



v022

down in the dirt

Revealing all your
dirty little secrets

June 2005

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The heist is on and I'm running

Jeffrey Calhoun

The sun is red now and
I have a gun and it's blazing.
The package has to be at the docks
but the van hasn't arrived.
Bullets are flying and I know
adrenaline only lasts so long.

I escape in dreams that are truer
More vivid than any movie scene-
The 'i' in movie is a fake letter-
It's in dreams I'm not buried alive.

Just Fall

Michelle Greenblatt

standing in front of you
stripped of clothes almost

naked but not / quite it occurs
to me time reflects a mirror

which reflects a god who
reflects damnation which is

pinned on his forehead
like a note on a tack board by

a people too desperate to care
about salvation ::but:: I am

here to talk to you about this
crumpled page which I chose

to write on b/c it is ragged
like my country, which is of

course 'tis of thee, sweet
land of misery, froth

ing at its gaping red
mouth caged w/a clipped

left wing; a terrible, scarred
face, too naïve for truth,

too greedy for accepting
just the barest necessities

so we leap toward the
impossibility of breathing

carbon dioxide perpetually
& abandon poetry, flock

around for the next re-run
on t.v.; holding hands

we jump out of the tower
& just fall, just fall.

March 2005

Eye of the Beholder

Christina Ells

she stands in front of the mirror
getting ready for the night shift at the diner
applies her orange-red lipstick
that's what it says on the tube, "orange-red"
not fire
or tangerine
but orange red
she contorts her lips in that funny way
all women do when they apply lipstick
but she goes outside the lines anyway
runs a comb through her hair,
its dyed black as night
so many damn tangles
flicks her cigarette ashes on the floor
and reaches for her mascara
the kind that clumps really well
and makes you look like you have spiders on your eyelids
doesn't wash off with soap and water
or anything short of turpentine
runs the pencil over her lids
a nice charcoal black
big, clumsy lines
running her entire lid
coughs because the smoke is in her nose
as her cigarette hangs on her moistened lips
dots the lipstick on her cheeks
and rubs it in for rouge
assesses herself in the mirror
you are beautiful she thinks to herself
and in the end
isn't that all that matters?

St. Louis Cemetery II

Jessica McMichael

We drank bayou liquor in
Louis II near Marie Laveau's mausoleum,
Breathed in the curdled Mississippi,

Thought - for once -
Gris gris was more than voodoo dust.

You told me New Orleans was shaped like a bowl,
That we could pull ourselves up to the rim,
Then slip back into the gutter.

Here we had no names,
No mortar, no bricks, no crash test similes.
We shed our skin and melted through the rows of tight
pressed dead -

Dusted one another off,
Decided to keep our hands in fists
So we could never crawl over the edge.

PRETTY BLOND GIRLS

M W Hamel

how the hell
did things end up
like this
and when did you lose
your virginity and
to whom

everyone grows up
to look the same

On comfort and solace

Jeffrey Calhoun

*It is wrong to be comfortable
One should always be
at least somewhat uncomfortable*

he shivers 'cuz it's cold out

Finally, some Truth
but it's hard to swallow
like those pills he
takes every morning and night
many and multicolored
like those rainbows on TV
some as large as his
fingers so his
kidneys don't stop
while all the other kids
grow tall and laugh

And that's the one
problem with my faith
When I am singing at
Mass and I'm praying
I am full of solace
And I forget that
just outside the
stain glass windows
there's a kid
laid out on the sidewalk

And it is the Truth
comfort and solace
breeders of forgetfulness
forgetting the woman
who's never been the
same since she
took the shortcut
through that blasted
alley last year

*'cuz the gangsters don't
like it when you run*

What does it all mean?
That's a good question
since we're all too
lazy to find a better way
we'll just go watch the
5 o'clock news
and listen mindlessly as
they tally today's deaths

And comfort is nice
It helps us overlook
that man with
a Santa Claus beard
full of crumbs that
spills over his
tattered coat and
sweat-stained shirt
covered in newspapers

and then the weatherman
he comes on and
tells us the sun is coming out
from behind the clouds

but only after winter ends

A Former Zen Master Is Breaking Down

Daniel Gallik

The cords encircled me. I foresee
ugly death in the center of an eel.
He rubbed his hands in anticipation
then added, my being is done with.

And my wife, my wife, she just sits
crosslegged, every once in a while
asking for a Scotch as she soothes
her eyes staring at the sun. I mean,

I tell her, I am fucking dying, and
she says, ain't we all? Jimmy, my
only son, cries. I mean, at least,
he understands. And I do too. I

let him cry. I know he needs to cry
about such a thing as death. His
teachers call us and complain about
his moaning in class, how it messes

up their lectures about the three
branches of gov't. Screws their
sessions on the difference between
past and present participles. They

listen to me cry over the phone line.
They've reported me to the county.
I told this civil servant about my
death. He told the wife she should

raise our child. Only 1 is listening.
My audience is my self. My positive
emptiness is compelling me to see that
my actualizing is a singular ending.

THE WATCHERS

Mel Waldman

I

Prelude

I am the author of the “Letter to the Editor” and poem-“A,” whose consequences I cannot conceive. My intentions were honorable, and certainly in this age of terrorism, racial profiling, and mass paranoia, I consider myself an all-American patriot. Indeed, I wrote a song praising our police officers and firemen as true-blue American heroes. Yet I am also the author of “A,” a poem that explores a young man’s innocence and quintessence, illuminating the ironic, poignant symbolism of his American heroism. Although I do not overtly point blame at the officers who murdered him, the tragedy of A’s death is obvious, with frightening implications. I am compelled to ask the reader: “Have the policies of the police department changed as a result of A’s death? Will others be saved from similar fates or will this tragedy be perpetuated? Will it?”

II

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

In this time of national trauma and uncertainty, I believe it is necessary to honor and celebrate the lives of individuals who embody the transcendent principles of peace and love. Recently, after appearing on a cable TV show about problems confronting our youth, I met Dr. C. Dr. C, a dynamic pastor, also has her own TV and radio shows, and is collaborating with A’s father on a book about A. When Dr. C discovered I was a poet and writer, in addition to being a director of a mental health program in the Bronx, she requested I write a poem about A for their book. Enclosed please find the poem-“A,” enlightened by the apocalyptic information I obtained about his life.

Both in life and in death, he is the avatar of the hero, a spiritual zephyr passing over humanity. He is also the quiet voice of the Muslim

community, reminding America that terrorists are the fringes of any religion, never the quintessence, never the true, gentle core. A is, indeed, an American hero. He embraced the innocence, purity, and vision of the American dream when he lived. It is our responsibility to continue the quest for ubiquitous justice, freedom, and peace.

Sincerely,
M.W.

III “A”

“A” is written in invisible ink and encrypted. A cryptologist is needed to determine its meaning.

IV Aftermath

“A” is an innocent poem. But the only response to it is a blue wall of silence. I have catapulted it to magazines and newspapers of different political persuasions, including a black newspaper in the city. No one wants to touch it. Is it because A was a black Muslim? Do they wish to forget? “A” is untouchable. And what about A, the man?

Perhaps, I too will be buried in a Waste Land of the Forgotten. That is okay. I love what I do. I save lives! Yet I must confess I have experienced some “healthy paranoia” about the consequences of my writing the poem-“A” and launching it into our community.

What will They do? Who are THEY? It may be much safer to run a mental health program for the underserved who live with trauma and violence every day than to write a pretty poem that points to... Well, it points to something-real and terrifying. At the other side of the poem is an infinite, labyrinthine wall of silence. Still, I write. I send “A”-out there. And I wait.

V Postscript

Dear Poet:

We are watching you! We know your history, demographics, favorite

authors and books, and... We have total access to you. Yesterday's blood pressure reading. All medical, academic, and financial records. Your honors. Your failures. Your dreams. Everything!

You can't hide! You can't run! Be careful what you say. And what you write! Maybe you ought to write children's books.

Don't step over the line! You say you are a patriot. Don't associate with certain individuals of questionable... We hate freakin' liberals!

Don't screw with us! We can alter your "clean" identity or simply obliterate you. We think you have a dark side too. We'll find it-or create it!

We were here! We could have killed you! We chose not to. But if we discover that you are part of a cabal, we will. And if we suspect...

We wait too.

THE WATCHERS

This is Yesterday's anonymous letter that was slipped under my door. It vanished this morning. I think they were inside my home last night. I slept for only one hour. Still...

I wait. (Should I call the police? The FBI? The CIA? You?) I think. (What a heavy price for freedom of speech!)

Later, I grin sardonically at the distant face in my mirror hanging in the bathroom. I whisper: "But it's such a pretty poem. Really!"

BIO

Dr. Mel Waldman is a licensed New York State psychologist and a candidate in Psychoanalysis at the Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies (CMPS). He is also a poet, writer, artist, and singer/songwriter. After 9/11, he wrote 4 songs, including "Our Song," which addresses the tragedy. His stories have appeared in numerous literary reviews and commercial magazines including HAPPY, NEW THOUGHT JOURNAL, THE BROOKLYN LITERARY REVIEW, HARDBOILED, HARDBOILED DETECTIVE, DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, ESPIONAGE, and THE SAINT. He is a past winner of the GRADIVA AWARD in Psychoanalysis and was nominated for a PUSH-CART PRIZE in literature. Periodically, he has given poetry and prose readings and has appeared on national T.V. and cable T.V. He is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Private Eye Writers of America, American Mensa, Ltd., and the American Psychological Association. He is currently working on a mystery novel inspired by Freud's case studies.

Prairie, by Patrick Waters

Daddy rolled out of the Tennessee hills in eighteen seventy six. After he saw the Rockies looming over him as God loomed over Moses on Sinai he could not call what had been his mountains mountains anymore, those Tennessee mountains became hills. I think it takes something out of a man when his god and order is found lacking and small in the world.

He built our home over virgin land in prairie country in Nebraska. The wood of the shack rose up over the small rise of the foundation, roofline stuck against the blue sky like a tick on a hound or profane humanity against a god, footer steeped in the loam of the ground. The wood rose up in the grass and the two substances, dead and wild, were never far apart. The corral was in the small holler, as that's what Daddy still called them, and the river further on. Trees only grew near the river, mostly stunted and deformed cottonwoods like children for who adulthood came under a short ceiling in the cave dwellings of the Southwest. One big oak stood for no damn good reason. It was tall and straight and proud, a lord over peasants, a lord over daddy who lorded over me. That oak never bent in wind or when men would come calling to hang devils off it. Then men would come inside our home, murder and coffee going together like lovers in the night.

Daddy had to entertain the men that came by. They would stare at Momma for she was a woman and drool over Sister for she was a girl and come back the next week on Sunday to court Sister, the killin' of the week before gone like as the waters of a river and this day was a new world with a new Sabbath. Momma would cook up what little we had and sling half-raw beef down a table, beef that we could barely afford anyways, to the eager coyote faces with curiously white teeth. The men would savagely swallow down the food the way feral dogs feast on a buffalo's innards. The men would offer to hire on to stay or when Sister became old enough they'd take Sister for a walk and if they did she'd walk for an hour and come back with coins or script or gold or silver and Daddy would say, good girl, and she'd preen and smile and give him the money and the look at Momma and exclaim, what did I say, she's a moneymaker. And over this domestic life there would be a man in the window across the way from me, hung from the neck until dead, swinging back and forth and I would shudder. After Hell, the men would see my broken form and only see evil. To others I wasn't even human, just a coyote. Other men were beasts to me. They created

death and take whatever virgin innocence Sister still had. These things I saw from dark eyes stilled with morphine.

The market busted south in eighteen eighty six, five full years before I was born. Daddy said, those days, before the bust, I was a rich man, running all of them cattle up and down the prairie, into and out of the hollers, around dusty towns and roads and into huge long trains which the bellowing of steers reminded me of the death bells I heard coming from the county church when my own daddy died by a shotgun blast.

I got born in ninety one and sister got born in the late winter of nineteen double aught. I thought Sister was beautiful the first time I saw her. Momma had gone into labor on night and when the cries stilled, of her voice and Daddy's and a new voice, I knew Sister was born, but until I saw her at the table a week after, I never truly believed. Her hair was white gold and mine dirt black. Her skin was gold peach and my skin was black grime. She was birth and new made, and within years I would dig graves when men hung. She looked like the babe I saw in the Bible momma would pray to before I got crippled and she said, Sister was Daddy's prayers came true.

Momma was still young and Daddy would leave her for months on those drives which never got us enough because the cowboy was already gone and Daddy was fighting against the world. When Daddy came back in nineteen oh one, after getting thirteen-fifty for fifteen dollar steers and we had no new clothes for three years straight, after all this he came home to a silent wife. I entered purgatory for a sin which only Daddy, not god, could forgive and Daddy wouldn't because then it would be his own sin, and daddies can't carry sin like a noose around the neck like wives and daughters and sons can.

Momma didn't talk for five months after Daddy came home that winter with more cash than we'd had in years and then he paid the debts he could and borrowed to pay debts he couldn't and began to plan for a horseraising and a horsebreaking business and he made ready for the alfalfa planting season which was coming with a Chinook wind, the one prairie wind that don't howl like a woman hurt. But Momma was a woman hurt and she told Daddy in slow words, first as half-mumbles in cold sleep next to him in a bed heaped with quilts and blankets made when he was gone, then whole words muttered when she saw the oak protruding itself into our lives like greek gods onto heroic mortals, then halting sentences when he wasn't in the room until he overheard her crying by the woodpile one morning when she thought he was in the stables breaking a mustang. That horse didn't get broken that day but Momma broke and Daddy looked to his god and saw him-

self rise into air, hung on his own sins.

The men had come with a horse thief. A restless mob perched on gaunt damn near wild horses craving for the violence they knew must come. They didn't seem to be men at first she said, as she saw the floating dust a veneer over the men. She said they looked like purposeless ants milling about a lone sweet stick covered with honey and then the form rose up the lone oak in the valley, hanging by the neck until dead, sentenced without a judge, jury or defense other than the pistol the horse thief didn't have money to buy bullets for. She saw the horse thief rise up in a hazy red dust cloud and she saw the horse thief die. The dishes in her hand suddenly stilled and the wind suddenly howled but it had been howling all along; she had never heard it until then. Then the dust thrust into her home, clinging to forms that must have been men as some point but were changed into animals. They took her, she said, and that was that.

Daddy looked at me with eyes that were so away and old and cold and said, where were you?

Scared, Daddy. Me and Sister run out from the house to the stall. Momma said run and we did.

You should have stayed and protected her.

I ain't a man, daddy.

Those weren't men that did this, you goddamn coward.

My purgatory had begun.

Daddy never went to town to talk to the sheriff and never tore down the oak. He just moved the table so my seat stared out to the tree where dead men swung. When I was little, he would cut down the men and dig the graves on a hill facing the graveyard with the two sisters that didn't live long. Then I turned twelve and he told me to dig. I had grown big, big enough for a spade and big enough to climb the oak and saw the line and drag the body by the neck as I rode a broken mustang. Daddy would watch from the table as my spade sunk into the loam and the spade rose and dirt flew and my spade sank into the loam again and rose again and my penitence, postponed for two years, began. Momma didn't say nothin', but I saw her if I stopped in the window. She just stared back straight through me. I went on with the work.

There are things that roll through your mind as you dig a grave even when you are young. What did they do, when will you be in one. I once laid down in the bottom, with steam rising off my chest into the air and the dirt streaking down my skin and me thinking as I saw dirt rise six feet above my head that maybe this is hell and I looked to the sky but I was in the shadow of a grave. I saw clouds and an unfeeling sky, a sky the color

of daddy's eyes when he first called me coward and stopped calling me son.

Those years before Hell were a paradise. I remember Sister was eight by then and she used to laugh with me and play with me and we'd walk into the nothingness that was Nebraska farm and we'd play games among wheat that never grew high enough and steers that could never find feed enough. Her laugh would give her away when she hid for the sound reminded me of what the river murmured when I woke up before the birds and I saw the sun rise up warm and beautiful before it became harsh and killed daddy's farm in front of his eyes. Those mornings I would go down and see a new man hanging and I would wonder what that person did and walk up to him and know I would bury him come high noon but for the moment I just turned my back and pretended he wasn't there and I fished for fish I knew weren't there and pretended the murmur of the river as was my sister laughing.

Daddy bought a stallion at the last public mustang auction in Nebraska. The mustang was gone from the prairie after that auction and Hell was the last mustang stallion. Ain't nothing' should have broke that horse, but I tried. Daddy could have broken Hell in a day but it was my turn to be a man, he said. I didn't become a man, just a cripple.

Hell was a compact, muscular horse. Hell's eyes were cock-eyed and blazed wild with near-human hate and his jaw had been shot through with a rifle bullet. The maiming must have happened before Hell stopped growing because his teeth grew in crooked sharp like the teeth of wolves that ate human flesh. His lip was twisted into a snarl, the snarl of lonely men who live with sins and do not find the forgiveness they should find in their own heart. Daddy said, god said death rode a pale horse and hell followed with him. That wasn't true. Hell was Hell and I had to ride him.

Daddy roped Hell and managed to get him in the chute and when I looked at Hell's body swirling and twisting and fighting and kicking and gouging and trying to destroy the only restriction to unfettered freedom he had ever known, I vomited at the sight. Daddy called my name; I came running to the shoot with bile still burning my throat and spittle spurting between my teeth. I jumped on Hell's back, called to Daddy, throw gate, and I rode and rode hard.

Hell busted way out and my shoulder blades slammed into his back. My feet were flying high up in the air, spurs flashing, as I kicked into the shoulder flesh of that beast and I saw small blood drops fly and fleck my clothes. Hell bucked high and swung right. Hell bucked high and swung left and then something snapped. Hell bucked high and we were one statue, my body prone sideways across Hell's hard spine, Hell stiff legged, spinning perfectly, spinning like the sky and ground just slowly switched

places along an unknown axis somewhere just under my legs, maybe even through Hell's own heart.

Hell slammed on me, his body going straight into my chest as if he was going to bury me with his momentum for a spade. He kicked twice into the air, screaming at the sky or god that had flipped us and not knowing it was his own body and his own hate. He twisted and ground me into dust as the druggist does to the drug in the mortar, and I saw the cinch flap when it shouldn't have. The cinch was sliced through.

My brain was translated into a white hot light. My chest caved in and I felt a waterfall in me, just water running through my chest in spurts all over. Hell twisted off and rose up, my head seeing flashing rear hoofs. He kicked and sent me whipping around to hit his forelocks and me looking down my leg to see my foot still caught in the stirrup. My mouth was full of bile and mud and horseshit, my eyes covered in the grime only fit for my feet. I couldn't even shed tears to wash the hurt and dirt away.

Hell leapt forward and I fell behind him. Hell kicked once, twice, and my body ripped free and Hell was finally free of his master, a master who could master nothing not even a wild mustang his daddy could have broken in a day. Hell's kick went into my jaw, smashing my own teeth into my own throat, cutting my flesh all the way down. I could not feel my right foot and my jaw was unhinged and nearly off and my eye was gone from a hoof that pierced the fragile bubble of sight, making me a cyclops. Nobody had destroyed me, only Hell.

Daddy was there when I came to, dull on morphine. Momma rested by my bed and Daddy looked out to see the tall oak.

Daddy said, God said penitence wasn't over. You are not forgiven. You can't get on your knees to pray, so you'll just go to hell. There is no forgiveness for the unrepentant sinner.

After I rode Hell into the dust Sister never looked at me again and her laugh became the unnatural hiss of water over a dam. My jaw had been reformed into a shape from which sound could not slip through and I could not ask her to murmur like the river and float me away where oak trees couldn't hang men.

In nineteen sixteen three men were hung and the animal pack that hung them burst into our home still drunk, still happy that they were alive and that they could kill men who really weren't even men, just animals like themselves. They called, hello house, and tramped up as if they were welcome all along, that it was not midnight and the moon had not disappeared behind clouds which never came except for nights in which dead men swung. The men came into the house and tried to find moth-

er but she was hidden and they just found daddy at the table and my form, crippled and broken lying on the floor. Daddy never moved as the men broke into our sanctuary. They didn't care home was sacred and Daddy didn't know home was sacred.

The men yelled and hungered for food. I got up and shuffled, trying to serve their needs and trying to keep them quiet and satisfied. I looked up into the loft and saw my sister's face looking down. Her hair was matted, the matted hair of a slatternly mare, a mare which still needed protection in her sluttish weakness. Her lips curved in laughter as I shuffled to serve animals which weren't even men, just beasts that killed because they were strong unlike some men who were weak because god, who never watched and only gave a blue sky blanket and a hard yellow sun for men to find comfort in, that god was the oak, an unbending and an unquestionable lord, a father that never should have born new flesh in the body of another. Sister laughed, her laugh the harsh, jaunty roar of a flood into the ditches Daddy built to irrigate the upper fields.

The animals saw her and she shrieked as a caught rodent and she slunk back into the loft trying to forget she even saw and hoping the men wouldn't notice that a young sin-haloed girl was standing above them just out of reach but yet in reach if they could climb, this mare slut one who was laughing at their jokes and therefore wanted their company or even more if she could be had like they had her mother had been had years before. Those animals wanted her and one of them, a thing in shabby clothes with a brokened tooth grin which was Hell's snarl and mine too if you squinted and remembered I could have been a beast once to in some other life, one of them climbed up to get his prize, the prize which was his and not mine because he was whole and not broken like me.

That beast pulled her down and I shuffled brokenly to the corner of the room where the shotgun stood, the gun Daddy didn't allow me to shoot. I only learned how when Daddy had gone on his drives again. I pointed the gun but words couldn't come out of my snarled smashed mangled jawbone. That man had my sister and I shot him down where he stood. The other men rushed me and Daddy.

Daddy yelled as Lot did to the mob, take him, take her, except there were no angels to save from worse rape, just himself and he yelled again, I didn't do nothin' and I will not die for the sins of my son and I thought, Daddy. Any sins I got, they were passed down. This is our lot.

I was taken down to the river and stood under the big oak, the shade of this oaken lord deepening the night. Sister was with me for they had taken her too and daddy was there for he couldn't save himself and

momma was at window with a rifle.

I was calm. I saw momma raise the rifle and look through the sight.

I was on Hell again and I thought it was good that Hell was with me and would send me to the next cycle of life and I would come back. Hell stood there angry at the saddle and rope and slaving beasts and I looked to my mother who was still. I watched her count her breaths the way Daddy taught her after he came back and found I couldn't protect her, one, two, in, out and sigh. And Daddy leapt into the air beside me, his shirt pushing out bellshaped and then a small red flower coming out, so short lived it just turned into blood and Daddy now swung in the air beside me. His face stretched in death and froze, him hung and shot and now swinging dead, a sin hanging from god's own neck.

Then I heard the rifle's ghostlike echo, an echo that never should have been as on the prairie there is nothing to echo against. I heard the rifle in my ears and looked to Momma. The beasts cowed at the invisible death and unnatural noise and saw Momma who was unnatural and raising the rifle again and the beasts broke, running away at the sight of a woman, who was still more man than a pack of wolves.

Momma came down and stood in front of me on Hell and Sister on Daddy's horse.

His seed should die with his sins, she said. His seed made her, she pointed to Sister, and his sins made you, as she pointed to me.

I said nothing as sister started crying and then Sister yelled, it wasn't my choice and daddy was god and made forgiveness not Momma and Momma said, then god is dead.

Momma slapped Daddy's horse and Sister dropped until she was caught by the wet rope. Her breath snuck out of her in small harsh ugly gasps that came out like the river hissing over a dam and her lips turned a dark blue, then purple and then her eyes filled with hate at Momma and then she died and swung and was dead. Her body was stiff and swung slowly in the night and I saw something evil in her, something evil and small and her teeth shown like a dead coyote's and her hair was matted like the mane of a yellow mustang and nothing of her was human. Sister was human at birth, just out of Mamma but Daddy's seed took and twisted her beauty and soul into something too much like him, too much like that selfish god Daddy worshipped and I saw all this in her eyes and I felt pity, pity Sister and pity for Daddy and pity for Momma and pity for me.

Momma cut me down.

Penitence is over, she said and Momma walked away.

I buried Sister and Daddy and their sins with them.

08.02.05 NATHAN, Fallujah

Forrest Koch

I

The roof fell on her son cutting his legs off.
All she could do was wrap his legs up
And watch him die.

Because no one is allowed
On the streets after dark.

She clutched his dead body in her arms
Till the wet sun leaked daylight
Onto her son's face.

II

He found her
As a boulder blocking the door
Broken down at the core
Of her last stand
Against Iraq.

He found her
Arms wrapped around
Ten years of her life
Gone in a night
Of bombs
That promised her freedom.

22.1.05 NATHAN, Fallujah

Forrest Koch

I

His mother told him growing up
He would be a man longer than anything else.
And warned him he would be dead longer than that.

He has killed five
The first bullet in the head of a man
Who looked like the first boy
He ever kissed.
The third in the stomach of a woman.
Someone's mother.
Fierceness marched her
Screaming in his direction.

The second bullet in a child
Small face
Seeming older
Than his grandfather's.

II

He was ten
His father was teaching him
To suck it up and live life free of regret.
He remembers his grandfather's dead face
And the tears
And the pit of his stomach
Empty. For years
He rocked himself to sleep
In hope of dreaming back his grandfather's arms.

III

Today is an apology letter from
His mother.
She writes bright saffron sorrys.
Remembers the first time she caught him
Kissing a boy.

He was sixteen
Stumbling over his lips
He tense, fragile.
She ashamed.
She lost him that day,
She promises change.

IV

Today is a ten day old baby who sleeps nestled in dirty blankets
As flies buzz above her head.

Today is a home made of cans and mud where
Two little girls with dirt caked on their faces
Play with an old piece of tire throwing it back and forth

14.03.05 NATHAN, Fallujah

Forrest Koch

To jump at shadows.
To carry a dim flashlight
That found the child
Crammed behind a refrigerator
Three days after watching
Iraqi soldiers shoot her mother and father.

Drying tears, he told her
How he once scraped his dead sister's
Body from the debris
Of their family sedan.
He told her he knew what she meant
When she said she couldn't live without them.

That night he wrongly imagined himself invincible.
He doesn't sleep anymore.
Just a sleeping position and suspicious sounds.
A barking dog.
Showering gun fire.

He doesn't jump at shadows anymore
He simply stops to admire
Those that move with the grace of trees.

Killer Instincts

Mark Phillips

William McBride couldn't remember what he was doing. Well, he was driving that was true enough and he could do that. In fact he thought of himself as quite a good driver. The thing that he was having a problem with was exactly where he was going. He supposed that it was home but it suddenly occurred to him that he didn't know where home was. He looked around trying to figure out what he could remember.

Outside of the car was a macabre sight. He was driving through a forest. The trees were knarled, twisted and leafless. They looked as if they might reach out and grab hold of his car. He could imagine himself being pulled into the gaping maw that would appear in the center of the tree and it made him shudder.

It was night that much was clear. Yet the forest seemed to be illuminated by a strange glow that William couldn't chalk up to moonlight. Although he couldn't remember where he was going he supposed that it would be obvious when he got there for the dirt road that he was traveling on was only big enough to occupy one car and must surely be some sort of private drive.

Or cabin, he thought.

That thought something sparked in his mind. He was on to something but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. It was the same feeling that he would get when he smelled some odor, a perfume or some food that he couldn't quite place. It was familiar and he would almost be able to do it and then his mind would throw him off in a different direction entirely.

That's it, I'm going to a cabin. But whose?

He couldn't answer that. In fact, he couldn't answer many questions other than his name. He didn't know what he had been doing right before he'd gotten in the car. He didn't remember buying the car. He only knew he was William McBride and he needed to keep driving on this road.

His eyes rose to the rearview mirror, looking to see if there happened to be any cars behind him so he could stop and ask where he was.

When his eyes fell upon the rearview mirror he didn't see a car. He didn't even see the road. The entire mirror was taken up by the visage of a man, or what appeared to be a man. He wore a knit black ski cap. The thing that William focused his attention on was the large blade that the man held raised.

Thoughts ceased and he just reacted. He jerked the wheel to the left and heard the thud as the man struck the back passenger door. The car struck one of the trees hard, so hard in fact that the tree fell over.

William jumped out of the car and began to run in the direction that he had been traveling. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that the man with the

ski mask was exiting the car and steadfastly walking in his direction. William had hoped that he'd been at least dazed by the crash but it appeared as if he was in good condition.

"Damn!" He cursed.

He ran off the road and into the forest. His hope was that he would be able to lose the man in the foliage. Behind him came the steady crunch of leaves under foot and William knew that he'd been followed.

He didn't understand how the man was able to keep up with him when he was walking and William was just about falling over running.

He kept taking furtive glances behind him paranoid that the man in the ski mask would be right behind him ready to run him through with his knife.

There was a break in the trees ahead and not fifty yards away was a large log cabin. *That's where I was headed. I bet there's people there that can help me.*

His feet pendulumed up and down with rapidity that he never would have credited them with. All the while he strained his ears but could no longer hear the man's progress behind him. It appeared as if he was able to outrun him after all. Still he didn't slow down as he entered the clearing and crossed the gravel driveway to the house.

The cabin was large standing against the night. On the second floor a dim yellow light shown out the front window. There was a yellow convertible in the driveway. The car seemed to jog something in William's mind as well but he dismissed it. He ran to the front door praying that it wouldn't be locked and by some miracle it wasn't.

The first thing he did after plunging into the cabin was slam the door behind him. The darkness was immediate and complete. His eyes had been so focused on the light in the upper room so he hadn't noticed that the downstairs was completely dark. He turned around and fumbled with the lock. For an agonizing moment he thought that he wasn't going to be able to get it in the blackness and then his fingers slid over the rounded knob of the latch and he turned it. The pleasing sound of the bolt sliding into place set his mind at ease.

He looked around the room but was barely able to make out much more than shapes. He walked blindly forward with his hands stretched out in front of him towards a squat rectangular shape that he hoped was a table. On it was a long slender shape that he further hoped was a table lamp. When he got there he wasn't disappointed.

He ran his hand slowly up the cool metal, when he reached the top he found a hard plastic circle. He turned it and suddenly the room was illuminated.

It was a rather large but otherwise perfectly ordinary room. The lamp that he had turned on sat on a small brown coffee table. Parallel with the table was a fireplace with a few burnt logs sitting on top of the gray ash. Above the fireplace was the head of a large buck. William couldn't remember if he was a hunter or not but he knew that the buck was a twelve point.

"Must have been a big one," he muttered to himself.

In the silence that followed his speaking he heard a distant noise. In his excitement to lock the door and then get the room lit he hadn't noticed it. It sounded like a light rapping almost as if someone was tapping on a window in the back of the house. William slowly walked through the living room into the kitchen. There were a great many empty beer cans lining the sink in there. Potato chip bags and other snack wrappers littered the floor and counter.

Must have been some sort of party in here. Why the hell can't I remember it?

He was trying to distract himself from the noise that was taking up all his attention.

At the end of the kitchen was a small hallway, which led to a staircase. In front of the staircase was a glass door. The door was hanging wide open and banging against the wall.

William rushed forward and slammed the door shut turning its lock at the same time.

He feverishly calculated how long he'd been in the cabin, how fast the man in the ski mask had been going and how far ahead of him he had been.

He could have done it. He could have made it here and in the back door.

The sound of footsteps walking down the staircase came clearly to his ears. William's eyes opened wide.

He turned around and saw a closed door he tried the knob, found it open and then darted in. He closed the door quietly behind him hoping that the man in the mask didn't hear. The light was already on and William could see it was a bathroom.

Across from the toilet was a bathtub with the curtain drawn. William sprang over and drew the curtain.

When he looked down he saw the tub was filled with blood. Presumably the blood of the young lady who was lying face down in the muck.

William wanted to scream but he knew that would be a very bad idea. So he cupped his hand over his mouth hoping to both suppress the scream and the vomit that wanted to rise.

Behind him he heard the footsteps and he knew there was only one thing to do. He climbed into the tub and threw the curtain back. He pressed his face against a relatively clean portion of the tub and closed his eyes. He heard the door open and though he wanted to look up to see who it was he kept himself as still as possible.

The footsteps moved forward slightly and William held his breath. Suddenly he didn't want to be there at all, he felt completely trapped but it was the only thing he could think of to do at the time. He kept his eyes closed and his face pressed against the tub, smelling the sweet smell of the blood around him.

The footsteps stopped but William could feel the presence of someone in the room. He waited there for nearly twenty seconds. Seconds that, to William, felt like days. Then the footsteps turned and walked out of the room closing the door behind them.

William got up feeling awful. His entire lower half was covered in the sticky blood and he felt as if he wasn't going to be able to control the vomit this time. He stood breathing in deeply trying to catch his breath after holding it for so long. He

looked around the bathroom and saw a knife sitting on the edge of the sink. He couldn't remember if it had been there when he entered the bathroom but he didn't care. Nor did he care about the streaks of blood on the silver blade. He picked it up hoping that he wouldn't need to use it.

He opened the door to the bathroom and crept out. The back door was open again and banging slightly with the wind. William walked over to it and peered out. He looked left then right but could see nothing it was too dark. He turned around to examine the inside of the house but when he did he was face to face with Ski Mask.

Ski Mask had his own knife raised high in the air about to bring it down into William's flesh. William surprised the killer by lunging forward and plunging the knife deep into his stomach. Ski Mask stumbled backward and fell over.

William was on him in an instant and stabbed his chest over and over and over.

He stabbed until his arm was tired. Then he threw the knife aside and rolled off Ski Mask. He collapsed on the floor crying. After a half a minute he stood up warily. He began to walk in the direction of the living room to look for a phone so he could call 911 but that was when Ski Mask stood up again.

"You can't be alive!" William shouted both shocked and scared. "I killed you!"

Ski Mask slowly shook his head and William ran.

He ran around the corner and up the staircase remembering the light and hoping that someone was still alive upstairs.

"Someone help me!" He screamed.

He got no answers.

The upstairs couldn't have had a more simple lay out. It was one hallway with five doors. Two on each side of the hallway and one at the very end of it. All the doors but the one at the end of the hallway were open and they showed horrific signs of brutality.

As William ran past he could see blood smeared on the walls, people lying dead and body parts strewn about.

He hit the end of the hallway and turned the handle. He slammed the door closed and looked around for something to bar the door with, there was nothing. The room was bare; it didn't contain a single piece of furniture. The only things in it were the door and an open window across from it.

William backed himself up keeping an eye on the door. The handle turned slowly and Ski Mask walked in slow as ever. He began to walk towards William and William moved backward at the same pace.

He was only eight feet away when William's back hit the window. There was nowhere to go but down. He glanced out the window and quickly put his odds at surviving a jump at a thousand to one. He turned around and Ski Mask was only five feet away and closing.

William put his right leg on the ledge and was about to swing his left leg out when he heard a shout behind him.

"Cut!"

William turned around unable to comprehend what he'd just heard. When he did, Ski Mask was gone.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"Cut!" Someone shouted again and this time William saw something. It was a short man with a good-looking black beard coming towards him.

William moved closer to the ledge.

"Don't jump," the man said and his voice was both comical and alarmed.

William put both of his feet flatly on the ground.

"Where is the guy in the mask?"

"He's gone," the man said in a reassuring voice. Then he turned his head and yelled. "Will someone get Peter his shot!"

"Who the hell is Peter?"

"You are."

"No my name is William."

"Just take your shot and you'll see."

William wasn't sure what the man was talking about until he saw a man in a white lab coat carrying a long syringe.

"Oh no," William said raising his hands. "I'm not taking anything you shoot into my body."

"Peter," the short man began

"My name is William!"

"Let Dr. Bishop give you this shot and you'll understand everything."

"I will not!"

"Pe...I mean William if you don't let him do it I'll just call security to hold you down and he'll do it anyway."

William looked into this man's eyes and saw that he was every bit of serious.

William lowered his head. "You're going to kill me." It wasn't exactly a question.

"No," the short man with the beard said, laughing. "Everything will be clear in a minute."

For some reason William did believe him. He pulled up his sleeve and let Dr. Bishop stick his needle in.

The pain was sharp but short. He felt woozy at first and thought he was going to fall over and then all of a sudden his head hurt badly. It was as if he had suddenly contracted a huge headache. He shook his head and some of the pain went away but not enough of it. Then the most odd feeling came over him. It was like waking up again from a dream. Only this dream, he knew, had been part of reality. Suddenly he knew what his name was, it was Peter Stefan. He knew where he was born, where he went to high school, who his parents were, what he did for a living.

"Oh my God I'm an actor," Peter said.

Doug nodded.

"And you're Doug Sherman," Peter said. "You're my director."

Doug nodded again. "Everything coming back to you.

"Yes it's all there. We're shooting a horror movie and you had an idea to make

it more real. You gave me a drug so that I could..." Peter broke off. "There I'm sort of hazy."

"We gave you a drug that temporarily erased your memory while at the same time leaving you open to suggestion. It's almost like a hypnosis drug. Dr. Bishop here invented it."

Peter turned to Bishop who smiled and nodded.

"Yeah," Peter said, with his hand on his chin. He was thinking hard to earlier that day.

"The way it was supposed to go was that Dr. Bishop here would shoot me with his needle and you would implant my character on my psyche. Then the entire thing would seem real to me. That way we could make the most real horror movie ever, completely devoid of those normal horror movie clichés." "Exactly," Doug said. "How did the drug work? Did you remember anything about yourself?"

"No," Peter said. "Actually I think it worked a little too well. I couldn't really remember anything about my character except for my name." "Yes," Dr. Bishop spoke up. "I thought that maybe we gave you a slightly large dose. Next time we'll have to lower it slightly."

"That could explain why you screwed up the scene so much," Doug said.

"What do you mean? I thought I did okay."

"You still did the same things that the victims do in every horror movie. You ran upstairs to try and get away when you know there's no way to escape. You didn't even check the back door. I mean hell; you almost fell in the woods. God would that have been a disaster."

"Well I'll do it better next time."

"Yeah, I think we can get one more try in today if Dr. Bishop is ready with his formula."

"I'll just have to measure out a new batch it shouldn't take but a minute."

The three of them began to walk back downstairs towards the starting point of the scene at the beginning of the woods.

"This stuff is totally harmless isn't it doc?"

"Of course," Dr. Bishop said.

"Cause I've got," Peter paused and realized that his headache was now completely gone. "Well I had a headache anyway but it's gone now."

"Just a minor thing," Dr. Bishop said. "It's from the rapid return of your memory. It's nothing really and as you said it doesn't last very long does it?"

"No I guess not."

"Well you better get the dosage right this time doc," Doug said. "I don't want to be here all night."

"How many times have we done this scene?"

"Ten."

"And I haven't gotten it right yet?"

"Nope but we'll get there. Don't worry this one will be cliché free I can feel it."

Four Blocks from Home

Paul Lewellan

I left the White Front near closing. The transition from humid, smoke-filled, blue-collar barroom ambiance to cool night air sent me into coughing spasms and gasps for breath. “Clean air will kill you every time,” I told the empty sidewalk when my breathing was restored. I zipped my Oscar Meyer windbreaker to protect me from the light rain and began the ten-block walk home.

I bought my house a marriage ago in hopes of building sweat equity and restoring its former glory. After gallons of sweat and no appreciable equity, I was trapped in *Better Homes and Gardens* Hell while my wife sends postcards from the rain forests of Costa Rica where she escaped with our realtor.

The tradition of walking home from the White Front began after my second arrest for OMVI. I later gained an appreciation for the practice. In ten blocks the scenery turned from booming businesses (strip joints, tattoo parlors, and pawn shops) to seedy housing (railroad flats, homeless shelters, and transient hotels) to Gold Coast homes (now low income apartments, crack houses, and restoration nightmares). The walk was uphill all the way.

In order not to be a target for roving packs of thugs, I attempted to look down on my luck. Fortunately, this was not hard. I taught English at the small Catholic high school across town. The only people who acknowledged my presence were the workingwomen who frequented the area. These ladies held a special fascination for me, especially on nights when the beer slowed my thought processes and the loneliness crept deep into my cortex. “Funny,” I remembered thinking, “I don’t feel fifty. I feel more like . . . dead.”

“Hey, looking for a party?”

The husky female voice jarred my thoughts. She wore orange tights, a yellow leather skirt, black tube top, and in deference to the cold night and the intermittent drizzle, a Wilson High School letter jacket. In the tint of the low-pressure sodium lights she looked jaundiced. I wanted to wash the makeup from her face. “Not much in a party mood.”

“How about we go somewhere quiet and do nasty things to get over these bad times?” She came up to me and touched my chest. The human

contact felt good.

“Not much into nasty things.”

“You’re tense, baby. Maybe we could do something to relieve those pressures.”

I looked into her face. It hadn’t seen thirty any time recently. “Maybe the letter jacket was a gift from an admirer,” I thought. “Maybe it’s her son’s.”

“My Cavalier’s in the shop; that’s why I’m tense. I’ve got no cash left for carnal pleasures.”

“Screw you,” she spat as she walked away. “Hey, good looking,” she shouted to a passing motorist, “looking for a party?”

I was almost home when I saw someone walking down Fourth Street. Her pale dress was pressed against her razor thin body, soaked as if she had been standing all night in the drizzling rain. She wore no coat. She was giving the finger to some guys in a low rider driving by. She heard my footsteps and turned to face me. “Hey, mister, looking for a party girl?”

Her long black hair hung like strings on her shoulder. She was shivering. Before I could stop myself, I said, “Yes.”

I said it so tentatively I wasn’t sure she had heard me. Fifteen seconds elapsed between vague recognition and mutual realization. Context is so much a part of knowing someone. “Mr. Mikoska?” she asked.

“Lorraine?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m walking home,” I told her, skipping the facts that it was after midnight; I was drunk; and I’d just propositioned her.

Another car drove by, an old Mercedes convertible. It slowed as the white-haired driver leaned to get a better look at Lorraine.

“I guess you know what I’m doing,” she said. I nodded. “It kinda sucks.”

“You dropped out of school to do this?” That didn’t come out the way I’d intended it. “I mean, I thought things were working out.”

“My boyfriend, Jimmy, left me to work in Chicago. Mom said he was a scumbag, but I didn’t listen. I stole some money from Wilt, my stepdad, and hopped a Trailways. When I phoned Jimmy from the bus station, he called me a stupid bitch for not hitching. He said with a body like mine, I could get a ride anywhere I wanted. To prove it to me, he sent a ‘friend’ to pick me up at the station. The friend told me cab fare to Jimmy’s place was a blowjob. Within a week I was doing his buddies for spending money. Then I was out on the street turning tricks to pay my rent. That’s

where Mom and the juvie cops found me.”

“There were rumors about that at school.”

“Figures. Those assholes. I dropped out before they could push me out. Those country clubbers never worked for a dime in their lives.”

“No chance you could go straight?”

“I got fired at Safeway when I ran off. When I got back, I found a new job at Super Value, but somebody told the manager’s wife what I did on the side. When Mom caught me stealing money from Wilt again, she threw me out. ‘Good men are hard to find,’ she said. Now I’m sharing an apartment with Mattie Heinz above the Grim Artist Tattoo Parlor. Mattie wants two-hundred bucks for rent and fifty for groceries and cigs. She loaned me working clothes . . . This is just temporary. It’s not a career or anything.”

A black BMW pulled up to the curb and two large blond men in their mid-twenties emerged. “What’s happening here?”

“Just reviewing the menu,” Lorraine told them.

“Don’t look like this fellow got the spare change for an appetizer.”

I put on my best stupid grin. “It’s payday. I’m ready to party.”

The one in the black trench coat grabbed Lorraine’s arm. “Old man, this is prime chicken right here. We’ve got plans for her ass. That’s why we came looking for little Jewel Box here.” He grabbed a handful of her hair. “Looks like we got to get her dried off first.”

I moved toward them. “I’d pay for the rest of the night.”

“That’s \$400 Old Man.”

“Shit, \$400,” Lorraine shouted at them. “Does he look like he’s got \$400?”

“I was hoping for a senior citizen discount.” I reached for my billfold. “I’m concerned she might be underage.”

The one in the blue slicker stepped in. “She’s a fine age, old man. Got an I.D. says she’s nineteen. You save your money tonight. Tuesdays are discount days.” They began walking toward the door with Lorraine between them.

She looked back at me as they stuffed her into the car. “Sorry, old man,” she said. “Maybe another night we’ll get lucky.” Then Lorraine was gone, and I was still four blocks from home.

Fade to Black

Ralph Scherder

Alice never expected her patience to run out all at once. Emotions, she thought, were strange. And yet, the emotions, especially the rage, felt so good. Only in the instant after it subsided did she realize she was standing in the living room holding a broken flower vase, and her husband lay unconscious on the floor.

Her mother gave her the vase as a wedding gift; in the glass had been engraved their wedding date. Now its pieces were scattered on the gold-shaded rug and a few pieces – one of which still had the “Ju” of “June”

written on it – were stuck in Howard’s head.

Kneeling down, she studied him. Where had all his hair gone? Thirty years ago, when they first met, he had thick black hair combed Beatles-style over his forehead. She could hardly remember when or where he lost all that hair, but he was completely bald and the glass shards sparkled like pillars of light on a desert landscape.

She touched his shoulder. Poor Howard. How could she have known it would end like this? Not with a whimper, she thought, remembering an old Frost poem. With a bang.

Upstairs, Alice packed her suitcase with clothes, makeup, and a couple books she’d been meaning to read. Now she’d have time to read them. Time to herself. She packed just enough for a week, maybe two. By then she’d have things figured out and she’d call him and she could talk and he could listen.

Alice looked in on him before she left. Still unconscious. She could see his enormous gut (which had occurred as gradually, she assumed, as the hair loss) rising and falling. She picked up her suitcase, stopped by the door and glanced over at him again.

“Goodbye, Howard,” she said, and then left.

She didn’t see the pool of blood that had begun soaking the old gold carpet.

*

Maggie lived in a pre-fab home on the other side of town. The vinyl-sided home sparkled as new as the other twenty homes in the plan. A perfect, uncracked driveway ramped up into a two-stall garage. The American Dream had worked out for Maggie, at least.

Alice clipped her sunglasses to the sun visor and got out of the car.

The lawn smelled of deep forest and underground rivers. Islands of cedar chips and full-bloom flowers added life to the green sea of grass. The effect almost made Alice cry, as if the lawn itself were an oasis. Maggie opened the front door and Alice did cry.

“Mom?” Maggie said. “Are you okay?”

Alice cupped her hand to her quivering lips and shook her head.

Everything

about this house and lawn was impossibly beautiful.

“I thought I was,” she said.

*

Many years ago, when Maggie had something bothering her, Alice would brew tea and bake fresh cookies, and they’d sit at the kitchen table and talk.

Now it was Maggie brewing the tea and baking cookies; Maggie putting the cookies on a plate and then sitting across from her mother.

“You can’t just leave,” Maggie said. “You know that, don’t you?”

Alice shrugged, nibbling on a cookie.

“Seriously, Mom. Who told me to never walk away mad?”

“I didn’t walk away mad,” she said. By the time she’d left, she’d been perfectly calm, almost a melancholy happiness. And Howard certainly hadn’t tried to stop her.

None of this she told Maggie. The edited version ended with her and Howard screaming at each other in the living room. Fade to black, cut to next scene – the beautiful lawn.

“You should call him.”

“He’s probably asleep. You know how your father likes his naps.” She sipped her tea. Then she suddenly reached across the table and put her hand over her daughter’s – oh, to have skin that smooth again, she thought – and she spoke as she just had the idea of the decade. “We could go away together. For a week or two. Just you and me. We’ve talked about it before, a mother-daughter trip. Whaddya say?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Work, for one. I’ll get fired if I leave for a week without notice.”

“Phooey.” Alice took her hand back and smoothed the crisp edges of the lace-fringed tablecloth. She snapped her fingers. “I got it!” she said.

“Monday’s a holiday. We could go for a long weekend. Jim’s away on business this weekend anyway, you said.”

The look was something she thought she’d never see on her daughter’s face.

The flex of mouth corners and a deep sigh. Like a cornered soldier helpless to escape.

“Okay,” she said. “Where do you want to go?”

*

“This is ridiculous.”

“What’s so ridiculous about it?”

“We just drive and see where we end up? No plan?”

“Why not?”

Maggie sighed. “Fine.” She gazed out the passenger’s window. A soft shade

of twilight swept over the cornfields to their right. Behind them, the sun set bland and uni-color, no dazzling pink or blue, no brilliance, just a cream of clouds and darkness pulling the sun below the horizon.

Alice wasn't used to her daughter's silence. Usually when they got together, they talked non-stop, laughed.

"Is everything okay?"

"Sure," Maggie said.

Alice took a long look at Maggie – as long as she dared to keep her eyes off the road – and noticed her eyes were glassy and a tear had already escaped down her cheek. She reached over and grabbed her hand.

"This'll be fun," she said. "A grand adventure."

Maggie wiped her face. "It's not that."

"Oh, Maggie. Don't worry. I'll probably forgive him. I always do."

"What did he do anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"Daddy. What happened this time that caused you to leave?"

Alice licked her lips and tried to remember. Everything around her seemed to narrow. Shadows formed in her peripheral vision and slowly expanded, canceling out everything except the road ahead of her and a small patch of shrinking light.

"Christ, Mom!" Maggie shouted. "Slow down!"

The speedometer fluttered. 95 mph. Alice eased her foot off the pedal and the light grew bigger again. "I've never done 95 in this car before," she said. "I've never done a lot of things. That's the point of this trip."

She smiled at Maggie. "But I'm glad you're with me."

"Well," Maggie frowned, and continued staring out the window.

A short while later they came to an exit with three or four restaurants.

"Hungry?" Alice asked.

"Sure."

They found a diner, ordered two chicken salads, low-fat dressing, and ended up just picking at the lettuce.

"I'm going to call Mike's cell phone," Maggie said.

By the door was a payphone, the old rotary type, with a yellow phone book dangling on a tarnished chain. Alice had thought about using the phone, too, but she hoped eating would quench the urge. It hadn't.

Alice stared out the window and waited for Maggie. The waitress took their plates and left the check. Outside, it was completely dark now and no stars in the cloudy sky. The moon was a smudge of dim light low on the horizon, behind the clouds.

Alice tried to eavesdrop, but Maggie shielded her conversation with her hand. She couldn't shield the tears, though.

A minute later, she hung up and ducked into the restroom. More people came into the diner and ordered while others paid their bills and left. The amaz-

ing thing about people is that they were always going to or coming from somewhere, and the destination always surprised you. They all had their lives, their secrets. They were all running away from something.

The waitress, a heavy-set brunette in a pink-striped outfit, came over to Alice's table holding a pot of black coffee. "Are you the mother? Excuse me. Hey."

Alice snapped into awareness. "What?"

"Are you the mother? Your girl's cryin' in the ladies room. That woman over there said you'd better check in on her."

From a booth across the diner, an elderly woman gazed intently at Alice.

Alice nodded and the waitress moved to the table behind her and filled a cup with coffee.

Alice knocked on the bathroom door and went in. The bathroom was surprisingly clean, only one large crack in the wall tiles. The floor was footprinted with dirt dragged in from the parking lot, but the sinks were pearl white.

In the corner, Maggie slumped to the floor, her head hidden behind her hands.

"Oh, Maggie, Maggie," Alice said. "I wish you wouldn't let this bother you so much. Everything will work out fine. Your father and I..."

"Damn you!" Maggie screamed. She shrugged away her mother's arms. Her body trembled even more and there was a hitch in her voice when she took a breath. "Why is it always about you? You and Daddy. You always show up at my house when you and Daddy fight. You don't care what it's doing to me and Mike. You don't care that it's pushing us apart. You get between us and drive us apart and you just don't care."

"But you're all I got. Who else can I turn to?" Alice said.

"Find someone!"

"Maggie..."

"No!" she said. "No more." She frantically wiped her eyes and got to her feet. She straightened her slacks. "I'll be in the car."

Alice watched her leave, the door closing coldly behind her, the chill of the linoleum and dripping skin, the cracked tiles. The bathroom, she noticed suddenly, smelled heavily of the fresh beige paint on the bathroom stalls. She remembered hearing from someone long ago that rest stops repainted on a regular bases to cover the profanity left by strangers.

If only it were that simple, she thought.

*

Maggie had sunglasses on when Alice returned to the car. The dark lenses covered her eyes but not the red streaks on her cheeks. She wasn't smiling.

Alice got in and buckled the seat belt. She sat there holding the keys.

The windows were down and cars whirred by on the Interstate. They'd driven three hours and were now in the center part of the state where the mountains began and the air felt considerably cooler.

“We don’t have to go any farther,” Alice said. “We’ve gone far enough.

We

can turn around, if you want.” She looked down at the red key fob in the shape of the number 1 and Hanson Auto Sales printed on it in white lettering.

“He’s not out of town on business,” Maggie said. “He went to Chicago to see if he’s in love with some woman he says he met at a conference.” She put her elbow on the door and combed her fingers through her hair. Her voice was low and steady. “I asked if he loved her and he said he didn’t know. I asked how he could not know and he gave me this look. I’ll never forget it, that look. And that’s when I knew. He wasn’t leaving to see if he loved her. He was leaving to see if he still loved me.”

They sat there and Alice knew what she wanted to say. She wanted to tell Maggie that bad love was better than no love at all – at least, that’s how it had always been for Alice. But she didn’t say it because she also knew that, somehow, it would only make matters worse.

Finally Alice put the key in the ignition and fired the engine. She reversed out of the parking space and circled the parking lot to the stop sign. Left would take them home. Right would take them farther east.

Maggie sighed heavily when Alice turned left.

Around midnight they finally got back to Maggie’s house. The red light on the answering machine blinked manically. Alice saw the light and got a sick feeling in her gut. Before Maggie could play the messages, Alice seized her arm and pulled her to the kitchen table.

“There’s something I should tell you,” she said.

*

At the hospital, a male nurse pointed them in the right direction. Room 304. And there he was, hooked up to multiple machines, looking small and pale. She recalled the message on the answering machine – “lost a lot of blood...nearly died...”

Maggie waited in the hall while Alice went in to check on him. She leaned over his bed, gently grabbing his hand. Had he really dragged himself all the way to the kitchen to call for help?

His eyes opened slowly at first, and then jerked wide. He smiled vaguely.

His voice was a weak gasp around plastic tubes. “Come to finish the job?”

“Can you forgive me?” she asked.

“Can you forgive me?” he said.

“Of course I do,” she said, but couldn’t remember what for.

A Project Reprieve

Roy Haymond

To look at Delsie walking home from her custodial job at the Rehab Center one would have thought her a male, with her broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs. A full five-foot-ten, her gait and long arms, even her close-cropped hair, gave off an air of masculinity. Only her over-large breasts stamped her as female.

There was more than a slight chill in the January air and her old high school letter-jacket, now too small for her, could hardly keep out the cold breeze. And she was weary from the routine, this going to the center to scrub floors and toilets, then walking the five blocks home to the high-rise project for her maternal responsibilities.

She shrugged as she shivered, in the mode of one who sees one day very much as another.

Immediately upon entering her two-bedroom third-floor apartment, she sensed something amiss - someone had been there, someone who had fouled the atmosphere! Instantaneously she knew what was about, but she could not let herself acknowledge what was looming; rather she postponed any recognition of what she must deal with.

She went down the hall to her mother's apartment. Her mother and five-year-old Bertha were not there. The baby, Johnny, was in his crib, just coming awake and beginning to squall. She wrapped the baby in a blanket and took him back to her own apartment. Here she placed the child in another crib.

As she returned to close her door, Harold staggered in. The smell of booze was heavy and the eyes swam in dissipation.

"Whatcha doing?" barked the out-of-place Harold, his voice thick with threat and disorientation.

"Puttin' the baby down!"

"Who baby?"

"Yours. Who you think?"

"I got Bertha; I know that! Who this?"

"This be Johnny. He borned while you away! I wrote you!"

"I ain't read no letter. What you talking about?"

"I talking about this baby. I told you before you left I was pregnant. Don't you remember? He borned while you was away!"

He swatted her with his right hand, leaving her left cheek smarting from

the impact. "You been fooling around, you whore!"

She took a quick step toward him and shouted, not quite defiantly, "Look, Harold, I ain't been doing no such! I told you I was pregnant... just before they pick you up. Little Johnny borned while you was in jail. What you want I do? You made a baby and you was gone. I had Johnny and we had it hard...I never hear from you...What I suppose to do?"

"I think you fooling around. Ain't nobody going to do me that way..."

"Fooling around? How I fool around? I got two babies to feed. Mama keep them all day. I works at the Rehab Center...don't work, they ain't no house aid, and no food stamp...Look, this here your child, you can believe it if you wants to...but right now, I needs to know: what you want? You been out of jail for a week and we ain't see you, ain't hear from you...now you shows up here calling me a whore...What you want, Harold?"

"What I want? You know what I wants!"

Avenues of fear sprang through Delsie's head like so many snakes of Medusa: the very thought of this apparition taking her body was enough, but the other things were even worse.

"You come here for me? Where you been since you get out?"

"Been around. You don't need to bother about that. You still my woman!"

"But you might have them Aidses. I ain't want to fool around with that stuff!"

"I ain't got none of that..."

"How you know? What you been doing in that jail? Fooling with them little boys? And where you been since you get out? Harold, I ain't want to get messed up with that stuff..."

He took a step toward her, a look of hate and determination blasting through the bloodshot eyes. And the other fear grabbed Delsie: when he took her to bed only to try and fail, he usually became unbelievably violent - one time had resulted in a broken wrist and several cracked ribs.

But an idea, a concept, clicked in her mother-of-invention reasoning. That he had been drinking was a clearly-seen fact, but the deep smell of fatigue and empty stomach indicated more: this man had been drinking for days, and he was perhaps on drugs, too, eating little, sleeping little, and only more imbibing had temporarily kept away the sickness and delirium and pain of a withdrawal hangover!" All right, Harold, if that what you wants. But look here, I gots to get little Johnny formula ready, and we is out. I needs to run down to the store around the corner..."

"You just wants to get away, bitch! I ain't put up with that!"

"But the baby got to eat! Let me go get the stuff for his formula and then we goes to bed!"

"Hell no! You ain't going nowhere!"

Dramatically, she paced the floor for a moment. Then she planted herself before him, close, her face looking up into his.

"Harold, I can't believe you so bad you let your own little baby go hungry! How 'bout this: you go get the stuff. It called Enfamil, little blue can, or maybe a brown can, I don't know...you can just ax them for Enfamil. I mix it and heat it and feeds the baby. You won't let me go, you go. Then we see 'bout the other! Can you do that? You too drunk to go to the store?"

"No, I can do that."

"Then go on. The baby beginning to cry!"

"O.K. I go. But I don't got no money with me."

"Don't they give you some when they lets you out?"

"Yeah, but I ain't got none with me..."

"Well, I give you the money..."

She fished a five-dollar bill from a jar in the cupboard and handed it to him. "Enfamil. Remember that. Get the sixteen-ounce size. That convenience store down the street. And hurry back..."

As soon as Harold had left, she reached into the refrigerator and got several already-prepared bottles of the baby's formula. She put these in a tote bag before gathering the child in his blanket and rushing to her mother's apartment.

Her mother was in her kitchen preparing supper; five-year-old Bertha was watching TV.

The mother said, "Harold out. He been around."

"I know. He been by."

"What you going to do?"

"Don't know, Mama. But I sent him to the store...said I need some baby formula. I don't think he be back. I give him five dollars. Think he just pass by them people on the corner what sell that cheap whiskey?"

"No, you right, there. He get him a bottle of hootch you won't see him no more tonight. But they be other nights!"

"I know, Mama, I know. But I been thinking about that. Where he sleeping? Who he with? He headed for more trouble. Can't be long before he back in jail. And I look at him: he used to be strong, so strong I scared of him sometime. But he ain't so much no more. He slapped me a while ago, and it didn't even knock me down! I bet after he go to jail this time, he come around here and I bust his ass!"

"You talking 'bout you chil'ren's daddy!"

"They ain't got no daddy...like I ain't had no husband..."

"Anyways, I think you right...he get a bottle and he ain't coming back tonight..."

Outlet

Yorgo L. Douramacos

I hate the plate windows
 in stores, that reflect shoppers
Me, with no money for product
 Flawed
Lumpy
 Distorted
 Accurately portrayed
as the useless consumer, jaded
to slogans. I have met my quota of fear.

I am as close
to perfection
as any
moving picture
can portray
without me.

Sum total of my influences

The Philosophy of “Who”

Yorgo Douramacos

It is so simple to say that some one is stupid. But it seems even easier for them to just prove it and you not to have to say anything.

There is a vile equilibrium at work in daily life. It is the middle step in a narrative of inevitable doom that begins with a question, “Who am I?”

The question builds, rather than being answered, into an entity so large and consuming that the asker forgets that an answer is even required. Instead a balance is struck with this one question, stale and malignant, acting as a basis for lives of unflinching hollowness.

“Who am I?” becomes, “I am who.” I am the question, the quest is me. That may sound wrought with dynamism but it is in fact an easy excuse to settle into routines that don’t need justification.

Empty jobs built on obligations built on relationships built on emotions that you don’t know why you had in the first place. Accept that they may have had something to do with a long forgotten question, “Who am I?”

Like a positive seeking a negative a free floating question, embodied by someone who has accepted the “who” of their own quest as their identity, is open and attractive to absolutely any answer and very likely defenseless against them.

There are millions of “answers” out there, but any that actively seek corresponding questions are self serving, looking to self actualize, and therefore are mere questions themselves and as answers equal zero.

Neither negative nor positive, they claim to be one but act as the other. Zero, self canceling, neither the seeker nor the found gain what they need.

A cycle of zero answers breeds a knee jerk need for the quick fix, which further erodes the likelihood of avoiding the “zero-answers.”

All the layers of a life spent in the pursuit of an acquired identity come out to zero and the reward is white collar, white walls, bland thoughts and vague memories of more exciting possibilities.

The answers are not out there.

Letter of Fighting

Alexandria Rand

You're a rapist, you know.
Has that ever occurred to you
Did you know you could take someone's life
 away from them
When you just thought you were getting laid
Did you know that by giving yourself something
You were taking something away
 from someone else?
I guess that's the way physics
 and the laws of human nature work

but did you fucking GET that much?
Did you?
Because you took a shitload from me
And I hate you for it
And I want it back

I really hope it was worth it for you

God, I wish I could get it back
I wish I could turn back the hands of time
with the knowledge I have now
Because I would never let you do
What you did to me

but if I went back
would I have that knowledge
or would I just be another stupid girl
that would still be too afraid to fight back
and would I still let you do that to me and
would I still be feeling like this
and would I still want you dead

Oh my god,
these are the rantings
of an insane girl,
of a girl who doesn't know any better,
of a girl who has been raped,
of a girl who doesn't know what to do.
A part of me wants to apologize,
but damnit, these are MY feelings
and this is about what YOU did to ME
and I have a right to what I feel
and I have a right to all of this

and I still hate you for it

a part of me wants to know
what your life is like now,
so I can show you what I have accomplished,
so I can show you how good I am
 despite your existence,
so I can show you I beat you

but did I?

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