. "Right," she said. "Fine...I'm going to talk to her."

She turned and approached the girl cautiously as if she were sneaking up on a wounded animal.

"Miss," she said coming forward. "Miss. My name is Julie...what's yours?" The

girl didn't answer. Julie came to within ten feet of her then stopped. "I've got a phone here, and you're welcome to it. I can slide it over. Or, if there's someone you want me to call, you can just give me the number and—"

"Why don't you leave her alone," the man in the jeep interrupted. Julie turned to face him. "Let the cops handle it...it's their job," he snapped. "Unless of course you're a professional?" He smiled a bit. "Are you?"

"No," she answered, sheepishly, "no, I'm not."

The woman in the minivan chimed in: "He's right then...it's best to not get involved. If she jumps, her family could sue you."

"Sue me?" Julie said. "For trying to help?" For being a human being?"

The man in the jeep flashed a twisted smile. "We all admire your altruism," he scoffed. "But it's obvious you aren't doing any good. She won't talk to you. Besides," he said, and smiled again, "we all know she's going to jump."

Julie's jaw dropped. "Wh-what did you say?"

"I said she's going to jump. They always do." He leaned his head further out the window. "Isn't that right, honey?" he shouted. "You're going to jump, aren't you?"

Julie shook her head. "What's the matter with you?"

"Me?" he said, looking surprised and insulted. "I'm not the one's about to swan dive off a bridge. Besides, what business is it of yours?"

Before she could answer, Julie saw the traffic part as police cars made their way to the top of the bridge.

"Hallelujah!" cried the man in the jeep. "Here comes the cavalry!"

A few people clapped, a few laughed.

Julie turned to the girl. "Hold on...just hold on."

As the sound of sirens grew louder, the girl looked up from the water for the first time. She turned and stared at Julie, her face calm and carefree. Then she smiled. A sweet little girl smile. Julie smiled back and took a step forward. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. The girl nodded her head in thanks. Then she quickly, nimbly, climbed to the top of the railing, dropped both legs over and sat down. She was now directly over the water.

"Please," Julie implored her, "please don't." She didn't know what else to say. Her heart was pounding and she was out of breath, though she hadn't moved in minutes. And where were the police? Their sirens were blaring, but they were still a few cars back. What could she do? And why was the burden hers to bear? She felt sorry for feeling sorry for herself. "Miss," she said, "I..."

A noise from behind gave Julie a nasty start. She couldn't place it at first in the state she was in. Then she realized...it was a car horn. Someone had honked their horn? She turned and was greeted by that same twisted smile.

"Can we move this along already?" groaned the man in the jeep. "Some of us have jobs to go to."

Julie took a few steps in his direction. "Are you crazy?" she shouted. "Well, are you?"

He smiled

“I’m not talking to you, lady. I’m talking to Rapunzel.” He snickered and looked around to see if others shared his humor. “Hey Rapunzel, let’s get this show on the road!”

“Yeah,” yelled the man in the SAAB, “shit or get off the pot!”

The two men giggled like sleep-deprived school girls. Then said something she didn’t hear.

Julie looked to the others for aid, but they all seemed occupied, talking on their cell phones—undoubtedly explaining why they were late.

The man in the jeep smiled wide.

“Hey girly,” he hissed. “Do you know what happens when a body hits the water? From this height?” He waited a moment. “It’s like hitting concrete...only you don’t die right away.” He waited again. “You break your legs; maybe your back...and your organs all just go to mush. Then you flop around in the freezing water until finally...” he paused and extended a thumb. “You drowned...choke to death on salt water.”

“Really?” said the man in the SAAB.

“Yeah, really. I read an article about it in the Post. It said fifteen people have jumped from this bridge.” He stopped. “I guess that makes Rapunzel sweet sixteen.”

They laughed for a long time. When they were through, the man in the jeep said, “So, whatddaya think?”

“About what?”

“I got fifty bucks says she goes within the hour.” He looked at his watch and tapped it with his finger.

“This-this isn’t a game,” Julie said, her voice tired and trembling, “This is someone’s life.”

The man in the jeep grinned. “If she doesn’t care about it...why should I? Why do you?”

Julie shook her head. “I—”

Before she could answer, someone started chanting, “Jump! Jump! Jump!”

The man in the jeep smiled.

His friend in the SAAB laughed. “Jump!” he joined in. “J—”

“Shut up!” shouted a policeman, who had just arrived on scene.

He looked stunned “It’s a free country! I’ve got the right to—”

“Not another word,” the officer barked, and pointed a peremptory finger at him.

The man in the SAAB pantomimed the zipping of his lips and the officer gave him an icy glare.

Then he approached Julie.

“Ma’am, please get back in your car,” the officer instructed, and pointed at her idling Honda. Julie stood motionless for a moment staring at the girl. “Please, Ma’am,” he said, “return to your vehicle. Let us handle this.” Julie turned and slowly walked away. “She’s going to be alright,” he called after her in a soft, uncertain voice.

As she was walking back to her car, the man in the SABB stopped her. “Can you believe this?” he said. “I’m an hour late for a videoconference with Tokyo. I could lose one of our biggest accounts.” He shook his head at his misfortune. “If

she wants to kill herself—fine...let her do it on her own time!”

Julie didn't say a thing. She got back in her car and rolled up the window. Even with the radio on, she could hear a few people chanting.

Outside, three burly policemen were attempting to coax the girl off the railing. They talked to her for almost an hour, but she never even acknowledged them.

At 10: 37 the girl stood up on the railing and calmly, without a word, stepped into thin air.

A few people gasped, a few cheered.

Julie returned to an empty home. She took a shower, had a glass of wine, and buried herself in the bed sheets.

The next morning the headline on page 11 read “Suicide Jumper holds up traffic on Harbor Bridge.” She didn't get to the third paragraph before she broke down in tears.



Portrait of the Artist's Self-Expression,
art by Aaron Wilder

An Unfortunate Host

Danielle Stirling

Every morning Bentley Ferrari wakes up at 6 o'clock and drags himself sleepily across the room to the small area in the corner: the bathroom. He has a morning battle with the cockroaches for authority and proceeds to make himself look semi-decent all the while stepping over the losing cockroaches dead bodies. His grey-brown hair is combed into a comb over and strands of his greasy hair fall from their place on his head down in front of his boring brown eyes. He wobbles to the left of the bathroom area and pulls out his work outfit. He struggles to fit the red plaid shirt over his head and his beer belly hangs slightly from the bottom. His blue jeans are worn and faded, reaching right above his ankles.

Before he leaves for work, he pours a few cups full of dog food into his dog's food dish and gives him fresh water from the tap. He takes his keys from the table in front of the television, littered with beer bottles, and walks out of his dumpy studio apartment on his way to work.

Outside his apartment in his designated parking stall sits a white, 1979 Chevrolet Chevette, its paint chipping horribly, making the car look pitiful and sad. Bentley gets in his car and starts the engine; it purrs softly then roars to life, making a small bird fly away in fright. He pulls out of his apartment complex and races down the street and around the corner, the tires screeching as he disregards the red light.

Fifteen minutes later he arrives at a small, broken down building and parks directly in front of it. The orange neon sign above the door glows dully in the morning light. The lines swirl together, the sign reading: Key Shop. Bentley takes a small, dirty key and shoves it roughly into the door handle and turns it to the right. The door squeaks open and he walks inside, throwing his keys on the front desk. He flips the light switch on and the small shop comes to life quickly. Keys of every shape, size and color dangle down the walls that are painted a soft blue. The cream colored ceiling has small cracks over its surface. Chairs are lined up against the back wall and the front desk lies directly across from them.

Bentley looks up as a little bell rings, signaling a customer has come in. A man with gloves over his hands walks in carrying a big chest and walks over to the front desk; he sets the chest on the ground besides his feet.

"Good morning sir, it's unusual to see customers this early in the morning, what can I do for you?"

"I can't open this chest; I need a key made for it."

"Didn't it come with a key when you bought the lock?"

"Yes but I lost it."

"I see, well I need to make a mold of the lock and have the key made. It will be ready by Thursday for you to pick up. Can I have a name and number?" Bentley takes out a sheet of paper to write on.

"Thank you," Says the man with the chest, ignoring Bentley's last question. He abruptly turns away; throwing his gloves in the trash can near the door and walks out quickly. The little bell rings again.

Bentley watches him walk out, "I guess he'll pick it up Thursday," he says and shrugs.

Bentley gets up from behind the front desk and looks strangely at the large chest on the floor. The wood is old but still sturdy; an iron lock holds the chest closed. Bentley bends down awkwardly to pick it up, it's very heavy. "There must be something in here," he says to himself. He takes the chest to the back room and puts it on a small wooden table with drawers on the sides that hold his key making gadgets and materials. He sits down, and opens the first drawer on the right which contains his molding materials.

Fifteen minutes later he finishes the mold and lets it sit to dry over night. He walks back out to the front of his shop and starts his book keeping; it keeps him busy until more customers arrive.

As Bentley walks out the door to go home for the night, he takes the trash bag out of the trash can. He locks his shop up and walks over to the dumpster to throw away the trash. He gets in his car and drives home.

Bentley comes home that night after a long day at work and enters his apartment. His dog is asleep on the couch and the lights are off, only the moonlight illuminates the room. He flicks the light switch on and throws his keys on the table in front of the television. He walks to the refrigerator to grab a beer and walks back to his couch. He sits down and kicks his old and torn shoes off while popping the bottle cap off his beer on the side of the table. He picks the remote up from the floor and pushes the power button to turn on the TV. Breaking news flutters across the screen, a woman's voice speaks:

'Early this morning, 60 year old Tom Lucas was reported missing from his home. His wife, who was spending time with her sister out of town, tells us that he never leaves the house due to his lower body paralysis. She came home around 8 o'clock and her husband was no where to be seen. If you know anything about this event please contact your local police station.'

"Well I'll be damned, isn't that my old grumpy neighbor?" he said to no one in particular. He just shrugs and flips the channel. 10 beers later, Bentley is passed out on the couch, the television still talking to the quiet room.

The next morning Bentley awakes to a beeping sound. "Damn, shut up!" He rolls over, not judging the space between the edge of the couch and the floors, and falls off, face first. "Shit, ouch." He rubs his head; a small red bump starts to form. He struggles to stand up and walks over to his empty bed and unplugs his alarm clock; it immediately stops beeping. He continues over to the bathroom area, once again killing cockroaches. He combs his hair the same way and stays in the clothes he wore yesterday and passed out in. He quickly brushes his teeth and puts his deodorant on. He fills his dogs dish and grabs his keys off the table and walks out the door.

He arrives at work fifteen minutes later. He once again rams the key into the lock and the door squeaks open. Right away he notices a stench that wasn't there yesterday.

"What the hell is that smell?" He covers his mouth and his nose as he gags. He

decides that he needs an air freshener so he walks out of his shop and down the street a few shops over and quickly buys a strong air freshener. He walks back in his shop and leaves the door open to air out the shop, putting a wooden block under it so the door does not close.

The day goes by quickly. Bentley has little time to finish working on the key for the chest the strange man brought in, but he gets it done. Customers come and go, a few making comments on how it smells like “someone died in here”. Bentley apologizes and says he doesn’t know why it smells bad and bids his customers good day.

Bentley walks in his apartment and shuts the door behind him, yawning. He throws his keys down on the table in front of the television and walks over to the refrigerator to grab a beer. He goes to his bed and plugs his alarm clock back in, walks back over to the couch and plops himself down next to his dog and turns the TV on. The news is on again:

‘60 year old Tom Lucas was reported missing yesterday morning. We have new information that leads us to believe that he has been murdered. Investigators found spots of blood on the carpet, leading out of his apartment. Police say a witness saw a man walking out of the apartment complex that very morning and sped off, running a red light. We do not know if this man is responsible or not. Once again if you have any information, please contact your local police station.’

“I hate that old guy, but why would someone kill him?” He says to himself. He takes a large gulp of his beer and sets it back down on the table, flipping through the rest of the channels. The night repeats itself with Bentley lying passed out on the couch and the TV still on.

The next morning Bentley awakes to the same beeping noise. He groggily gets up and goes to turn the alarm clock off. He continues his same morning routine of killing cockroaches and making himself look semi-descent.

He leaves his apartment and drives to his shop. He opens the door and the same stench is in the air, but it’s overwhelming.

Bentley cringes at the smell. He makes his way to the back room to find an infestation of flies swarming around the putrid smelling chest.

“Oh for the love of god!” he manages to choke out as he examines the back room. Bentley walks toward the chest with his arm guarding his mouth and nose. The flies hover and stall his concentration as he tries to feel for the key on the small wooden table.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Bentley screams as a fly nearly chokes him out. He finally spots the key near the edge of the table and swipes it before he inhales anymore flies. As he fights back the urge to vomit, Bentley feels for the keyhole, almost blinded by the flies. He jams the key into the iron lock, as he does he hears the sound of the little bell on the door ringing and more than one set of footsteps marching towards the backroom.

“Put your hands where I can see them!” A police officer demands.

Bentley, with a stunned and confused look on his face, throws his hands in the air. Silence fills the air for what seems to last for hours. Bentley clears his throat trying to overcome the shock and says, “What can I do for you boys?”

The cop pulls out his handcuffs and says, “You’re under arrest for the murder of

Tom Lucas,” as he slaps the cuffs around Bentley’s wrists.

“I’ve done no such thing!” He whimpers.

“We got an anonymous call about you being the murderer, Mr. Ferrari.”

Just then another cop unlocks the chest revealing Tom Lucas’s missing body.

Bentley feels his knees give out as he looks at the unfortunate host of the chest.

“My god it’s Tom.” Bentley gasps as horror fills every crevice of his body.

Cats in the Window

Joseph Jude

He stepped lightly, trying to remain quiet, but look as commonplace as he could.

He was a little man, balding, small rimmed glasses that looked more like goggles. He wore a black suit and a thick black wool coat. No one would suspect him as long as he didn’t draw attention to himself. He kept a safe distance behind her, but was steadily closing in. He had a whole block to go and was confident that he would be caught up to her by the time she reached the corner. His van was already parked there, unlocked. All he would have to do is slap the handkerchief over her face and pull her in.

He didn’t like walking down this particular street. It was too well lit. Normal neighborhood homes lined up both sides. It was late. A little after one A.M. but someone could still be awake in one of the houses. In the split second he would make his move, he could be spotted. No matter. He had to take the risk. He had watched the lovely twenty year old girl with soft chestnut hair walk home from her job every night, and concluded that this was the best place to strike. The only place he could casually walk up to her and grab her without her, or anyone else, seeing him. He had thought about waiting in his van, but figured that that would look far more suspicious to anyone who happened to pass by. He also considered approaching her head on from another street, but she might see him coming and be ready for the grab. This was the best way. She wouldn’t see him until it was done. If she or anyone else did notice him beforehand, he would just be a simple small man walking home.

He was getting closer to her. He looked back and forth to the houses to see if anyone was looking out their windows.

Something was.

He spotted it. A small black cat, sitting straight up in one of the windows. Eyes wide, it was staring right at him, silently watching him walk. There was no movement in it at all except the gradual turning of its head to keep him in its sights. It unnerved him. There was no sense of playful curiosity or affectionate warmth in the way it stared into him. It was like the cat knew what he was up to and was watching him.

He couldn’t look at it anymore, he turned away.

Then he saw another cat, in another window. It was a grey tabby with black stripes, and it too was staring at him with those wide glassy eyes. Eyes that had the sort of emptiness one gets when they’re blinded by anger. There’s nothing going on in the eyes because there’s too much going on in the mind.

He looked away again. He turned to other houses, but there too, he saw more cats in the windows, all breeds and colors. Siamese, Longhairs, Shorthairs, Bobtails, Persians. The one unifying feature was that they were all staring at him with that look of knowledge and hate. He looked around at all the houses and he could swear that although he didn't notice it a mere minute ago, all the houses now had cats in the windows, all staring at him, watching his disgusting evil, all ready to rat him out or take their revenge in their own way when the time was right.

He started to sweat despite the cold weather. He felt sick in his stomach. He was closer to the girl than he had ever been, but it only made him more nervous. They could see him. Both he and the girl were almost at the end of the block. He could easily make his move now if he really wanted to. Instead, he could barely summon the strength to move his legs at all. He couldn't even look at the girl in front of him.

She continued across the street to the next block while he turned the corner. He climbed into his van and drove it away, never to return.

Hitchhiking at Night

Chris Butler

The couple speeds along the abandoned highway. She sits alert in the driver's seat of the white Suburban, guiding the wheel. He rests in the passenger's seat, reaching into his pocket, searching for a pack of cigarettes. Pulling out the soft pack, he lifts the single protruding cylinder to his lips and lights it with a disposable blue lighter. He presses down on the automatic window, allowing the lingering cloud of smoke to slide out of the car. He relaxes his head against the leather headrest. The car accelerates through a puddle, splashing a wave across the windshield. She switches on the wipers, swiping the water off to the sides.

"I told you that they would like you," she says.

He remains unmoved, staring directly out the passenger-side window.

"Hey, ground control to space cadet, did you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, it was fun."

"And I told you there was nothing to worry about. My parents are just happy that I fell head over heels for a good man."

He leans and softly stamps a kiss on her cheek. She smiles. They pass a road sign covered with dirt and a signature in spray paint. He squints to read it to see that it is marked Route 695.

"Route-six-nine-ty-five," he says.

"What did you say?"

"I've been on this road before."

"Really? I thought you've never been out this way."

"So did I. But I definitely remember that sign back there."

He sits looking deep in thought. She glances at him with curiosity.

"Well, when were you out here?"

“It’s a long story.” He pauses, but remains in silence.

“What? Come on, you can tell me,” she says, her smile returning.

“I just don’t really feel like it.” He reaches over and flips on the radio to change the subject. He scans several stations on the FM dial, all of them static. He switches the volume on the radio off until it clicks into silence. Slipping back into his seat, he listens to the humming engine and the wind blowing into the car.

She huffs with annoyance. “We can’t just spend the rest of the ride in silence. Come on,” she says, each of her words seductively slowing with emphasis on each syllable. “I’m a big girl. You can tell me anything. You don’t even have to keep it PG.” She places her hand on his knee. “I happen to like rated-R movies. Please.”

He flicks his cigarette butt out the window with his right hand. He watches in the passenger’s side mirror as the cherry explodes against the darkness of the road.

“Pretty please, with sugar on top.”

“Alright, I guess if there’s sugar on top. It was a few years ago. I remember it was pouring rain. I was riding shotgun with my old buddy Spoon.”

“Spoon?”

“Yeah, his name was Spoon. Now do you want me to tell you the story or what?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Me and Spoon went back. I met him in the first grade. He was the type of kid who farted during nap time, or started food fights on Sloppy Joe day or initiated games of frog baseball during recess. During and after high school, we tended to hang around with the same people, so we’ve always been in each other’s company. I remember one time at a party he tossed an empty propane tank in a bonfire just for his own amusement. Me and a few other guys scrambled to kick it out before it became a Fourth of July spectacular. And all he could do was laugh until he puked and then he drank the rest of the beer. I wouldn’t say we were friends, per se. We were more associates by circumstance. But we had a long history together.

“Anyway, on that particular occasion I was riding in Spoon’s piece of shit pick-up. I mean, the passenger’s side window wouldn’t roll up, the windshield looked like a spider’s web and the bed was always full of some kind of trash or garbage or refuse or whatever you’d prefer to call it. But the heat and the radio always worked, and he always had a full tank of gas, so I used to catch rides with him a lot. Spoon steadied a gallon bottle of tequila between his legs as he drove. I remember I had a slight buzz, but I knew I didn’t want to drive. I think it was half empty by that point. He steered with his knees, and brought the bottle up to his mouth. I asked him if he wanted me to grab the wheel. He said, while simultaneously belching, that he was a professional and this was his closed course.

“He had the heat blaring, even though it was an early summer night, so I stuck my head out of the window, like a dog going to the park. Actually, now that I think about it, it wasn’t raining at all. We were actually in the middle of a drought that year. There was a cloud of dust following us down the road, like a shadow or something. I could only see what was directly in front of the one working headlight on Spoon’s truck. And then we passed that same sign back there.

“Next thing I know, I almost whacked my head against some silhouette. I jumped

back into my seat. Spoon asked what the hell had happened. I didn't know. I thought I almost hit a grazing deer with my forehead. It was that close. I heard him mumble something that sounded like dinner, and he slammed the brakes. The tires screeched like a banshee having an orgasm. The smell of the burning rubber made me dry heave, but I swallowed it down. It could have been a mix of tequila and motion sickness though. Spoon drove across the grass median and headed back in the southbound lane. He crept slowly, scanning both sides of the road. And then we saw him.

"Who?"

"Now, are you going to interrupt me every five seconds," he says, jokingly aggravated.

"Sorry, sorry, please continue," she says, sprinkled with sarcasm.

"Now, where was I?"

"You were saying something about 'him'."

"Oh, I had seen this guy all over town, walking down the road, day or night, rain or shine. At first, we all just thought he was crazy because it seemed like he was shouting at every passing car. But he was actually reading every license plate that passed. I swear he could tell you the make, model and plate number of every single car that drove by him. I heard he just had some mental problems. But he was also a genius, like Rain Man or something like that. He memorized every name, number and address in the phonebook, and could associate anyone's license plate with their first name and home address. He was like one of those characters you have back home who everybody claims to know but never spoke a single word to.

"Then Spoon said something I never thought I would hear him say. He said we should pick him up. I said that we should just keep going and leave him be. But Spoon was adamant, saying the more the merrier and that it was his truck and he was driving. I could only sit in silence. He made another u-turn and we headed north again. The Hitchhiker was wearing a filthy red flannel shirt and some cowboy jeans with massive gashes and mustard stains. His hair was long and nappy, and it looked like he hadn't shaved since puberty. I could smell him as we approached. It was like burnt cabbage and expired milk mixed with a hint of lemon. The truck crept alongside him. Spoon asked him if he needed a ride out of my window, still open.

"He didn't say anything. He didn't even look over at us. Spoon yelled at the Hitchhiker calling him deaf and dumb. The Hitchhiker muttered '634-UGK' Spoon asked him 'what', this time in a more assertive tone. I said that the Hitchhiker only read his license plate. Spoon ignored me and continued his monologue with the Hitchhiker. In a pleasant manner rare for Spoon, he told the Hitchhiker to hop in. He looked at me and ordered me to slide over.

"I reminded Spoon that his truck was only a two-seater. I don't know if he didn't hear what I said or he just ignored me again, but the next thing I know, I'm sitting in the front of a two-seater truck between Spoon and the Hitchhiker. I squirmed to get comfortable against their shoulders, but I couldn't. We sped along, not seeing a single car for miles. We were listening to some AM station with some guy ranting about kids running naked through the streets making babies or something like that. I looked over at Spoon, driving with his knees while chugging. Then I looked over at the Hitchhiker, staring out the window. Suddenly, there was this thud.

“Spoon dropped the bottle in his lap, spilling booze all over the cab. It splashed into my eyes and up my nose. The tires screeched as he tried to get control of the steering wheel. We spun around and around, I don’t even know how many times. Smoke and dust billowed in through the windows. I could only see blurs of black and brown streak past my line of vision. And then, we stopped.

“We were facing the opposite direction on the road. It was so quiet I could hear the blood pump through my temples. I asked Spoon what happened. He sat there, counting his fingers to make sure there was still ten. He looked over at me, frowning, saying that this skunk made him spill his drink. Then he asked what happened to the Hitchhiker. I looked to my right, and the passenger’s door was swung wide open and the Hitchhiker was gone. My first thought was that he was ejected from the vehicle. I looked back over at Spoon tipping back the rest of his jug down his throat. Spoon exhaled, and with his next breath, said that we had to go get him. Then I remember him saying, ‘I’ve got two D.U.I.s. And three strikes and I’m out.’

“He shifted the truck into reverse and sped in a perfect circle. He raced down the road, the speedometer spiking so quickly I thought it was going to snap off. I pleaded with him to slow down, but his focus was locked on the passing pavement in front of us. We went about a mile down the road before he slammed on the breaks. Spoon asked if the Hitchhiker was a ghost, but I wasn’t sure he was looking at me for an answer. I said he was probably long gone, trying more to be reassuring than sensible. Then, Spoon said something that still sticks with me to this day. He said, ‘No. The Hitchhiker never strays far from his road’.

“He made another sudden u-turn, almost tipping the truck. We sped back down 695 for the fifth time. I can’t even remember which direction we were heading. Spoon’s eyes squinted, as he scanned both sides of the road for anything that moved. And then we saw him. It was like we never even picked him up. There he was, keeping the lonely road company, like he was its significant other. Spoon accelerated quickly, getting right in front of the Hitchhiker with the high beam blinding him. Before I knew it, I was staring the Hitchhiker right into his beady, bloodshot eyes. Spoon leapt out of the truck. I saw their shadows move against the pavement like two drunken sailors dancing. I heard Spoon screaming, so I jumped out.

“Spoon pushed the Hitchhiker to the ground, and yelled in his face something about prison and showers. I ran over and grabbed Spoon’s shoulders. Trying to calm him down, I told him that no one was going to jail tonight, if we left ASAP. He shouted back at me, spitting in my face, that the Hitchhiker knew his face and license plate. I said that he knew everyone’s license plate. But my pleas for peace were disregarded. Then Spoon said that he had to make sure the Hitchhiker wouldn’t say another word again. Before I could react, Spoon pulled a switchblade out from his boot and tried slicing at the Hitchhiker. I had never seen him that aggressive before. He had this weird look on his face, like all of his muscles were clenched at once. I grabbed the hand with the knife, trying to bend back the wrist, but all I could do was stall him. It was like he was possessed, and his eyes burned with blind rage. I couldn’t overpower Spoon, so I wrapped my bicep around his neck and squeezed like a starving boa constrictor. We fell back. I felt Spoon’s lungs filling and draining faster

and faster. I looked down and saw the Hitchhiker motionless underneath the mass of bodies. I couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

"Spoon gasped for air. I swear it was the most ghastly sound I've ever heard. Then he went limp. I released my grip, and Spoon fell on top of the crooked heap of the Hitchhiker. I kicked the switchblade from Spoon's hand into a patch of grass on the edge of the tree line surrounding the road. I tried to catch my breath, but everything in my vision was spinning. So I got up and ran back to the truck. I switched on the hazard lights, although they only worked on the back. I threw the empty bottle of booze and heard it smash in the distant darkness. Then I started running. I don't know why or where I was going, but I ran. I kept running for what seemed like miles, but I could still see Spoon's headlight hanging in the distance behind me. My feet went right over the fresh rubber of Spoon's final u-turn, which still stunk like a tire fire. I kept moving, until I could no longer see the one headlight of that truck. Then I took out my cell phone, which had only one bar, and called 9-1-1 to report a car accident. Then, I hitchhiked all the way back home. A trucker picked me up about forty-five minutes later. And luckily, he wasn't drinking."

He reaches into his pocket, and lights another cigarette. The window is still open, so he blows the smoke straight out. He looks over at her, but she doesn't return his glance. He waits for her to respond. She sits silently. He is unsure if she will react. They drive further down the road. He realizes they are light-years away from the abandoned highway. She makes a left turn, and then a right. Her eyes purposefully remain focused on the road.

"So you just left them out there, on the road?" She asks, her voice laced with concern and confusion.

"No, I didn't. I called for an ambulance. And I checked the paper for the next few days to make sure they both survived, but I didn't find anything about it. I didn't even see Spoon in the police report. So I'm sure he didn't get busted. And a few months back I heard the Hitchhiker was run over by a semi a few towns over. I mean, there was nothing else I could have done," he says, sounding as if he was trying to convince himself more than her. He notices they are driving on their street.

She turns the wheel into the driveway of a small, single-story home, and brings the Suburban to a rest in front of the closed garage door. She stares out the windshield as she turns off the ignition. He notices that she still hasn't looked at him. He wraps his hand around her hand, slowly rubbing his thumb across her row of knuckles. She offers him a faint smile, but averts her eyes away from his. She pulls her hand away to open the driver's door.

"I told my mom I would call her as soon as we got back. I'll see you inside."

She steps slowly out of the car, and makes her way towards the front door. She fumbles her keys at the door before unlocking it. She makes eye contact with him as she closes the door. Light bursts from the interior of the house. He realizes that everything is different between them. He doesn't know how or why, but he knows. He remains still, and takes one last drag of his cigarette. He flicks it out the window, and watches the orange cherry explode against the pavement.

Management Training

Edith Parzefall

I had no choice. My boss signed me up for this four-day management training in Brussels. I expected the worst brainwashing ever and an advanced level of bullshit bingo.

To my surprise, the trainer was fantastic. After the usual embarrassing games to break the ice, we talked about typical situations a manager faces on the job and acted them out in role-play giving each other a hard time. It was stressful and fun until they gave us the task to tell our teams they'd have to accept a salary cut of twenty percent. I prepared a flaming speech circling around the word Enough! But I wasn't asked to act the part. Our General Manager EMEA delivered the message like a good soldier. I wanted to quit my job right then even though it was just a game.

On the last day I felt exhausted, elated, and energized at the same time. My thoughts squeaked with the soaping and scrubbing. As the last topic, the trainer focused on trust. They warned us how easily trust is lost--I know, I thought, glaring at our GM EMEA--and how hard it is to regain--fat chance.

After lunch and just before wrap-up time, the trainer asked us to talk about a personal experience of trust. My heart raced. Not in front of all these big-shot colleagues! We sat in a wide circle and I was one of the last to speak. A husband thanked his wife for her trust, some guy spoke about jumping from a plane trusting his parachute, another talked about a coach who had believed in him.

My mind worked frantically to find something innocent to reveal. I thought about my parents and how I'd stood with my suitcases at their doorstep begging them to let me come back after I'd gone off with the wrong guy--twice. Of course, nobody needed to know what an idiot I had been, so I said, "Trust is when you know you can absolutely rely on someone even when you screw up. They will catch you if you fall, no matter how often you pushed away their helping hand. They might say, 'I told you so', but they'll embrace you."

Sobs erupted. The woman next to me buried her face in her hands. I stared at her in shock. What horrors of the past had I evoked? The GM raised a brow, most people lowered their eyes. The woman still cried. It would have been her turn to speak. She couldn't. I swallowed a lump. How had real drama intruded our artificial little world of management excellence?

The trainer nodded at me, her eyes glistening. "Thanks everyone. Good stuff. We'll ask for your feedback after the coffee break."

At the cake buffet, the lady walked up to me. She still looked a bit shaken. "Sorry about this stupid melt-down," she said.

I smiled at her. "Oh, don't worry about it."

I didn't dare to ask if someone had caught her.

Vigilante

Marina Rubín

ivan razvalkin, a russian covert operative turned american computer programmer, found a job at a small retail company in manhattan. three days later he got fired because allegedly he applied war interrogation tactics to gather data from the users. but ivan didn't go gently, before security escorted him out he deleted the entire database then escaped through the back door carrying the heart of the company on a floppy disk. next day the business of the firm was in a state of hiroshima, the database that housed all the sales, shipping, distribution and accounting was gone. the president received a ransom note demanding that an envelope containing fifty thousand dollars in unmarked bills be left under an oak tree sixty five meters from exit eleven off the belt parkway at exactly 0600. when the operations unit "Rescue Database" captured ivan razvalkin at the designated pick-up position, he screamed launching floppy disks in the air, power to the programmers

Guests

Marina Rubín

i was eleven and a half the summer we rented a cottage on the shore of the black sea. mom could not get away from work so dad became a regular chef boyardee making us garden salads in sour cream. my brother played tennis, dad read newspapers on the beach about chernobyl, perestroika, a gang of crimean boys occupied our backyard fixing motorcycles, scooters. one day coming out of the water, i saw blood dripping down my thigh, horrified i hid in the bathroom recalling stories i heard at the girls pioneer camp about blood coming in every month like a horde of uninvited but punctual guests. for days i tried to stop the flow with rags secretly washing my underpants in the sink. on the fourth night i could not fight any longer, i whispered into the darkness dad i am bleeding, from down there, a moment of silence then *horosho*, just one word, good. the following morning when i woke up, boxes of maxi pads, tampons, sanitary napkins, cotton balls, and even q-tips sat on my nightstand like some kind of a magical gourmet gift basket

The village struck me for its brownness: brown sand paths and brown dust.

It was the second day of the Lunar Year.

The streets were empty.

It was cold.

A man wearing a blue windbreaker suddenly came out of a narrow alley. He waved his hand at us and screamed something we couldn't hear. From the backseat, and as the car veered off, I saw a cloud of sand dust swirling up in the air.

The road that led up to the first village houses was narrow, stretched, rectilinear, flanked by a row of vertical trees. I have never seen such trees, so tall, and so straight, reaching up to the skies. Solitary figures were plowing the corn fields left and right. Besides the pervasive brownness, there was also the dazzling transparency of the sky. It was blue, violently blue, ice-cold, glaring with anger. There was something dead in the stillness of it all. It was not as if life was slow, but as if there was no motion, no breath, no pulse. A frozen and totally paralyzed village. Not just as if nothing was happening, but as if nothing would ever happen again. As if everything had happened already. Everything. Ever-a-thing.

Eight people were waiting inside Miao's house, a beautiful courtyard with green door frames and empty flower pots resting on window sills.

"You used to have plants in here" I said to Miao, not sure about whether I was asking a question or making a statement.

"Used to" He replied.

It was as if everything belonged to the past: life, the flowers, the voices of Chinese songs on the gramophone.

"My family. They all left when they found out I had HIV."

I shook his hand, coarse, sunburnt, brown like the sand paths and the village dust.

It was four years ago when they told him he had HIV.

We were in 2008. The year of the Olympic Games. The Olympic pride. The building of a new China.

Miao grabbed a document from one of his drawers. It was written by the local government.

I read: "Letter to the people infected with HIV: You were infected with HIV in 1995." The letter said he would get free medication and free medical check-ups every six months.

It was dated October 2003.

I looked up to him, questioningly.

"2003?"

He smiled to me, a half-hearted smile, apologetic, as if he was sorry for all the things he couldn't explain.

"In 1995, they warned us about an outbreak of low resistance to disease in the village."

He mentioned the word immunodeficiency.

It was a word he had heard, a familiar word, a word he didn't dare use, unsure of its real meaning.

The government warned them about low resistance to disease, but they didn't mention anything about AIDS.

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome.

There was strain and ageing in his face, and a similar expression, half grief, half expectation, in all of them.

Miao walked up to the sink and came back with a glass of hot water. I stamped my feet on the ground. I was freezing. The sunlight pouring in from the windows was blurry, its radiance shielded by a thick layer of dust.

Miao was a very attractive man. He looked more like a film-star than like a peasant. I couldn't understand how anyone could leave him.

He laughed. A boisterous laugh which bounced against the walls of the empty courtyard, suddenly recalling the emptiness and bringing back the voices of those who were no longer there.

Departed.

But unforgotten.

"A lot of people died" He said.

There was a silence.

His face resumed its graveness.

"Do you really think I'm attractive?"

"It seems really stupid to me to want to run away from someone like you."

He burst out laughing.

And I laughed with him. Laughed to tears.

He said it was like the skinny boy with glasses who knows he can't compete with his tall and attractive classmate to win the girl he likes.

"They both ran away, my son and my wife, to live with someone else. I can't really compete with a healthy man, someone who is not living with HIV."

"Compete?" I said. "Is it really about competing?"

He shrugged.

He became serious again.

Maybe it was.

At that time, selling blood was a quick way of earning some extra cash. They were poor, and poverty was the one thing that had remained. All the rest, their memories and their pasts, had been brushed off, replaced by grief, different layers of grief, stacked up, locked up inside their looks, like heaps of trash.

They didn't know where the money went. Miao said that every year the municipal government of Hebei Province was allocated a considerable amount of funding by the Global Fund.

"But nothing has changed. We don't know where the money goes."

There was a silence.

"We only see the van from the Global Fund. They must have given the money to government officials. Where does the money go?"

He fixed my eyes, as if I had the answer.

The local government building was a shabby white-walled construction in the middle of the village. A dead place, buried under the dust, like a lazy cat sprawled out in the sunlight.

“The premises where the local government has moved... that used to be the blood station” Miao explained.

Miao found it hard to explain it all.

Their history.

The reasons why they didn't do the things they could have done.

The reasons why they did the things they could have not done.

“It is hard to change the past” He said.

He probably often wondered about the ifs.

What if.

What if they hadn't been poor.

What if they hadn't sold their blood.

But that was the wrong way of thinking.

Because anyway, everything was already written.

Carved in the walls and the buildings and the looks of the village dwellers. Just as if everything had already happened. As if life had been lived. As if nothing would ever happen again.

“They don't understand” Miao said.

The government officials, he meant.

That was the way he always referred to them: they.

As if everybody knew, as if there was no one else to talk about.

But it was not only them, “they”, who didn't understand.

It was beyond understanding. No one, absolutely no one would ever understand. They were alone in the same boat. A crew of stranded sailors.

Miao explained.

Sometimes the doctors from the Center of Disease Control refused them a glass of water for fear of contagion.

Sometimes they were declined changes in medication.

“Second line treatment is not available.”

And they had to put up with side effects and resistance to medication.

A whole world in itself.

Sometimes, the neighbors would simply slam the door in their faces.

There was fear.

And stigma.

Miao described government officials gulping down huge bowls of sticky rice.

Killing time.

Smoking cigarettes and pacing up the yard outside the premises.

There was only one woman.

With curly hair and eyes wide apart. A vacant stare.

In the neighboring village, most of the people infected are women, she explained. Here, it was mostly men. She was not infected, but her husband had passed away a few years ago.

“I took him to all the hospitals in Beijing. Nobody was able to tell me what it was.”

“Because they didn’t know? Or they didn’t want to tell you?”

She shrugged.

Her husband had died in the arms of a doctor in one of the most prestigious hospitals of Beijing.

The only doctor who had been able to tell them about the disease.

She remembered a turmoil of anxiety: unremitting fevers, diarrhea, herpes, hemorrhage. A final unspeakable struggle against death. An obscenity of pain. She described it to me, in a matter-of-fact way, as if she had told the same story too many times, to different people.

“The government finally agreed to build a house for me. After many complaints. And it’s where I live now. With my kid.” She said.

“Besides that house, they didn’t give us much.” She paused and reflected. “At least not enough.”

Someone opened the door. Her name was Hong. She was wearing jeans. She grabbed a chair and took a seat next to Miao. He gave her a glass of water. Their fingers touched, and their hands remained there, motionless, skin to skin.

For an instant.

Unnecessarily long.

Unnecessarily close.

Nobody noticed, I thought, or maybe everybody knew. Hong was living at the other end of that narrow rectilinear road flanked by tall vertical trees. They were separated by that straight line, a one-way path which could only lead to each other.

“I traveled thousands of miles to the South of China to have a medical check-up”, Hong explained. “I started having fevers, it crossed my mind that I might have that thing, AIDS, which had been discovered in Henan Province.”

They confirmed she had HIV, and she told the rest of the village. She was threatened and bid to shut her mouth by government officials.

“It was hard in the beginning” She said with a smile. “It meant death at the time.”

She presses Miao’s hand affectionately. She won’t abandon him like his wife and his son did. It is clear from her smile and from the way she gently presses his fingers. It is a faithful, honest, affection, unshaken.

Love.

It is not because they are on the same boat, and it is not because he looks like a film star.

A Chinese song is playing on the gramophone.

They were all silent, as if they had said everything that was to be said.

Some of them stand up and leave.

“We have to get lunch ready” They say, and disappear behind the dusty yard.

Only Miao and Hong remain, hand in hand, more comfortable in the intimacy of the empty room. They smile at me. The song is still playing. Miao stands up. He rests his arm around her waist, pulls her from her chair gently.

They dance.

They move swiftly, dangling shadows, unreal, like undying souls.

My Date with Britney Spears

Adam Graupe

I stood in the entryway of the Denny's Restaurant waiting for my blind date Marcy to arrive. She told me on the telephone that she looked like Britney Spears but the name didn't register with me. This was in 2001 and I was still years behind on pop culture.

"How can you not know who Britney Spears is?" Marcy asked.

I didn't know much about music and didn't own a television. I just stood in the entryway of Denny's hoping someone would walk up to me ask, "Are you Elmer Bull?" Just then a woman walked in with a body shaped like a football and she had a head of long wild hair that stuck out in every which direction. "I'm Marcy, you must be Elmer?"

I debated saying "no" as Marcy's eyes looked a little bit crazed. It didn't bother me about how the rest of her looked, but her eyes conveyed a lot of inner disturbance while they darted back and forth. I said I was Elmer.

Our maitre d' looked like a parolee, and his arms were covered with tattoos of dancing clowns. He sat us down at a booth and asked if we wanted to hear about the special. Marcy said no and he left us with the menus. I wondered if I was supposed to make small talk with her but decided to study the menu as Marcy was moving her lips mouthing the words on the menu.

An ancient looking waiter asked me what I wanted. I told him I'd have the special, not knowing what it was. "With our without bacon?" I hesitated and said, "Without."

Our waiter turned to Marcy and smiled genially, "What can I do for you Ma'am?"

"I'll have the number four. Oh, and I'll also have the number two in a to-go container so I can have a meal for tomorrow."

The waiter was non-pulsed that she ordered two meals, and he took our menus and left. Marcy looked me in the eye and said, "What's your favorite all-time movie?"

"I have no idea," I said.

"Mine is *Dirty Dancing!*" Marcy talked nonstop about *Dirty Dancing* until our waiter reappeared with the three meals. It turned out the special was bacon lettuce and tomato. I ate the lettuce and tomato on a bun and watched Marcy as she ravaged her pancakes, sausages, and eggs. Soon the check arrived and then we were in the parking lot together. I didn't know how to graciously say goodbye, and I started strolling backward away from her while saying, "well it was nice to meet you and—"

"WAIT!" She shouted hustling toward me with her Styrofoam food container. "I WANT TO SEE YOUR PLACE! YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT A MAN BY HOW HE LIVES!" She was still shouting even though we stood three feet apart.

"I'm sorry but I am starting a new job tomorrow and have to get up early." It was true. I had a new job working at a receiving dock of a bookstore.

Marcy shouted, "I'LL JUST COME OVER FOR A FEW MINUTES! I'LL FOLLOW YOU IN MY CAR!"

I turned the key to my Ford Festiva and it started. Marcy followed me in her Dodge Omni and I sped off debating the ethics of trying to lose her in traffic. We sped down Interstate 694 and swerved in and out of traffic, but there is a maxim about driving a Ford Festiva: it is impossible to lose someone who is chasing you. We pulled up to my apartment building, and soon we were inside Scorpio Heights, which is a three story affair with carpeting and a broken buzzer in the entryway. I gave her the grand tour of my one room apartment with all of the furniture and belongings: a bed, alarm clock, card table, yellow rotary phone, clothes, and some novels.

Marcy shouted, "DO YOU READ THOSE BOOKS?"

I was about to ask her why she was shouting but instead I yawned and stretched my arms out while saying, "Well I have to go to bed now. I have to get up early tomorrow."

"HOW EARLY DOES A BOOKSTORE OPEN?"

"I don't know but I want to be well rested."

She leaned her face up to mine and shouted, "YOU CAN KISS ME GOOD-NIGHT!"

I leaned toward her and she opened her mouth and a smell came out similar to raw sewage. I forced a cough and said, "I'll walk you to your car." I didn't want to tell her she had bad breath.

"WILL YOU SING ME THE SONG *I'VE HAD THE TIME OF MY LIFE*?"

"Never heard of it," I said.

Marcy started shouting the lyrics and someone in the apartment next to mine pounded on the wall and screamed, "SHUT THE HELL UP!"

I walked Marcy to the door and she said "WILL YOU CALL ME LATER TONIGHT?"

I said I was going to be asleep and she left. I set my alarm clock and went to bed. Her shouting voice echoed in my head. Marcy was like a wood tick that was going to latch on to some poor schmuck and drain the life out of him while shouting at him to his dying day. I fell asleep to the sound of traffic on Interstate 694 and awoke an hour later to my phone ringing.

I answered and heard, "I MADE IT HOME OKAY. THANKS FOR CALLING ME AND ASKING IF I MADE IT HOME!" It was Marcy screaming.

"That's good," I said.

"SOME GUYS DON'T KNOW HOW TO TREAT A LADY! CALL ME BEFORE YOU GO TO BED OKAY?"

I hung up the phone and then took it back off the hook. I fell back asleep and dreamed that I was two inches tall and lived in silence inside of a water cooler. I just swam and swam and swam and drifted in the water bubbles. I didn't have to work or deal with the Marcys of the world. The water bottle gurgled and I floated up and up with the bubbles. The alarm rang and I showered and shaved and chewed thoughtfully on some toast. I put the phone back on the hook and it instantly started ringing. I picked up the phone thinking it was the bookstore but instead I heard Marcy's voice, "DID YOU SLEEP OKAY?"

I hung up the phone, ripped out the cord and sped off to my first day on the

job. The supervisor of the receiving department of the bookstore was a pill-popping man named Joe who wore dark sunglasses, and the right side of his face twitched often. He said there wasn't much to the job. You unload the delivery trucks. Something about manifests and checking if all the books are inside the boxes. We drifted lazily through the morning, and I thought I could last a few months on this gig. Then we ran out of books to unpack. Joe said when there was nothing left to unpack we had to stock the shelves of the bookstore.

I followed Joe while he pushed a cart of books onto the sales floor. He reached into his shirt pocket to get a couple of yellow pills and jerked his head back to swallow them. While he did so he crashed the cart into a table of *Harry Potter* books. We reassembled the display of books on the table, and his face sweated profusely. He stood up and stared off to the right and said, "That woman over there looks just like Britney Spears." He tugged on my arm so I would look at the woman. My entrails froze. It was Marcy looking about with that crazed look on her face. She was looking off to the side so I lifted up the tablecloth of the *Harry Potter* table, got down on my knees and crawled underneath the table. I heard footsteps approaching and then Joe said, "hi there sexy." A trail of light shone under the tablecloth as it lifted up. Marcy's face peered one foot from mine.

Marcy eyes blinked, and she shouted, "ELMER IS THAT YOU?"

I didn't know what to say so I said, "no."

Marcy shouted, "NOBODY PUTS BABY IN THE CORNER!" She dropped the tablecloth, and I listened to her footsteps marching away. I crawled out from under the table and wiped off the dust bunnies. Joe said, "Dude, you know that chick? Why did you blow her off? She is so hot." I didn't understand what any of it meant, but my relationship with Britney Spears ended then.



Mute Point, art by Cheryl Townsend



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