

A misty, teal-tinted photograph of a forest of bare trees. The trees are thin and leafless, with intricate branch structures. The background is a soft, hazy light, suggesting a foggy or overcast day. The overall mood is quiet and somewhat somber.

down in the dirt

v **028** November '05  
revealing all your dirty little secrets

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Scars

art: toc, page 3

(bricks in the Forbidden

City, Beijing, China, 19. Cover art  
of an Ohio road.

## War Gives Life

*Christopher Barnes,  
England*

The shoot-out fathers its spray.  
Crud bears cold fingers,  
hatching worms.

# Conduit for Death

*Michelle Greenblatt*

there's a hole in your brain, Nellie, let's fix  
it, we can do it with my extra brain matter  
I'm sure I have some lying around somewhere~  
we can pick my brain, Nellie, get it? I will  
jump if you toss me a coin, I will stand on my

head; I will perform tricks, as I feel the jerk of  
all the little strings I watch what warps in & out  
of those shadows. plenty but not you. plenty  
but not you. I paraphrase my self & try again.  
Nellie, somebody is looking for you, but no,

you do not even come to the scent of gold  
dust. perhaps you are tired. I'm exhausted from  
the vertigo, the fire blazing thru my veins; conduit  
for eyeless eyes, corridors for moving masses  
of money, passing between hands for death.

6.16-8.8.2005

# Escape Hatch

*Linda Webb Aceto*

Life goes on, return to your normal, old life,  
get over it. Just don't think about it anymore--it's done.  
In fact, my old life was done; there would be no return  
to a life not dominated by the loss.

It took various turns. Taunting itself up into  
unrecognizable cause, it required nerve bound dancing  
to the dictates of denial. I practiced, I thought perfected,  
avenues to escape, living in unending madness to  
cloud over the reality of what had happened, what  
I had done, and, my God, what will I do next?

# Mom's Passing

*Cheryl Lynn Moyer*

There's not enough air to breathe  
All our pain  
Real and imagined  
Mental and physical  
Is rising up from our DNA  
Rushing through our cell walls  
Pouring down from our veins  
Like a gushing spout  
With stripped threads  
Nothing can stop this blood  
Coursing, coursing, coursing  
Through generations of flesh  
Welded to it's kinfolk  
Eye to eye, memory to memory  
Birth to death  
We all imagine ourselves to be separate  
Islands onto ourselves  
Until one of us passes  
Then the vacuum demands  
This living breathing coursing blood  
Streaming like a river  
Washing away the pain  
Making the air fresh  
To breathe again

---



## To make bricks

*Kyle J. Warnica*

To make bricks, of pieces, of broken hearts and stack them in the strongest of ways, to bury ones self in ones own obsessions, and finally to curl into the tightest of balls and burrow a hole like the lowliest of rodents. Oh that would be nice. Wouldn't it be nice?

# The Power

Brad E. McLelland

We were driving west over the Panhandle, speeding through the dust-laden heat toward Black Mesa country, when Randy glanced over and said, "I think I've got a power, Quay."

I returned his look with groggy, bloodshot eyes, and lay my head back on my pillow. I'd been napping since a little after Tulsa, and Randy had been killing the silence with one of his Johnny Cash albums, the one where old Black sings of blood and bullets and booze and Apocalypse, whichever one that might have been. It drove me crazy, Randy's music; I'm a classical guy myself, a bona fide freakster for Brandenburg Concertos and Impromptu In C Sharp Minor, and Randy's measured, mournful, Give-My-Love-To-Rose vignettes gave me migraines like dust gives allergies.

"Did you hear me?" Randy asked.

"I'm trying not to," I told him, and yawned.

"A power," he said again. "Like Superman. You know—a power?" He glanced almost crazily at the faded lines on the highway, then back to me.

"Yeah, whatever, dude." The afternoon sun had toasted the underside of my rolled-up pillow; I turned it over to feel the warmth encircle my face like a large hand. "Sounds good."

"No, really! I've got a power!"

"Well, if you got a power, I got a power," I said, and yawned again, this time to drop a hint.

"I'm bein serious, man."

"Whatever, dude."

"Jeez, you don't even want to hear?"

I gave my friend another squinty, half-conscious stare into nothing. He saw the look and turned down the radio. "I'm bein serious, you know."

"I have a feeling," I said, "this is going to be really stupid. Okay, shoot."

He glanced down through the steering wheel and took note of his speed: eighty-seven miles an hour. Most of Oklahoma's roads are sixty-five, but Randy kept it razor fast on the highways. He'd been in trouble with the Okie 5-0 before and should've known better, but a guy with a lead foot doesn't think about burning again, and especially not how good old Dad won't cut a check for next semester's tuition, which the man had

“Well, fine, Randy, say it. I’m all ears and a bag of pretzels.”

Randy glanced away, the stubborn Jenkins that he was. A half a mile rolled over on the Mustang’s odometer before he chanced another look back.

“Listen, this is the best way I know how to put it,” he finally said. “The only way, really, and if you laugh, I swear to God I’ll never speak to you again!”

“All right then,” I said, but frowned. “Just don’t swear to God, dude. You know how I hate that. Seriously.”

“Sorry.” He took a deep breath, let it out in a rush, and began:

“You remember that wreck we got into our freshman year? The one on Tarver’s Road, back when I had that pickup, the one with the busted heater hoses?”

I frowned. “Dude, how could I forget that? I got my head split open right up the middle, don’t you remember?”

“And had to get like a dozen stitches, right?”

“More like a hundred.”

“Whatever. What I’m sayin is, I didn’t get a scratch, Quay, not the first damn scratch, and we tumbled, what, fifty feet over that bridge?”

Truth be told, the distance from the bridge on Tarver’s Road to the dried-up creek bed beneath had been more like eighty, so far down that the front end of Randy’s 1978 Chevy Sierra had crumbled in like month-old melba toast. I don’t exactly remember that wreck, particularly the part where my head had kissed the windshield at fifty miles an hour, but I do remember the four-day holiday at the Tulsa hospital, lying under cold white sheets and staring at the pictures Randy had brought in the day after, the pictures of the Chevy sitting in Ted Landers’ dump yard, the old 350 peeping out of the accordioned hood like guts from a soldier’s peeled-back belly. In bad shape, that truck, but Randy was right: He’d walked away from it, not a bruise or cut or bump on his entire body.

I didn’t say any of this to Randy as he drove—I don’t believe it’s best to share old stories about wrecks on road trips; there’s such a thing as kismet, I believe—but I did ask what he thought his point might be because I knew he’d say it anyway.

“My point is,” Randy said, “we’ve been in like lots of accidents together, and none of them ever seemed to hurt.”

“You at least.”

“Exactly!”

“So that’s your power? The ability to walk away from accidents?”



“One aspect, I think.”

“Dude, you’ve watched too many Bruce Willis movies.”

“Quay, seriously ...”

“Don’t you think it might just be luck?” I asked. “A kind of fluke? Twist of fate? Or maybe even something ... God-sent?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Randy said. “Luck is a credit line, Quay, and people run out. They step into a busy street, a bus whizzes by, and they don’t even know they’ve just lost credit. Goes even more for all us thrill-seekers, the parachuters and the mountain climbers and the guys on the skis that conquer K2. We’re talkin dozens of accidents, Quay, and I never got hurt. You, on the other hand, have been in the hospital half a dozen times—count em, six times, Quay—and every single time I’ve walked away feelin nothin but a little shook up and sick to my stomach.”

“Still,” I said, “I really don’t think that’s power.”

“I’m not so sure anymore.” He scratched at his goatee. “Just not so sure, man. Somethin’s goin on. Somethin strange. Too many accidents. Just too many.”

“Yeah, you’re frickin accident prone,” I said. “Whoever’s responsible for keeping up with you is working double-time, I bet.”

He didn’t reply.

“So what do you think it is?” I asked after a moment.

He stared at the road. “I think I might be invincible, Quay.”

I blinked at him ... and then laughed. Such a word coming from a guy with tan lines on his big toes. “Invincible, Rand? C’mon, invincible?”

“Maybe so. Yeah, maybe so!” And then he grinned.

“Hey, listen, don’t talk like that.” I frowned extra hard, just to make him understand I wasn’t joking. “That’s really stupid. Don’t ever talk like that.”

“And why not?” He was still grinning, and I suppose I knew why: Humans, as a whole, are caught up in the fictions and don’t have time for the truths. Randy, the quintessential Spring Breaker, was the classic case of that. He was grinning because the fiction was a heck of a lot more fun than the truth. Or so he thought.

“Because,” I said, “only God is invincible.”

“Well, maybe I’m God,” Randy said.

I felt myself go cold all over. I turned back to the road and lay my head back on the pillow and couldn’t say a word for the longest time, just sit and stare and listen to Cash, whom Randy had turned back up after our philosophical discussion. The sun bore down and the Mustang turned into a dark red streak on the dusty path to Black Mesa. To the left

and right the sprawling pastures looked like ponds of flame, the trees dotting here and there like standing shadows reaching for the freedom of the road. The view beyond the windshield looked like a painting in the windowsill of some rustic art collector, a world of greens and oranges and burgundies and whites, divine chiaroscuro transformed into unstill life. The stark, raving beauty of Oklahoma.

"I tell you what," Randy said, turning Cash back down to a road noise, "let's put this thing to a test, find out once and for all if what I'm sayin is bull."

"How about we don't, say we did," I told him.

Randy spat laughter. "Where's your spirit of adventure, man? Where's the Quay who bungeed off the Cotton Bridge and grabbed a god-damn fish with his bare hands!"

"He's ten miles back with a guy who used to have common sense," I replied. "And don't take God's name in vain. You know how I hate that. Seriously!"

"You're chicken, man."

"Chicken? About testing some stupid idea of invincibility? Yeah, I guess I am, Rand. About as chicken as it gets."

"C'mon," he said, "it'll be like one of Dr. Havert's essays. Describe in a well-organized, well-developed paper what it's like to have The Power."

"You're nuts, dude. Absolutely nuts."

"Not as bad as bein chicken!"

"Famous last words," I said.

Randy sniggered. "Nah, you're just chicken."

"Look," I said, getting angry, "let's just stop and stretch a little, put this crap behind us. Maybe we can grab a bite at Sal's. That's just up the road, ain't it?"

"Five more miles," Randy answered, and the thought of hot food must've rendered the whole notion of his invincibility moot ... at least for the meantime. Randy never could resist a stop at Sal's. In the years we'd been coming to Black Mesa for Spring Break, we had never passed up what Sal Grimmatt called the Beef Bender, a two-pound cheeseburger with a whole side of onion rings and an extra large Coke, all for just over three dollars—virtual manna for the American college student. I'd never successfully put down a Beef Bender myself, but Randy Jenkins had put down four. His mug was still pasted somewhere on the walls probably, in between the three-hundred-pound truckers and the skinny salesmen with the hollow legs and unstoppable metabolisms. Sal Grimmatt liked us. He



met us at the door every year and gave his Beef Benders the best touches he knew how. We were Spring Breakers, and he liked our kind because we liked his. No spitting in our burgers, no sir.

Five miles later, we pulled into the diner.

Sal's was one of those Route 66 kind of joints reminiscent of old Lucille Hamon's gas station near Hydro, the one with the haunting little cross in the window and a marker that reads "Mother of the Mother Road." Sal Grimmett and his food is a lot like that; he conveys a sense of the everlasting, as though you fully expect to see old Sal's fat butt standing in his greased-up kitchen until the end of times, blocking the creak-swing of that dirty wooden kitchen door as he barks "Two BB's hold the heartburn!" to Bob the short-order cook with the bad hair and the Oakland A's ballcap. In fact, you sort of feel as though Sal will still be standing there as long as Bob with the bad hair is cooking the burgers. They're a team, Sal and Bob, a lot like me and Rand, and Sal's always got Bob's back, a lot like us. Yes sir, that's Sal's Diner, and when we pulled in, our stomachs already rumbling for a Beef Bender, Sal met us at the door in keeping with tradition.

Ten minutes later, after Sal had said his hellos, shared a little of the latest road gossip, and jotted down our orders on a ketchup-stained note pad, Randy and I sat chewing on crackers in the corner booth by the bathrooms and tried our level best not to bring up the previous conversation. I could tell he wanted to say something about it, and at the same time, he could tell I wanted to avoid being a jerk. We didn't like to argue, me and Randy; in the four years we'd been roommates, we'd only gotten into what I'd call serious tussles about three times, and one of those times concerned who had sprinkled Ovaltine powder all over a mutual friend's bedsheets. Nothing too severe, in other words, but even those times weren't all that fun. Randy and I were friends, you see. We had that kind of friendship. The kind you know you'll still have when you're sixty-two and retirement's knocking and you've run out of Maxwell House so you bum the last can. The kind of friendship that stands at a bus stop and waits, maybe even holds an extra bag. The kind of friendship that sits in a corner booth at a place called Sal's and orders the same kind of cheeseburger just because it's all you know.

Yes, we were friends, and because we were friends, Randy Jenkins, the quintessential Spring Breaker, couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"So," he said, "what do you think?"

I looked up from my crackers. "About what?"

“The test, man. The well-organized, well-developed essay, ‘What It’s Like To Have The Power.’ Want to take it for a spin?”

“No, Randy. N-O. It’s stupid, dude.”

“Listen.” He pushed his Coke aside and leaned in close. “Think back, Quay. Seriously—think back. All those accidents, all those fender-benders. Whatever the cause for those—Father Time wantin to put me down early, wantin to take a bite out of my life, whatever—I never got hurt. It’s simple math, Quay. I never got hurt, and you and me both know—and it’s a fact, Quay—that I should probably be deader than a damn doornail right now. Hell, should’ve been dead at the bottom of that bridge on Tarver’s Road, probably.”

I knew exactly where he was going and tried everything in my power to shift the focus elsewhere: to the diner, the swoosh of the paddle fan on the smoke-browned ceiling, heck, the crackers. But it wasn’t working. Randy was in the moment, and that moment would not be ignored, for so sayeth Randy.

“Okay, Rand, I call.” I crossed my arms over the table. “Let’s assume you’ve got a power. The power of invulnerability, let’s say. The power of surviving every bad thing that comes along. What do you think gives you this power, dude?”

Randy looked aside, thinking. “Maybe I was born with it. Maybe it’s—hey, maybe it’s genetics!”

I nodded. “Okay then. If it’s genetics, think back to every time your mother or father got into an accident. Did they get hurt?”

He didn’t have to think long before disappointment settled in. “Yeah. Damn. Yeah, I guess they did.” He glanced up then, so quickly it made me jump. “Damn you, Quay! You damn religion major! You always gotta disprove science on everything!”

I laughed. “It’s not science, man, it’s common sense. Heck, I went to the hospital myself the time your dad fell off his ladder, remember?”

“Okay, so what is it?”

I sighed. “Have you ever stopped to think something might be protecting you?”

“God, here we go—more religion stuff. Like what, Quay?”

“Dude—” I laughed again “—you can believe you were genetically encoded to be invincible, but you can’t believe it’s something external?”

“Damn religion major,” he said.

I grit my teeth. “Religion’s got nothing to do with it. Religion is weak anyway. Religion is a coffee grind at the bottom of the cup, noth-

ing more than a major in college. There's a world of stuff above it, and that's the stuff that means something, the stuff that gives existence its true flavor."

Randy just looked at me.

"What I'm trying to say," I continued, "is that you have to stop thinking about yourself sometimes. It's a big universe, Rand, and while Fate or Death just might be after you, and while it's throwing everything it's got at you like some kind of mad bomber, there's still a big universe out there, and something else watching how everything else goes. Dig?"

Randy fumbled at a cracker. "You're talkin about God again. You and your God, I swear."

I threw up my hands. "Believe what you want. It doesn't change anything."

"So my power—it's God."

I sat back. "What else could it be?"

Randy looked around. Took a big breath. Picked at the end of his straw. "Nah, I don't think so," he replied. "I don't think so, Quay."

Before I could say anything else, Sal Grimmett came waddling back up, balancing two white plates piled tower-high with Beef Benders on one hand. Our mouths instantly started to water. Sal and Bob save the day, I thought.

"Two Benders, gentlemen," Sal said, and slammed the plates down in front of us, their contents steaming and looking absolutely heavenly. Randy grinned, but he still looked upset. "I had Bob put a few slabs of bacon on there for you no charge. Hope you like, boys."

"Hey, Sal, I got a question," I said. Randy shot me a look, his eyes panicked. Don't you go there! that look yelled. Don't you even go there!

"Shoot, kid." Sal wiped his big hands across his dingy apron. "I'm all ears and a bag of pretzels."

I snorted laughter. "That's weird! I just used that expression today! Maybe I got it from you, huh, Sal? Last time I was here?"

"Yeah, maybe so!" Sal chirped. "Two peas in a pod, huh?"

"Quay," Randy said. "Don't, man. Let's just eat."

I ignored him. "No, seriously, I do have a question. Randy here, he thinks he's got some kind of power. Crazy, huh?"

Randy's face turned as red as the ketchup bottle.

"Oh? A power?" The big man leaned back, put his hands on his sides.

"Thinks he's invincible," I said. "You know, like Bruce Willis? Ever see that movie? Anyhow, my question is, do you think that's possible,

Sal? That a human being can be invincible?"

Sal moved his hands to his belly. "Man, these folks today!" he replied, chuckling. "I had this talk with Bob just two days back! Old Bob back there thinks he's the same! A friggin short-order cook!"

Randy took a bite out of his Bender, but for the first time in years he looked like he wasn't enjoying it very much. The diner was empty except for us, and I could tell he was thanking his lucky stars for that: The guy was embarrassed. But I wanted him embarrassed. Maybe he'd forsake this invincible idea before Black Mesa and we could both go back to having our Spring Break fun.

I threw a small wink at Sal—I don't think Randy saw it. "So what do you tell him?" I asked. "What do you tell a short-order cook who thinks he can't be hurt?"

"Funny you ask," Sal answered. "Just the other day, Bob, he takes this big skillet off the stove, don't have hisself a good grip, and drops the friggin thing right there in the kitchen, hot grease and all! Except, thing is, I'm walkin by when it happens, so I get the stuff poured all over my friggin left foot! Had to spend a whole day at the doctor, but old Bob, he walks away with nothin but a red face! How's that for irony?"

I was about to turn the knife a little more when something I didn't expect happened: Randy threw his burger down and stood up. "All right, smartasses, y'all don't believe me—?" He grabbed the keys to the Mustang, which he'd tossed onto the table when we got here. "—then let's just put this to the test!" Then he pushed past Sal and headed straight for the door. Sal just looked at him, confused, and wiped his hands again.

"Rand, sit down!" I jumped up to run after him. "I was only fooling around! Trying to have a little fun! Stop, Randy! I mean it, dude! Get back here!"

I knew what he intended to do, but Randy was a good five paces ahead of me and was already hopping into the Mustang before I could even reach the diner door. Sal followed me out, and by the time we'd stepped outside into the dry heat, Randy had cranked the car and had put her in drive. We watched helplessly as he unrolled the driver's-side window and poked out his left hand, index finger pointing due west down the road to Black Mesa.

"That old cedar tree!" he yelled. "See it, Quay? See it?"

I looked where he was pointing. A half a mile up the road, sure enough, stood a tall, gangly cedar tree, looming on the parched horizon

like an old giant's fist. It looked like it had been there for centuries. I glanced back at Randy, about to scream NO!, but he was already rolling back onto the road ... and grinning as he went.

"I'm gonna run this goddamn car right into it, Quay!" His voice carried across the dusty air like an insignificant yap of thunder. "We'll see then who's laughin, won't we! I'm gonna walk RIGHT AWAY FROM THIS CAR, and everybody'll know then that I'VE GOT THE POWER!"

And then he sped off, the Mustang's tires grinding in the gravel.

I ran after him, screaming, "RANDY! YOU CAN'T BE ALONE! I'VE GOT TO BE WITH YOU, RAND! DON'T DO THIS! IT'S NOT TIME! I'VE GOT TO BE WITH YOU, RANDY!"

But he was too far out to hear.

I jogged to the middle of the road and stopped there, my heart hammering, my eyeballs bulging. Sal met me a moment later, his face crimson with the heat, and the two of us watched as Randy's red bullet made a kamikaze track straight for the cedar tree. He veered once, a little to the right, but I realized with sick panic that he'd actually veered to align with the tree.

A second later we heard the crash.

A great fireball followed, a bellowing cloud of black that mushroomed like an H-bomb and rose under a blistering canopy of red and orange. I felt my blood freeze up again, and I ran, down the road, toward my friend, knowing all too well what I'd find once I got there, but running still, giving it great lopes that felt a heck of a lot like flying. I glanced back at Sal as I went, but he had sprinted back into the diner, apparently to call 911. Not that it would do any good.

I reached the end of the half-mile and stopped in my tracks, guarding my face from the wall of heat as the flames licked away the Mustang's red paint, turning both its devastated frame and the victimized cedar tree into a shrieking mutilation of carbon and smoke. I dropped to my knees, my stomach wrenching, when I saw the figure in the front seat burning like an oak post. I could still hear his voice, a haunting melody, murmuring words like power and invincible over Johnny Cash singing of great fiery rings and stumbling down, down, down.

Randy was dead.

I stood there for a long time—I'm not exactly sure how long. Even when Sal pulled up in Bob's rusty Ford Station Wagon and put a hand on my shoulder, I didn't budge, didn't even turn to register his presence. Randy, the quintessential Spring Breaker, was dead.

already threatened. The insurance on the Mustang was already rocket-high, and one more ticket was all it would take to break the beer fundage and the financial aid. If that happened, goodbye Mr. College, hello Mr. Navy. It was pretty much the Jenkins family deal (Randy's dad, a retired officer, thought the whole idea of higher education without G.I. Bill backing was absurd), and Randy was nothing but a hair on the speedometer away from that future.

He set the cruise a notch below ninety and slid his foot off the accelerator to stretch his toes. He wasn't wearing shoes, and the tops of his feet sported dull brown stripes from the sandals he wore to our weekend fishing holes and hiking trails. He looked like that quintessential Spring Breaker you see on the college brochures, the guy who's either flashing the peace sign or holding up an acoustic guitar. Footloose and fancy free, to quote the old Chicago song. Or is it Alabama?

"Well?" I said. "You telling it or not?"

"Yeah, but I'm tryin to decide how," Randy said, and stretched and popped his toes, like he didn't know I hated it. "When a guy's got a power, it's kind of hard to explain."

"Oh, of course. Of course it is."

"Ha-ha, very funny."

"Whatever, dude. I'm turning back over."

"All right! Fine!" He popped his toes again. "Have it your way!" And he went right back to staring at the lonely, heat-baked highway, the broken yellow lines that zipped like George Lucas lasers underneath the car. In the course of our college careers we'd driven this highway nearly half a dozen times, and we never got tired of the rugged, meandering Panhandle country and tilting cedar fences that reached like open arms all the way to the rising hills and Black Mesa's gaping embrace. There was something bonding in it all, and Randy and I had given our share of blood, sweat and tears on the work-study wagons every semester to share that experience. Plus, the chicks that awaited you at Lake Etling were too fine to pass up.

"Go ahead, dude, tell it," I said at last, unrolling the pillow and putting it back in my lap. My hair must've looked a wondrous sight at that moment, having been splayed against the glass for the better part of two hours, but I didn't care.

Randy huffed. "Quay, why don't you ever take me serious, man?"

"Why don't you ever say anything to make me, Randy?"

"I'm sayin somethin now, Quay."

Which meant that I had failed.

“Don’t even think that,” Sal Grimmett told me, standing quietly behind me, taking drags from a Pall Mall. That he could smoke while standing before such a bellowing inferno was beyond me. That he could smoke period was irony in itself. “The Boss don’t like that kind of attitude. You win some, you lose some. You know that, Quay.”

I nodded slowly. But I wasn’t even sure about what he’d said.

“Maybe we’re doin ... too good of a job,” he muttered.

Wiping away a tear, I unfurled my wings and flew away for reassignment.

## Daddy’s Silence

*Ashley Rene Clark*

Salty drops of liquid fall  
Streaming a path down the rounds of my face  
Mixed emotions flutter throughout my heart  
Voices in my head  
Take the shape of friends & family  
Teasing me  
Taunting me  
Confusion arises  
The silence of my father  
Delves deep into my soul  
Haunting me  
Driving me mad  
The everlasting moment passes between us  
Begging him, urging him to make a move  
To take that step into a blossoming friendship  
Silence  
Death is ever-so forthcoming in the aged  
He’ll pass away & leave me the memory  
The memory of silence  
The language of the deceased  
Talk to me, Daddy



# AFTER LOSING THE JOB

*John Grey*

The first thing I notice  
is that you are no longer my lover  
but the woman who constantly moans,  
“What are we going to do?”  
We still splurge on the morning newspaper  
but, for now at least,  
I toss aside the sport’s pages  
to get at the anemic classifieds.  
“No one’s hiring” replaces  
the kiss on the cheek.  
Once it hit you  
that, for the time being at least,  
you are the breadwinner  
and you stood there shaking  
in the kitchen,  
imagining a great twister  
cutting through this neighborhood,  
jerking off the pieces  
of this house,  
sending them sprawling  
across the county.  
And then just the two of us here,  
exposed, wet and cold,  
you with your flimsy paycheck  
from the Seven-Eleven  
and me, years beyond whatever  
it was you married,  
stiff and robot-like,  
screwing and tightening the air  
where nuts and bolts  
ought to be,  
humming to the clatter  
of an imaginary assembly line.

# But First You Have To Love Yourself

Raud Kennedy

Maybe moving back to the town  
I grew up in was a complete mistake,  
just chasing twenty year old ghosts.  
When I left, everyone was older than me.  
Now I'm one of them. The old.  
Gray beard, anonymous pains that find  
a new spot to warm each morning.  
When I last lived here I was a punk,  
and if that punk sat  
next to my current self,  
he'd smirk and chuckle,  
not recognizing himself.  
And I'd grumble about sitting  
next to a know nothing  
dolt.

## Megalomania

Amir aziz

We bid farewell to these inhabitants of sandcastles  
Who are the confessed impotent guides of the virgin heads  
These professed vanguards of justice, order and parity  
Who always stand condemned by their own contradictions  
Whose verdicts make even the foxes hide in disguise  
The drunken bulls forget their ferocity on seeing their villainy  
Lunatic architects, who make a monument and destroy it in the end.  
Pity for these famine-struck patronizers of the sparkling regiments  
For whom the whole ration is their solo morsel  
Always widening the gulf between their sayings and deeds  
And becoming elated by ethereal pride in their ignorance  
Preaching worship of the omnipotent in heaven,  
And themselves behaving like a sinister deity on land  
Oblivious of the approaching storm of acrimony, apathy and revolt  
Which can reduce these airy fortresses to their shameful shrines  
Alas! Fortune weeps over them and future puts a curse on them  
And we bid farewell to these white-skinned one-eyed bearded fiends.

## LANDLORD

Michael Keshigian

The tenants left him a bar of soap,  
two rolls of toilet paper,  
shredded paper towels,  
and a ripped sponge mop with bucket.  
He tried to rub the white wall clean,  
discovered it impossible,  
realized they tried as well.  
He decided to paint it over.

Hair choked the bathroom sink,  
long hairs, male and female,  
they both wore ponytails,  
short of acid, nothing else would work.  
The hardwood floor  
wore rubber scuffs and high heel turns,  
no doubt they danced and laughed,  
but only broom swept it clean.

He began to know who they were,  
seldom did he speak to them,  
the check always arrived in the mail.  
They breezed through, a great wind,  
leaving behind a trail of dirt,  
a thank you of sorts,  
the residual continuity of broken leases  
and painstaking interviews.

He seized their soap,  
a green veined, marbled bar,  
curved like a woman,  
took a bath  
after he cleaned the tub,  
and dried with no towel,  
in the air  
with the walls and floors.

# A Bedside Plant

by Jon Kuntz

A potted plant stood on the bedside table. It occupied a common ceramic pot covered in green-colored foil. The plant itself was a large leafy thing, that should have looked majestic were it not for the tinges of brown on its stalks and leaves. It was slowly dying, like Ralph.

Ralph knew it, his wife knew it, and his doctor knew it. He was given a prescription drug to give some comfort from the pain, and presumably to prolong his life, somewhat. Why should he want to prolong a life of anguish?

His illness was very hard on his wife, Susan. She had to continue working and then come home to nurse him at night. They agreed he should take over the spare bedroom, because his convulsions kept her awake at night. They paid a nurse to come in, about an hour during the day, to make him lunch and change his bedding. That was all they could afford.

Ralph kept reviewing his life. He was satisfied for the most part. It was a good life, one of friendship and family. He had a good career, one that provided for them but wasn't overbearing the way some jobs are. His two children were always a joy and satisfaction to him. He loved them dearly. He and Susan had shared their life together, a life of accomplishments and even daring.

They had spent money when it probably wasn't prudent to do so. They had a boat, a mini-yacht, so they spent summers on the out-islands. Later they had an RV and would make big trips in the summer and smaller trips throughout the year. They even, at one time, had an airplane. He had a license to fly from his early days in the Air Force. The airplane had to go when the first child arrived but that was all right.

Yes, it was a good life, but now it was ending. He was not going to recover. The illness would only get worse and with it more demand on Susan's time.

She felt so bad for her husband. He had worked his whole life and would have been able to retire next year. There were to be some good years ahead: retirement, travel, hobbies, doing things never done, things never tried. It was all being denied him because of his illness. She didn't think it was fair. Well life isn't, is it?

She hated to see him suffer, and for no good. The end was to be the same, whether it took one month or six months.

She had to change his garments, help him get to the bathroom, even



feed him. She could tell he was

embarrassed and hated that he couldn't do basic tasks for himself. She knew the doctors were not doing him any service by prolonging his life.

This evening was like the others in her present life. It seemed the days just ran together. The old times would never return, but she didn't have time to dwell on them.

She was fixing Ralph's medicine. A half glass of water, break the capsule and put it in the water, stir it completely. She then brought a can of powder out of the dregs of her pantry, put some on a spoon and stirred that completely into the water of Ralph's medicine. She put the cap on the can and returned it to the pantry. The label on the can had a warning, a "skull and crossbones" in white on a black field. She hated what she was doing, but she loved Ralph so much and didn't want to see him suffer.

She brought the dinner tray and his medicine and helped to feed him. She then assisted him to the bathroom and back to bed. He never wanted her help to take his medicine, so she put it on the bedside table and left.

Ralph waited until she left the room. Then, as he'd done since taking this medicine, he reached over and poured the medicine onto the plant.

The next day their doctor called Susan at her workplace and asked her to come in. He had good news for her. They would discontinue Ralph's medication immediately and put him on something new that has proved to work in cases like his. He has a 100% chance for recovery.

That happened a month ago, and you should see that plant now. No more dead brown, but new growth on it everywhere. And, the plant deserves it, because Ralph and Susan both give that plant credit for saving Ralph's life long enough for the new medicine to come to them.

# Dreams of Ulhu

David McBride

Man has always struggled to understand our place in the universe: why are we here, who created us, are there other life forms out amongst the stars? Now that we knew the answers to those questions, I understood why ignorance is bliss. This was how I always started the day, staring at the water-stained ceiling, wondering what went wrong. I sat up on my paper-thin mattress and stared out the window at what was once a city named Moscow.

My name is Jeremy, but that is not important. Identity is not important, not anymore anyway. I got up and lurched toward the bathroom hoping that the water would be running today. As usual my hopes were dashed when I turned the faucet handle and nothing but a weak moan came through the pipes. That's three days in a row without a shower. Oh well, no one would notice where I was going. I put on my uniform and prepared for another day of backbreaking labor. I made sure the few appliances I had were off and headed out the door of my compartment.

The building was a housing area for the forced laborers; it was 80 floors of compartments, as they called them, with locks on the outside instead of the inside. I proceeded down the gray-painted hallway becoming more sullen with every pointless step I took. I would have imagined that the old mausoleums they used to store the dead would look something like this, but no bodies were buried anymore, only burned in the pits to feed the machines. I began my long descent down 23 flights of stairs feeling very much like a soul descending to the deepest circle of hell.

The guards opened the doors for me, holding their pikes at their sides, and I stared up at the target of my loathing. Two miles north of my building is where it stands, and will most likely continue to stand for all of eternity untouched by the barren terrain surrounding it. The black pyramid rose to touch the sky; flat at the top where normally there would be a point, it resembled a volcano awaiting its daily sacrifice. The outer surface, which could be seen clearly from where I stood, was polished to a mirror-like sheen. Glyphs and symbols written in an unknown and alien language were scrawled on the face of the mammoth edifice. I could see tiny ants crawling across the surface of it, carving yet another symbol on the southern face. I began walking to join my fellow ants.

These structures were erected in every corner of the world once they

came. Or returned perhaps I should say. The Old Ones returned to the planet they had created all that time ago, very upset that we had gotten away from their teachings of Gods and our creation by 'higher beings'. It is true that these beings are the closest things to Gods as we'll ever see while in this mortal coil. They are undying and very close to all-powerful, wiping out the men who tried to destroy them in one fell swoop when they first returned. They inspired the polytheistic religions of old and kept a light hand in our affairs for millennia, only intervening directly when absolutely necessary.

Upon their return after a couple millennia of exploring the cosmos, they found we had acquired new ideas that didn't involve them and this angered them greatly. The technology we had created was a slap in the face of their benevolence; a single God was the height of insolence in their eyes. The worship of men such as Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, and Buddha instead of Them was incomprehensible. They deemed to punish us for our trespasses. They had conquered the planet in six days, the same amount of time it took them to create it. From then on, no one was allowed to speak as punishment for all of our uttered prayers to 'mere mortals'.

After telling us of our true history, they demanded that these pyramids be built in their honor, a different set of symbols carved into the face of the temple for each God, five of them in all. They then proceeded to create a new island in the Pacific that would be their new dwelling while on Earth. It was called 'Uhlu-Salla', the seat of power for the old rulers. From what I hear it's a tropical paradise, unlike the hell the rest of us now inhabit. The desolation in my city, and cities around the world didn't exist on this island of the 'chosen'. There are rumors about an obelisk at the center of the island that is made of the bones of the men that they slaughtered, a monument to their unstoppable power.

I arrived at the base of the temple in a few minutes of hard walking. The bodies of men that fell off of the tower littered the ground, food for the circling scavenger birds. As I ascended the staircase cut into the south side of the temple, I saw the beginnings of a statue. Another man fell to his fate as I neared the summit; at least he is free now. Even though we can't speak to each other, I know the dreams they have. They are the same as mine: dreams of Uhlu-Salla in flames.



# Jenny Goes Looking

Curtis M. Urness, Sr.

Jenny sat on the cheap steel-and-vinyl chair she had pulled in front of the dresser and wiped her sweaty brow with an equally sweaty forearm. She pulled open the bottom drawer that contained all of Rick's stuff – his “stash” — and glanced back toward the door, half expecting Rick to be looking over her, his face reddened and accusing. “Suspicious bitch!” That was what he'd called her the last time he caught her looking through his things. “I can't leave here without you tearing through my private things. What do you think you're going to find?”

Then the answer would have been her mother's wedding ring with the large emerald – what Jenny's father had dubbed her jealous eye — which she didn't find in Rick's things anyway. She found it later at a pawnshop nestled with other wedding rings and heirlooms in the glass counter. She'd made Rick get it out but it eventually made its way back. The only difference was that the second time *she* was the one who pawned it, to pay the gas bill.

Now she was looking for something just as important. When she glanced back for Rick, she saw instead the disarray of the back bedroom in her sister's house where her entire family was living. The other three drawers of the dresser were grouped in a sort of triangle on the floor, their contents jumbled. The family's two suitcases were opened and the children's clothes they contained were scattered. The mattress was halfway off the bed, one sheet hanging off it like a dirty, white sail. And lost in all this mess were two children, a girl of four sitting close to Jenny and a boy of seven, huddled in a corner.

Misty, the girl, laid a tiny, tanned arm on Jenny's lap. She leaned into her mother's side. Jenny considered pushing her away to keep the girl from getting filthy against Jenny's factory overalls. Instead, she pulled the child closer.

Jenny rummaged through the stash drawer, thinking, *This should have been the first place I looked.* She dismissed that thought as another, a hopeless one, reasserted itself from the recesses of her mind.

She riffled through Penthouse magazines, baseball cards, rolling papers, roach clips, playing cards, dice. There was one promising envelope but it turned out to only contain a small sinsemilla bud. Rolled in a T-shirt was a half-full bottle of Seagram's Seven. That settled it; Rick

would never have left whiskey sitting unattended.

She turned to the corner where Kevin cowered. “What time did your father leave,” she demanded.

“I told you already,” the boy cried. “After lunch.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

Kevin slunk down and covered his face. “I told you,” he mumbled, “out.” He said, “Daddy’s going out for awhile.”

Misty laid her head face down on Jenny’s lap. Jenny noticed a fresh, red welt on Misty’s arm. Misty was trembling. Jenny felt a presence behind her. She looked back; hoping to find Rick but instead saw a heavy woman in a sundress filling the doorway.

“Good Lord, you’ve torn this place apart,” Donna, Jenny’s sister, bellowed.

“I’m organizing for the move,” Jenny said.

“This doesn’t look too organized.”

“Give me some peace, Donna. Is it too much to ask for a little privacy?”

“Not at all – I love privacy!” Donna put her small, chubby hands together and held them up close to her chest. “Privacy is fine. Only I haven’t had any privacy for the past two months. All I’ve had are your screaming brats and Rick lounging around like he was a millionaire. I *yearn* for some privacy.”

“You’ll get all the privacy you want when we’re gone.”

“The sooner, the better. What are you looking for?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Go back to your soap opera. Leave me alone.”

“You have it, don’t you?”

“Have what?”

“You know what I mean. Are you going to be able to move?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

Jenny said nothing. She stared at Donna, who stood with her arms folded now, a glint of knowledge flickering in her eyes. *She wants me to ask*, Jenny thought. *I’m not going to ask her.*

“I saw Rick leave with –” Donna began.

“Shut up, damn you. I don’t care who you saw Rick with. I don’t go telling you all about your husband.”

“I don’t need to be told about my Earl.” Donna sniffed. She

walked away.

Misty still trembled. Kevin hadn't moved from the corner. He nibbled on his fingers.

"Why don't you two go out and play?" Jenny asked.

"I don't want to," Misty said, without looking up. "I want to stay with you."

"I have some work to do. Go help Aunt Donna with something."

"No, I don't want Aunt Donna."

Jenny stroked her hair. "Mommy has to go, honey," she said. "I'll be back soon."

"I don't want Aunt Donna."

"I know," she said. "It'll be all right." She looked again at Misty's welt. Then she lightly pushed Misty off and stood up. She walked out of the room.

Donna was seated on the divan, watching the big screen TV. The living room was immaculate, everything in place and redolent of Lemon Pledge. Donna gave Jenny barely a glance and shifted her weight on the divan cushions.

"I'm going out for a little bit," Jenny announced.

"And leaving the kids? Am I your babysitter?"

"It's just for a little bit."

"A little bit." Donna shook her head with disgust.

Jenny went to the door and opened it. The heat outside was oppressive. Jenny started out but then stepped back in. "And Donna – don't lay a hand on them."

"They better mind me."

"Don't lay a hand on them. I mean it."

Jenny walked across the front lawn and started up the street. It was a windy August. The wind was one of those searing summer winds that blew hot breath on the back of Jenny's neck, making her imagine the smell of her own singed hair. She kept her gaze on the sidewalk, as though the thing she was looking for was blowing around with the litter and the grass clippings.

After several blocks, she reached a crumbling, two story brick building, sandwiched between a drugstore and a submarine shop. The top floor was boarded up, the bottom divided into two storefronts, one empty and the other bearing a neon beer sign. Jenny went into the bar.

Inside it was dark. An old song from her high school days – Nazareth's "Hair of the Dog" — blared from a jukebox. A scarred, ply-

wood bar ran from the door to the rear of the narrow room. A heavily made-up redhead leaned over the counter, smoking a cigarette. Two men swiveled on the stools in front of her. They erupted into laughter over some raucous joke.

Jenny approached them. "Sue, you seen Rick?" she asked.

"Hell, is it my day to watch Rick?" Sue said, blowing smoke into Jenny's face. "Go ask Jim. Maybe he's his brother's keeper." She gestured toward the far end of the bar.

Jenny looked over to see Rick's brother sitting quietly in the corner. He was a massive man and Jenny wondered why she didn't notice him when she walked in. *Maybe that is how it is when you are looking for something. You tune out everything else, including the obvious.*

Jim sat with half-full beer mug before him, concentrating on a ten-inch TV on an overhead shelf. He didn't notice Jenny either. He was a mechanic and still wore the blue coveralls with his name stitched on the left front pocket.

Jenny knew Jim's habits. He had probably just gotten off from the shop, was now drinking his one beer and would soon go home to watch TV with his wife and three boys. Jenny was amazed that two brothers could be so unlike. Then again, Donna and she were not alike either.

"Hello, Jenny," Jim said, when he finally noticed her. He lifted the mug with a beefy, tattooed arm. "Just get off work?"

"A little bit ago."

"Where's Rick?"

"I was hoping that you knew."

"Haven't seen him." Jim glanced back up at the television.

Jenny looked down at the bar and tapped her fingers.

"Hey!" Jim said. "I heard you all found a place. When are you moving?"

"I don't know if we can," Jenny said, in a low voice.

"Don't know?"

"I don't know if we have the – well, I just don't know."

"You don't know?" Jim knitted his brows and dried oil accentuated the wrinkles on his forehead. He stared quietly ahead, not at the TV but somewhere out in space. Finally, he said, "Hell, Jenny, why are you asking me? You know as well as I where Rick is."

"I know. I was just hoping that you would tell me that I'm wrong." She walked out of the bar.

She didn't have much farther to go. A narrow avenue led from the

other side of the sub shop to a dead end. There were few homes on that street. Dust from a lot where a house had been demolished danced in a dust devil, sucking into it all the wrappers, napkins and other litter that blew into this street from the restaurant. Jenny went to a gray frame house, guarded by an elderly pit bull that didn't bother to get up as she passed.

She knocked. An eyeball filled the peephole. Then the door opened slightly. A sallow-faced man with a beak nose pushed his face into the opening. "What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Rick."

"He ain't here."

"I hear him talking." She pushed the door open and brushed past the man.

"Damn it, you can't just come in here."

Jenny ignored him. She crossed through an untidy living room to a formal dining room dominated by a large table. Smoke – from cigarettes, cigars and marijuana – hung in the air. Several men were seated around the table, holding hands of playing cards with crumpled bills and poker chips in front of them. Among them sat Jenny's husband, clad in a holey, black T-shirt and ripped jeans, gambling like he had money to burn.

"Jenny," Rick said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"You know what I want. We're supposed to pay the new landlord today."

"Later. I'm in the middle of a game."

"Then give me the money and I'll go pay."

"It's my tax refund, too."

"How did you figure?" Jenny said. "You didn't work last year."

Rick didn't say anything. He pretended to study his cards.

"You still have it, don't you?"

Rick laid down his hand impatiently. "I've lost a little," he said, "but, damn, Jenny, my luck's changing. Give me a little more time."

"Give you what? You gambled us out of our last house and now you're gambling us out of the apartment we haven't even got yet."

"Damn, Jenny."

"How much do you have left?"

Rick glanced around the table, his face flushed, eyes lowered. He produced a wad of bills from his pocket, withdrew a few to keep and held out the rest for Jenny.

"Take it and leave me the hell alone," he said. "Don't interrupt a

man at his card game.”

Jenny took the money and sat down in a ladder-back chair near the wall. She smoothed out the bills, counted them and then counted again.

“Rick, there’s only seven hundred and sixty dollars here.”

Rick ran a hand through his yellow hair and looked away.

“It’s not enough.”

She sank low into the chair and considered her options. The landlord might take a deposit and hold the place until her next paycheck. That would mean almost two more weeks of living at Donna’s. Of course, there were other people interested in the apartment and the landlord might not want to wait. Rick and she had given their word that they would have the money today.

The men at the table were impatient, waiting for her to leave. Rick purposely looked away from her. A multi-colored pile of chips lay in the middle of the table – more money than she earned in a month. How could these men take money that could mean life or death, shelter or homelessness to some people and risk it all in a *game*? She knew these folks. They weren’t all like Rick; some of them worked and supported their families.

A bearded man named Cliff asked across the table, “Are we playing cards or what? You raising, Leo?” A few men glanced in her direction, expressing surprise that she was still there.

*I guess I’ve been dismissed.* She stood to leave but something would not let her go. She stood for several seconds before clearing her throat.

“Listen up,” she shouted. “I had twelve hundred dollars to put down on an apartment. We’ve been living in my sister’s spare room for two months and I’m not staying there another day. Now I can leave here with twelve hundred dollars or without it. I don’t care. But if I leave without it, I’m walking straight to the drugstore and calling the police. I know everyone here. You decide.”

Cliff slapped his cards against the table and said, “Shit!”

“Talk to her, Rick,” another voice said.

Rick himself stood up and said, “Jenny, damn you, don’t go talking crazy.”

Jenny turned and left the room. The hawk-nosed man rose from his chair in the living and blocked her way.

*I’ve gone too far.* She tried to step around the man but he moved with her.

“Jenny, wait a minute,” a fellow called. Jenny turned to see the man

who had been sitting next to Rick. A heavy-set man with a face wrinkled like the pit bull's in the yard, he hooked his thumbs on his red suspenders and stamped one foot. "Come on back here," he said.

Jenny walked back to the table.

"We don't want to see anyone lose their home over a friendly card game," he said, affecting a smile. "You had twelve hundred dollars, right? Now you have seven-sixty. So you need four hundred and forty more, right?"

"Yes," Jenny said. She looked over at Rick, who fidgeted in his chair like Kevin had fidgeted in his corner a short while ago.

The man reached into his pocket and produced a thick wad of twenties, held together by a silver money clip. He removed the clip and peeled off twenty-two bills as if he were peeling potatoes.

Jenny's hands shook as she accepted the money. She folded it with the bills Rick had given her and stuffed it into her purse.

The man removed a notepad and pencil from his shirt pocket and wrote "\$440-" and Rick's name. Rick stood up. The man put his hand on Rick's shoulder and pushed him back into the seat.

"I think you better stick around and see how you do on this next pot, Rick," he said.

Jenny looked from the man who had given her the money to Rick, who was picking up his cards. She turned, walked past the jaundiced man and out the front door. The August sun was in her eyes as she hurried from the dead end of the street. Still, her head was held high and she didn't blink. In her mind's eye, she saw Rick the way he looked when he sat back down – embarrassed and undignified. Jenny walked on, not minding the burning wind that blew dust and grit into her face. She had found what she was looking for.

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## Charcoal *Christian Ward*

Toss some memories  
On the burning embers  
And watch spitting sparks  
Consume them.  
Then wait:-  
For all you have left  
Is charcoal.



# I tip toe like the earth is going to swallow me any second now

*Rebecca Susan Lemke*

Point X marks the spot I was here and analyzed everything  
To bits and pieces of substance, into fragmented cells and evidence  
I stifled up baby steps coming around points A-W as I  
watched for cracks in the sidewalk  
It's for my sake or my mother's, watching for cracks  
like misguided conceptions,

Blessing her heart in the ways I know how to  
I go out beyond the picket fence  
and white house visage that speaks in secrete  
of the painted mirages of bonding and loving  
when it's not nearly sugar coated in the soft center of it all

Depending on the value and nurturing of feelings  
I sucked it all back into my belly  
With a pending need for restitution  
And it's still there  
I try my best to love the fearful  
Assuming karma's real and blows up in my face  
Any day now, any day  
I tip toe

I cross my fingers, winking at fate  
Waiting for the judgment call to boom in my ear  
At the beat of a kamikaze conclusion

Any ventures in dogma  
Are like a sure fire exit,  
fearing, going up against  
questions unasked with out validation  
It doesn't hurt to look into the mirror,  
and to ask a lot of questions

Point X marks the spot I bat an eye at glass  
Drawing my breath back into my skull and lungs

# Cosmopolitan Blush

Matina L. Stamatakis

I will tell you a thing or two about marriage:  
it takes strong support hose, and a couple  
fists in faces to drive home a point--  
all knuckles look plaster white, and I know  
which homes need a bitch slap tonight. Mine

is a blissful one. No need to turn on a night light,  
carve anger in worn bedposts over a magazine  
which reads: How's your lover in bed?  
I couldn't begin to roll out the carpet, twenty positions  
added to "make him love you forever". He will love

me regardless of 69, the new fetal position where  
my head finds itself compromising tight fits.  
It's times like these where I need a good fist,  
not to be fisted red as battered eels, but pressed  
in between pallor and consummation  
of a marriage in opposites  
from the norm.

# They Say He's One of the Lucky Ones

Lauren Harrison

Not some nameless soldier, not this time.  
He's alive and he's my brother.  
Sean beat up boys in his class cause they looked at me.  
One got a black eye when he sent me a Superman valentine.  
He sold x in our garage, kept it in a shoebox, he was a  
soldier for the American way. I didn't know  
how tiny ecstasy was til he showed it to me.  
Now he's the one with pins in his leg. They're all  
that keeps his shinbones together. He can't fit  
pants over this thing. Half a metal ladder sticking out.

I didn't know what shrapnel was really until Sean handed me  
a little bit of metal, smaller than his tongue ring.  
As the skin heals, it forces  
all those little bits out. He wanted me to have  
something from inside of him. It looked like pepper,  
black scratches and swollen skin,  
all up his arm, back, side, right leg, neck, and half of his face.  
The mortar missed his eyes and brain, and all of the major organs.  
I guess there is a god. Sean had a white tiger tattooed on his ankle  
before he went over. Now it's missing half of its head  
and the hind legs. I'm not going to ask him  
where the rest of the skin went. Some of it is still there, anyway.

# And So Quietly

*Stephanie Maher*

You smelled like cigarettes  
Smoked in a VW bus crossing state lines in the Deep South.

Like cigarettes,  
Smoked over conversations  
About a pretty young thing you had left on a bus.  
Who would tangle her hands in your hair,  
And always left your fingers smelling  
Like currants and black tea.

She kissed you in a field,  
Flooded,  
With a lamp like moon.  
It pushed past tree boughs  
And dug deep lines in the tall grass.  
It left a mark,  
Shaped like a girls hand on your back.

You remembered as the van pushed through bayous and voodoo cemeteries,  
The night you pressed your hands against her hips.  
She pressed so gently against your fingers,  
And so quietly kissed your lips.

## Biography

In 1986 Rosenberg developed a calligraphic exercise designed to open the unconscious while focusing in the present. Originally designed to enhance drawing the exercise evolved various strategies until 1988 when he began to use words for the first time. This method opened a door that led him to explore writing on a regular basis ever since. Two books of poems were self-published in editions of 100: *Skin Between*, 1989, and *What*, 1991. Books on his art include: *Inside the Dance*, 1994, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, *Generatrix*, 1995, UNO Editions, University of Nebraska, Omaha, and *Figuring Motion*, 2002, Smart Art Press, Santa Monica.

## DEAD JEWS

*Terry Rosenberg*

Dead Jews  
Who will you choose?  
To lead in the form of  
I dream it again

Surging across boundless skies  
What happened before  
Can happen again  
I wake already dead  
Late and blindsided  
Still with a guilty conscious

With every extreme  
I live to know  
No matter how crushed  
By massive adjustments

Hold yourself back  
No not that far or enough  
Never underground

Piles of scattered tautologies  
Broken still vowing my body  
Another hundred and fifty thousand  
Who will you choose?

# Forbidden

Walker Manning Hughes

On the fourth day, and about the hundredth try, Emily heard a sharp click and snatched the bobby pin back. Suddenly the door was unlocked. She turned the fake crystal knob and pushed. A chill ran up her spine and she glanced around quickly. *Am I really going to do this?* Grandmama had warned her every day about going in the attic, had said there were ghosts, but that was silly. Only little kids believed in spooks. She was nearly twelve, old enough to know that grown-ups only said those things to keep children from having real fun. There were probably all sorts of exciting things to play with in the attic. Toys and books and old dresses. Emily paused for barely a moment and caught the faint murmur of voices from down the hall stairs. She wondered who could be visiting and hoped they would keep the old woman busy for long enough.

The door opened easily and quietly. *There, that wasn't scary.* Two quick steps and Emily was in, the door whisking shut behind her. She scanned the room and found it was not as she had expected, not as she had hoped. Yellow light spilled from two windows and played across a dusty wooden floor, revealing a wide-open and seemingly unused room. There were no boxes, no chests, no racks of old clothes, no shelves of moldy books, no old lamps or chairs, nothing at all. Just a lonely void where cobwebs hung down making sad shadows on the walls and ceiling. A ghost would quickly be bored in such a place. With complete disappointment, Emily turned to leave before she was caught and punished for something so dull.

"I'm over here," a voice called softly at that moment and Emily froze in mid-turn. Her hand hovered halfway to the doorknob. She didn't want to move, didn't want to answer.

"Who's there?" she eventually managed, and her voice was small and distant, not reaching the walls and echoing but falling from her tongue and dying in air. She couldn't tell what direction the call had come from and turned here and there, looking everywhere in a panic. A small figure huddled in a far corner and Emily locked her eyes on this.

"Don't be afraid," the gentle voice called again. "Come help me. I need help. Please?" The figure moved slightly and Emily thought she saw a tiny hand wave. A child. She rushed over, finding a small swaddling

blanket sheltering what could only be an old hand-stitched doll. Red yarn hair spilled out over the floorboards and a button nose glistened in the shifting light. Whoever had called to her must have dropped this.

“Please don’t be afraid and run away like everyone else,” the doll said.

Emily tensed, not quite able to get her legs to go, to flee as she really must. “But...but...” she stammered.

“Will you pick me up? Please?” the doll pleaded and her voice was sugar and spice. Entranced, Emily leaned to do as she was asked, feeling she must help, must have this special eldritch prize. She pulled the blanket back. Excited, frightened, confused, she noticed too late the needle teeth bursting beneath the button nose. She didn’t see the jagged scissor hands until they cut down on her wrists, paralyzing her with pain. She never screamed, never made a sound at all.

Once again the forbidden door opened and closed, quickly and quietly.

“Emily? Come down here and meet the preacher,” the voice of Grandmama called.

There was no answer but the soft patter of miniature feet in the hallway. A sharp ringing sound echoed as stained scissors drug with each step. *Schtnnng. Schtnnng. Schtnnng.* A safety pin came loose letting a few strands of rotted straw scatter. And still the patter, patter of tiny feet.

“Emily?” Grandmama called. “We’re waiting!”



# Lights Out

Mark Scott

A cold front followed us from New York down to San Antonio and the streets iced over the day before the fight. “It looks like that place has rooms.” I pointed over the steering wheel at a sign that said *Comfort*.

Louie pulled the old van into a vacant lot and we got our bags. It was a cozy spot right off the river-walk that used to be a jailhouse. Somebody had posted old *San Antonio Light* articles about cops-and-robbers on the walls. A clerk who looked like a hair-gel commercial was counting bills behind the check-out stand. “All the rooms are booked, guys.”

“The parking lot is empty.” Louie snorted through his nose and glared the way he always did when he figured somebody was trying to pull a fast one.

“Hmmm. There’s room 320 if you want that.” He licked his thumb and peeled off a twenty. “It’s a double and there’s really nothing wrong with it.”

“What does *that* mean?”

I plunked down my bags. “That’ll be fine. I know *Comfort* from other towns and you guys always do me right.”

“Next time try to get a reservation, umm-kay?”

“The Ruiz camp said they would put us up at the Hyatt. We just got the word this morning that they overbooked.”

The clerk did a curtsy and his face lit up. “*You’re* Joey Talbert, the challenger!”

“Right, the challenger.”

“I saw you fight Rollins. Now, he was a big boy!”

“Yeah, up in New York. I got lucky.”

Rollins was a light heavyweight who wanted to come down to middleweight because the money was better. He came in eight pounds over the weight at 168. Louie pitched a fit but the fight went ahead. In the third round Rollins had me in a corner with blood coming down into my eye from a two-inch cut on the brow. I threw a left hook with everything I had and caught him flush on the chin. He fell like a sack of bricks.

“Lucky is right, mister! It looked like he was going to take your eye out with that jab of his.” He licked his index finger and pointed at me. “Bang!”

“My eye is fine now.”

He looked over at the wall. “You know, the last guy they hanged here—” Just then a group of *hombres* who looked like mariachis came strolling in and the clerk gave them the elevator-eyes. “Anyway, you can read those articles.”

I'll fess up that I never was much for reading. That don't mean I'm stupid or un-literate. It's just that a fighter needs to concentrate and do what his trainer says, especially when he's going for the title. If I had done that, maybe I would have never heard of Clemente or the kid he cut up down at the river.

We sloshed down the river-walk until we found a restaurant that served something other than Mex. Their food is okay, but you don't want to get logged on enchiladas the night before a long hard fight.

Title fights went twelve rounds instead of fifteen ever since Boom-Boom Mancini killed that Korean boy on television. In my book that kid was kicking Boom-Boom's ass up until he went down in the fourteenth. He couldn't duck right but he had the spirit, a real Commie-kazi.

I'm here to tell you that twelve rounds is a long time, even when you're in shape. They scheduled the *pelea* between Ruiz and me for early on Saturday morning, which was strange as far as Louie was concerned. They wanted to show it on *Sabado Gigante* or somewhere like that.

Louie didn't like it, not one bit. "I just don't trust those people."

"Whatever." I ordered some gringo grub off the menu and Louie intercepted my fries when the plates came.

"Tomorrow you watch Ruiz' right, okay?"

"Everyone I seen him knock out, it's been his left hook."

"That one you can see coming. But his right is like-- what? It's Montezuma's Revenge in a Spalding glove."

"Montezuma? Didn't he fight Napoles for the welterweight title in '74?"

Louie just sat there so I said, "Or maybe it was Benitez in '76. I'm sure he was a welterweight."

"No, he was an Aztec. But don't worry about it. Ruiz has a sneaky right that he slips over your jab and you never see it. If you *do* get tagged and hurt, you make sure you hold him."

"Lock up both his arms?"

"Yes. And don't let him talk to you in the clinches."

"He can talk all he wants. It don't bother me." After the food was gone I still felt hungry. I figured I'd come in a pound under the one-sixty limit but Louie didn't want to take any chances. His boxing talk was getting on my nerves and I knew it was up to me to make the conversation more educated. "I wonder if that river's ever froze."

"I really don't know, Joey. They sure know how to keep it clean, you can say that for them."

"Yep."

By the time we got back to our room it was pitch dark outside. The money-counting dude was gone and a foxy black chick sat there watching a rerun of *The Jeffersons*. George had screwed up somehow and Wheezy was

giving him a talking-to.

As soon as I cut on the light in our room it started popping on and off like a strobe. I called Foxy Brown in the lobby and I could tell right off she was from England or some state other than Texas. Accents are something you get a feel for when you travel around fighting as much as I do.

“That room has been rather a nuisance ever since this establishment opened. The repair firm didn’t connect things as they should have done.”

“Rather a nuisance?”

“Yes, quite.”

Louie twisted the bulb around so it would strobe no more. Other than the bulb the room was okay at first. It had cable with most of the stations but Louie didn’t let me watch because a fighter has to concentrate. “Sleeping ten hours won’t hurt you at all.”

I hit the hay and hadn’t dozed off but probably a few minutes when the television busted on real loud. “Damn,” Louie said. “Is the television shorted too?”

The guy on the tube was saying they quit hanging criminals because it wasn’t humane and the gas and electricity people weren’t making any money off of it. Some woman named Saran Dawn said they executed innocent people half the time, but she shut right up when they asked what to do about the other sixty or seventy percent. She was a real looker and I had a hard time turning her off.

Next the sprinkler system goes off. It just hosed us down all of a sudden for no damned reason. Then as I’m finally getting to sleep this crazy ghost starts trying to tell me why he killed a boy in 1923. It was *to keep the river clean*. I told it to shut up because a fighter has to concentrate. But I barely got any sleep.

The two white boys in the preliminary bouts both got knocked out in the first round so my fight was a little early. Louie hadn’t even taped up my hands properly when they came in. “Talbert, you’re in the blue corner.”

In the first round nothing much happened. I circled to my left and kept a jab popping in his eyes to keep him off of me. In the second round I shot a hard right hand down at his chin that should have ended the fight. His head swiveled so that his chin flew up above his shoulder, and his legs went rubbery. But his eyes stayed fixed on mine like black coals from the nether world.

I couldn’t finish him but when the bell rang I felt cocky sitting there on my stool. That’s when I saw the Mexican honey in the third row. She was a petite little thing and I just couldn’t help but think she would freeze there in that sundress and espadrilles. “*Andale! Mata el gringo!*” It sounds nuts to say it now, but I was jealous that she was rooting against me.

Next round in a clinch I looked over at her and saw she was standing on her tippy toes trying to see around some jug head in front of her. That's when I took it on the chin. An uppercut from out of hell crashed against my chin and I was in a dizzy room. Ruiz stood back and pounded his chest with the glove that just caused the explosion in my head. "*I am the ghost of Clemente Apolinar!*" That's what he said. I am not at all particular about how a man or a ghost introduces himself, but it was weird.

The next few rounds were a blur, but he told me the story of Clemente that I'll never forget. Then he smacked a hard one against my brow where Rollins had opened it up before. Blood filled up my eye, and Ruiz kept talking to me.

Clemente killed the boy down at the river for teasing him, and to keep the river clean. He kept the boy's eyeball in his vest to light his way back home. Then Ruiz told me how it is to choke while you're dancing from the end of a rope. I was sucking in air as hard as I could while he dug both fists into my mid-section. A numb kind of death crept into my arms and legs and the lights started to go out.

But I was in shape and hung on. When I locked up his arms he would talk to me. Clemente's ghost had been hanging around town ever since they hanged him in '23. I knew then that all Clemente's hate didn't have anywhere to go until it got bottled up in this middleweight I was fighting. I never thought much about an eye for an eye. A fighter has to concentrate or otherwise he ends up babbling and repeating himself.

By the eighth my sweetheart in row three was cheering for me. The fog started to lift off of my brain. He was dipping to the left each time he threw a left hook and I started to time the dips and shoot a right hand over. He pitched forward like a bull that the picador has stuck with five lances.

When he went down I saw him give up the ghost. It floated up into the rafters and I could hear it say softly, "Goodbye, San Antonio."

So that's how I ended up middleweight champion. Ruiz became an actor and now he's down there in the *Distrito Federal* starring in tele-novelas, which is the Mexican version of soap operas. I knocked the ghost right out of him. Ruiz had a mean spirit in him but I was meaner that day. That's how I won the middleweight title. Some other time I'll tell you how I lost it and submitted myself to holy matrimony.

I married the girl in row three. Her name is Esmerelda. She is sitting here beside me now at *Comfort* to make sure I get the story right. The ghost don't bother us no more and *Comfort* is the greatest place in the world to stay, especially if you like to read stories about cops-and-robbers.

# Questions

*Yorgo L. Douramacos*

Allen Ginsberg once said something to the effect of, if you can't move past writing about your own problems and how they make you feel then, "...get a job. You're no poet." Ken Wilber suggests that to properly criticize, one must first understand their target intimately. He also implies that it is a stunted development that leaves one stuck in complaint mode. Always listing grievances but not offering options or allowing suggestions. The long dark teen years of the soul so to speak.

They both seem to be pointing to an obvious next step, a stage of thought beyond rock and roll style vitriol and political satire.

But what precedent is there for such a step in everyday American life? I mean, where does one go after recognizing a problem?

The news media won't tell you, they live off of problems. Popular music has no answers. They prefer love's first blush and the righteous teen lambaste of hypocrite parents. There are no lessons on how not to become a hypocrite yourself though. All you get is advice on what clothes to wear to make sure your opinion is associated with the right group.

Religion is a business that looks to make each cadre of souls into a socially cohesive unit. Not much room for enlightenment.

Then there's advertising, built on false solutions to invented problems. No help there.

These are the creatures we must learn from. Yet the greatest lesson they seem to teach is that of their own falsehood.

We must become interpreters of vice as a recipe for virtue. They go one way, we'll go the exact opposite. Music and sex and pop culture once tore down the existing order. Or they claim to have done. Probably to make themselves look cool. But they have outlived their usefulness and now we can develop by always doing their reverse.

The virus became the operating system and now we should use it against its self.

Always ask questions, but don't forget to look for answers. It's not enough to introduce instability, you should be willing to see a subject through to repair or complete destruction and refit. You will never find answers by blindly attacking what you don't understand. Only those familiar with a subject are qualified to attack it.

Fortunately, after full lifetimes inside the media machine, we're qualified to analyze little else.

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Down in the Dirt  
Scars Publications and Design  
829 Brian Court  
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

Alexandria Rand, editor  
AlexRand@scars.tv  
  
<http://scars.tv>

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