

A woman with blonde, curly hair, wearing a dark green turtleneck, a long greyish-brown coat, and dark pants, stands in a snowy field. She is holding a large, dense bundle of dry sticks and branches behind her back with both arms. The ground is covered in snow with some fallen leaves. The background is a bright, hazy sky.

down in the dirt

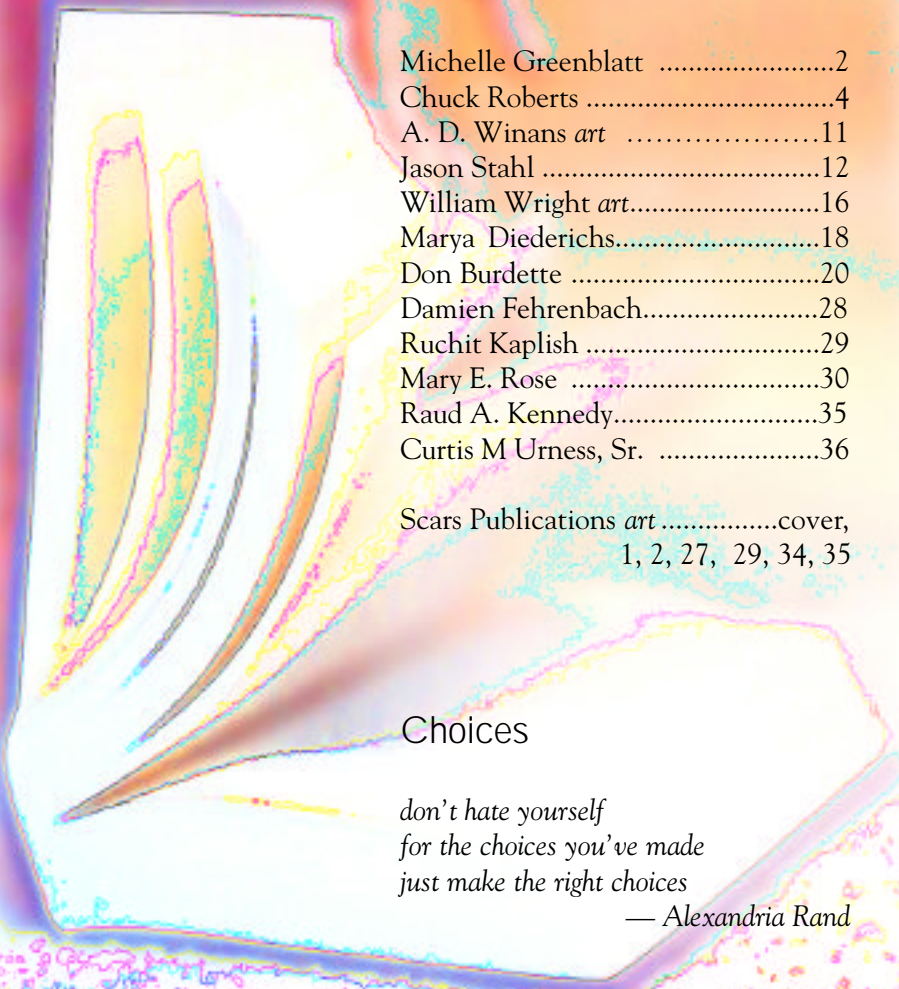
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revealing all your
dirty little secrets...

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Choices

*don't hate yourself
for the choices you've made
just make the right choices*

— Alexandria Rand



To Juan in Kappa Sigma

Michelle Greenblatt

you are short but you don't know it, there is always
a Bud Light in your hand, you are always talking among

friends, one hand in your pocket,
balled into a loose fist. I sit on the big red

couch by your side then follow
you around, vaguely, like a bleached-out shadow. I would like

your attention, or most of it. I couldn't ask, please would you
validate my existence; that never goes over well, it sounds desperate.

I danced the other night, had to get drunk to do it. I didn't care though.
I just puked into the toilet, four times, tasted Jager in my nostrils, then fell

backwards on my ass in the women's bathroom in your
frat house and there was no one in there to help me up.

I know you don't understand, I don't have a home, there's no water
pressure in my shower. That's what makes me cry.

2000



Tampax

Michelle Greenblatt

Far too long women have
Been bleeding and told to stop
Up our wounds with Tampax

2005



"Tampax" photos by Kyle Ramsay

A PLACE FOR VIOLETS

Chuck Roberts

As if her sudden death wasn't enough, there is more. Now I find myself attracted to a man. And I am sick of listening to Reverend Talbot telling me about God's plan. Would he say it was God's plan if I told him about Michael? For me, this supposed plan, this answer for all unanswerable questions, is phoney. It does not bring solace. It is a worthless cliché so often spewed from the mouth of a white suited TV evangelist, the one recently arrested with a prostitute.

During the five months she has been gone I have been invited to dinner in the homes of several kind old ladies on the Caring Committee from church. Small talk is difficult when I want to scream about what is fair. None of the couples we know have invited me. Evidently I don't fit in any more. At church I listen to their stumbling words and want to respond with sarcastic laughter.

Our son and daughter call every week to see how I'm doing and I cover well. We had another son but he died suddenly three years ago. That was supposed to be God's plan too. Reverend Talbot said so.

I had expected to have difficulty, but not with this other dimension. Often I spend the night walking through our empty house, unable to sleep, asking the un-answerable why. I sit down and try to read but don't see the words, then go back to bed until it is light.

Michael is one of the company representatives I talk to on the phone. We've had several business lunches together, but always with management people from the company he works for. Sometimes he has walked to my car with me. We've never seen each other socially or talked about personal things.

But he knows.

He has called twice since she has been gone, to our home phone rather than the business line.

It is morning. It takes great effort even to get dressed. I find the empty bourbon bottle under the bed and throw it into the trash. My hands shake so much I drop the coffee carafe then kick its broken pieces across the kitchen floor. Finally I sit down in despair thinking about my gun in the kitchen drawer. The telephone rings.

"This is Michael. I want you to come to the beach this weekend. I

think it will be good for you.”

Goose pimples rise on my arms. “I’d like that,” I say. It is a defiant choice, not compulsion.

Michael lives two hours away. When we meet he suggests we continue on to the beach in his car. Riding in it gives me a lift but it is noisy with the top down.

We change into our bathing suits at the motel. My fantasy had him in a small bikini but he wears cutoffs. We walk on the beach and I feel the accumulated tensions leaving my body. A single, pleasant one takes their place. When we hold hands I imagine others watching.

We go into the water for a short time then back to the room and take a shower together. We soap each other. Michael likes it. I do not. I wonder if it is because everything about me is tangled and distorted.

We go to a restaurant Michael knows. I have been to Oceanside many times but never noticed it. Candles are the only lighting. All of the couples are men. Conversation is subdued and a pianist plays softly. The food is excellent, the waiters attentive. I wonder if they think I am Michael’s father, then realize men probably don’t come to places like this with their fathers.

Back at the room we hang up our clothes without speaking. Still silent, we stand for a moment looking at each other before getting into bed. For me, fantasy and reality look at each other across a chasm of guilt, anger and ten thousand must nots.

I am afraid but he is gentle, almost delicate. Then he tells me what he needs. Afterward I turn off the lamp. He lies against my chest, his head under my chin. The hoped for relaxation does not appear. Only guilt.

“This is new for me,” I say.

“Not even on camp outs when you were thirteen?”

“No, I was the last to mature. Being teased about something over which I had no control left me feeling inferior and afraid. Some of that has carried over into my adult life.”

“Yes,” Michael says, “maybe that’s why you’re always jumping up to do things for others, as if you need their approval. That’s how you are at our business lunches with the big guns. I’ve wanted to tell you to relax.”

There is no need to respond. He is right.

“With all the interesting things you’ve done in your life and all the places you’ve lived,” I ask, “why are you in that terrible job?”

“Because it is something not many can do. Knowing that gives me a feeling of self respect.”

“The training you’ve had is way above that,” I say.

His hand rubs my face. “You look beyond the prejudice that keeps others from hiring me,” he says. “Don’t you do things because you need to feel self respect?”

I think of the worthless college degrees I have collected but don’t answer, changing the subject instead. “I’m pleased but surprised you would call. I’m thinking about our age difference.”

His smile reassures. “Age has nothing to do with it,” he says.

He sleeps well. I don’t, afraid I have made a horrible mistake. I look at Michael. The guilt always waiting in the wings again comes to center stage, its weight crushing any good feeling there might be.

I get up early, put on my pajamas, and read the paper. Our motel room is new and I wonder who did the finish work. The pocket door to the bathroom is an inch short. The plastic base board material is loose. A curtain rod is low on one end. Everything not quite right. I identify with that.

Michael wakes up. I make him a cup of coffee and sit on the edge of the bed.

He touches my back. “This was new for you but I have always been this way,” he says. “It is lonely and I am not one to indiscriminately reach out.” His voice is soft. “I’m attracted to you because you allow yourself to be open, to show your feelings.”

Far too sensitive, I say to myself. Too open to hurt and guilt. Vulnerable. Feminine. We talk for hours. He asks a lot of caring questions about her. I cannot think of a way to tell him what I have to. At noon we have champagne cocktails at an outdoor restaurant, then lunch.

We go to the beach then to a little shopping mall where Michael buys me a container of violet starts for my garden. In the early afternoon we take showers separately and get ready to leave. We embrace before we dress but men’s bodies don’t fit together like those of man and woman.

The noisy convertible makes conversation difficult, giving me time to decide what to say.

He stops next to my car and speaks before I can.

“This isn’t right for you,” he says, “I can tell.”

“Michael, I don’t know and I’m afraid.”

He rubs the back of my neck. “Its OK,” he turns his face away, “you aren’t the only one who is afraid. I’ve never found anyone who I really wanted to be with,” he swallows. “Until...”

He turns to me and I see the tears in his eyes. It rips my guts out.

I try to find things to do at home. The next morning I go to the China

cabinet and take out the good China I never liked, have it packed and sent to our daughter. I buy a simple blue and white set to replace it. After planting the violet starts Michael gave me I pull out all the dwarf Barberry bushes that line the front walk and replace them with Dusty Miller.

Goodwill comes to pick up the heavy coffee table I don't want any more. I start to empty its single drawer, then stop. Her reading glasses are there. The auger in my stomach makes another turn and I dread finding other things of hers.

I invite two couples for lunch after church. I always did most of the cooking. It was a secret she and I had. They like the chicken salad. It is the one with red grapes and toasted almonds with the chicken marinated in raspberry vinegar. I make cheese sticks and the wine is a dry semillon.

Later, when I am putting dishes into the dish washer, Maxine Johnson comes into the kitchen. We have known Maxine and Bill for a long time.

"The salad was excellent, Frank. All these years and we didn't know you cooked." She stands too close. "Bill is gone all next week helping his brother." Her tone of voice says more. "Come over some evening. Late when its dark. We'll go into the hot tub. It'll be good for you."

She has never been like this before. Perhaps it is something she too, has wanted to try.

"I'd like to come over when both you and Bill are there," I say.

She blushes. Bill comes into the kitchen. "There you are," he says, looking at both of us. He takes her arm. "C'mon," he says. His look tells me he thinks I was hitting on her. I know I am crossed off their list.

Next I invite the Rawsons. Recently retired, they have just moved here so there is no history on either side. I had spoken to them the first time they were in church.

Don Rawson calls a couple of days before the dinner. "Frank, my sister is visiting us unexpectedly. OK if we bring her? She recently lost her hubby."

I prepare the pot roast in beer. Potatoes, carrots and onion go in when the roast is almost ready. I had made a relish plate and the green salad before going to church. The last of the Key lime juice she and I got in the Caribbean went into the pie I made last night. A Gamay goes well with the roast.

Benita Rawson and Don's sister come into the kitchen after we have eaten. His sister is tall, over weight and wearing a heavy perfume that partially covers her perspiration odor.

"Our turn," Benita laughs, taking my arm and guiding me out of the

kitchen. “The chef cooks but the slaves clean up. We’ve been watching. You’re the quintessential care giver. Time to receive.”

“How about going fishing with us down the river for a few days?” Don says when they are leaving. “It would be just the four of us.” His sister watches, smiling.

“I’ll call you,” I say.

They leave. I go to the office and check the answering machine for messages.

Michael has called.

With effort I turn away from the phone, wanting to return Michael’s call and at the same time not wanting to. I drink the rest of the wine, then start on a bottle of bourbon. I look at the drawer with the gun in it.

On the last day of the fishing trip Don and Benita go hiking at dusk. His sister and I go into the water. When we come out she unzips her bathing suit and looks at me, smiling. It is her third invitation in as many days. I should have gone hiking with Don and Benita. I mumble something about going to look for a good fishing spot. Later she comes to my tent. I tell her to go away.

The next afternoon they drop me off in front of the house. I do not invite them in. I rush to the liquor cupboard, take a bottle out and mix a drink. Then another. Several. Oblivion beckons. I go to the drawer and take the gun out. I set it on the counter. I hesitate, then drink directly from the bottle. Vomit runs down the front of my shirt. I look at the gun. I pick it up. The barrel is cold in my mouth. My hand shakes. Then something inside me cries out. I put the gun down and stay up the rest of the night.

“I miss her so much, yet I went to the beach with Michael,” I say to the psychologist.

“So you’re going to flog yourself forever because you had sex with a man?” he says. “You say what you did isn’t right for you. Or does it just go against what others know and think about you?”

I can’t answer. I don’t know.

He waits, then continues. “Will you tell me more about your relationship with Michael?”

“I was stupid.”

He holds up his hand. “I asked you a question.”

“We had a good time together and have lots in common, but I guess sex was not, it didn’t seem right for me.”

“Sex with a man isn’t your thing and you’ve said another woman

could never measure up to what you had. Do you see what you've done to yourself?" he asks.

"Yes, I've turned everything into shit!" I spit out the words.

"Listen! If you want to feel sorry for yourself you don't need me to talk to. The world is full of practicing experts in that area. I asked you a question."

"I have put myself into an impossible position," I say.

"Now we're getting somewhere. Tell me more about your wife."

It takes a long time.

"I've got the picture," he says. "You can work yourself out of this or go the self pity route. Which is it?"

I start to speak. He holds up his hand again.

"It would also be a good idea to explore your having to do so much for others. Even with sex. How did you feel when Michael did things for you? Or when your wife did?"

"With her, I had to be so noble. I always had to be the one to do everything. With Michael I'm...I don't know."

"I don't know. I don't know. In always doing for others are you blind to people wanting to do things for you?"

"No!"

"Or do you feed others only so you can get what you need from them?"

"Wait just one damn minute!"

He leans forward. "Ah! Talk about your anger."

I have a lot to say.

He pushes the box of tissues toward me. "So there's anger mixed with the fear. I've heard some classic examples of wrong thinking too." He stops. "You OK? What are you feeling right now?"

"Stupid but relieved now there is someone I can talk to."

"This is a start. I can help but you have to find the answers for yourself and you can't reason if you are depressed. I'll call your medical group and get a prescription. Make sure you pick it up today. I'm guessing your booze consumption has gone way up too. With the meds you'll be taking that has to stop."

He leans forward again. "One last thing. I need a commitment that you will call me rather than kill yourself."

"I can give you that."

"Then you've decided to live?"

"Yes."

"OK," he sits back, "bring me the gun."

In the last three months Michael and I have had no contact. The confusion remains and I keep telling myself I'm handling it OK. Then late one night the phone rings. It is Michael. I am afraid.

"How have things been going for you?" he asks.

"You already know."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he says.

"Always that," I respond.

"I hope things will get better for you," he says.

"The violets are growing," I say, wanting to tell him I'm lonely.

"I'm living in Vermont," he says.

An instant sadness comes over me. "I had something to do with that. I'm sorry."

"I knew that's what you would say," he responds. "Don't be sorry. I move a lot."

There is a long pause. I wait for him to speak. "I'm calling on the chance you might come here and be with me."

I close my eyes and take several quick, shallow breaths. In that instant my confusion disappears.

"Yes, Michael, yes. Give me your phone number.

"I was so afraid...I didn't think that...I'm so glad."

He gives me his phone number and address. "Hurry," he says.

"There are some things I've got to take care of here."

"Hurry," he says again.

I go to the kitchen window and watch the full moon come up.

For the first time in many months, I am sleepy.



**Hunchback homeless man,
Noe Valley, San Francisco. 2002**

A. D. Winans

Metamorphosis

Jason Stahl

I had just finished studying for my Comparative Literature mid-term and was dashing off a letter to my dear parents in the UK and enjoying some chamomile tea when Bones exploded into the room, bringing with him a sudden gust of wind that carried the odor of stale tobacco and cheap ale. With Bones, so named for his fondness for playing dominoes, it was not an entirely unusual circumstance for him to stumble back to the dormitory late at night, inebriated and wild of tongue. But this was different. His face was slate gray, and his eyes so wide I thought they might pop out at any moment and roll under the bunk. I was already halfway out of my chair when he collapsed into my arms and started gibbering unintelligibly. I hauled him to the bunk and tried to lay him down, but he clung to me like a man dangling from the precipice of a bottomless canyon.

When I finally managed to wrest myself from Bones' steely grip, my first instinct was to retrieve a cold compress for his head. Instead, I grabbed a bottle of corvouisier from the bookshelf, poured a capful and brought it to his quivering lips. The poor boy's whole body spasmed as he choked it down, and a deep flush bloomed in his cheeks. His eyes, those terrible eyes, squinted gratefully shut for a moment, then reopened and resumed their wild search.

"Easy now, Bones, easy," I said, cradling his head. I was afraid that if he didn't calm down soon, I might have to phone the ambulance. My First Aid training as a lifeguard in Sothesby two summers ago would only take me so far here before his well-being might run completely out of my hands. "Tell me the matter, man. What perturbs you so?"

Just then, a breeze rattled the window and blew the letter I'd been writing off my desk. Bones snapped his head toward the sound, leaped off the bed and scrambled madly toward the door. Despite being caught off-guard by his sudden movement, I managed to hook an arm around his legs and trip him. His chin smacked the floor with a sound like billiard balls clacking together, and I felt his body go limp as he fell unconscious.

I sprang to my feet and rolled him over, cursing myself for having tackled him so violently. Now that he was nearly comatose, I couldn't query him further on the source of his terror-stricken demeanor. I patted

him down, searching for anything that might give me a clue as to his whereabouts earlier in the evening, and came across a damp spot on his leg. When my fingertips came back red, I hastily grabbed my Bowie knife from the bureau and slashed apart his denim trousers. I felt my jaw unhinge and fell backward onto my buttocks at the sight before me: a six-inch gash running from Bones' ankle to his calf. My blood ran cold at the thought of who or what was responsible for this abhorrent assault. Given Bones' distress, this cut was not the result of a drunkenly prance through rose bushes or even the loss of equilibrium on his sojourn home from the tavern. This dastardly deed must have been perpetrated by a malicious hooligan or strung-out opium addict.

Fury must have gotten the better of me at that moment because I leapt to my feet, tore open the closet, and retrieved a slender pine box from the top shelf. Inside it was the Remington rifle my father had bestowed upon me with the understanding that I would use it only when absolutely necessary. Now was one of those times. The campus was largely deserted for spring break, so there were no colleagues to call upon for help in this matter. The campus security personnel were utterly inept; those good-for-nothing fools were probably tipped back by the telly, snoring away among empty Krispy Kreme boxes and tattered pornographic magazines. And since ours was a rural college, the fastest the local constable could motor here was 40 minutes, and by that time the perpetrator would probably be long gone. No, the time to act was now, and alone with only my wits and a keen sense of loyalty to my criminalized friend.

I loaded the Remington and slipped on my peacoat to guard against the March chill outside. Slipping into the hallway, I was immediately unnerved by the quiet. Usually, a leisurely stroll through this corridor could expose one to a myriad of different sounds: the high-pitched moaning of a couple engaged in coitus, the blaring wail of an electric guitar from a Jimi Hendrix or Led Zeppelin tune, farting and belching from a contest between a gaggle of neanderthalithic pledges hoping to join their favorite fraternity. But the sources of these noises were elsewhere this week, probably in Cancun or South Padre Island or St. Maarten where they would undoubtedly be imbibing cheap ale and grinding body parts with complete strangers in packed nightclubs. Bones had chosen to stay on campus because he lacked the funds to travel to such exotic locales, and, if you believed him, so that he would have his favorite local watering holes to himself. My parents were on a skiing vacation in the Swiss Alps, so the only welcoming sound I would have heard at home was the

chime of our grandfather clock or the mew of our cherished cat Gypsy. It was only Bones and I, at least in this section of campus, and that reality was now more than a little unsettling.

As I came upon the stairwell, I stopped abruptly and reflected upon the situation. Perhaps I should call the campus authorities. For all their incompetence, they at the very least would turn the odds in our favor three to one if there was indeed a single perpetrator. But I discarded the thought, ashamed at my own cowardice. This was my first opportunity to extract myself from academia, to shrug off my cloak of intellect and philosophical endeavor in favor of utilizing more primal instincts, defense tactics and survival strategies. Would I embrace the challenge, slay the beast and avenge my dear friend or run back to the shelter of a textbook?

My thoughts were interrupted by the sight of blood droplets, crimson dimes scattered on the slate gray stairs that I assumed had come from Bones. They served to reinstill my sense of urgency, and my grip on the Remington grew ever tighter as I leaped down the stairs by threes, grimacing as I sidestepped the grisly spatters Bones had left behind. Perhaps I had gotten too excited, for I stumbled with three steps to go and lost my balance. I could see a likely scenario unfolding before me as I fell: I would crack my head on the concrete floor and lose consciousness. The gun would discharge, alarming the rent-a-cops. They would find me as I lie, with a warm gun, blood droplets on the stairs, and Bones injured in my room. Soon I would be shackled and dragged off to the hoosegow for attempted murder, with Bones, in his stupefied state, unable to confirm what had happened to him.

But the gun didn't discharge. It click-clacked to the corner where I tossed it out of harm's way and I crashed through the exit door into the cool night. As I lie on the ground, the wind knocked out of me, nursing a sore shoulder, I was immediately taken by how quiet it was outside. There was no traffic on the road, and only a whisper of wind stirred the skeletal trees into symphony. Far off, a dog barked.

I got up gingerly, holding my breath for fear of making the slightest noise. I no longer had the protection of being inside the building, and the realization of that made me rest my finger close to the Remington's trigger. I scanned the moonlit courtyard but sighted nothing suspicious, only a dog poking around in the withered and colorless garden. The sight of him comforted me greatly. I whistled low to him, not wanting to alert a hiding assailant to my presence. He showed no reaction whatsoever, continuing to forage around for Lord knows what. I slapped my leg next and

made a smooching sound with my lips, and for the first time he stopped his manic search.

All at once, I wish I hadn't gotten the beast's attention. He emitted a low growl and, for the first time, turned to face me. His face was obscured in shadow, but I imagined coal black eyes and silver teeth glistening with saliva.

I took a step back toward the door. Then, I witnessed something that violated everything I knew, all of my university training, the rules of science and evolution. The dog began to stand up. He did it slowly, but my eyes weren't deceiving me. My rationality was shattered more quickly than I ever thought as I stared at a creature that I had previously believed to be mythical.

The wind shifted, carrying the beast's odor to my nostrils — a combination of excrement, old cheese, and something else, a mean smell, the kind of smell that might come from the armpit of a cantankerous deep woodsman who has caught you trespassing on his property. This wasn't a dog but a werewolf, a monster that had previously only reigned over my dreams and memories of late night television.

I was surprised at how steady my arms were as I lifted the Remington and took aim at the beast's chest. It was barely able to take a defensive stance before I blasted a hole clean through it, the shot ricocheting around the courtyard. Its cry of pain was of the sort I hadn't expected, more of a weak mewling sound rather than a hellish shriek, the kind an injured feline might make as it gasped its last breath in some dirty alleyway. The thing fell backward and, oddly, lay ramrod straight on the cold turf, as if set out by a mortician.

I took a few careful steps forward, training the gun on the beast in case it hadn't been mortally wounded by my single shot. What I witnessed made my feel as if I had just chugged a shot of liquid nitrogen, with the freezing pain starting at my mouth, working down my throat and spreading slowly through my innards. It was changing. Metamorphosing. True to the legend, the beast, upon death, was turning back into man. The hair receded, the teeth retracted, the snout caved in. And when the man's face began to take shape and I began to recognize who it was, I dropped to my knees and began bawling like a child: it was my good friend and mentor Douglas Redmacher, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts.

After laying my hand on Douglas's chest and saying the Lord's prayer, I picked up my rifle and trudged head down back into the building. The climb to the third floor felt like an eternity, slowed by my fits of sobbing

and cursing. I thought I heard a siren approaching in the distance; perhaps the campus authorities had heard the rifle shot and called the local constable. No matter. The situation would be resolved shortly.

In all of my adventures that eve, I had completely forgotten about Bones, who stirred ever so slightly when I entered our room. Although he seemed better, it was clear he would be in a restful slumber the rest of the night. I sat at my desk where only two hours before I had been deep in study and reflection and pondered what would come of the dreadful actions I had been forced to take. It was then I realized there was one final act to perform. I lifted the Remington with what little strength I had left and placed the business end into my mouth. I, too, wanted to rest peacefully.



Forbidden Fruit
art by William Wright

Dear readers,

My name is William Wright, and I have written a short script (27 pages) entitled FORBIDDEN FRUIT. It's the story of Adam and Eve with a modern-day twist. Of course, you know Adam and Eve from the Bible – everyone does. But how well do you really know them?



In this version, when Adam asks God for a partner, God creates Steve. He thinks the two men will make good friends. But when the guys start getting a little too friendly, God finds himself forced to take drastic measures. He creates a woman, Eve, to quench their carnal thirst. The only thing is, Steve isn't attracted to Eve, only to Adam. Eve is also attracted only to Adam. Adam is attracted to both Steve and Eve and feels torn between them. God is losing his patience, while the serpent licks his chops. Probably not the version you heard growing up.

The film could be made in a week for only a few thousand dollars. Anyone interested please email me for a free copy of the script. Thank you.

William Wright
bill91932@hotmail.com

Aisle Five

Marya Diederichs

I understood you today.
It swept past in an instant,
firm but gentle as hovering beyond a breaker,
gripping sand with splayed toes.
Rolling lift in warm saline,
planting me softly home.
The hands of God touched her golden child.
I gazed skyward hoping for repeat.
Aisle five's dingy perforated tiles regarded me.
I winced at their accusation.
Selfish.

I seem the mark of all vile and foul.
This sour milk, this skull
a crucible of scrambled transmission.
So hateful am I, my name can not be spoken
within your country.
I've cowered at the gates while children point,

whispering in hushed awe.
Fetid mythic evil to virgin eyes.
You have banished me to aisle five.

I smelled your fear.
Not what one would expect,
it touched my face and filled my mind.
Light and thin yet tangible as custard.
I saw its face, its smile in no way unpleasant.
My own fear bullies and squeals,
pulling my hair with sticky fat infant fists.
Impatient.
Yours faced me, genteel on your behalf.
Our cheeks brushed in aisle five.

Water spun on parallel walls
while fluid roared in my brain.
Equalized.
The universal solvent surrounding, blood within.
There has been no adolescent need
to slice my borders,
achieving parity through fractional annihilation,
each score a murder.
I reel, sneakers producing painful murmurs
on aisle five's wet linoleum.

Afraid.

I see us arm in arm, tear stained and weary.
Comrades in frosting, you once said
“no one understands what we know.”

I stand alone in aisle five. Rainbows right. Africa left.

Blaze of Glory

Don Burdette

The camera catches Sam in the last minutes of his life. Poor guy. He will die working so hard. Sam bounces in between tables and the main counter of Pico's Sunnyside Gourmet Deli and Diner, clearing dishes, delivering orders and getting those little extra things that customers always realize they need afterwards. In a rare lull, he is stopped by a gesture then the approach of Greg, the Diner's manager. They talk for a while. At first, Sam bounces in front of Greg, anxious to continue his route. Then he slows, stops, and listens to Greg intently. Greg appears worried. Greg walks off camera before Sam turns full around and stops again.

One has to know to notice the lone customer, sitting at the upper right corner of the camera shot, monopolizing a table, sitting before a plate long emptied. Unless, of course, one makes note of his skin color, Eastridge black, a contrast to all the other white customers who fill the shot. Otherwise, he only catches the attention once Sam approaches him with uncharacteristically cautious urgency.

"Excuse me, sir," a survivor would later corroborate Sam as saying. "My manager wants to know if there's anything else we can do for you."

The customer does not appear to respond. Unless one considers the pushing aside of some object or objects to the corner of the table, away from Sam, as if to clear room. One has to know to identify the objects as a syringe and a rubber cord, the kind used to temporarily cut off circulation to an arm.

The survivor claims to have heard Sam request, "Sir, we'd like you to leave." Those are Sam's final words. Unless, of course, one counts the screams.

In the last moments, the customer looks at the camera. He knows it is there. "Glory!" he calls through a pained grimace. And then he begins shaking. He holds his fists and arms taut in front of him, atop the table. They quake from the tension. But also from something more, for the muscles seem to ripple as if some fluid rushes below the skin. They swell from it. And the shaking grows to violence as if invisible hands hold the customer and push him back and forth, up and down with a strength beyond human.

The other customers become agitated. Most look, some manage to

stand. That is the farthest anyone gets. In that last instant, the customer's frenzied eyes fill and spray with bursting blood and, but you have to know to see, there is the slightest hint of a smile.

Agent Damon stops the tape. He pulls at his collar, which is browned with sweat despite the cold winter day. The tape makes everyone uncomfortable. Police Captain Steffes shifts in his chair. His voice cracks when he clears his throat.

But it is Agent Damon who speaks first. "Do you know this man, Sergeant Toomes?"

"That's the wrong question," Police Sergeant Toomes answers. Despite the attention from the F.B.I. agent and his Sunnyside ally, Toomes sits secure in his chair.

"What's the correct question, Sergeant?" Agent Damon asks.

"Do I recognize the symptoms? Do I know what happens next? Do I know why?"

"And?" Captain Steffes bites.

"The answer is yes. I know what glory is. Show the rest of the tape."

Captain Steffes looks to Agent Damon, unsure. But Agent Damon does not hesitate in obliging. Although he pulls at his collar again once the tape whirs into action.

In the video, Sam scrambles to escape, grabbing for surrounding tables and customers to speed himself away. But the monster has his bleeding eyes set on Sam as his first victim. After it looks away from the camera, it becomes a black blur. Its swelled body moves so fast. Only its jitters catch its movement like a strobe light, still-framed before a blinding fast-forward strike at Sam. The sweep of its hand appears to land partially inside Sam's back, hooking into his meat, pulling him back into the monster's grinder. The monster rips at Sam, tearing an arm, leg, twisting free the head, each with a geyser of blood, followed by the limbs landing against the people around them, who now scream in flight. But the monster is too fast for them. Only one person escapes before the monster leaps out of frame to cut off their path. Limbs and a steady flow of blood replace it on camera. Until it returns to dismember those in frame.

Agent Damon and Captain Steffes have long turned away from the screen. Sergeant Toomes joins them now. He doesn't want to watch what happens to the children.

What they don't see, but already know, is that the monster comes to a kind of rest in the center of the carnage, pieces of furniture and people spread around it, red all over everything. Although it appears at rest, its

body still moves, jerking and quivering, less violently, but faster now, like a machine that revs at a steady idle. Red line. The monster screams in triumph or pain or both as it lifts its arms at its side. Then its chest explodes outwards with such force that it breaks the ribs open and splatters its insides with a cannon burst. The shell of the monster crumbles to the floor, joining its victims.

“Sergeant Roberts said it looked like Tel Aviv in there,” Captain Steffes offers. “Autopsy revealed flesh beneath his fingernails, in his teeth.”

“You can spare me the details, Captain,” Sergeant Toomes cuts him off. “I know the details. I’ve cleaned up after them too many times now. Eastridge knows glory.”

“Yah, but now this is happening in my city!” the white Captain responds.

The comment gets Sergeant Toomes hot. He brings a black fist down on the table before standing and pointing an accusatory finger at Captain Steffes.

“Don’t you get righteously indignant with me, you donut-eating, bicycle-beat, Sunnyside snob! We’ve been dealing with glory for months! I had a woman shoot up glory at a cornerstore on Third, a guy at a city park packed with families. And I lost half my men, including my captain, when someone brought it in here. So don’t you come in here acting like you’re its biggest victim!”

Captain Steffes looks horrified. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t know.”

“The story didn’t get out,” Toomes explains. “Just like you two aren’t going to let this one get out. No cop wants any more people to know about this drug, or there’d be bodies lining the streets.” Sergeant Toomes calms himself and taps his finger in the air while thinking. Eventually, he asks, “That’s why you’re here, right? Because now glory is in Sunnyside. And your Sunnyside perpetrator looks Eastridge black.”

The Captain’s sympathetic expression disappears.

Agent Damon breaks in. “Let me add some other recent events, and the reason why I’m here. I’ve got a missing agent, missing about a week and a half. And since then, I’ve got a dead agent, regional upper brass, dead in his house from a glory attack. Home invasion. Seems curious though, doesn’t it? Why his house, well out of town? And an F.B.I. agent was at that diner,” he points at the television, “as she is every Tuesday at that time. Why that diner, on that day, at that time?”

“Were the perpetrators black?”

Captain Steffes answers coldly, “Yes.”

“So you see a connection,” Toomes concludes. “You think this is some kind of terrorism or something.”

“What do you think?” Agent Damon finally asks the question for which he came.

“I think you’re wrong. They might be black, but there’s no conspiracy. Unless you call suicide a conspiracy. The two glory users you know are perpetrators, but the ones I’ve seen are victims.”

Agent Damon frowns, unhappy with the answer. Captain Steffes glares.

“Take the first case,” Sergeant Toomes continues. “Ex con. Huggins. Got out of prison and moved back into the area. So I had my eyes on him. A lot of people did. But it didn’t turn out to be the typical situation where the con gets back in with the bad crowd. This guy was really trying to make good. Only me and the others didn’t give him much of a chance. I was riding him every day. And that didn’t help him much with the neighbors. People were suspicious at best, cruel at worst. And like most cons, he didn’t have much luck getting a real job. Maybe he could have worked at a chain store. You know, where they don’t need to know you too well to hire you. But there aren’t many of those around here. Even if there were, are they going to hire a bulked out black brother with tats and scars? No, his best shot was his former friends. But he really wanted to be better than that. He had no chance.

“But even so, I really don’t think he meant to hurt anybody. Because when he shot glory, he piled furniture at the front door of his apartment. He just wanted to end it all, maybe rip himself to shreds. But he forgot to block the window. He jumped three stories and shattered a leg and still kept going enough to tear four people apart and pull two others out of their cars before he exploded.”

Agent Damon frowns. Captain Steffes face grows more pale.

Sergeant Toomes continues, “Second case was a drug user. I figure someone sold it to him as heroin, or gave it to him free. I mean, is a heroin user going to pay for a drug he hasn’t even tried? A drug that isn’t heroin? Or, who knows, maybe he knew what he was doing. But the events suggest it wasn’t planned mass suicide.”

“Mass suicide?” Captain Steffes asks.

“The junkie brought glory to a crack house, enough of it for a small party, and shared it with the people there. When the five glory shooters tore everyone else apart, they went at each other. Three didn’t stay together long enough to explode.

“And that’s when I started thinking. This doesn’t make any sense.

What's the use of a drug that doesn't keep its customers? I mean, how can any dealer profit off that? As you can imagine, at that point my goal was to get the drug dealer. But how can you find him when every user dies after one hit? I was stuck.

"Then came Randy. I knew Randy well, since he was a kid. Poor guy had a hard life. All made worse by mental problems: anxiety and depression. Made it really hard on his wife. Especially when he was committed. She was my sister. Left her with two kids and no wage earner. I tried to help out, but I've got my own family.

"When Randy got out of the mental hospital, he tried to make things work. But his demons were bigger than him. He couldn't hold a job. And without him working, his poor wife just had another person to take care of. Randy got to thinking it would have been better if he wasn't around. He thought he was doing her a favor when he got glory. He even talked to her about it. And she called me. And she told him. And they fought real bad.

"By the time I got over there to confront him, he was red hot with worry. I took him out of the apartment because I was worried for the children. By the look on my sister's face, I should have been worried for my sister too. She looked frazzled, pleading, desperate. But even so, I can't believe she knew what she...was...doing."

Sergeant Toomes drops his head into his hands. When he lifts it again to speak, it is streaked with tears. But he continues on. "She loved those children..." He chokes up again.

"Jesus Christ, Toomes," Captain Steffes sympathizes.

"That's horrible," Agent Damon agrees.

"While we were out in the hall, she got Randy's glory...I had to hold Randy back, or we would have died too. Even afterwards, I had to keep him out of there. I couldn't even go in myself, couldn't leave him alone. You know, in the hall I'd been saying, 'Randy, you've got to hold on. My sister, the kids, need you to live.' But he said to me, and I'll never forget this, he said, 'How can you expect people to live like this, to struggle, to suffer and not to despair?' And it didn't matter whether I agreed with him or not because, soon enough, he had nothing left to live for.

"So don't talk to me about perpetrators," Sergeant Toomes directs to Agent Damon. "These people are victims. The only perpetrator is the person giving people this drug, the person who killed my sister and her kids.

"So, even though I hated Randy for bringing glory into the house, I had to keep him alive, stop him from killing himself. Because he knew how to get the drug. He knew how to get the dealer."

“So where did he get it?” Captain Steffes asks anxiously.

“What did you do?” Agent Damon concurs, leaning forward.

“I made the contact. Someone had slipped Randy a card when he left that mental hospital. It read, ‘When you want to end it all in a blaze of glory.’ And it left a number. I called the number. Someone picked it up. I did all the talking. Pretended I was like Randy. But didn’t let on that I knew too much. The person asked three questions: ‘How did you get the card?’ Picking a dead woman’s body, was all I said. ‘So you want to kill yourself?’ Yes, I answered. ‘Where do you live?’ I gave a vacant apartment room in Randy’s complex.”

“When was this?” Agent Damon asks.

“About two weeks ago.”

“Then what?” Captain Steffes prods.

“I staked out the place. A man drove up, went to the apartment. Picked his way in and left.”

“Was it glory?” Captain Steffes asks.

“I didn’t check,” Sergeant Toomes answers. “I followed the man.”

“Where to?” Agent Damon asks abruptly, like an interrogator about to earn a confession.

“He got in his car and drove to a house. I called in the troops.”

“You got him?!” Captain Steffes calls.

“He put up a good fight,” Sergeant Toomes recalls. “But we got him.”

“You’ve had him all along and didn’t tell us!” Agent Damon chastises.

“I’ve been leading up to it.”

“Well, let’s see him!” Captain Steffes proposes.

“Yes?” Sergeant Toomes checks with Agent Damon.

“Of course,” Agent Damon states. But upon further consideration, he proposes to Captain Steffes, “Let me do this alone.”

“Come on,” Captain Steffes protests.

“Let him join us,” Sergeant Toomes interjects. “I insist. This is happening in Captain Steffes’ town as well.”

Captain Steffes takes Toomes’ defense as judgment in his favor and stands, prepared to follow. Agent Damon does not resist.

Sergeant Toomes stands as well and leads them both into the hallway, then back to a door at its end. The Sergeant knocks at the door labeled “Interview Room,” a euphemism for interrogation. He waits. Soon thereafter, a police officer exits.

“Is everything in order?” Sergeant Toomes asks.

“Yes, sir!” the man answers enthusiastically as he leaves.

Sergeant Toomes holds a hand out before his guests, beckoning them inside. They enter.

Inside, a lone chair sits centered in the room, surrounded by walls that are featureless except for a window-sized mirror with a glassiness that suggest it is also a window for those in the room on its other side. Sitting in the chair is a bound man, tied to the chair by orange and black ropes. He lifts a blindfolded head, revealing little but the bruises that complicate his forehead, nose, and lips. Hardly protocol.

Agent Damon angrily spits, "What's this!? Since when do ropes, beatings and blindfolds substitute for handcuffs?"

He is answered by a slammed door. Sergeant Toomes is gone.

Agent Damon rushes to the door and tests its handle. It is locked.

"What the hell?" Captain Steffes asks, mystified.

Agent Damon goes straight to the mirror. "Let us out of here!" he demands of those on the unseen side. There is no response. He bangs the glass.

"Damon, what the hell is going on?!" Captain Steffes cries.

"Bastard!" Agent Damon curses the mirror.

"Boss?" the man in the chair mumbles.

"Shut up!" Agent Damon orders the bound man.

"I told him, sir. About the program," the bound man continues. His efforts to speak are slow but deliberate. He wheezes in between sentences. "He's got the drug. He gave it to people to use outside of the test zone."

"I said shut up!" Agent Damon exclaims. He slaps the man hard across the face. The man trembles.

"What is he talking about!?" Captain Steffes demands with an accusatory grimace, pointing hard at the man.

Agent Damon glares at Captain Steffes. It is the only reply he will give.

Frustrated, Captain Steffes turns his attention to the bound man. He discovers a small brown paper lunch bag crumpled at the bottom of the bound man's chair. "What's this?" he asks as he bends down to grab it.

Agent Damon ignores him, keeping his attention on the trembling captive.

Captain Steffes examines the contents of the bag. "There's a syringe in here and a tie-cord."

When Agent Damon fails to respond, Captain Steffes looks up at him. Agent Damon is fixated on the bound man. A look of fear has replaced his indignation.

The bound man is no longer trembling. He body shakes. His mouth begins to foam.

Captain Steffes leaps to his feet. “Oh, shit,” he murmurs. He reaches a hand forward and cautiously snags the prisoner’s blindfold. The Captain pulls it downward over the man’s foaming mouth, revealing two frenzied wide eyes. Captain Steffes steps back as the captive’s convulsions increase to violence, and his skin ripples, and his muscles swell. The ropes begin to fray.

“God help us,” Agent Damon whispers.

The captive’s eyes blast red.



LINES FOR GINSBERG

Damien Fehrenbach

He who once had visions of Blake,
dead 7 yrs now, gone
and still without him the world goes on,
In your words I heard blood,
King of May, son of the silent scream.
Someday that will be me,
6 feet below the earth you once walked upon.
Saint, now in the stars, holier than most,
Shining down as I rode in American cars,
I know
I felt it
They will call me crazy for saying so
but that is the risk we take for being honest.
Are you with Neal now or is there another?
Its funny
I never met you but I miss you anyway
No more obscene literature
from you bottomless well



Pessimism

Ruchit Kaplish

I'm feeling like an ocean behind me
but I'm not sure its reality or my doubt
I'm still fearing that I'll be drowned
I can't swim, 'cause I feel I'm enervated

I'm feeling like rolling stones chasing me
but I'm not sure its reality or my doubt
I'm still fearing that I'll be crushed
I can't run 'cause I feel their inevitability
like a juggernaut

I've no time to see a dream
'cause I'm so busy in life and love
so busy in love and work
and I'm afraid of fragility
once slept, I'll never wake up

I've nothing to prove my true love
'cause I'm so bewildered in the trends
tired from the chase of mirage and
now mortality told me, "I'm your next destiny"

untidy, horrible claws of a huge monster in front of my eyes
not giving me a chance to look at the world for the last time

Misery

Mary E. Rose

Mary Flemming picked up the telephone and dialed the bar nervously. What if Maxwell weren't there—or worse, what if he was?

The thought made her shiver, even though the sun, which had just set, was still sending out its last few warm rays.

"Hello, Pete's Tavern," greeted the crisp voice on the other end.

Suddenly losing her nerve, Mary put down the receiver. She scanned the room anxiously, letting her eyes rest on the Wireless set that Herve had bought to listen to reports of the war in Europe. Now it sat quiet, dusty and unused, the war having ended three years ago and Herve's suicide the same year.

Mary's mother was in the kitchen staring at the stacks of bills and slips of paper spread out on the table. At once, she burst into the living room. "Well, what did Maxwell say? Does he have the money?"

"I didn't call," Mary said softly.

"Well we'll be needin' that money soon; Billy will be here in less than an hour!"

"Oh I know! You think I don't know?!" retorted Mary, almost in tears. She regretted ever having gotten involved with Billy—but at the time, he seemed like their only hope. They'd needed a large sum of money quickly, and he'd been willing to make the loan.

"Well call!" With that Mrs. Flemming returned to the kitchen.

Suddenly the house seemed icy to Mary. The old clock up on the wall was ticking off the minutes extra loudly, it seemed—or was that just the pounding of her own heart? Mary picked up the phone again.

How had she gotten herself in this mess? She forced her trembling fingers to dial the numbers.

"Pete's Tavern," answered the voice on the other end.

"Is M-Maxwell McFaren there?"

She heard the bartender put his receiver down and call out "Is Maxwell McFaren here? Telephone!"

Mary thought she could hear Maxwell's own voice next: "Is that Mary? Tell her I'm not here."

"He's not here, ma'am," the bartender spoke into the phone.

“Oh—well—thank you,” Mary said softly and slowly replaced the receiver.

What would she do now?

Mother strode back into the room. “Well? What did he say?”

“I called the bar and they said he wasn’t there,” Mary answered.

“What are we going to do now? Billy’ll be here any minute! What are we gonna do?” Mrs. Flemming wailed.

“I don’t know!” Mary covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

“Well, crying’s not going to fix this! We’ve got to come up with a plan!”

Then they heard a rapping at the door. Maxwell bringing the money? Mary thought hopefully, practically skipping as she went to answer—but it was Billy come early.

What was Mary going to do now?

“Billy! We weren’t expecting you this early!” Mary exclaimed.

“Yeah, well, I was in the area.” Billy got to the point quickly. “Do you have my money?”

“Where are my manners? It’s too cold tonight to make you stand out on the front porch; won’t you come in?”

Billy removed his greasy Fedora and came inside.

“Mother’s still in the bath,” Mary lied.

“I’m not really here to see her; I’m here to see you. Do you have my 10 G’s?”

Suddenly, Mother came into the room. “Billy! What brings you out on a night like this?”

“We all know why I’m here, Mrs. Flemming. Don’t play dumb with me. I’m here to collect the ten grand you ladies owe me.”

“The money’s in the kitchen; I’ll get it.” Mrs. Flemming left the room.

“You get it and I’ll just make myself comfortable out here,” Billy said, lowering his weight onto the davenport.

Hatless and relaxed, Billy looked even uglier than before—if that was possible.

Mary had been married, briefly, to Billy years ago. At first everything was fine and they were both dazzled by each other and Billy’s get-rich-quick schemes. But the schemes never seemed to work out.

Mary, with her limited education, was forced to take a series of menial jobs to support them, while Billy stayed home and planned his next move. When Mary got pregnant and was ordered to stay off her feet, they had to start borrowing money from relatives and a few friends—some-

thing Mary hated doing, but what else could they do?

The miscarriage was almost a relief.

The subsequent divorce left Mary feeling as if a great weight had been taken off her shoulders.

Billy, very bitter, swore he'd get even with her some day—and now, here he was...

What was Mother up to in the kitchen? Mary wondered. She heard the teakettle being filled and set on the stove.

Poison? That's brilliant, thought Mary.

Mary smiled to herself. Things were going to work out just fine, thanks to Mother's cleverness.

But Billy must have had the same thought, for when Mother returned with the tea tray, he said abruptly, "I can't stay. Just give me the cash and I'll be on my way."

Mary's heart sank.

What would they do now?

Suddenly there came another rapping at the door. Could it be Maxwell at last? Mary thought as she went to answer. Billy stood to his full six feet and waited with his arms folded over his chest.

"There had better not be any funny stuff," he hissed.

"Oh Maxwell! Am I glad to see you!" exclaimed Mary, giving him a quick hug. "Did you bring the money?"

"Not all of it—but enough for a down payment," he answered.

"We can give Billy what we have now and pay the rest later."

"Oh that's fine!" cried Mary.

"How much do you have?" Billy growled.

"Most of it. Eight thousand five hundred. In small bills."

Billy snatched the cash and counted it himself.

"That's good for now, I guess, but I have a business to run. When can you get the rest?"

"I'll get you the fifteen hundred in a few days."

"Two hours. With no funny business," Billy stated firmly. "I'll be back later tonight."

"But that's not enough time!" Mary protested.

"Two hours it is, then; that'll be fine," Maxwell said, escorting Billy out the door.

Mary turned to Maxwell. "What are we going to do? He'll be back at 9!"

"I'll think of something," Maxwell promised.

"You mean you don't have a plan now? You sounded so confident when you talked to him."

"That's the way you gotta do with guys like Billy."

"Well, we need a plan," said Mrs. Flemming when she rejoined the others in the living room.

"I know that! But what, what?" Mary was again near tears.

Maxwell put a comforting arm around her. "We'll figure out something. Just try to stay calm."

"I've got it!" Mrs. Flemming shouted. "There should be some money stashed in the cookie jar." She rose and walked quickly into the kitchen.

A few minutes later she returned "I guess we spent that money. Oh, this is hopeless!"

"No; at least you're thinking!" Maxwell said encouragingly. "We've got to be creative!"

"Didn't Dad always keep his stash under his mattress?" Mary asked her mother.

"Yes, but I think we used that to pay for your typing classes," Mrs. Flemming remembered. "We've got to come up with something else."

The trio was silent for a time as they thought. Finally Mary spoke: "We do have Uncle Herve's old printing press out in the shed, and his inks."

"Print up our own money?" Mrs. Flemming was clearly appalled.

"That might be our only choice, since we don't have much time." Maxwell considered the idea. "But do you know how to use it?"

"I watched Uncle Herve use it hundreds of times! I'm sure it'll come back to me in no time!"

"Come on!" Mary took Maxwell's arm and led him out to the shed.

Herve had been a man of big dreams who'd enjoyed several years of real prosperity in the 'Teens and 'Twenties when the stock market was going like gangbusters. He'd dreamed of starting a small newspaper, so he'd rented a building and equipped it with typewriters, telephone sets, tables, and a modern hot-lead press. Unfortunately, the venture never really took off. Item by item had to be sold off to pay creditors. Finally, heartbroken and bitter, suicide seemed to Herve the only logical next step.

The old press was all that remained.

Billy could barely suppress a grin as he drove his ancient black Packard down the road away from the Flemming farm. The gods seemed to be smiling on him for a change. Soon, he would have enough money

to go far away from this crummy old town and start over.

Mary had really stung him when she'd asked for the divorce—like a fly with its wings savagely torn off—but having the Flemmings finance his Second Chance seemed like the perfect poetic justice.

Suddenly, a deer emerged from the wood and started to lumber across the road. Billy swerved to miss it—but lost control of the car in the process, sending it onto the strip of red dirt that broke off into cliffs. He pumped the brake frantically—but too late: the car kept going forward, hit the rocks with a crash, and spiraled down, down, down into the ravine.

It was several days before some kids hiking along the ravine found the mangled sedan and the body of the driver inside.





On the Corner of Vista and Minton

Raud A Kennedy

Let the skinny ones
stay skinny
standing,
thinks
the fat man
sitting
in the middle
of the bus shelter bench,
not wanting
to share
as he watches
the two dogs
on the corner
across the street.

The big dog sniffs
the little dog's butt.
The little dog
spins around
and snarls,
then presents
her butt again
for smelling.



The Bridge

Curtis M. Urness, Sr.

Gina ran a hand through her hair, feeling the sweat on her forehead and the scratch of her nails against her scalp. Jim sat seething in the driver's seat. Gina was careful not to stare at him. His labored breathing and ugly frown made asking him a question -- even a logical one like "Jim, why are we parked in the middle of the bridge?" -- a possible catalyst for violence. Jim leaned against the steering wheel, a hulking figure in the darkness, breathing heavily.

Gina turned toward at the river. The muddy Missouri stretched out, black, wide, seemingly endless. The barges below shone their lights, puny and insignificant, against the black waters. Gina shuddered.

Jim's head rested on the wheel. He mumbled to himself, a prison habit.

"Worthless, fucking sluts," he said. "Can't bring no money. Don't bring no money."

If she'd only done what Jim told her -- lure Pete out of the bar -- then Jim wouldn't be so bent. But the question had been whom to betray, Jim or Pete?

Gina twisted a beer bottle open softly to keep it from hissing too loudly when the cap came off. She waited a long time, trying not to look at Jim or the river. She focused instead on the cars driving past, some honking at the parked vehicle. Please stop, she thought. One of you stop and offer to help. Then she thought, Don't stop. Jim will kill you.

Finally she found her voice, a fragile, meek thing. "Jim, we need to go," she said. "What if a cop sees us stopped on the bridge?"

Jim lifted his head. A passing headlight illuminated his face. He had a broad face and close-cropped, black hair -- the face of a man more suited for farm life than the life he now led. The shadow of the rearview mirror made a black cross form over his face, the wider horizontal bar covering his heavy brow and burning eyes, eyes that were bright from methamphetamine. Then the light was gone, leaving only his eyes shining.

"Get out," he said.

"Jim, I can't get out here."

He reached across her, his rough arm brushing against her breasts, to open her door.

"Get out."

Gina grabbed her purse and hugged it to her body. Jim leaned on her shoulder. Gina set her feet on the pavement and stood. Jim moved the car forward, the open door banging once against her and knocking her off balance. She was pitched into the guardrail. Part of her beer splashed out. She threw the bottle over, never hearing it splash when it hit the water.

She leaned over the rail and retched. For several minutes, she stood gazing out at the river, shaking from the violence of the vomiting. The Missouri loomed black and abysmal. The gaudily lit casinos along the river, whores themselves, burned their artificial brightness in mockery of her. She had to turn away. In the direction that Jim had driven, the taillights of his car glowed near the end of the bridge.

Which way should I go? she thought. Four blocks past Jim's end of the bridge is a gas station with a phone. He won't let me get by him. I could go the other way, to the Flamingo. Maybe I'll find a john in the casino. Maybe I can call Pete.

The taillights burned malevolently. He's waiting. He'll get me any way I go. Maybe it will be all right if I go to him. Maybe making me walk is his way of punishing me.

Gina started walking. Her high heels made her dizzy. She slipped her feet out and carried the shoes.

Jim's car began to back toward her, its taillights two predatory eyes. Gina froze. She imagined herself to be a deer, staring briefly at a hunter lining her up his sights. She realized how alone she was. A damp wind chilled her. She smelled the foul river mist.

Yet she told herself, it's going to be all right. He's just coming back for me.

She remained mesmerized by the red lights until the black outline behind them became a car, until the car became huge and distinct, fumes stinking, brakes screeching. Then, like the deer recovering from its momentary paralysis, Gina bolted. She ran toward the other end of the bridge, holding her purse and shoes high against her breasts.

"Gina, come here," Jim shouted, and still she ran.

She ran, feeling her heart thumping, the vibrations pulsating through the arteries of her neck. She heard her quick steps landing with a soft, stocking-hose "plop" into the heavy bridge dust. She was surprised by how thick the dust was. Behind her sounded the thud of Jim's boots, punctuated by his panting breaths. It wasn't much of a race. A large hand clawed her arm, spun her around, and forced her to face Jim.

"Where the hell are you going?"

“You told me to get out. I got out.”

“You saw me coming back.”

“Jim, you’re hurting me.” The pressure from his fingers bruised her arm.

“I ought to throw you off this fucking bridge. You don’t make me no money. You run away from me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? Did you see the wad of cash that John had? We could have got it all. He wanted you.”

“I’m sorry, Jim. I’m really sorry.”

“You whored around all the time I was in the penitentiary. You can whore for me now. You do what I tell you.”

“Okay, Jim. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, hell. What happened tonight?”

“I was scared, Jim. I’m scared of Pete. He’s a pervert. He does weird things to me.” Gina hoped that the sincerity of her tone sounded fraudulent only to her.

“I was going to roll him, Gina. All you had to do was get him outside the bar.”

“I know but I was scared, Jim.”

“You ain’t been scared yet.”

Jim grabbed Gina’s thigh with his free hand and lifted her up. Gina screamed. She dropped her purse and shoes. She flailed at Jim with her nails. Jim held her over the guardrail at arm’s length. Below her the river waited to swallow her, to fill her with its wet, foul nothingness. This was the kind of fate her mother had warned her about.

“Oh, Jim! Oh, Jim!”

“Oh, Jim what? You sorry again? What good are you? Who’s going to miss you?”

“Oh, Jim, don’t.”

Her thoughts streamed rapidly, like several trains running simultaneously on different tracks, carrying bits and pieces of her life and worries about what was to come. It only lasted for a few seconds but seemed like an eternity dense with memories.

On one track she prayed, reciting the prayers from her Catholic girlhood. Our Father, who art in heaven . . . she prayed, interspersing the formal prayers with pleas and bargains for her life.

On another track, she was mopping the floors of her parochial high school, smelling the ammonia in her mop bucket. Except for two other girls from poor families and the custodian, she was the only student still

in school after the bell. She mopped the floors and her mother worked in the cafeteria to pay her tuition to a school she didn't want to attend. All those afternoons she could have enjoyed with her friends dripping into the foamy, brown water of the bucket.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .

Another track found her still in high school, in the hallway between classes, overhearing a group of boys laughing at Mark, a slender, wisecracking boy, who was telling them the story of how he popped her cherry. Then a bedroom of a bungalow near Independence Avenue with Mark beside her on the bed. Two of his friends, Jerry and Sam, waited outside the bedroom door. "Don't cry," he said. "You're not the first girl to pull a train."

And then to a seedy apartment off Linwood and Troost. Jim was in the bedroom then, an Illinois farm boy tired of hard work, Sunday meetings and family ties. At least, he claimed to have been a farm boy but the farm was all out of him by the time Gina met him. Instead, he lived off burglaries, armed robberies, and adrenaline. Brash, callous with other men, though sweet with her, he was the antidote to immature parochial school boys. He was also the antidote to her drudgery. He was the promise of an exciting life.

Now Jim's arms shook. "Who's going to miss you?" he screamed into the wind.

Gina thought about Taylor, Jared and Torri. None of them were Jim's kids; they were all born while he was in prison. What will happen to them? Sis won't raise them. It'll be foster care. And they won't even know what happened to me.

The prayers raced down their track. Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Jim lifted her higher into the air. His arms shook from the strain. His face gleamed like he was having a religious experience. A ritual sacrifice.

"No, Jim, no, Jim, no, no, no, no."

Gina closed her eyes. She felt Jim move, felt him stagger and then he dropped her. She screamed. Then she felt his arms holding her again, gently now. She could feel her feet touch the dust and concrete of the bridge deck. She opened her eyes to see Jim's face, still maniacal and gleaming. He released her and she collapsed. All the tracks of her mind momentarily stopped.

Jim walked away. The vibrations of his footsteps shook the bridge beneath Gina's body. She lay sobbing, face down on the pavement. She inhaled dust. The cold river wind enveloped her body. She was a dead

thing, as though Jim had actually killed her.

“Gina, get in,” he yelled.

Gina struggled to rise. All her senses came back to her as acute pain, as lucid awareness of her humiliation.

She began collecting items that had fallen out of her purse. She found one shoe. The other was gone. It must have fallen over the edge. She raised her arm to pitch the useless shoe over the rail. Only she could not. She couldn’t bear to throw another part of herself into that river. She walked to the car, carrying her purse and the one shoe.

Damn it, Pete. You really owe me one.

Jim had a pocket-sized mirror on the dash. On it, he cut a line of methamphetamine powder.

Stupid bastard, Gina thought. That crank is what’s going to get him. He can’t get busted with that while he’s on parole. He’ll be back in prison and I’ll be free. Maybe I’ll make the call to turn him in tomorrow.

She began planning. Maybe her old pimp, Shorty, would take her back. Maybe, she wondered vaguely, she could get a job. Mostly, she just thought, Jim is going to go down and I’ll be free.

“Get in,” Jim said, never looking at her. Gina got in beside him and closed the door. Jim rolled up a dollar bill and used it as a straw to inhale the drug.

Snort away, you stupid bastard!

He turned toward her. She saw by his face that he was shaken also. His eyes no longer burned with malice. He looked broken, vulnerable. He wrapped an arm around her. She felt her skin crawl.

“Gina,” he said. “I love you.”

Damn him, why the hell did he say that? What right does he have to say it?

He drew her near and kissed her. She shuddered. She tried to fake a response but was unable to carry it off. Bridge dust was on her lips and gritty on her gums. Dust to dust. She felt like there were worms crawling across her lips. Vaguely, she recalled the valley of Gehenna, another useless bit of information from her Catholic girlhood, where the worm never dies.

He released her. She shrank against the passenger door. Jim put the car into gear and they drove on. They both stared straight ahead.

Damn, Gina said to herself. He said, “I love you.” Love, love, love, love, love, love. The word rattled around her mind, like a marble in a maze, trying to get out.



down in the dirt

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