

down in the *dirt*
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

v. **030**
January '06

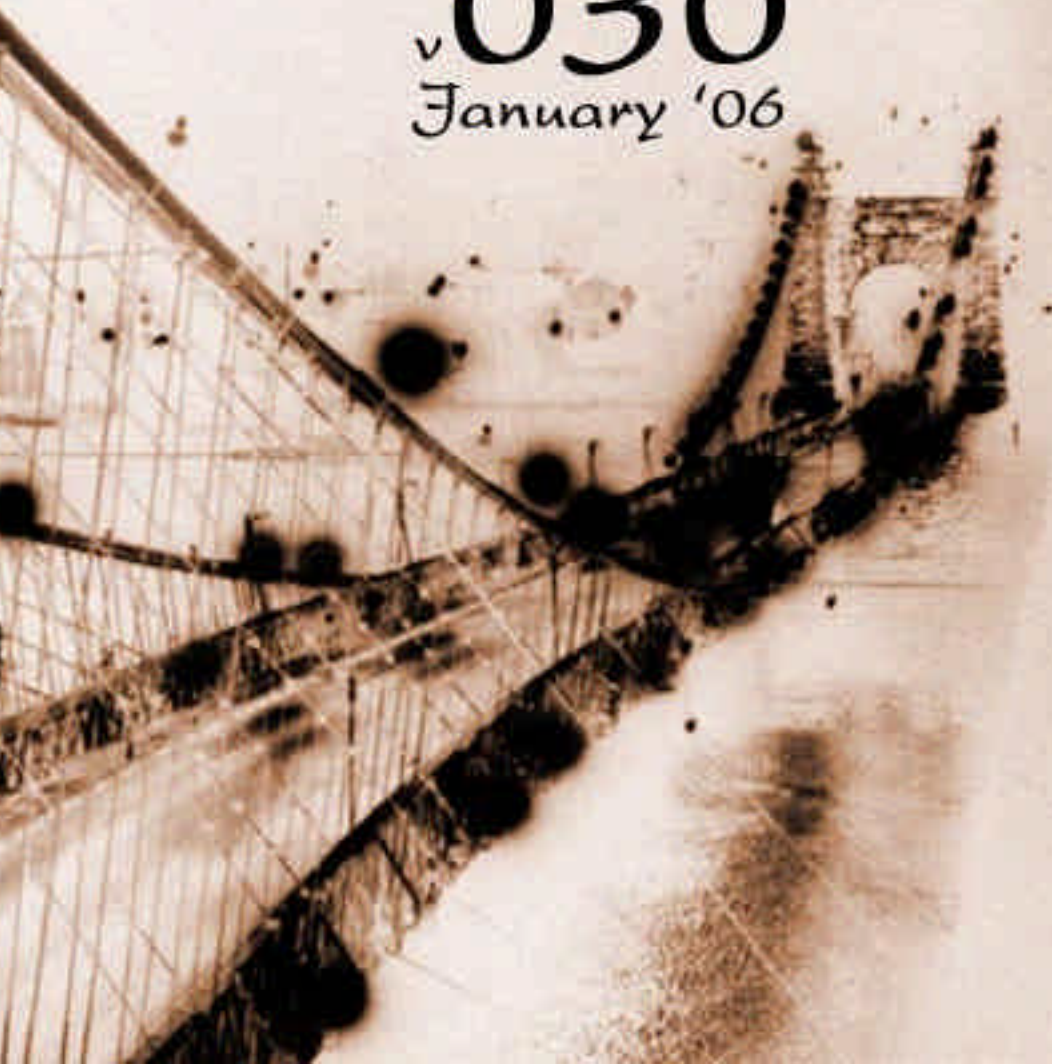


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Scars art, pages 3 (San Juan stray dogs), 27 (a collage of ROTC soldier repelling off a wall), 28 (cars after an accident), 29 (Paris), 40. Cover art: a West Virginia bridge.

A NUMB RHYME

Michelle Greenblatt

When you let my body be
a little purple, black
I start to reconcile
the fact that it wasn't sunblood
that made
these mountains
& also if I love you
who cares
but I?
one
to feel enough for
two
sleep the clock tick tock the drum
let's go
my heart perhaps
keeps beating
this brain, too, has been used
all the way
home. Slimness of even twilight
striking my ear
drums a numb
rhyme a shrinking
locked in a cellar prisoner—he
laughed, he laughed—put
his hand upon
the mirror & swore
to his reflection
he would keep
my thighs forever

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CANNES

© devin davis 97

got a shoe box
of old stock footage.

these images of spring,
that didn't make the cut:

flowers; multi-color poles,
dulled by closing apertures;

pin-wheels; and toy-car crashes,
washed out with your over-expo

-sure.

THEOLOGY

Michael Keshigian

The serpent did not seduce Eve
to the apple.
Facts are twisted.
Adam ate the apple,
Eve ate Adam,
the serpent ate them both,
regurgitated Cain and Abel
and the dark intestine
of human history propagated.
The serpent took residence

under the portico
of Cain's abode,
preached his sermon
and smiled each time
he heard God's name
used in vain.

God, distraught,
selected clergy to spread His word,
denigrated the serpent
to damp corners,
until those cloaked,
who spoke on His behalf,
unfrocked the innocent
within the flock.
The serpent still smiles.



THE MINUTE

Christopher Barnes, UK

I carried the flowers to her bloody grave,
flinched when you found the streak of guts,
plummeted when you asked the awful questions.

We were a couple that day, two grown men,
lovers of years standing,
sobbing into the squish of cars.

Today, behind the cupboard door
her leash and collar hang.

Children of Farm

Eric bonholtzer, from the book *Duality*

"I'm really so excited Father," the plaid skirted one crooned, her pigtails flapping wildly as she sat at the kitchen table with her father and sister.

"I'm excited too, Father," the blonde, Lisa, said with a smile.

"You know what a responsibility it is, right?" The man they called "Father" asked with a stern consternating glare. "This isn't all fun and games."

"I know that, Father, it's just that, well, we're of age now, and well^ojust a little eager." It was Lisa, a faint glimmer of anticipation in her crystal clear blue eyes.

Father ruffled the girl's hair in what could be said was an affectionate way. "Well don't be too eager, and don't pick the first man you see."

"I know Father, you've taught us well." Michelle's pigtails made her look that much more childlike, her tone mimicking her look.

"Don't bat your lashes, you look like a whore."

"Sorry, Father." Michelle was properly cowed.

"Remember what I said," Father cautioned.

"He has to be rich." Lisa was eager to chime in with an answer.

"Yes, for both of you. I don't want either of you barefoot and pregnant without support."

Lisa came to her father's side. She had always been the favorite and she knew it. "You've raised us well. Don't think we'll ever forget it. When we get men of our own, it'll be our turn to take care of you."

Well that's the plan, he thought to himself, but chose his words carefully, "You know I'm going to be gone all day. I've got to make a stop by Shady Vale."

"Can I go too, Daddy?" A meek voice came from behind the kitchen door.

"Sara is that you?" the father asked. A tender girl who looked no more than twelve stepped into the room. "Now what did I tell you about



listening to Father when he's talking to someone else?"

The cherub-faced little girl cringed, not wanting to disappoint her father. "I don't know."

"Yes you do," Lisa interjected. "Father's warned you not to do it. You'd better start listening to him or you're going to grow up to be a bad girl."

Not to be left out, in that wonderful way siblings constantly seek to outdo one another, Michelle added, "Yeah, after all Father's done for us. Why would you want to go back to Shady Vale anyway? There's nothing there but bad memories."

"But it's my home," Sara said softly.

Father took a step forward and the older daughters could tell he was getting righteously angry. "No, your home is here now until you turn eighteen and find a nice man. And I told you, it's Father, not Daddy. Daddy is what babies say."

"Yes, Father's right," Lisa said, stifling any argument from the younger sister.

"Now go to your room, Sara, and think about what I've said. That orphanage is all in the past." The young girl curtsied and departed, leaving Father with a lot to think about. *I'll have to keep an eye on that one, she looks like the rebellious type.* Father turned to his two oldest. "Isn't it great news that your big sister, Natalie, is expecting?" They both nodded their heads. They knew this all too well, and Father was just speaking to illustrate his point. "Her husband's a doctor, you know. Already sent me twenty five thousand to help his dear old father-in-law out."

They all smiled at this. "Now get going," he admonished, "you're not getting any younger." The pair departed with a spry spring in their step and left Father to his thoughts. He would go to Shady Vale later after he had a good long talk with Sara. He crept up the stairs to the bedroom, looking in at his three littlest, still in bed. "Wake up girls, I've got good news. Today you're going to get a new baby sister." The three girls ranging in age from six to eleven, all stirred eagerly, their eyes holding a promise of a new addition to the family, and sleep was a long way returning, as excitement swirled in their quiet impressionable heads.



RIGHT AS RALPH

Jon Kuntz

I knew enough to tell when Ralph was feeling all right or when he was hurting. Jack Daniels was on the pantry shelf and the fruit jar of whiskey was absent. He told me he only drank on two occasions: When he was feeling down, and when he was feeling up. He always said he didn't want to waste good whiskey on a downer. I asked him if he didn't make it by his downer one time, could I finish off Jack? He gave me a look like he was chawin' on rattlesnake toe nails. No, Sir, it was not a good look.

Ralph was a spare rib who was always moving, even when he stood still. Everyone in town thought he worked, but no one really knew where. Even if he weren't working, he cleaned up real good for the Saturday Evening Socials. He had a fantastic voice for singing, although it did tend to fall off if he needed it for straightening up some Joe cowboy trying to make trouble. On the other hand, I did see him use his voice on a cuss one night that would have shattered the last nerve leaving on the Reading & Susquehanna providing he had any nerves left. That feller just came apart at the seams, but I knew Ralph was only singing in his own way without the music. He could mess up your head that way.

The band would have Ralph sing a series of songs every Saturday, and even though they offered, he would never take a job with them. Said he was too busy to be doing too much more music. Also, you'd have to consider he only knew two types of songs.

Ralph would get mad, but it took him a long time. If you wanted to get to him, you could do it, but I just can't think of a reason you'd want to. You'd do best to keep track of where you were with Jack.

I saw him one day with the mechanic at Beeson's Auto Shop. That was in the days that we only had three pickup trucks in America. And if you drove one, you didn't try to push yours out like it was the only good one, it just wasn't done.

I was coming home one day and passing Beeson's when I saw Ralph punch their mechanic. Our town is kinda' set up where if you don't want trouble that isn't yours, then you don't stick your nose in someone else's. So I drove by, but later on got the story of what happened. The mechanic told Ralph he didn't have a radiator part for his Ford but could get a

part off a chevy and use it. That right there would have been good but, the guy went on to say the Chevy part would add value to his Ford. Ralph didn't say anything but just looked at him. After the part was put on and Ralph paid the bill, he gave the mechanic a roundhouse on the way out. That's what I saw.

Everyone understood that. Ralph was pushed into a position where he had to react. He was left no choice and had to strike back. I think the mechanic figured it out, also.

There wasn't a woman, kid, or dog in town that didn't like Ralph. He customarily carried lolly-pops for the kids and milk bones for the pets. Even so, they all knew to leave him be if he was feelin' low. Even the Sheriff figured that one out. A number of years ago he had a cell built on the back of the office. He got a special allowance to do it. Who does he pick to be his first lockup? Yep. Ralph, on a disorderly charge.

In the wee hours of the morning, there came about the biggest explosion you could ever hope to hear without angels being part of it. It was louder than thunder and it ran from one ridge peak covered in snow and ice, across the valley to the other ridge. Anyone who slept through that crescendo had to be dead. It wasn't long before everybody in and around town was congregating to find out what happened. It turned out that the back of the Sheriff's building, with the newly attached jail was completely gone. Vaporized would be a better word here, because there was no sign of brick, steel, concrete, or any substantial part of the addition or cell. I was wondered just a little bit if Ralph got vaporized along with the jail. I didn't need to worry that much because Ralph did have good luck pertaining all the time. As it turned out, he was home in bed sleeping away while the rest of us were trying to figure out what happened to the jail. If we wanted an explanation as to what happened, I'm afraid none was forthcoming. There were some casual references to a gas leak but nothing to back it up. One thing for sure was the Sheriff was not happy with Ralph since that time. His face would get a restrained look to it every time he came across Ralph. He never did say a thing, though.

I was trying to get home on the valley road one night, because it didn't usually get a hard freeze the way the more popular ridge roads did. I guess everyone else had the same idea, because it looked like a prayer meeting on the right-of-way past Cherry Creek. I stopped because I couldn't go any further. I looked and there was Ralph in a hot discussion with an eighteen-driver who looked like all he was interested in was finding a honky tonk angel and settling in for the weekend.

“I’m trying to get home for a few hours sleep, and I need to get through. Is there an accident, is anyone hurt, do we need the medics?” The Driver was asking Ralph.

Everyone’s attention fell on Ralph. You can picture it if you try. About 20 some people standing on the roadway on a dark winter night. The mountain ridges boxed in everyone and held back any ground light. The stars above were fierce. Instead of white stars, we had the blackest of velvet spaces interrupting a white background of the night. It even sounds strange talking about it, but it was like white and black trading colors.

This is the setting in which Ralph started to speak. Ralph told of his coming over the hill and seeing the luxury car and the boy hanging on its door. The man was trying to push the boy away so he could drive off. He didn’t admit hitting the dog, he said it ran out in front of his car, and he didn’t have time to stop. In fact, no one could have, he asserted. This was how the other drivers came on the situation, also.

Ralph stood on that cold dark highway, the kind of cold that echoed every sound for miles around, and he began speaking in his basso tones that would chase each other along in a resonance, like a marble chaser that had splitter rails and side wheels, dropping their apportioned kind with every consideration given to a doppler effect for every chord returned, and a tremolo too. And dang if he didn’t have the audience.

Ralph explained to the drivers how the boy’s dog got hit. There were ooh’s and aah’s. He explained how he had seen the boy holding the man from driving away because he needed to get help for his dog. People began to move in on this offender of children and puppies. There were more audible expressions. Ralph told the crowd the man was trying to leave before anybody else came, which is what happened when Ralph came on the scene. The crowd’s sentiments were beginning to get nasty. There were some references to possible physical damage being done to the rich man and his expensive car. The crowd was compressing even more to where the offender was somewhat squashed against his car door. Ralph added an octave swing for the summation. He told the crowd how the scoundrel was going to leave a 12 year old boy all alone with a wounded dog that he maimed and no resources to help. The boy hadn’t put a jacket on when he ran out the back door trying to catch his dog. The dog was too big for the boy to carry anywhere and he wouldn’t leave him lying along the road to die alone. He had too much character for that. The vet was about a mile down the road but he couldn’t manage that for the same reasons.

The crowd was murmuring very maliciously. In fact sounds of slaps

could be heard along with what were probable punches into the big fur winter coat the gentleman was wearing. He was asking for Ralph. Ralph came over and listened while the man talked. The he turned and addressed the crowd.

Folks, "Our man with the fancy car, on behalf of reviewing the evening events, and in keeping with everyone's requirements to go onward tonight, has rethought the situation. He feels he may have acted too hastily in his resolution of the problem with the dog. He has \$500 cash he's going to give to the vet for the treatment of the dog."

There were some sounds of approval.

"He said the vet could mail him the balance."

The man started to shake his head and hands in fiercely alternating gyrations showing a reiterating negative slant to be put on the current interpretation of the disposition of any excess funds at the vets.

Ralph interjected, "The gentleman says any surplus funds be given to the boy for his trouble."

This calmed the crowd a bit, but they were leery I can tell you that.

Ralph got the attention of the crowd again, "Here's what we're going to do ladies and gentlemen. We're taking the boy home to get his jacket and tell his parents what's happening. Then we're going down the hill to the vets and leave the dog with him. He'll get the money tonight. Then we're taking the boy home. If there are any complications, the man gave me his contact information. So let's go."

It was really a sight to see: seven pickups, four SUVs, three cars and an eighteen wheeler turning into one line to go up the hill, turning out of the boy's house and going down the hill, waiting in line on the roadway until everything was settled with the vet, then turning around to go up the hill to the boy's house, coming out of there and taking to the road once more.

So I hope you understand reverend, I can't really make a speech about Ralph at his funeral. I just didn't know him that well.

PHONE RAGE

Raud Kennedy

All these jackasses
who walk around
talking
into their cell phones
like the person
on the other end
is hard of hearing,
like everyone else
in line,
wants to hear them
go on and on
about their troubles
picking out a color
for the living room.
Paint it with feces,
I say, just hang up
the damn phone
and shut the f*ck up!

MR. ROBIN?

Constantine P. Firme III

Mr. Robin choked on a piece of unleavened bread during church communion. Her best friend, being one of the few people in the front row who didn't queue for the body and blood of Christ, leapt to her aid with the Heimlich maneuver and dislodged the piece of Christ flesh onto the pastor's cowl.

The entire procession was taken aback, and one woman fainted.

Mr. Robin hung her head low in embarrassment as she was escorted out of the building.

Two hours after the incident, the pastor made a courtesy call:

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Guess he loved me so much he wanted me to join him early huh?" Mr. Robin said with a lighthearted tone, and made the pastor giggle.

"Though God doesn't take favors," the pastor reiterated, "your caring for his animals is a plus."

Mr. Robin was twenty nine years of age, and an everyday Veterinarian in her neighborhood in San Francisco.

She was known amongst the locals for giving free pet care to the financially distressed, and administered preliminary examinations free of charge; still, every holiday, she affords lavish gifts to her co-workers.

But managing a Vet Clinic had it's run of the mill problems. Having been habituated to sleeping late at night by eight years of college, her motivation for starting work at 8:00 A.M. was based on the fear of disappointing her co-workers and patients. Her personal schedule book looked like a receptionist's sign-in sheet, and was full of crossed-out vacation plans. She lived in a drab apartment complex on the outskirts of San Francisco's Castro District.

A cardboard-thin ceiling conveyed disturbing bumps and howling pipes- one of the many functional defects fitting for a mediocre flat.

Her passable single apartment was clean to the point of being presentable, but messy enough to keep her feeling at home.

Sitting in the middle of the living room was her futon couch with a plain solid blue cover, next to a prosaic coffee table that shook with the wind. Across from her futon, and mounted above a banal wooden stand,



was a conventional CRT 16 inch television equipped with a lumbering DVD player, and digital cable service common to the other residents in her complex. Two identical floor lamps lit the corners of the living room with their regular 60 watt brightness. And all this on a dull beige carpet floor spotted with dirt.

Her typical kitchen was a humdrum collage of cookware by generic brand names, and unreliably made electronics. Her pans were left greased in the rack, and she had a pile of unwashed dishes in the sink. Her bowls and plates were rarely stacked in cabinets, and she had a tendency to leave out half-used produce.

Her standard top-mount refrigerator full of condiments and empty space was in contrast with the plethora of meats in the upper freezer.

“A woman who doesn’t like to cook and eats plenty of meat is a common thing,” she once said to a friend.

And for a woman who considered packaging material part of a daily diet, microwave-safe plastics were a Godsend; and a microwave was a must- though she was annoyed with how the waves cooked out the delicious fats. Her poor choices of diet were supplemented by the habit of eating technicolor kids cereals and avoiding most vegetables like the plague.

Her bedroom was a typical display of Contemporary Art. The colors of her cutaway Gibson melded with the poster laden walls that featured her favorite alternative bands. She had a computer desk at one end of the room where she processed most her paperwork, and a colorless twin sized bed perfectly centered in the room.

She had plenty of cubbyholes, shelves, and drawers that helped her keep things in their general categories, but finding a specific thing, like a .05 drafting pen for example, was like looking for a document in a file-

drawer of unlabeled manila folders. Even in a small bedroom, she lost her office papers more often than one should.

Across from her disorganized shelves of books was her cabinet of dull and inexpensive clothes. Her clothes were mostly jogging pants, shorts, cotton sweaters, exercise shoes, and cotton upper-body apparel. She was very active in the day, and the sweating made form fitting clothes uncomfortable, so except for two pairs of jeans, a shirt, and a dress suit, her clothes were loose and slightly oversized.

Then there was the wholesale mountain bike on which she almost broke her face when she tripped over a picture frame destined to hold her mother's photo.

Throughout the apartment, she displayed irksome photos of friends and family. She had the ordinary assemblage of associates consisting of a few close friends, direct family, and a handful of acquaintances. But of all the friends she had, there was only one friend she wanted but didn't have, a boyfriend.

While in college, she spent too much time studying and not enough time finding a sweetheart. Nearing the end of her college marriage years, she had yet to attain a suitor; at least, one that she'd feel suitable.

She was the kind of handsome looking girl waiting impatiently for love, but with the emotional selectiveness that keeps her narrowed on a minority of men her sexual attraction qualified her to choose from.

Her best bets had been social gatherings, though she was annoyed to find most who attended were stereotypical self-observers who believed they had to flaunt their personalities to be acknowledged.

She grew tired of singles bars and flings and dreamt of the day she'd open her closet and find someone else's clothes taking up the open space.

Whenever she took love into her own hands, she stumbled upon another's curiosity and lust, mistaking smiles for sincerity and cuddles for security. She blamed herself for limiting herself to this rare directory of men; but a disposition, she claimed, she couldn't deny herself nor fake the thumps of her heart with someone otherwise.

She blamed others in her list of classifieds for their indecisiveness in orientation.

"They feel it for a few minutes and they think they're attracted, then they feel it for the next few hours and they think they're in love. They think it's a sign of preference and either fight to suppress it or embrace it, rarely remembering that their decision would be permanent had they realized the seriousness of declaring standards of attraction. But that's

empty, all physical, it's classical conditioning because they end up believing their love rather than naturally feeling it. Some who genuinely know what kind of person they love won't fall victim to the confusion of that minute-hour rule, instead, they will see their potential mates in seconds-slowng down the clock to allow more time to think about them."

Her original experience with love had been one of deep companionship, construed as a sexual desire by the compelling norms of culture and interaction; and her love evolved in its respective path. She loved differently, and yet, she loved men much the same way men loved women.

Mr. Robin was beaten to death after Sunday mass. His arms spread open and his head tilted slightly to his right shoulder; he lay upon the stairs before his former house of worship.

The attackers smothered Mr. Robin's face with make-up, and mutilated the parts of his body that made him a man. They said they hated him, but couldn't express a substantial reason. They were annoyed with Mr. Robin, and again, with no material reason.

Mr. Robin had a formal funeral; his friends and family watched over his casket.

Mr. Robin's brother wondered if death was a proper consequence for a sibling who would have filed domestic partner papers rather than marriage certificates, or be flagged by his people to enjoy limited freedoms, and an unsaid feeling of shame.

Mr. Robin's mother cried on her knees, against the casket, and knocked at the lid with her palm. "Why did he have to be..." she pressed her face against the cold wood, "Oh God, oh MY GOD!"

Mr. Robin's father refused to show, but shed a tear for his disowned son; and in spirit, he tossed the mounds of dirt onto the coffin and finalized Mr. Robin's special spot in the ground with the others.

"I was an ordinary man," the epitaph read, "who embraced my choice to love like a woman."

FAST SONG

Luis Cuauhtemoc
Berriozabal

I bring you
a fast song
taught to me
by crickets.
I can't make
sense of it.
Its speed is
frenetic.
My voice will
only make
you scratch out
your eyeballs.
I won't bring
this song to
you. I have
changed my mind.
I take it
back and just
bring you the
end of song.

DRUNKEN JEOPARDY

Lawrence R. Dagstine

There was once an old saying: you have not seen anything until you have seen projectile vomit from a game show host. I now live by those very words.

So I'm sitting in a van sipping on a forty-ounce and smoking a big spliff. For those of you who don't know what a spliff is: it's a blunt, pot, weed, herb, doobie, chumba or God's organic plant of meditative life. I'm staring out the window and peeping these waitresses in a nearby diner. It's a curious fact that the majority of waitresses from Brooklyn diners have big fat asses. Maybe it's just me, because in this van there are six people, and I'm the only one holding the binoculars. The six people in the van are the most drunken and weirdest people you'll ever meet. I'm in the front passenger side, and my good Canadian friend, Alex Trebek, who hosts Jeopardy is at the wheel. The other folks we know from an orgy at Plato's Retreat and decided to pick them up and not leave them out in the cold. These other pop-iconic drunks you might know: Zsa Zsa Gabor, Count Dracula, Stephen King, The Ghost of Henry David Thoreau, and some black 'cool-moe-dee' homeless guy just hopped in the back for warmth as I've been telling you this story. It seems he has a very bad haircut, or a very bad excuse for an afro. I don't know what to call it, if you know what I mean. He told me that he castrated himself a moment ago, but I don't see any blood. However, I do see a bottle of J&B, so he must be seeing pink elephants, that's for sure.

Anyway, my name's Parker. It's my middle name. You don't need my first or my last; Parker will do. And tonight I want to try and ditch the people in the back of the van to focus on one thing. Getting drunk. Or, even better, more drunk.

"Alex," I said, as quietly as I could, "we gotta ditch these imbeciles and find us a bar."

"But I'm Canadian," good ol' Trebek said. "I have a show to host tomorrow."

"Listen, Alex, I'm sick of hearing how Zsa Zsa killed three husbands, Thoreau keeps mumbling some bullshit about wanting to live deliberate-

ly off the land, the Count is trying to suck the homeless man's blood out of him, and the Kingster has a Red Sox cap on, and you know how much of a Yankee fan I am."

"But tomorrow begins Teen Week." He had a chipper smile, beneath the furry mustache which he constantly refuses to shave. Only trim.

I shook my head in confusion. "What is it with you Canadians? I mean I enjoy the taste of Canadian bacon, but that's about it. And another thing, asswipe, what is it with you and these Daily Doubles?"

He didn't know what to say. For an intelligent Ontarian, which I thought was a religion at one time, he just kept his mouth shut and I kicked everybody the hell out; I would have let the homeless man stay, as I saw the J&B bottle and it kind of reminded me of my youth, but the Bram Stoker feller drained him white.

Finally, off to the bar!

Now just about everybody has a story of a time when they got themselves into such a bad fix with alcohol that they seriously considered never drinking again, or at least with friends. Of course, this is almost always a passing whim and usually doesn't last past the next smart opportunity to get shitfaced. I'm a drunk. There, you have it. I certainly know in my heart I'm going to drink to excess again; most likely in the very near future. Nevertheless, this is one of those stories. No, that's an understatement. This is my be all, end all, holy shit did I really fucking do that story.

Okay, so Sunday night started innocently enough when I took Alex to the pub for ninety-nine cent pitchers. Helluva deal, need to do it more often. And we put back six pitchers in the next two hours, no big whoop-de-do, and lost one pitcher, which I could have sworn was right in front of me, in the process. At this point I briefly mused that I've never had an overwhelmingly good experience on Sundays when I drank without eating dinner, but that thought passed with the next guzzle. I mean, what's the worst that can happen? I tend to get a little belligerent when I drink on an empty stomach, but it was just me and Alex and I planned on making it an early evening, so whatever. We had a few more drinks to make our lives that much more fun. My current level of inebriation could be described as speaking or balancing quite successfully, but *dangerously* fired up.

"Tomorrow's Teen Week," Alex kept reminding me, and his face was pale and his eyes terribly bloodshot.

"I know, I know," I hollered at him. "I'll have you home no later than three. If worse comes to worse, you can always crash at my place."

After we left the bar, my sense of personal safety and well-being kicked in and I declared that I was going to eat a piece of pizza. Now, anyone who has a general understanding of metabolism and boozing and then eating knows that it was *way* too late for me; the same could be said about the staggering game show host. Yet what I find most remarkable is that I know this—I know it well—as evidenced by the fact that I’m telling you now. I suppose feeding Alex eggplant parmigiana and eating myself was something better than nothing, even though I was pretty far up the river. So we went to Crusty McArthur’s Pizza where I ate a half-a-slice. Yep, a whole fucking half goddamn slice of “za”, as I certainly had no doubts that all risk to my stomach was eradicated by this pearl of strategy. Afterwards, we continued on our way to more drinking. By the way, if you saw a drunk feller woo-hooing in his boxers and sprinting as fast as he could through traffic along Stillwell Avenue, and you happened to be near Nathan’s on Sunday night, that was me. He’s funny and he’s smart, *and* he was accompanied by a showman!

To discriminatory wit, another drink with Trebek and we were on our way to further adventures. Now I was most definitely ripped. I stumbled with my friend into the bar up the street. The cute Puerto-Rican bartender I have a crush on was working, which was a stroke of luck because I was really in my best form. Her tits were so big and protruded over the bar it was as if they were speaking to me. And after practically screaming to my buddy how hot she was while she was all of four feet away from me, I sucked down a couple of tequilas.

“Heyyy,” the Latina said. “You lookin’ good tonight, Parker. Waz up?”

“I don’t know what’s up,” I said, as by now I couldn’t see straight, “and I don’t know what’s down. But your cum buttons are staring at me. Can I touch them?”

She gave me the eye and walked away, saying something in her native tongue, and it went something like this: “*Cogida estúpida*”.

“Did I just embarrass myself, Alex,” I turned and asked him.

He staggered over. “I’m a game show host. We have Latin literature many an occasion as a topic on the board.” Then he burped. “She called you a stupid fuck.”

I finally decided that this was to be my last consumption of the night. Though the details that followed are somewhat of a mystery to me, as Alex told me he was an alien from the planet Zorga, and he was only on earth *pretending* to be a game show host. He told me that that’s where all Canadians come from. But where the hell is Zorga? Apparently, I forgot

about it, and we just got up and left, declaring I didn't know what my alien friend was going to do but I was going to bed.

After getting home it was time to pay the piper. The mothership wasn't going back to Zorga, or a flight to Los Angeles, it seemed, so Alex crashed. This was the moment I set into stone with the first two forty-ounces and the first pitcher hours earlier. I walk in the door, barely able to stand on my own when Alex unleashes a torrent of puke the likes of which I hadn't seen since the college days of guzzling a fifth by myself for sport. The problem here was that I was so far in the bag, which makes it really hard to aim the puke, I did the same. It splattered across the walls of my living room. Both of us! As a career heaver, I usually pride myself on being able to hit the toilet no matter how blacked out I am.

"You stupid mother fucking Canadian Ontarian Zorgan," I yelled. "Look what you did to my living room. And look what you made me do!"

I guess it was from so much pressure on our systems, or maybe it was simply a complete and total lack of physical control, but the next thing I know the host of Jeopardy is shitting uncontrollably. No warning, no idea, and his slacks are filled with mud. My diet for the evening of beer and cheese probably weren't doing me any favors either. My main problem of many, in this case Alex, is that I can't stop puking while this is happening. I believe the only possible escalation for this kind of situation would be if I actually spontaneously combusted.

My subconscious recoiling in horror, I try to pinch off the flow of Alex's bowel before the trouble reaches ground level. But it was too late, I too have just shit on the carpet. I repeat, there is fucking doo-doo on the rug! Look at me now, mother. You'd be so proud of your son: thirty-one years old and he's shitting on the carpet with Alex Trebek, a man who now claims he is from Zorga. And who would have thought it took dexterity to clean it up? No motor skills or training required. Just mashing the poo into the rug; falling down repeatedly doesn't help either.

I guess this total voiding of all cavities must have brought me to a higher level of lucidity, because I did the only sensible thing. I jumped in the shower with my clothes on and tried to regroup. Falling down persistently in wads of shit though, I almost crashed through the glass shower door a couple of times before I got the dirty duds off. I might have taken a nap in the tub, but details on that is sketchy. I cleaned myself and my clothes as much as I could and called it a night.

I went to my bed, leaving a stink trail and swimming in hurl, and passed out.

* * * * *

The next day I woke up in a dreamless slumber. I consider ways to pawn this responsibility off on someone else. I kicked Alex Trebek the fuck out! I take parts of the rug, the comforter, and my own clothes to the bathroom, the scene of much earlier crimes. My equilibrium problems are still going strong, so I bounce off the walls on the way, leaving last night's stink trail in the hall. And let me tell you, if I had only known Alex Trebek was a Zorgan. I would have been prepared, because I sure didn't sign up for this duty when it first came aboard.

So that's pretty much it. I wake up Monday morning, still partly in the bag to rotate laundry and sections of carpeting and take exhibits A, B, and C down to the dry cleaner. The Asian man stares at me in astonishment. "Are you serious?"

"Serious as shit," I said to him.

I'm told this is going to cost \$99.00. That's right, \$99.00 tagged onto a night of pants-crapping and projectile-vomiting that started off with 99 cent pitchers.

SOMETHING LIKE HEAVEN

Brittany P. Dalton

Damon woke on an unfamiliar surface. His clothes clung snugly to his hefty frame as the humidity dampened his skin. The dead quiet caused him to shudder. He wiped the sleep from his dull gray eyes and lifted himself from his resting place.

Where the hell am I? he wondered. He glanced around the darkness that surrounded him like a suffocating void. He could barely see his hands in front of his face. He felt around for a wall, anything to notify him of his location. Without warning a bright flash of light illuminated the abyss. A hooded figure appeared before him, floating slightly above the ground. The figure was dressed in a long cranberry colored robe that dragged along the floor, covering everything except for his hands and feet

which were pale and gaunt. He was encircled by an eerie glow that gave him a holy appearance.

“Who are you?” Damon asked, cowering in fear. He shielded his head with his arms. The figure moved in closer, gently placing his hand on Damon’s shoulder. Damon flinched at his touch.

“Do not fear, Damon,” the figure spoke with a powerful voice. “I am your angel.” The mysterious glow that surrounded him grew brighter by the minute.

Damon’s mouth dropped. “I must be dreaming,” he replied sarcastically. He squinted his eyes to block out the light then rubbed them with clammy hands.

The figure nodded. “No, Damon.” He took a step back giving Damon a chance to adjust.

“Then what’s going on?” he questioned, focusing on the holy figure. He wiped his sweaty palms on the leg of his jeans.

The angel tapped his foot in frustration touching nothing but air. “You’re dead,” he answered bluntly. “And I’ll leave you to figure out where you are.”

Damon was baffled. “How can I be dead? I don’t remember anything.” He paced back and forth. “I mean, wouldn’t I remember if I died?”

The angel sighed. “When you die, your short-term memories are lost,” he explained. “But you’ll remember in due time. Follow me.”

Damon hesitated. *I must be in heaven*, he thought. *I just wish I could see Jess one more time.*

The angel studied Damon’s expression. “Is something wrong?”

Damon nodded. “Could I see my fiancée Jessica?” He lowered his eyes, focusing on his worn-out tennis shoes.

“That’s where I’m taking you right now. To the precise moment of your death.” He stretched out his hand to Damon. “Take my hand.”

Damon did as he was told. Waves of light flickered before his eyes at unimaginable speed. The waves quickly turned into images. All thirty-three years of his life flashed before him in a matter of seconds until it reached the last scene of his life. The images slowed down to allow Damon to absorb them. He watched carefully as the events replayed.

Damon stood in his living room, pistol in hand. He made his way to his bedroom and slowly cracked open the door. Jessica was inside of the room, quietly packing her belongings into a suitcase. Damon watched in silence as she packed the last of her things then closed the suitcase. He coughed loudly, startling her. She quickly turned around and met his gaze.

"Honey, what are you doing home so early?" she asked innocently. She quickly hid the suitcase behind her back.

"Bitch, don't play with me. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

She fidgeted like a restless child. "Nothing, sweetheart." Her tone was rushed and uneasy.

"Then what's with the suitcase?" He moved closer to get a better look.

She acted surprised. "Oh, I was just packing some things for a visit to my mother's house for the weekend." She tried to shrug it off. "No big deal." She threw the suitcase onto the bed.

"You're lying again. I can tell." He used the gun to scratch his temple. "Probably going to see that boyfriend of yours. You know, the one you've been fucking behind my back!"

Her eyes widened. "No baby, I wouldn't!"

"Don't give me that bull shit." Damon lowered his head and nodded. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a neatly folded letter. "I found this in the bathroom garbage can." He chuckled loudly. "You really should invest in a shredder," he added matter-of-factly. He held up the letter for her to see. "Says here that Ruiz, the guy you've been seeing, has invited you to stay with him." He cleared his throat. "He claims that you deserve better than that abusive asshole that you're engaged to." He looked deep into her eyes. "What kind of shit have you been feeding this guy?" He crumbled up the letter with one hand and threw it at her. "Well, that really doesn't matter now. I just know that you're not getting away from me that easily!" He raised the gun and aimed right between her eyes.

"Damon, please don't do this," she begged.

"Fuck you! I've told you before that if I can't have you, no one can. Now you have to learn the hard way." He let out a sadistic laugh.

She walked towards him. "We can get through this. Let's just talk about it."

Sweat formed on his brow. "Bullshit!" He kept the gun aimed, never budging.

She held out her arms as she moved closer. "You have to trust me. I'm not seeing that guy, he's just a friend."

He backed away from her. "And more bullshit! I've heard this from you before." His grip tightened around the pistol.

"Please, put the gun down! I love—," but before she could finish, he pulled the trigger.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "See you in hell, bitch." He shoved the silver gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Damon fell to the ground. The bitter taste of the cold metal returned to his memory. "I...killed her?" He put his head into his hands and wept.

“How could I do such a thing? Death is too good for me!” His sobs became louder as he continued to babble.

The angel smacked him across the face. “Pull yourself together.” Damon rubbed his face in pain. “It’s too late for crying! The deed has been done.” He grabbed him roughly by his coat jacket, lifting him from the ground. “Pick yourself up. You must accept your consequences.”

Damon ignored his statement. “But if Jess is dead, why isn’t she with me? Didn’t she make it to heaven?” The angel nodded. “Well, if she’s in heaven, where am I?” He paused. “This can’t be...hell?” The angel nodded once again. A look of confusion appeared on Damon’s face. “But I thought you were my angel?”

The angel snickered. “Didn’t you ever read the bible?”

Damon shook his head. “I was never big on religion.”

“You should’ve been. Look where it has gotten you. A homicide *and* a suicide.” He waved his finger to show his disapproval. “Not a very good record to have.”

Damon thought it over. “But I don’t understand. You *said* you were my angel!” He clenched his fists tightly, trying to suppress his anger.

The angel removed his hood, revealing a demonic creature. His eyes were pale- white with no pupil. The rest of his face was sunken and scaly, similar to a snake. He snapped his fingers, revealing the underworld. The darkness that once engulfed the area was lifted and a world of horror was revealed. Damon fell to his knees in fear. Tears trickled from his eyes onto hell’s surface, instantly bursting into flames.

The angel was enjoying the spectacle of panic that Damon performed. Raucous laughter escaped his ghastly lips as he drew Damon nearer using an unseen force. “I am your angel,” he spat. “But the devil has angels, too.”

MILITARY

J. Williams

Through the contemptuous times when the ice melts on the asphalt after a blizzard and we are left pondering the very meaning of our rather meager existence, it’s very important to know that the answers to all of life’s questions are present. They are there staring us in the face waiting to be found, eager to be learned and eventually bound to be forgotten.

BOYS MOTS FROM AN OLD PROFESSOR

Richard Thieme

Once upon a time, writing and articulate speech were reserved for an aristocracy that knew how to use words, back when thinking was conceded to be important, and essays and fiction were not so much convoluted as rich in a level of detail that signified in turn a level of reflection appropriate to complex topics. Such oratory and literature was understood to enhance our ability to seek and find deeper, more nuanced meanings. Back then, when writers sat in drafty great halls, dipping the tips of their quills in ink, our literary mentors—people like Laurence Stern or George Elliot, or more recently, Henry James or Virginia Wolff, following I suspect the example of Proust and his beautifully woven memory webs, never mind Joyce who is widely admired but seldom read—engaged in well-wrought exchanges and wrote with respect for the other's ability to understand subtler shades of meanings, their delicious ironic wit often eliciting subtly approving laughter instead of the guffaws one hears these days from the morbidly obese watching sitcoms and stupid videos.

Depth of meaning and the detail sufficient to invoke it have their place, I think we all agree, when we describe the natural world. At every level of existence down to the sub-atomic, at the level of the rudest, most primitive forms of life, we find the building blocks for all existence and the complexity that has evolved, one thing linked to another in a structured network impossible to have foretold and equally impossible even in retrospect fully to comprehend, the mechanisms by which it has all been produced remaining largely in the dark despite advanced scientific tools and the breadth of government-financed research in cooperation with academic institutions, corporations, and a vast intelligence establishment; in the natural world, that is, there is a degree of detail that the most erudite prose could never hope to emulate, yet we do not hear philistines whining about the complexity of existence, do we? or mathematics? or quantum physics? Oh no, but we do hear them, oh, we do, we hear them complain in the snide tones of barely pubescent teens, in those irritating middle-school voices of resentful entitlement, about the depth and complexity of written and spoken expression beyond their limited understanding.

Publishers today market and deliver products—not books, products – to that invincibly ignorant demographic. As a result they only publish works written in simple sentences. Never more than seven words, I have been advised, in a single sentence, never more than two syllables in a word. Aim not at the ninth grade level of the Wall Street Journal; aim at the fourth grade level standard in the trades.

I surrender.

I will get with the program.

From now on, I will write simply. I will use words at a fourth grade level. I will write short stories—*very* short stories—using very few words. Maybe then the whining will stop, and no one will ever be able to say they don't know what I mean.

Bio and Info 12-19-05

Richard Thieme is an author, consultant, and speaker focused on the deeper implications of technology, science and religion for 21st century life. Thieme's work has been translated into many languages and his articles are taught at universities around the world. Richard Thieme's *Islands in the Clickstream*, a collection of work from the past eight years, was published in July 2004 by Syngress Publishing. *Entering Sacred Digital Space* was published in *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium* from T. & T. Clark, Ltd., June 2004. *Identity/Destiny* was published in "Prophecy Anthology, Volume 1," a full-color book featuring sequential art by artists such as Shannon Wheeler, Scott McCloud, Sho Murase, Yuko Shimizu, Nathan Fox and Bernie Mireault by Sequent Media (2004).

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articles in: *Forbes*, *Salon*, *Information Security*, *Secure Business Quarterly*; *LAN Magazine*, *Village Voice*, *LA Weekly*, *South Africa Computer Magazine*, *Wired*, *Counter Punch*, *Common Dreams*, *alternet*, *Internet Underground*, *National Catholic Reporter*, *Asia Times Online*, *.net*, *Internet Today*, *Computing Japan*, *Business Times of Singapore*, *Convergence (Toronto)*, *Computer Underground Digest*, *CTHEORY*, *DoubleClick*, *Ethical Spectacle*, *Small Business Times*, *Computer Mediated Communication*, *Skeptika (Denmark)*, *Milwaukee Business Journal*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Informatiebeveiliging (Netherlands)*. *Now Magazine (Toronto)*, *Future Briefs*, *Access Control & Security Systems*, *Fellowship*, *Phrack ...*

articles anthologized in: *Digital Delirium*, *Cyber Reader II*, *Cyberculture (UK)*. fiction anthologized in *CyberTales: Live Wire*, *Chaos Theory*

A SURVIVOR'S BURDEN

A Memorial Tribute in Poetry to Simon Wiesenthal

Sharon Esther Lampert

After six million Jews were silenced:
Simon speaks above a hush.
Simon speaks above a whisper.
Simon speaks above an earshot.
Simon speaks out loud above the deafening scream of EVIL.

After six million Jews were silenced:
Simon's voice shatters the ghetto walls of anti-Semitism.
Simon's voice bellows in the streets of Argentina.
Simon's voice hallows in the halls of JUSTICE.
Simon's voice harkens in the International Arena of INJUSTICE.

After six million Jews were silenced:
Simon Wiesenthal WALKS his TALK and JUSTICE is done:
Adolf Eichman is brought to JUSTICE.
Franz Stangl is brought to JUSTICE.
Franz Murer is brought to JUSTICE.
Erich Rajakowitsch is brought to JUSTICE.
Hermine Braunsteiner is brought to JUSTICE.
Karl Silberbauer is brought to JUSTICE.
Josef Schwammberger is brought to JUSTICE.
1,100 Nazi War Criminals are brought to JUSTICE.

After six million Jews were silenced:
Simon Says:
"This man is on my list as a suspected war criminal."
Simon Says:
"When history looks back I want people to know the Nazis weren't able to kill millions of people and get away with it."
Simon Says:
"If we don't do anything about evil, that will encourage future perpetrators."
Simon Says:
"My work is a warning for the murderers of tomorrow."

Simon Says:

“Survival is a privilege which entails obligations. I am forever asking myself what I can do for those who have not survived.”

Simon Says:

“I have received many honors in my lifetime; when I die, these honors will die with me, but the Simon Wiesenthal Center will live on as my legacy.”

Simon Says:

“My epitaph should read simply “SURVIVOR.”

Simon Says

(in the afterlife... to the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust):

“I didn’t forget you.”

BIO:

Sharon Esther Lampert has a POETRY WORLD RECORD: 120 rhymes from one family of rhyme. She is a poet, philosopher, pioneer, paladin of education, pin-up, painter, photographer, politician, prophet, and princess. Her publications are too numerous to list. She has an international fan club. She is also a poet-in-your-pocket activist, and there are hundreds of people walking around with one of her poems in their pockets.

POETRY BIO:

Sharon Esther Lampert, is a famous poet, philosopher, and educator. She is the Sexiest Creative Genius in Human History. She has a POETRY WORLD RECORD of 12) words of rhyme from one family of rhyme. In philosophy, she created the 40 Absolute Truths of “The Theory of Reality.” In religion, she created “The 22 Commandments” a universal moral compass for all people, for all religions, and for all time. In education, she created the ACANDY Study Skills and she is the only expert in the country that can transform an F student into an A student. There are many more contributions and a movie is in the works, entitled, “A Complicated Woman.”

Brittle

Tom Page

Bonded to such a place,
they were lost to themselves
& everything and everybody.
Death came early
unless dry-out came first
and you got out, not to return—
left with the ashes of brittle
meandering through
no meaning at all.

LUNCH HOUR

Brian Douglas Moakley

Nancy's coworkers extended the cake to her like a sacrificial virgin. She was expected to be happy by their consideration. Danielle had bought it. John had found the candles in lunchroom. The others had filled out her card with careful penmanship, wishing her a bright and prosperous year. Her boss stood in the crook of the room. He watched her with a calculating grin.

And so Nancy blew. The candles extinguished. The smoke wafted towards the ceiling. They clapped in stutters.

She blinked back a deluge.

Not now, she thought. Not in front of them.

Nancy pushed a knife into the depths of the celebratory bread and sugar. Danielle tried to take it from her, but Nancy waved her off.

"It's my birthday. I do the cutting."

She needed something to do. Something to keep the ocean inside her at bay. So she cut with geometric precision. She placed each perfect square on a paper plate as if the piece were a baby being put into an incubator. She adorned the plates with a matching pink spoon.

She was to have the first piece. The cornerstone. She held it in a loose grip as she leaned against the back of her desk. She took a bite with all eyes on her. The frosting clung to the roof of her mouth. She scooped it out with her tongue, making a strange puckered face in the process.

"Looks like Nancy is going back to margaritaville."

She produced an empty smile amongst the stray giggles, hiding a flash of irritation. For just a moment, she hated all them and then felt nothing.

Her spoon fell between loose fingers. It stuck to the floor, embracing the dirt, hairs, a stray nail clipping. A bath of discarded organics.

"Damn it," she spat.

John muttered something about the "five second rule", and the small room chortled once again. Nancy reached down. Her index finger ran across the back of the plastic spoon. Curved. Flawless. Cold. The cheek of a dead baby.

She bled a tear. A small bead. She didn't notice it. It rolled down her face, prompting her boss to lose his smile. His appetite. He turned to his office. Shut the door.

She paused. She raised her eyes to them. Danielle held her mouth.

The tips of her nails withheld her tongue. John shifted to and fro as if he were wrestling with gas. The others trickled from her vantage.

“Happy Birthday,” John muttered. He turned. His unfinished cake abandoned.

Danielle looked from her. Turned. Turned back.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Go,” Nancy said. Danielle went.

The remaining dissected cake reflected the silent flickering of the fluorescent lights. It had lost all value. Lunch hour was concluded.

LLOYD

Angela Lungu

Living soldier.

So many words on the tip of those lips;
so many worlds reflecting in those eyes;
so many stories carried beneath your breath;
so many passages beneath those feet.

Between those walls,
your sanctuary;
those walls built of sweat and heirloom,
you walk beside the dusty memories
rolling on the floor.

You walk between the echoes
of maudlin nostalgia
that hang in the halls
of your sanctuary.

You never cared about
the money for those books.
They were simply old friends
you were letting go of,
while they passed into their next life,
loyally whispering between their covers
the story of yours.

SKIP THE CRYING TEARS

Christopher Barnes, UK

Phlegmatic on the clammy bed
with a quartz-iodine bulb
a glow
in tropical brilliance. I'm blinded,
see only Anthony,
revelations projecting
as clear-mirror flickers,
marionettes of light on the wall.

Fly by the cycle of crying.
His lake-white cheeks
poised in a woodchip moon.
Grimace.
His knuckles spinning tops,
boyish fingers, skin and bone.
Another ghost, another suicide
a miss all the same.



DIVORCE,

Anthony Liccione

like two cars crashing into each other,
and both cars driving off from the scene-
with their mangled dents attached;
and the course of their lives that mingled
for but a second, a blink of an eye-
the children in shock crying in the backseat
how fortunate for some to have that
second chance to move on with life,
when others have died with their hearts
smeared on the dashboards, a short-lived
reverie thrown through the windshield
onto the highway of a once loved,
but forgotten destination.



INSTEAD OF THINKING OF YOU, I PRETEND

Stephanie Maher

I am in a Paris café.
There is a tea stain on the table cloth,
The sun hitting my knees.
A man, who wants to write a song about my laugh,
Is near me.

He'll tell me that most of the perpetually in love will be forgotten,
But I will not.
He won't let it happen.

I will sigh.
Happy to be in the city, close to the monuments people see on t.v.
Happy the local news is only in French.

Happy you are somewhere across the Atlantic and have no idea where I am,
Or how good it feels to be with this tall Parisian who brings me tea and lilies,
And lightly kisses my forehead,
When he can see I am overwhelmed by the hurry and the noise of the city.

SOCIAL SKILLS

Linda Webb Aceto

Sex became my relationships.
Never got past puberty.

Don't know what to do with yourself?
Take off your clothes.

Trouble holding up your end of the conversation?
Hike up your skirt.

No prayer in hell with such a limited vocabulary.

MAKING IT NUCLEAR

Ray Succre

The swingset had
stilled and did not
play with him, though
would move a girl soon
and make its fun for her.

She was relocated, put to
Chicago with new parents, given
to swinging on the front lawn with
an older brother who's skin was
problematic and smelled of medicines.

While she unseated
herself from the swing at
its highest point forward,
and dropped to giggling there,
he itched his arms, a
nervous, as well as chemical
disorder, and the one in which
she would use to tease and
anger him once she
became comfortable
in his family.

"Your turn! Your turn!" she shouted.
"No, you go again." he advised.

He preferred to
push her on the swing,
and not swing, himself.

It was his swing, though he'd
grown too big, and the thing was
being eaten by rust,
which was a parasite,
like he was being eaten by his rust,
which was a condition.

“–tell you that, well, son... you're
going to have a little sister soon.”

“Mom's gonna have a baby?”

“No no, not this time, bug.”

The crossbeam and joints whined and
groaned above the swinging chains and
seat, but she certainly enjoyed it.

“Push!”

“Higher?”

“Push me!”

“Higher?”

He wondered what would happen if
the swingset gave out, if it collapsed.

Would the metal fall on her?

Would she be flung from the seat?

Would it just buckle and set her down?

Would it fall on him?

The sunlight made him itch.

The clouds had vanished a week.

“Higher?”

“Higher!”

The seat was jarring her.

He scratched his arms.

The chains were grinding and

the rusting joints were voicing distress.

“Higher?”

A GRAIL STORY

Mel Waldman

The old shriveled-up woman, with azure eyes that seemed to search the heavens, sat on her small terrace and drank a cup of tea perched on a black round table. Nearby, her neighbors waved at her from their terrace. She nodded her head and gave them a weak smile. She had taken her pain pills an hour earlier, but still she was in excruciating pain. She was terminally ill. Most of the time, the pills did not work. She prayed for death. But being a religious woman, she could not commit suicide. So she prayed for a miracle to release her painlessly from an intolerable life.

In the distance, Coney Island was lit up. From her balcony, she saw the Wonder Wheel and Tornado. And farther away, in the postern of her mind, she saw a little girl eating Nathan's frankfurters and French fries over 75 years ago, flanked by two loving parents. Instantly, her face glowed with joy. Then she returned to the present.

It had been a dog day afternoon and now, a sultry night. At the other end of the terrace, three moribund pigeons were crouched in a corner. Although most folks loathed the pigeons' apparent invasion of the balconies and even displayed all kinds of gadgets to keep them away, she identified with the unwanted birds and welcomed them. She beckoned the three sickly pigeons to come to her, but initially they were too weak to move. Still, they eventually crawled a few inches toward her. Apparently, some neighbors had left poisoned food for the lost creatures. Yet they had come to die near the old lady who loved them.

When she looked at the birds, her eyes became wet. Then she remembered that not all the pigeons were dead or dying. Like a zephyr, one had gently flown by a little while ago. She wished it had stayed. A familiar friend, it had visited her before. Yet it flew away, after blessing her with its presence.

Momentarily, she gazed at her precious cup of tea. The cup was gold and seemed majestic. It was a gift from her true love Stephen, a.k.a. the Doc. He loved her madly, so he claimed. But he refused to live with her. On the other hand, he lived on the next floor, his terrace right above hers. He often slept in her bed. But he still maintained his own apartment. He was the independent kind, she chuckled. In fact, at this very moment, he was having dinner with his old buddy Walter at the Sheepshead Bay Diner.

Although Stephen walked with a cane and suffered from crippling rheumatoid arthritis, he had agreed to meet Walter at the diner. Before leaving, he briefly visited his beloved Elizabeth whom he called “my beloved,” “my dearest,” “my queen,” and of course, “my Queen Elizabeth.” After calling a car service, he kissed Elizabeth on her forehead, whispered- “I love you,” and sauntered off.

“See you later, Doc,” she cried out. “Love you forever.”

“Yes, my queen. Forever!”

At 7 PM, Stephen and Walter, two retired professionals, sat at a booth in the Sheepshead Bay Diner and talked about old times. Stephen and Walter had known each other since college. Two Brooklynites, they both attended Brooklyn College, the poor man’s Harvard. Walter was a tall, emaciated chemistry whiz who eventually became a professor of chemistry at NYU after earning his doctorate at Yale on full scholarship. He helped Stephen pass chemistry 1 and 2. Stephen, a pre-med student, had planned to become a brain surgeon. With a “C” average, he ultimately attended med school in Europe, taking courses in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris.

At some obscure point in time, Stephen realized he did not want to “get down and dirty” in the operating room, becoming a Janus-faced God of Hope and Angel of Death. He feared the inevitable intimacy with death. So he chose to become an internist who wore the mask of hope.

“I’ll wear a beautiful mask,” he told his buddy Walter.

“I hate to be the dark voice of reason,” Walter had told him years ago. “But you’ll see plenty of death as an internist.”

“Perhaps, you’re right,” Stephen had replied. “But it’s all a matter of statistics my logical friend.

“Statistics?”

“Yes, I’ll be able to smile at many more patients and fill them with a cornucopia of hope. And who knows what the ‘placebo effect’ will do for their immune systems?”

“Stephen. Stephen,” Walter replied. “For your sake, I hope you’re right.”

Unfortunately, Walter’s prediction came true. Stephen saw a lot of death, much more than he had imagined. And although he became an internist, he was quite intimate with Thanatos.

“It’s almost sunset, Stephen.”

“Perhaps, a golden one, Walter.”

“Stephen. Stephen. Always the optimist.”

"You too, old buddy. Remember when we used to stand on the Sheepshead Bay bridge, just a few blocks away, and gaze at the glittering waters of the bay?"

"You bet."

"Well, you saw a glorious future in the kaleidoscopic bay. Told me one day you'd become a chemist."

"I did."

"Yes, and a great one I might add."

"Thank you, Stephen."

"It's the truth, Walter! Nothing more."

A long silence followed.

"And you also said you'd make a great discovery. Cure incurable diseases! Save lives!"

"Yes, I said all that. I was a grandiose young man."

"Yet once again, Walter, you spoke the truth. You saved many lives."

"I suppose..."

"Of course, you did. And your last discovery-Sopor 1818-was the purest one. It brought everlasting joy."

"But..."

"Walter, it's gonna be a golden sunset!"

Elizabeth sat on the terrace, gazed at the glorious sun, and slowly drank her tea from the gold cup. It was soothing and quite delicious. She took a few more sips again and again until she finished it. Then momentarily, she smiled at her neighbors and announced: "It's a golden sun! Soon, it will disappear in a magnificent sunset." They nodded their heads in agreement as she drifted off to a pain-free chimerical universe where Stephen waited for her.

After they made passionate love, she lay in his arms and rested. She was at peace with herself and the universe for the first time in years. Later, Stephen took her on a magical time-tripping journey through the past where she was reunited with all her loved ones who had passed away.

"You're such a gem, Stephen," she whispered.

"It's your birthday, Elizabeth!"

"No, it isn't."

"Of course, it is! And I'm giving you the grandest surprise birthday party in the galaxy."

"Oh, Stephen!" she said softly, as she blew him a soulful kiss.

"You've convinced me, Stephen. It's gonna be a golden sunset!"

"Of course."

"So tell me, how is Elizabeth?"

"She's suffering, Walter. The pain is intolerable."

"Why don't her doctors give her stronger pain medication?"

"They're practicing old fashioned medicine. And protecting themselves from possible lawsuits."

"But she's dying!"

"Of course, she is! And too moral to die with dignity."

"She's a grand woman, Stephen. That's why you love her."

"A bit too proud for her own good. And unfortunately, assisted suicide is not her cup of tea."

"Still doesn't believe in it?"

"Not now. Never! Yet it seems that part of her wishes..."

"Well, of course. It's simply a matter of chemistry. A single atom is a unity of positive and negative charges. And so is a human being. Opposites attract. She wishes and fears the very same thing. You've heard of Freud, haven't you?"

"Of course, Walter."

"Well, as much as she loves you, she prays for death. She can't kill herself but..."

"Nonverbally, she has begged me to kill her! It's her little secret buried in her unconscious."

"Yes, Stephen. Brutal but very real and very true. And as Freud said, there's a Death Wish in all of us!"

It is almost sunset. Elizabeth sits in her chair and seems to be asleep. She is far away, with Stephen, at her galaxy surprise birthday party.

"I believe you, Stephen. It's gonna be a golden sunset!"

"A convert?"

"Yes. And a true believer. Because of you, Stephen."

"Thank you, Walter."

A brief silence separates them until Walter asks: "How are her friends?"

"They died suddenly."

"I see. If I recall, they were terminally ill too."

"Yes, and in excruciating pain."

"Of course. Trapped just like Elizabeth."

"Yes."

"How many passed away?"

"Six."

“How far apart in time?”

“Six months, from the first death to the last.”

“What a coincidence!”

“Yes.”

“And they all died naturally?”

“Of course. Still, there was a homicide investigation.”

“Why?”

“They all died in our building.”

“Another coincidence!”

“Oh, yes, Walter. And there are more coincidences. They died under similar circumstances-including place and time. But ultimately, Homicide Detective Endler concluded there was no foul play. They died of natural causes.”

“Perhaps, Stephen. Or perhaps, someone committed the perfect murders.”

Elizabeth dances with Stephen at her galaxy surprise birthday party. After a slow fox trot, she kisses him on his lips and whispers: “How did you remember my birthday?”

“How could I forget?”

“I did!”

“You weren’t supposed to remember, my beloved.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a surprise, Queen Elizabeth! A glorious surprise!”

“Did I mention, Walter, that your miracle drug-Sopor 1818-brought everlasting joy to those who tried it?”

“I believe you did, Stephen. Did I give you an ample supply?”

“Just enough.”

“Well, let me know when you need more.”

“I will.”

An eerie silence connects them.

“I’m gonna miss her, Walter.”

“Of course. It would be insulting to her if you didn’t.”

“Don’t know if I can go on without her.”

“Your choice, old buddy.”

“What’s left for me?”

“Aside from a lot of self-pity, excruciating physical pain, and the agony of loss, you’ve got your loyal companions at home and your everlasting friend Walter.”

“Thank you, Walter.”

“Oh by the way, Stephen, how’s Mort these days?”

“Well-trained, Walter. And he always delivers the goods on time.”

“Always reliable?”

“Perfectly reliable, Walter on at least six-perhaps seven occasions-just like Sopor 1818.”

“Spoken like a proud father.”

“I suppose...”

“And as an aside...”

“Yes?”

“In an uncanny way, Stephen, you remind me of Burt Lancaster.”

“Are you nuts, Walter?”

“Well, of course. Madness goes with the creative flow. But let me explain, old buddy.”

“Please do.”

“He’s tall, dark, handsome, muscular, and very macho.”

“Correct. Everything I’m not.”

“No argument, Stephen. You used to be five eight. Now, you’re hunched over and I bet you’re not even five six. You’re dark but certainly not handsome-not in the classical way. You’re flabby-not muscular. And no one would accuse you of being macho. You’re too sensitive. Obviously you’re crippled but distinctive in an enigmatic way, with your goatee and moustache, bald head and penetrating dark brown eyes.”

“Thanks for the compliments.”

“You’re welcome, my dear friend.”

“So what’s your point, Walter?”

“You remind me of Burt Lancaster in a famous role he played. But I can’t recall the name of the movie nor the character he portrayed. Still, it’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“Why don’t you have a Freudian slip and let it out?”

“At the exact time and place, I will. And by the way, you never told me where and when the others died.”

“In plain sight of their neighbors, they died on their terraces. Always at sunset. And always while drinking a cup of tea, coffee, or soda.”

“And Detective Endler ruled out homicide in all six deaths? With so many coincidences?”

“Yes. In each case, the neighbors saw a sick person pass away peacefully. And no poison was found in their cups, indicative of suicide or homicide. If they were victims, they drank a lethal dose of an untraceable substance.”

“Incredible!”

Suddenly, Walter looked out the window and cried out: “A golden sunset!”

Stephen’s dark eyes darted out the window, rushed upward toward the heavens, and gently held and caressed this splendid sun before it vanished forever.

“She’s leaving, Walter! She’s leaving!”

“I know, Stephen. And it’s time to let her go.”

“But she’s my beautiful little bird of paradise. How can I let her fly away?”

“Feel her love and let her be free.”

“But...”

“If you love her...”

Now, the silence that stretched between them was like a tight noose around his neck. Hunched over, Stephen looked like a moribund birdman.

Then suddenly, Walter cried out: “I know who you are!”

“Of course, you do. I’m Stephen!”

“No! You’re Burt Lancaster’s character-the Birdman of Alcatraz! But you’ve been relocated to Brooklyn. Yes, I know you! You’re the Birdman of Trump Village! And Mort, your beautiful pigeon, is your sweet, soothing instrument of death, perfectly trained to deliver at the exact time-a few minutes before sunset-my magical dust-Sopor 1818-at the correct dose-to our ladies in distress, sprinkling the almost invisible substance into a gold cup of bliss and delivering these tormented souls from unbearable pain and anguish. Within seconds, it’s untraceable, except for the beatific masks of freedom we see on the faces of the departed, who have already traveled to a splendid place.”

“Are you condemning or praising me?”

“I bestow upon you a crown of courage. Congratulations, Stephen. You’re a true-blue antihero-Dr. Death in modern terms. Yet similar to a brave knight in King Arthur’s court, seated at the round table. And like Moses, you’ve led these lost souls out of a vast desert of despair and into the promised land of Heaven.”

Yet already, Stephen was deaf to this fusillade of fierce cryptic words from the friend who was in complicity with his merciful but ineffable deeds. He traveled to a distant place searching for Queen Elizabeth, praying that love, indeed, conquered all, and hoping that God, or his seven victims, especially his beloved, or the man who killed them-the mirrored-

face he could not gaze at-would forgive him for his sins of premeditated murder, a dark euthanasia, Janus-faced with its subtle violence and divine blessing of freedom.

With Walter's Sopor 1818, he had stepped out of the human domain. Was he guilty of hubris? Much more? Much less? He seemed to exist now-outside the universe of good and evil. Was he a Superman? A god? Had he transcended all human categories? Or had he simply lost his soul?

But looking back and remembering his Queen Elizabeth, he realized a very simple truth: He loved one woman so deeply and passionately that he sacrificed himself for her, saving her soul and the soul of her friends, while butchering his own innocence. And thus, he was forced out of Eden, with a gentle brutal knowledge, transcending good and evil-ineffable and incomprehensible-blessed and cursed by the omnipotence of love, a gold cup not unlike the Holy Grail, possessing the magical secrets of the universe, hypnotizing and subduing gods and kings, coveted and pursued with insatiable hunger and thirst by the beast known as man, and transforming all who drink from it forever.



I WISH I DIDN'T LOVE, I WISH I COULDN'T LOVE

Milos Petrovic

I wish I were a horse, so they could kill me
If I broke my leg,
I wish I were a fly, lizard could cram me,
I wish I were a dragonfly, so,
with the dark, death would come to me,
I wish I were Jesus, so they could crucify me.
I wish I didn't love, I wish I couldn't love.

I wish I were a river, so I could dry,
I wish I were the Sun, to burn the ground
And to turn it into firebrand, to seen,
I wish I were the most beautiful flower, and then to fade,
I wish I were a spring, to flow in, at the moment.
I wish I didn't love, I wish I couldn't love.

I wish I were a bridge, to separate,
I wish I were a dream, to have an end,
I wish I were a candle, to burn myself,
I wish I were an executioner, to kill myself.
I wish I didn't love, I wish I couldn't love.

I wish I were a fish, to chase the lure and the net,
I wish I were a snake, to stretch out under the axe,
I wish I were a virgin, to lose my virginity again,
I wish I were a bird, to land in someone else's nest.
I wish I didn't love, I wish I couldn't love.

down in the dirt

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