

down in the dirt

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

034
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Self Help

Linda Webb Aceto

I love to crack my back;
I can do it by myself.

Noble

Eric bonholtzer

from the book *Duality*

Grace Noble held the vial above her head with a profound look of triumph, an overwhelming sense of wonder filling her. *And they said it wasn't possible*, she thought and couldn't help but feel a tinge of smug vindication as the years of experimentation and harsh trial and error were finally paying off. After the seed had taken root in Grace's mind, the project had become not just a passion, but an obsession.

The substance she'd created had a greenish tint to it, looking unpleasantly like radioactive waste, but Grace scoffed at its foul appearance, knowing that the effect far outweighed anything else. *One month and everyone will be drinking it*, Grace thought, picking up the phone, nearly too excited to dial, still trying to decide who among her close circle of friends would get to try the miracle serum first. "Agnes," she said aloud, already pressing the buttons, "She was the catalyst for the whole thing."

Grace had been having lunch with Agnes when the idea was spawned. "I still tell you plants are superior in every way." Agnes Wright, who worked in the same botany laboratory Grace had labored in for the past five years, spoke with her usual cynical flair.

Grace smiled good-naturedly. "I swear Agnes, sometimes I think you spend so much time in that garden of yours, you're going to marry that patch of lilies you're always fawning over."

"Gracie, don't get me started on how plants are superior to men, or we'll be here all day." She gazed out at the scenery, the veranda on which they were dining overlooking the pleasant vistas of Napa Valley, one of the main reasons the restaurant stayed in business. "And you should be one to talk. It was your research that gave new life to the grapevine's crop cycle at the expense of a year of your life. In case you've forgotten."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten." Grace chuckled to herself, still almost unable



to understand how she'd done such a thing, being transformed almost overnight from a routine plant specialist to a superstar in the world of modern agriculture. "Well, it was really a simple matter once I stopped and thought about it. Empirical evidence just filled in the blanks for me."

"I wouldn't call a full page write up in *Scientific America* 'a simple matter'."

"I have to admit that was pretty exciting."

Agnes languidly sipped her glass of iced tea, enjoying the cool morning breeze. "I still don't fully understand how you figured it out and you've told me at least ten times."

"Honestly, it *was* really simple. I knew that some unknown agent had been leaching the nutrients from the coastline for at least the past ten years. Well, a little digging and some shale analysis proved it for me. I knew there was a severe zinc and iron sulfide deficiency. Underground erosion of salt and calcium deposits affected the deep soil, and the trickle-down effect meant the topsoil was losing its nutrients too. No nutrients, no good crops. See it *is* simple."

"Yeah, maybe that part is, but formulating the chemical compound to stabilize the minerals sure isn't. And that's why you're the botanist extraordinaire." Agnes made a grandiose saluting gesture. Everything Agnes did was exaggerated for theatrical effect.

"Yes, well, can we please talk about something else? I think all this flattery is going to my head. I think I'd rather hear you rant about how plants are better than men."

"Not just better than men, better than all mankind, womankind included." Agnes had a glimmer of delight in her eye as she spoke as if she'd unearthed the greatest life-altering truth.

"Okay, I'll humor you." Grace looked at her friend through a half-drained wine glass, marveling at the refraction of light in it, framing her lunch companion, and wondering just how excited someone must have been to discover what silica could become. "But I'm only asking because I know you want me to."

"Desire," Agnes answered. "Or more accurately, lack of desire. That's what makes plants superior to humans. They don't desire. That's why they don't have wars. Desire is what makes people unhappy. It's what makes people want to lose weight, what makes people fight over things. Want. I swear sometimes I think Buddhists are onto something. No attachments. And what do you think Heaven is? A place where no desire is necessary because everyone has everything they could possibly want right there. No desire."

That equals happiness, I tell you. Why do you think that plants don't fight?"

Grace smiled, with genuine warmth this time. "Perhaps because they don't have any means of holding weapons?" Agnes raised a quizzical eyebrow, in a look of mock disdain. "Actually," Grace continued, the scientist at heart speaking, "plants do fight, constantly. They compete for air, that's why they grow higher and bigger, constantly trying to adapt to get sunlight for photosynthesis. Even their roots try to strangle each other to get enough nutrients. Not to mention the fact that the oxygen they emit as a byproduct, that we all love so much, is really a poison."

Agnes was nonplused. "Well, I stand by it. If you eliminated desire you'd have peace."

Though their banter went on, a deep-seeded idea had already been planted, burrowing into the fertile landscape of Grace's subconscious, and that solitary supposition formed the centerpiece of everything she did for the next twelve years. It was why Grace left the botany field and became a chemist. It was why she never married, and some said why she became a recluse: Desire.

Dr. Doris Step was the invited guest to arrive at Grace's house, a broad smile on her lips, hiding internal jealousy. Doris had been a chemical engineer for six years at Cal Tech before making a northward migration. Although she'd been working in the same field as Grace for most of her adult life, in the short amount of time Grace had spent at the research lab, the young upstart had eclipsed Doris' achievements by a broad margin. Now in her late fifties, Doris hid her disappointment behind a mask of affable tolerance.

"So what's this miracle serum?" Doris was a straight-to-the-point kind of person.

"Uh-uh, not until the rest of the company gets here." Grace smiled mirthfully, seeming about to explode from the magnitude of her secret. Doris made an exasperated gesture, as she sat down on the overstuffed couch.

Douglas O'Brien was next to arrive. He comprised the only relationship, other than the professional kind, that Grace had experienced in the past twelve years and it had ended miserably. When Grace's desires as a scientist had superseded desire for human interest, Dr. O'Brien had called the whole thing off, telling Grace she was too cold, too absorbed for anything meaningful. He now had two children and a beautiful wife, though he and Grace had stayed close friends.

Another knock at the door brought Joyce Rivers to Grace's home. Dr. Rivers, a standoffish woman who Grace had never liked, was the oldest and most revered scientist in the Chemical Research Department at the lab, and on the eve of such a momentous occasion, Grace felt obligated to include her.

Agnes came last, entering with her usual flair, flinging her dark trench coat to the side, saying, "The party can begin now that I've arrived." Dr. O'Brien laughed politely, but the two other women stared in silence, Doris constantly checking her watch. "This better be good to get me out here this hour of night," Agnes continued with a smile. Doris' ears perked up at the comment, as if Agnes had just given voice to what she'd been thinking all along.

"Believe me, this will be well worth the trip," Grace assured them, trying to keep the overwhelming excitement out of her voice. Now that everyone had finally gathered, she almost couldn't control herself, thoughts of the famous Peace Prize running through her head.

The group gathered in the living room, huddled like children who'd discovered their parents' secret stash of booze. There was a taboo feeling to the night that no one could precisely put a finger on. Grace broke the tension by withdrawing a beaker of serum made from the formula she'd been so carefully honing and perfecting all these years. "What you see right here will revolutionize the world. It's been my dream and my goal since a very special friend of mine gave me the idea, what seemed like a lifetime ago." She nodded to Agnes who actually bowed slightly. "Some say it's been my obsession, but I've gathered you all here tonight to show you the future. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity." Doris couldn't suppress a yawn, though she ostensibly tried to hide it. "What you're going to experience tonight will be the wave of the new world. One of peace, love, and prosperity." She couldn't help but think how she sounded like someone at a Woodstock revival but Grace was way too jazzed to care. "You're going to be my test group for my miracle serum."

Dr. O'Brien didn't like the sound of that one bit and voiced his objection. "Grace, you of all people should know that there are procedures to be followed. There's FDA, regulated double blind groups, you can't just whisk us over here and hope to use us as guinea pigs."

Grace snapped at him, "And is that what Madame Curie thought?"

Doris interjected, "She died of radiation poisoning from her own experiments."

Grace was not dissuaded, "Okay, is that what Jonas Salk thought

when he cured the world of Polio? And friends, I tell you, I'm curing the world of something much more important than that." Her words were clipped and ran together like she was hyped up on stimulants. "Much more important."

It was Joyce Rivers who spoke up, one of the first things she'd said the entire night, seeming intrigued, "Oh really, and what is that?"

Grace didn't hesitate. "Desire."

There was a uniform chorus of 'oh brother' and 'give me a break'. Grace, however, was not deterred. "I'm not joking with you. And I have Agnes to thank for it all. Before any of you object, just hear me out, and then if any of you don't want to take part, it's your choice, but I can guarantee you in a month or less everyone will be taking this stuff. And I don't care what the FDA has to say about it."

Again, Dr. O'Brien interjected, "But long term trials, resultant factors..."

Grace held up her hand. "Just give me a chance. You see, it all leads back to desire. Addiction, sorrow, depression, rage. I've been taking this drug for three weeks now. One more week and it will take full effect."

Dr. O'Brien muttered under his breath, "Well, that explains a lot."

Grace didn't stop. "Like every drug, there's is a short spike at the beginning, a period of heightened intensity. With this drug, it's relatively brief; but Douglas, you mentioned clinical trials, and I can tell you I've done extensive trials myself and I've formulated this thing perfectly. Initially, I wanted it to be a one-shot dose, but that was way too powerful, too unpredictable. Believe me I've got a hundred placid, perfectly happy hamsters at the lab who've been given he perfect dosage. I formulated a reduced potency, one that was safe for humans. Right now I'm in the down phase. The drug is changing the chemical balance in my brain, slowly, so that there's no damage to my equilibrium. Like other synthetic drugs, this miracle, which I call 'Peace,' affects the levels of dopamine, testosterone and estrogen in the body, while at the same time stabilizing the dangerous surges in serotonin, which is the primary cause for mood altering effects. Basically, 'Peace' equalizes the hormones, balancing the testosterone and estrogen levels as well as administering a regulated constant supply of dopamine which, as you all know, regulates happiness and thereby placidity, making people peaceful, content, to the point where desire is eliminated. And the effects are even more far-reaching than that. It can eliminate sorrow. It can stabilize brainwaves which could help many people with mental afflictions like bipolar disorder and manic depression. Perhaps with alterations it can affect the palsy that strikes the

brain at old age causing strokes, or regulate healthy circulatory functions to avoid embolisms. The possibilities are endless..."

Grace couldn't help but smile, a sweet victorious grin. "In effect this will eliminate the need for religion, for money. I have the power to create a new world."

"But what if someone doesn't want this?" It was Dr. O'Brien.

"You're just the eternal cynic aren't you, Doug? Well, if that's the case then they don't have to. I'm not forcing this on anyone."

"But you've got to think of the ramifications..." He continued on, but Grace was no longer listening, turning her attention to Agnes who had her hand raised like a school child aching to go to the restroom.

"Agnes."

"Yes, well, I think this thing is great, but you say there is a down phase?"

"Yes, temporarily. It allows for the body and the mind to harmonize. There's a huge spike, a full effect with the first dose, which all you active participants are going to experience in a few minutes, but then after a little bit it wears down, bringing you back. It's less of a shock that way. Then, with regular doses, the effect can last longer until it becomes permanent. Like I said earlier, it takes about a month. Otherwise, I'd be peaceful as can be, but I've still got a week to go. But I've become used to the downs. The dose is great and I can't wait to feel it all the time, but I have to be safe. I don't know what exceeding the dosage would do."

Doris voiced her opinion. "I would have to say, Grace, it does sound exciting, but what if someone uses other drugs like cocaine or Prozac? Won't that affect it?"

Grace felt on top of the world. She'd done her research, thought this through from every aspect of attack. She was ready. "Yes. Only temporarily. Cocaine would release greater quantities of dopamine and serotonin but 'Peace' would eventually equal it out. Same thing with Prozac as that drug has a similar balancing effect, and with other anti depressants drugs that inhibit the release of MAOI. But these are all really moot points because you have to understand that once someone takes 'Peace' they're not going to want to take any of those other drugs. They're not going to need to."

"And the supply?" Doris was a realist and a worrisome one at that.

"Indefinite. That's the beauty of it. I built off of known chemical substances readily found in plants. Why do you think so many societies have relied on medicinal herbs for so long? The beauty of it is, since it's organically based, the supply is self replicating."

An awed silence fell over the room. Grace went to the counter and grabbed four glasses. “Now, since there are no more questions. Let’s drink up. I’ve already had my dose for the day, and I have to tell you, I’m a little jealous.” She couldn’t conceal her smile. She poured the beaker equally into the glasses, the amount little more than a shot of liquor. The four invitees, feeling a part of something beyond their control, swept up their drinks, Dr. O’Brien the most hesitant of the group. In the end, peer pressure and curiosity finally wore down any last barriers he had erected.

In typical fashion, Agnes called a toast. “To ‘Peace’,” she said with a wide eyed smile, and the four drained their glasses.

Agnes thought she was in Heaven, the sheer euphoria wrapping her like a tightly woven cocoon of good feelings, the individual threads all delightfully lifting emotions she didn’t even know she had. *I wonder if this is why they say we only use ten percent of our brain*, the thought fluttered to her, and she made a mental note that she’d have to tell Grace. The only way she’d ever be able to describe it was to say that she felt like she was flying when she was standing still. The only problem with that analogy was that it was all too accurate, her descent rapid, and very unsettling.

“More,” was the first word out of her mouth. The down was so intense, so crushing that she felt as if she’d lost her ability to think rationally all together. It was as if she’d seen the true face of euphoria only to be ripped away as she was about to touch it. It wasn’t fair. “More, more now,” she repeated. Grace backed up a step, unsure about her friend’s rapid change in demeanor. Grace was baffled, nothing like this had happened in her personal experience with the drug. Dr. O’Brien was joining in the chant, almost zombie-like, staggering toward her.

“Agnes is right, Gracie, you have to give us more.” Dr. O’Brien was actually salivating. “It was so remarkable, so beautiful, I have to have more.” Doris joined in the call, stripping off her blouse for some unknown reason.

It was Joyce Rivers who broke the chant-like spell of “More...More...More...” screaming out viciously and lashing at Doris with grasping hands.

Joyce was obviously older, but she had the advantage of surprise, pushing the younger woman to the floor. “She has some,” the crazed woman was shouting, “I *know* she has some and I need to get it. Now. I have to go back. I have to...” she screamed, still clawing at Doris who attempted to fight back.



Dr. O'Brien was within a few footsteps. Grace retreated until her back was pressed against the wall. Scared, terrified, by the sudden and unexpected change of events, she threw the empty beaker at Doug. "Here, take it, I don't care," she screamed, trying to keep the fear from her voice, but failing. With greedy hands O'Brien snatched the container and licked the insides for the remnants of the serum. A glazed look began to fill his eyes as he relaxed, but it was short-lived as Agnes jumped on him, grabbing for the beaker. O'Brien did not hesitate, striking back with hate-filled force. Grace tried to run, but only made it three steps before she felt the glass of the beaker shatter against the back of her head. As her vision dimmed she could see Agnes staring at her unrecognizably,

kicking at her screaming for more, the group of well-educated doctors degenerated into a scene of carnage and death, all searching for Peace.

i/POSSIBLE

Sharon Esther Lampert

It is impossible to breathe in air,
Without breathing in toxic pollutants.

It is impossible to ingest nutritious food,
Without ingesting chemicals and preservatives.

It is impossible to have a loving relationship,
Without bumping into a loved one's emotional problems.

And it is IMPOSSIBLE not to BREATHE, EAT, and LOVE.

The Marriage

Christopher Barnes, UK

1

the lubricated love angel
lurched towards the lethargmobile
to steal a clanky kiss
softening the unforgiving throat of the incinerator
dripping love-slide right down the copper funnel
cooling the hot plate

2

as the machine slept
a transformation broke
the white feathers began to stick
on the breakneck, flat across the hood

The Salmon

Geoff Jackson

The energy of the ocean faring salmon
Coursing the rapids and the waterfalls
Like my dreams, leaping all obstacles
To win through to spawn
In the natal waters, to start the cycle
Again, the gyre turning again,
In my dreams, great hunter, fleet of foot,
I shot the salmon and brought it home
To you. Nature was magnificent
And I sprang waterfalls
With the power of the life of the salmon



GNOSTIC SONG

jm avril

Revolution upon the world.
Desolation following Repression.
Worries eating for the weapon
Is here. Evil is taking over.

Against the ills of fate
You want to dive in the surreal,
Wishing your return to Heaven.
On earth, we are alone.

Divine man fallen into matter
Desperate. Blaming the Creator.
He beget this misshapen earth
Where is the Universal Spirit?

Light in the jails of Darkness.
To free the Sun, a whore matter
Must become and a queen the light.
Liberated soul is healthier.

The liberating material apocalypse.
Freedom but our hearts in darkness.
Against that knowing the Higher Secret
Man overcoming the enslaving spirits.

Gray
clouds

Thomas Rucker

In the face of the ruddy red
sun, came the dark gray clouds.
Like thick silk, they ride across
the sky.
Dropping their silver droplets,
they drift onward, leaving all wet
and refreshed.

iNFEStATIOn

Gerald E. Sheagren

Carl Dahlgren drove his Porsche up the tree-lined drive, marveling at his two acres of lush green lawn. The flower beds were in full bloom – a virtual rainbow of reds and yellows, violets, blues and creamy-whites. He always had a green thumb, even as a child. On his twelfth birthday, he had wished for and received gardening equipment in lieu of a twelve-speed bike. At thirteen, his roses had won first prize in the national 4-H fair.

He suddenly slammed on his brakes, his eyes squinting into the distance. Was that a weed he saw – way over there next to his azaleas? Jumping out of the car, he slowly approached the spot, eyes narrowing, lips set in a grim line. He stopped short of the multi-leafed aberration, circling it slowly like a lion stalking its prey. Round and round he went, muttering under his breath, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. This was impossible, totally unacceptable! Only yesterday, he had smothered his lawn with a specially-formulated weed killer - success guaranteed or “your money happily refunded.”

“Adrian!”

Moments later, the front door swung open and his wife rushed onto the porch.

“Look at this, Adrian! Come over here and just look at this!”

Frowning, his wife hurried over and directed her attention to where he was pointing. “It’s only a weed, Carl. My God – the way you screamed my name, I thought you were having a heart attack.”

“Damn near it. Just look at that monstrosity, screwing up my entire lawn! It’s like — It’s like a zit on the very tip of Julia Robert’s nose!”



“Oh, for heavens-sake, Carl.” Adrian dropped to her knees, dug her fingers around the weed and yanked it up by its roots. “See how simple it is.” She extended her arm toward Carl, growling, as though the weed were a rabid animal about to bite him.

Wide-eyed, Carl leapt back. “Get that away from me! How could God have plagued the world with such infernal things?”

“If you haven’t noticed – he also gave us Aids, crib-death syndrome, serial killers and Muslim terrorists. And as far as your plant life is concerned – poison ivy and dandelions and skunk cabbage.”

“I’m going to spray this entire lawn, after supper. This time, I’ll really give it a bath.”

“This is a new house and an even newer lawn. Give things a chance.” Adrian rolled her eyes, letting out a weary hiss of breath. “It’s only one, itsy-bitsy, solitary weed and an unhealthy one at that. Park the Porsche and come in to eat. We’re having your favorite – prime rib, baked potatoes and asparagus.”

“One weed will breed others. It’s like a bad family moving into a good neighborhood.”

That evening, Carl sprayed the entire lawn with an extra-strength dosage of the weed killer, totally saturating the spot where he had found the lone culprit. Adrian watched from her rocking chair on the front porch, wondering what had ever given her husband such a phobia with weeds.



*** * ***

The next day, as he was coming home from work, Carl gasped, very nearly losing control of the Porsche. His lawn - his whole beautiful lawn - was totally infested with weeds and every facsimile! Big and small and everything in between! It was a goddamn frigging jungle! He leapt from the Porsche, staggering like a drunk, his rubbery legs nearly buckling out from under him. He was going to file a complaint with the weed-killer company, demanding his money back. And then – maybe even a multi-million dollar lawsuit!

“A – A- Adrian! Adriaaaannn!”

His wife rushed onto the porch, stumbling over the welcome mat in her haste. “Carl, what in the world is it? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? Look at this lawn, woman – just look at it!”

Adrian stared, her eyes growing as big as saucers.

“How could you ever have let this happen? What the hell were you doing – watching those nitwit soap operas all day?”

“And what do you suppose I could have done, Carl? Maybe I should have patrolled the lawn, whacking the little suckers as soon as they showed their heads?” Adrian paced, barking a laugh. “No wait – maybe I should have called in Delta Force.”

“This is no time to get smart-alecky with me, Adrian!”

“It’s just one of those problems of life we’re going to have to deal with. Maybe we have inferior soil.”

Weeds kept popping up even as they spoke – much like the heads of cobras darting from the underbrush.

“Come on in to eat and we can discuss our options. Maybe we can hire a professional lawn service.”

“Are you insane? No bumbling strangers are going to touch my lawn! Go on in. I can’t eat until I tackle this mess.”

Three hours later, Adrian parted the curtains and watched as Carl fought the multiplying infestation with his weed whacker. He looked foolish – having donned a pair of her latex dishwashing gloves, as well as the rubber waders he used for trout fishing. Good Lord – you would have thought that the weeds were carrying some lethal virus. He crazily went about his work, chopping weeds down as quickly as they sprouted, his lips moving in a stream of muted curses. When it grew dark, he continued under the outside spotlights – back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. She began to fret over his sanity. When she went to bed at two in the morning, he was still hard at work.

*** * ***

Carl started out for home late the next afternoon, his Porsche riding low under a trunk loaded with a new type of weed killer. When he rounded the last bend of his drive, he screamed in horror, the Porsche plowing down a whole row of his prized rose bushes. His house, his entire house – from the cellar clear to its roof – was totally, one-hundred percent green! The weeds in the front yard had spread like a fungus, and joined



by creepers and ivy and all sorts of other horrendous plant life, had infested the porch and every inch of the two-storied house's brick façade! He could only stare – struggling to breathe, his mouth working like a fish out of water. Finally, regaining his senses, he snatched up his cell phone and placed a call to his wife.



“Hello.”

“Adrian, are — are — are you all right?”

“Well, of course I am, Carl. Why wouldn't I be? Where are you calling from?”

“I'm — I'm right out front.”

“Why are you calling from out front? Supper's ready – you're late.”

“Are you absolutely crazy? I'm not going into that jungle!”

“What jungle? Oh, you mean these little plants?”

“Little my ass! They're — they're all over the place! It's the Twilight Zone, Adrian! It's — It's worse than that Amityville house!”

“Honestly, Carl – why must you always make such a big fuss over things? Maybe you should go to a shrink and get some valium or something.”

“You're the one that needs a frigging shrink! Get out of that house, quick! Move it, Adrian, now!”

“Please, calm down.”

“The house is a virtual rainforest and you want me to calm down?”

Carl leapt out of the Porsche and began to pace, “I’m — I’m coming in there and getting you out, if I have to sling you over my shoulder!”

“Over my dead body.”

“I just might oblige you!”

Carl took a deep breath – trying to settle his nerves – and started out for the house, walking gingerly over weeds as though they were a bed of hot coals. Sweat burned his eyes, his heart felt like a clenched fist. Never in his wildest dreams, could he ever imagine anything like this happening. Reaching the front porch, he hesitated for a few worrisome moments, before tearing away a thick growth of creepers and ivy. Swinging open the front door, he took one wobbly step after another, heading cautiously toward the kitchen.

The lights were all on and it felt as though the thermostat had been jacked up to a hundred. Creepers and vines, ivy and moss and all sorts of strange-looking lichens totally covered the walls and there were weeds and dandelions by the hundreds sprouting from the floor! How – in the name of Jehovah – could they be growing and flourishing from goddamn wood? The moist air smelled of chlorophyll and decaying undergrowth, as if he was winding his way through some steaming jungle. The floor felt soft under his feet and looked down to see a carpet of moss, very much resembling broccoli florets.

“Adrian! Adrian, where are you?”

Her voice replied from the direction of the kitchen. “I’m in here, Carl, and don’t even think of slinging me over your shoulder.”

“One way or the other, I’m getting you out of here!”

A vine fell, dangling over his shoulder and he yelped in panic, tossing it off.

Adrian appeared in the kitchen doorway, grinning from ear-to-ear, a piece of crystal stemware in her hand. “Well, Carl, how do you like my little Garden of Eden? I bet you could find a snake if you looked hard enough.”

“Are you crazy, Adrian? Have you gone totally out of your gourd? Look at these goddamn plants! Mutants, every last one of them!”

The plant life began to stir, seemingly taking exception to his criticism. The heat was unbearable, his shirt having taken on the feeling of soggy tissue paper.

“What the hell do you have the heat up to?”

“Ninety, ninety-five. My little garden needs heat and moisture in order to thrive.”

Adrian held up her crystal glass. “I’ve opened that bottle of dandelion





wine that your father made for us. Quite befitting, wouldn't you say?" She took a sip, smacking her lips with relish. "Would you care for some, Carl?"

"Jesus H.!" he shouted, reaching for her. "And you think I need a shrink! Come on! I'm getting you the hell out of here!"

"You most certainly are not," she responded, yanking her arm free of his grasp.

Cursing, he lunged for her again, but she squealed with delight, scampering out of reach and pausing for a few moments to stroke the fronds of a giant fern.

"I will not leave these premises without you! And the first call I'll make is to the Department of Environmental Protection!"

"You will not!"

"I will so!"

As he prepared to make another rush for her, a creeper shot out, wrapping its leafy tentacles around him and yanking him back hard against the wall. Before he could realize or react to what was happening, another creeper reached down, coiled itself tightly around his neck and lifted him off the floor as if he was nothing more than an oversized rag doll. Tighter and tighter it squeezed, causing his eyes to bug, his lungs struggling for precious air.

Adrian watched, unconcerned, taking another sip of wine. "Now see, Carl – you got my babies all upset. You really need that psychiatrist you know." She giggled. "Or should I say 'botanist'?"

"Auggghhh! He – he –helpth!"

Carl tried to claw the creeper from around his neck, but it was much too strong. After a good minute of wriggling and twisting and kicking, he finally drew still, his face a sickly shade of blue. He hung there – swaying gently – like a cattle thief at the end of a hangman's rope.

WITNESS TO A TRAIN WRECK

Mel Waldman

Witness to a train wreck,
trauma-terrain
ghetto-land,
a witness.

Nearby, a churchyard,
The Cross,
cemetery,
God bless.

The victims
on the train
rushing across my hands in prayer,
can't guess
why,
The stakes are too high.

Back to dust,
incomprehension,
a train wreck less than
nothingness.

In the distance, broken brakes
can't stop a train on a mission. Whose command
screams-"the lifeless shall fly away"?

Witness to a train wreck,
screaming train
roseate, ruined, twisted, gnarled faces
of the Wasteland.

Can't caress,
or say goodbye.
Why are ghosts untouchable?

Witness to a train wreck,
a crying train,
swirling scents of burnt flesh and
rest
in peace, lie
far away.

In a lake of rushing colors
cascading in my brain,
a flood of impossibilities command
me to witness
my
phantasmagoric goodbye.

Synapses on fire bake
my red train
and its smoky sleeper-a fiery void and
a dark blessing
as I
fly away
to a holy, holy land-MY TRAIN WRECK.
Why?

TABOOLSEERS

Victor Phan

Jenny had always been around the wrong crowd. Throughout her adolescence she had been drawn to trouble makers like a moth to the flame. She didn't know why this was so, nor either did she care. She was content with the unpredictability of it all. Jenny could have been a good girl and hung out with all the boring guys, but where was the fun in that? She liked being with the mischievous ones because there was always a rush.

Jenny felt the beer beginning to get the best of her motor functions. The beer warmed her stomach in this otherwise freezing night. She lied on top of the dirt staring up at the bright full moon. She had never gazed into the moon as she did in that moment. Her body relaxed as she stretched out her arms and breathed in the cold air. Cathy sat down right next to Jenny and handed her another beer. As she took the poison from Cathy, she felt how smooth Cathy's hand was. Jenny lifted her eyes to meet Cathy's and was lost by how beautiful Cathy looked in the moonlight. Somehow, in this moonlight Jenny could still make out the green of Cathy's eyes. The way they were lit mesmerized Jenny. Jenny and Cathy had known each other since the seventh grade. Together they started this game of going from one rush to the next.

The girls consumed more beer and lay together bathed in the moonlight. They have never been in such a place that wasn't surrounded by buildings. In this sacred place they were away from the ruckus of urban life. There were no cars speeding by, people cursing, radios turned up too loud, or anything of that matter. Trees, silence, and darkness were all that surrounded them. Off in the distance they heard Alan and Chad coming back from their trek around the woods. It was these two delinquents who had brought the girls to this place of black silence.

Alan approached and asked, "How can you two just hang out like that? Doesn't this place creep you out at all?"

"This place is nice," responded a lightheaded Cathy.

"You really think so? I've had the creeps since we first got here. This place is way too quiet," replied Alan. Alan and his friend Chad were just some of the local hoodlums the girls had met at continuation school.

They were not the best looking or most athletic, but they knew how to have a good time. These were the kind of boys the girls were attracted to. These were the kind of guys that would make nothing of their lives, but as long as they were young they would know how to live.

“How did you know of this place, Alan?” asked Jenny as she sat up leaning on Cathy.

“Chad’s the one who told me about this place,” responded Alan as he cracked open another beer and poured it down his throat.

“Then how did you hear of this place?” Jenny asked the quieter of two. Chad opened a beer and sat down beside the girls. He took a gulp and stared off into the endless echoes of trees.

“To tell you the truth, I heard about this place from a ghost story,” Chad murmured. Jenny no longer felt the warmth of the alcohol; instead she felt the chill of the air.

“A few of my friends had told me that one night they were just driving around looking for a place to drink. One of them had heard of this place from his friend, you know, this empty forest in the middle of the city. So they came here and sat in the bed of the truck, drinking, you know.”

Due to their mild intoxication, the story was very vivid in their imaginations. It was like they were reliving the tale that was being told. Chad’s words made Cathy and Jenny begin to clench each other. It then felt like there were thousands of eyes in the forest just staring at them. Eyes that were so vicious that they could skin the girls with just their stares. They heard little whispers off in the distance but they could not determine whether it was just paranoia or something unseen. The little sounds of creeks off in the distance were loud to their alert ears. This place that they had once thought so beautiful, had transformed into a place of absolute fear.

“And then one of the guys could swear that he had heard something. So he sat up and looked around. But he didn’t see anything. Confused but buzzed, he lied back down and started drinking. A little moment later, he thought he had heard something again. He sat back up and looked around again. Still nothing. This time, the other guy, who was also in the bed thought he heard something too. So both freaked out and got back inside the truck.” The girls were so immersed with Chad’s tale that they did not acknowledge Alan slipping away into the darkness. Alan wandered off back to the road where he had left his truck. He opened the cold metal door and began to shuffle for something hidden underneath his seat. The little dome light of the truck glowed like a bea-

con in the immense blackness of this dead place. He laughed as he grabbed a white sheet from beneath his seat. He couldn't wait to see the expression on their faces as he stared satisfied at the cloak.

"When inside the truck, the sounds that they heard suddenly became voices. The voices were very faint and muffled. They had to roll down the windows and listen carefully to make out what the voices said. The frail but numerous voices were telling them to join them, or something like that. The guys were all scared and stuff in the truck when they realized the voices were coming from underneath the truck. So they drove up a little and looked out the window. And what they saw was that they were on top of two wooden doors that were flat on the ground. They both sat there zoning at the doors trying to make sense of it all. Then there were huge bangs from coming from beneath the doors, like there was something, or some things trying to get out. From underneath the door they could hear howling and screaming and crying. They couldn't tell what or how many voices were underneath the wooden doors, but whatever they were, there were a lot of them and they only sounded remotely human. They got all freaked out and drove outta there. But as they drove off, one of the guys looked into the rear view mirror. And what he saw in the reflection were what looked to be human figures, all wrapped up in white sheets, with eye holes cut out staring at them from the forest as they drove off.

Chad's tale sent a chill down Jenny's spine. The story was so familiar, but in her mildly tipsy state she could not remember why. She squinted as she focused her memory although her memory was never that great to begin with. Suddenly she knew where these two imbeciles had taken them. She was sitting in what the local kids had dubbed *Sierra de los Muertos*. She too had heard stories about the unexplainable occurrences that had happened in this dark decadence. She had heard stories of people driving in to never return. "Cathy, do you realize where we are?"

"No. Where are we?"

"These idiots took us to Sierra de los Muertos."

"So what?"

"Don't you remember the stories about this place?"

"Yeah, but they're just stories. Remember when we played that stupid Bloody Mary game and nothing happened?"

Jenny then noticed that there were only three of them. She looked around and saw only trees. Trees with darkness, trees with silence, but only trees nonetheless.

“Where is Alan?” Jenny’s voice trembled.

“He was just here.” All three of them looked around calling out for Alan. Their voices drifted into the dark quiet of the abyss. Cathy then froze in place and squeezed Chad and Jenny’s arms.

“Oh my god.”

Jenny saw the horror on Cathy’s face and follow her line of vision. There before them was what appeared to be a human figure bounded in a white sheet. It was way too dark for them to make out the visage of the face underneath the cloth. Jenny felt her consciousness and sanity waning.

After a moment of complete paralysis Chad began laughing hysterically. The girls looked upon the mad hyena with question in their eyes. Chad fell onto his knees and rolled on the dirt hugging his stomach. Jenny thought that Chad’s feeble mind had snapped. Cathy couldn’t take the fright anymore and began to cry. She hid her porcelain face into her hands.

“I can’t believe you guys fell for it! You should have seen the look on your faces!” Chad yelled in between laughs.

“You jerk!” Cathy screamed as she whacked her delicate hands on Chad’s laughing abdomen. Chad grabbed onto Cathy and rolled her onto the ground smothering her tear drenched face with kisses. Cathy let up and giggled along with the jerk. Relief liberated Jenny’s nerves. Her nerves had truly gotten the best of her. She cursed herself for being so gullible.

Chad made his way back to his feet still laughing. The draped figure quietly paced its way behind Chad. Chad turned to it and said, “Dude. You can take that stupid thing off now, buddy. We got them good.”

Chad could not see the eyes under the cut out holes but could feel them burning on him. He felt that the eyes were so hot that they could have melted a hole right through his body. Chad’s smiling face turned into a confused expression.

“Alan?”

As that last word escaped his lips a hatchet forced its way into his skull. The melon split in two as the jaws remained flapping trying to let out a final scream. None ever came.

The girls watched in absolute terror as the clothed demon chopped away at Chad’s twitching carcass. The strong thrusts of the hatchet sprayed hot blood onto their faces. Cathy screamed at the top of her lungs. Jenny immediately took Cathy by the wrist and dragged her screaming away from the frenzied beast. Jenny ran through the maze of trees desperately trying to remember the way back to the road.

“He’s chasing after us!” Cathy screamed. Jenny looked behind and

saw the hungry hatchet giving chase. But as Jenny's attention was diverted her foot was snagged and she fell forward. Cathy also fell on top of her panicking. Jenny looked down at her feet to find whatever took hold of her foot. There she saw what was left of Alan. Alan was half the man he used to be. Cathy looked too and began screaming even more frantically than before. Her panic made it impossible for the girls to find their footing. Jenny's eyes were looking past Cathy's head at the apathetic sky. Then the beast came into vision.

"Run, Cathy, he's right behind you!" Jenny pleaded.

With a single stroke it was too late. Cathy's body went completely limp and pinned Jenny underneath. Jenny could feel the pressure pulsating through Cathy's body as the beast chopped away at it. Jenny's mind could no longer handle the horror so everything slowly drifted into utter blackness.

The blackness was disturbed by the slight sounds of dripping water. The sound was so subtle, but for some unknown reason, it echoed immensely. There was also a very sour smell present. It was like the smell of cheese that had gone bad and cooked in the sun for days. When Jenny came back to she found herself lying on a hard, cold, concrete floor. The room was lit by a single candle that was going to die out at any moment. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the light but it was still difficult to make anything out. She rationalized that she was in some kind of concrete room. This was her stone coffin. She then heard echoes and whispers all around her.

She couldn't understand anything. Her senses must have been betraying her because nothing was making sense. Her body had numbed from the cold from her stone coffin. She crawled around searching with her hands for an exit of any kind. Her fingertips found something cold and very wet. When she got closer to the object her eyes adjusted to what was there. She had found the remaining pieces of Cathy. She could not tell if her imagination was making up for her lack of vision, or whether what she was seeing was real. Her eyes then forced themselves to focus even more. She then made out the mutilated bodies of dozens sharing the floor with her. Their grimaces were frozen from the moment they had died. Many lied their with eyes and mouths wide open still trying to let out words like: no, why, and god.

She tried to cry but no tears ever came. Laying in the fetal position her eyes fixed themselves at the candle. She lied there and watched in complete silence as it slowly burned out. Then there was only black.

David had always been the instigator. His previous obsessions had led the trio of thrillseekers to long spend nights at houses rumored to be haunted. At those venues, they would let paranoia seep in and get the best of them for the hours they stayed. Everyone needs a good scare now and then. What harm can it be as long as no one was harmed, right? That was their reasoning, and this logic is what kept them coming back for more. But eventually haunted houses no longer gave them the rush they needed. They've never seen any specters or apparitions at any of their nightcaps. They've only seen shadows of their subconscious projecting images of their own inner darkness, and they knew it.

David had always been the one who found the locations for them to scout. He would listen to stories from other troublemakers as to where their next adventure would lead them. This time, David did not have to seek those unmerited resources. This time, the newspaper was his source of scare. Jose and Tyrone had rushed over to David's apartment as soon they got his call.

"Where's the fire, man? Why did you want us to come over so badly?" Tyrone asked.

David sat with his nose buried in a newspaper. "Check out the first page." David tossed the newspaper to Tyrone.

Jose and Tyrone scanned the pulp paper page. The article was about a group of missing teenagers. Their last whereabouts was the local trouble spot, the infamous Sierra de los Muertos. The hairs on Jose's neck began to rise. All three of them have heard numerous stories of the fabled Sierra de los Muertos. They had never considered going there because it wasn't just rumored to be haunted, it also was rumored be a death trap.

"You got to be kidding, man. We can't go there, we'll get killed." Tyrone pleaded.

"I'll bring my gun. We'll be fine." David explained to his less courageous friend.

"I don't know, David. I've heard some awful things about that place. I heard KKK members used to hang people over there." Jose added.

"We'll be fine. You guys were the ones saying that haunted houses are lame. You were the ones that said they're weren't scary. Now here's a chance to get the real scare of our lives." David sounded almost Hitler-like as he spoke.

"Look at the front page, David. These people are missing to this very day. I don't know if that's the kind of scare I'm really into." Tyrone replied to the little dictator.

“I’m with Tyrone on this one, David. He has a point.” Jose seconded.

David turned his back towards the two. He paced his way towards the window. He stared out into the baby blue cloudless sky. He stared off into the horizon, at the mysteries he would never discover, to the questions he would never have answered. He had always lived in Southern California; all he ever knew was Southern California. And for numerous reasons, he knew he could never leave Southern California. His life, like so many others, was just a repetitious cycle until death claimed its prize. But unlike so many others, he was aware of the game.

“Fine. We’ll have it your way. We’ll just keep on doing what we were doing before. Or why even do that anymore? Why don’t we just be like everyone else and just live like worker bees ‘til we die?”

Jose and Tyrone were now being swayed. They have been David’s friends since childhood. They knew how trapped he felt. They too shared the same feeling of being stuck in lives they’ve never asked for. That’s why the boys started this game of scare. They wanted something different. They didn’t want to go clubbing, street racing, or bar hopping like everyone else. They wanted to do something that would require courage, as well as a touch of insanity. They wanted to stand out from the flock. They wanted to prove to the world that they weren’t just any worker bees swarming in the hive of life.

Jose hesitated what he felt inside, and then he accepted it, and said, “I’m in.”

Tyrone then stepped up to the plate, “Yeah, I’m in too.”

With his face turned away from the easily manipulated fools, David cracked a smirk. David had always been the instigator.

The long winding road ahead of them was as dark as death. Their Japanese compact car could barely drive along the narrow path. The light of the moon was shielded by the tall trees with their long skinny branches reaching over the sky like witches’ fingers. The cold air stung their lungs as they breathed in heavy gasps due to their uneasiness. The young men could not differentiate if the terrain they drove on was scathed, or whether it was just the rapid thumps of their hearts. They could only see what was in front of their headlights; everything that followed was drowned in black and silence.

Each man had brought his own weapon. They each had brought a form of protection that they had put their faith in. Jose always kept his Louisville-sluggers in his car. Tyrone brought a military knife his father

had given him. David had brought his .357 magnum, one that had seen some drive-by shootings in its younger days, but that was in the past. Weapons like David's were easy to come by in the area. For a under a hundred dollars fee one could purchase a gun that had already tasted blood. They relied on their weapons like Chinese monks relied on little mirrors to protect them from the unseen.

The further they drove the more the stories echoed in their minds. They have heard numerous tales of this decedent place. They have heard of the endless darkness in the maze of woods. They heard about others who came seeking thrills but were never seen again. They heard stories of the undead terrorizing unsuspecting joy riders. They have heard of an underground church with a cult waiting for curious adventurers to journey into their forbidden land. All of these tales ricocheted in their minds as they drove deeper into the dark.

As they drove along the endless road David recognized where they were. He took out the article from his pocket and turned on the dome light to read it. There was a picture of where the missing teens' truck was found off the road. The instigator was the first to break the silence. "Let's get out of the car and see if we can find any traces of the missing kids. The newspaper said that there last whereabouts was a little open field off the road somewhere." David unbuckled his seatbelt and turned towards the other two. "Come on. It'll be fun."

Jose's voice trembled as he replied, "Why should we do that? We've been here for five minutes and I'm already more scared than I've ever been in my entire life."

Tyrone leaned towards David from the back seat. "Yeah, man. There's something wrong with this place. I've never been so scared in my life. This place is rotten or something."

David had felt the same aura the others were speaking of. He too felt the paralyzing fear that was carried in the air. His skin had turned to goose bumps the moment they entered the forbidden. His hairs were standing on end as though they wanted to leap from his body. He was definitely scared. But the more horrified he was the more enticed he became. The fear had made him feel alive. The fear somehow set him free from his trapped existence. Adrenaline had become David's heroin, and like any other junkie, he wanted more.

"Pull over, Jose."

"What for?"

"I'm gonna go check it out by myself then."

Tyrone stepped in, "Hell no, you're not."

"Yes I am," David showed his teeth as he spoke.

"Yeah, man. I'm not pulling over," Jose shook his head.

"Fine. We're going slow enough I'll just jump out," David threatened. Jose and Tyrone did not buy his bluff. So David opened the door and leaned a little out of it. The car came to a complete halt. As soon as it stopped David stepped out of the car and turned to his startled friends. "See you sissies in fifteen minutes."

"Dude, you are not going out there all by yourself. There could be psychos running around out there," Tyrone pleaded.

"I'll be fine. I have my strap with me. If anyone comes out at me I'll blow his head off," David contested. He turned his back towards the car and started walking towards the woods very slowly, eyeing the car from over his shoulder. He walked and waited for his friends to follow. The two in the car watched him head off in front of the headlights.

Jose turned towards Tyrone and said, "Let's go after him. We can't let him go by himself. We'll go to wherever the newspaper said the kids' last traces were. Then we'll head on back." Tyrone nodded and they stepped out of the car. Jose yelled, "Wait up! We're coming with you!"

Tyrone and David were walking towards each other in the light. Jose turned off the engine as well as the lights. Everything went completely black. All three of them stood frozen in place. Everything that surrounding them was as dark as the insides of a demon's stomach. Tyrone's heart skipped a beat. David felt his bowels wanting to give. Jose waved his hand right in front of his face and saw only black. Jose panicked as his hands shook to turn back on the headlights. When the lights reemerged, they all breathed a sigh of relief. Jose shivered as he went to the trunk to get the flashlights. Their adventure had officially begun.

Trees surrounded everywhere. The trees were old and dry. They bore the scent of old death. David walked in front with his flashlight guiding. Tyrone and Jose followed behind him, grasping their weapons in one hand and flashlights in the other. The only noise they heard were the sounds of their steps on the desiccated earth.

Jose kept looking behind constantly because he could have sworn he heard whispers of the night calling out to him. He told himself the sirens were only coming from his own insecurities and paranoia, but there was no way for him to be sure. He had heard similar voices in the haunted houses they have romped, but never this loud, and never this clear. He

thought to himself maybe the whispers were some kind of defense mechanism within his psyche telling him to turn around. If his theory was so, then why weren't the others hearing the same voices? They too shared the same primal instinct of fear didn't they?

Tyrone noticed Jose looking back and felt relieved. He thought he was the only one who was seeing strange sights. When he would look down to the ground, the texture of the dirt would form into faces of abomination. He would then blink and they would disappear. But the longer he would stare the more the faces would reveal themselves to him. There were hidden faces everywhere. The surface of the trees would form together like wrinkles and reveal their masks of mayhem. Tyrone could only look at his friends. Their bodies had no evil figures to hide.

It was getting colder by the minute. They could see their breathe swim before their faces. The mist of their exhalations would appear and disperse like ghosts. David was too busy looking for his prize to notice the shift in temperature. David was so high on the fear that he ignored his mind's warning signs. He did not see or hear anything strange. His only focus was to find where the suspected atrocity had occurred.

Tyrone thought about how this quest had seemed like an eternity. They had completely lost track of time. Tyrone looked down on his watch and felt his heart wanting to jump out of his chest. "Dude! We've been walking for over an hour already!"

"You're tripping, it's only been like fifteen minutes," David shrugged.

"Fifteen minutes? More like fifteen years. I can't wait to get out of this hellhole," Jose added.

"I'm for real, man! Look at my watch! We left the car at around ten! It's eleven o' eight right now!"

"Let me see that!" David walked over and grabbed Tyrone's wrist. He shined the flashlight at the imitation Rolex. His eyes widened as he realized that Tyrone had been telling the truth. Where had all the time gone? Each person experienced the duration differently like they were in some kind of forest of lost time. "Oh shoot. You aren't tripping. We've really been out here for over an hour."

"See I told you, man." Tyrone added insult to injury.

"We've been out here forever! I say we start heading back to the car!" Jose's fear was apparent.

"No. We can't go back. We haven't seen the location yet." David spat as he spoke.

"I'm with Jose, man. We gotta go back. The longer we stay out hear

the more lost we'll become." Tyrone stressed.

Fury overtook David. He wanted to pull his gun out of his pants and shoot both of the cowards right then and there. He felt his hand sliding towards his weapon when reason got the best of him. He knew Tyrone was right. They had not found his prize but at the rate they were going, they probably never would. The location was not supposed to be far from the road, but somehow they've trekked in the wrong direction. Maybe the woods were playing tricks on them. He would have to regroup and convince them to go again another night. It would be easy for him; they were easily manipulated sheep anyway. "You guys are right. We've been here forever. Let's head back to the car."

"Man, I thought I had to carry you back to the car over my shoulder kicking and screaming," Tyrone said in his relief.

The trip back towards the car seemed to last even longer. David led the way as usual. It was even colder now, and worse, it was windy too. The wind was so loud that it drowned out the whispers that called out to Jose. Tyrone had to constantly squint and blink his eyes to keep the dust from being blown into them. He did not see any more hidden faces. The wind had made sure that their natural defenses have been neutralized.

David had known for some time that they should have reached the road already. He felt the panic in his stomach. He felt the vomit wanting to reach the back of his throat. He didn't want the others to know that he had gotten them lost. He just kept on walking hoping that the road would miraculously appear in front of him.

Both Tyrone and Jose knew that they were completely lost. They have been keeping track of time on the way back. They knew that they have been walking for hours and found no road. Jose was very frustrated, but he didn't want to say anything because he didn't know the way back either. They just followed their leader with blind faith. They were mice in a maze of darkness.

The wind finally died down. It was as though the wind was satisfied with its duty and no longer needed to blow. The woods were once again quiet. Jose then thought he heard a faint cry in the distance. He ignored it because he thought it was just his imagination again. But then it got louder. Jose stopped and turned to the direction the cry was coming from. The other two stopped and stared at him.

"What's up, man? Why'd you stop walking?" Tyrone asked.

"Do you hear that?"

“No. I don’t hear anything.”

“Just listen.”

David took this moment to sit and rest. He watched as the others stood and listened to the darkness. He then heard the whimpering too. All three heard the cry and stared off into its direction.

“What is it?” Tyrone asked.

“Sounds like a person.” David answered.

“We should check it out. Maybe they’ll know how to get back to the road from here.” Jose reasoned.

They walked off into the direction of the cries. They could tell they were getting closer because the cries were getting louder. Jose led them through the trees towards the despair. While getting closer to the source of the agony, Tyrone had envisioned the worst. He pictured them walking into a trap set by the ghosts of the woods. He imagined all three of them being torn apart by living trees. His body didn’t want to walk forward but he did not want to be left behind, alone in the dark.

There before them was a patch of moonlight. There was a small area where the long fingers of the trees did not block the illumination. In the middle of the patch sat a figure on a stone. They stood there in silence and watched as the figure bent over and wept. Jose stepped towards the figure without fear as the other two followed cautiously. The moonlight revealed the figure to be a girl. She was in her teens. She held herself in a crunched over position crying. Her clothes have been torn and there were bruises and scrapes all over her petit figure.

Jose walked over to her and asked, “What happened?” She removed her hands from her face and looked up at him. She had been beaten recently. She had a black eye, a split lip, and scratches all over her face. But despite all the injuries, she was the most beautiful girl Jose had ever seen. If love at first sight did exist then Jose would be its witness. “What happened to you?”

The girl did not speak and who could blame her? After what she had been through, one would be amazed if she ever spoke again. She lunged at Jose and exploded with tears.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Did someone do this to you?”

She dug her head into his chest as she nodded. Jose felt his heart melt. Jose felt all the compassion and sympathy he was capable of circulate within him. He was brought to tears.

David immediately knew where they were as soon as he saw the girl. They were at his prize. This was the place they had given up looking for.

David felt the joy erupt in his heart. This night wasn't a total waste after all. David whispered to Tyrone, "This is the spot we were looking for."

"Duh. I can figure that out on my own."

"This girl must have been kidnapped or something."

"Yeah, I know, man."

"What the hell is she still doing here? The rescue crew must have missed her, but that was a few days ago."

"Yeah, man. This is a really bad situation."

Jose held the girl in his arms like she was the treasure he had searched his whole entire life for. "We gotta help her, guys."

David had already been satisfied. In this one night he had gotten enough scare to last him a lifetime. He had seen what he came to see and now he wanted nothing more than the comfort of his bed. "Ask her if she knows the way back to the road, Jose."

Jose turned his head towards her ear. He spoke lightly as he would if he were speaking to child who had just awoke. "Do you know how to get back to the road?"

The girl turned her tear drenched face upwards. The moonlight reflecting in her eyes was mesmerizing. Even in the low illumination Jose could still make out her crystal blue eyes. They were hypnotic and deep as the seas. They seemed to have touched his soul. The smell of her hair aroused him. Her skin at his fingertips was silk smooth and feather soft. She nodded her delicate head.

She wore Jose's jacket as she led him by the wrist. The path that they walked in was as quiet as a cemetery. The thought that if she knew where the road was the whole time, why didn't she run to the road to look for help baffled David. David began internally reasoning the situation. Maybe she had just gotten free of her captives and ran back to the moonlight hoping to find friends. David began wondering about the whereabouts and the identities of her captives. Were they just another bunch of troublemakers who were just visiting or were they some unseen band of raiders who lived in the canyon? And if they did reside in the forbidden territory, why haven't they encountered them yet? Many questions spiraled through David's mind as he followed the way.

Too entranced by his train of thought, David tripped over something and fell forward. He landed on all fours dropping both his flashlight and his gun. All of the others were startled by the surprise of David's falling. David was on all fours bent over whatever block of wood that had caught his feet. He made his way back onto his feet and began dusting himself off.

“You alright, David?” Tyrone asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I tripped over a log or something.” David was still dusting himself off when he felt the wetness on his clothes. It must have been the condensation from the log he had thought. Tyrone froze as he shone his light at David. David saw the expression on Tyrone’s face and looked down at his body. He was covered in crimson. David immediately knew what he had tripped over but did not want to accept it. Tyrone manned up the courage to work the light down to David’s feet. The beating in their hearts rose with every inch the light came closer to whatever it was at David’s feet. When the light finally found its target, David’s mind almost snapped like the delicate twig it was. There before him lay the mutilated torso of someone who had come looking for adventure as they have.

Jose put the girl’s face into his chest. He didn’t want her to see the corpse in fear that she would recognize it as someone she once knew. Tyrone bent over and vomited; never in his twenty-odd years of life had he ever been this close to the macabre. The closest he had ever been was through watching horror movies and visiting haunted houses. But they have never seen anything quite like this at any haunted house they ever visited. The sight of the carcass made him sick, but something inside of him wanted him to look. It must have been a few days old he thought. He looked at the killing blows it endured and wondered what kind of weapon could have caused the damage. The blows apparently didn’t just stab the flesh, but split it.

David realized that they were in danger and tapped at his waist looking for his gun. Whoever or whatever did this could be close. David’s hand did not find his gun and he realized that he must have dropped it when he fell. His eyes went straight to his flashlight on the ground. He did not see his gun anywhere near it. His eyes followed the light to where it was pointing. The light led his vision to what seemed to be a human foot standing ten feet away from them. His eyes began tracing upwards from the foot to look at its master. There stood a fully cloaked visage of a man. The cloaked form wore a white blood stained draping from head to toe. The blood had dried and coagulated into brown. There were eyeholes cut out, although it was too dark for David to see its eyes, David could feel them upon him, hungry for blood. The shape stood there with its arms to its sides. Its right hand wielded a rusty hatchet. David’s bladder gave way.

Jose and Tyrone turned to see what kept David’s paralyzed gaze. There they saw the messenger of death that had came for them. At that

moment they truly understood what fear really was. They finally understood how every experience they ever had in their lives that they thought was fear, was but a drop in the ocean of horror they truly understood now. Another predator leaped out from the trees behind Jose and split his cranium with a hatchet. Blood and grey matter splattered on the face of the girl. Jose's body went into massive convulsions as the assailant mounted on top chopping it into ribbons of red.

Tyrone rushed to the girl as David grabbed his flashlight and looked for his weapon. Tyrone dropped his flashlight as he took the girl under his arm and drew up his knife with his other arm. The girl led Tyrone away by the arm as he held up his knife at the attackers. David crawled on all fours desperately looking for his gun. More and more of them came out from the woods. They paid David no attention and circled around Tyrone and the girl.

The girl broke free from Tyrone's protective grip and ran away completely ignored by the monsters of the woods. Tyrone's eyes desperately tried to seek what direction she ran to. One of them came at Tyrone at the corner of his eye but it was too quick to maneuver. With one swipe of its hatchet Tyrone's right arm separated from him. The arm dropped to the dirt twitching and releasing the knife. Tyrone writhed in agony and fell to his knees. He grabbed onto his pulsating stump as he watched them circle in slowly. He knew that this was his end. He closed his tear-filled eyes tightly and prayed. He prayed for God to take him away to safety. He prayed that this was all a nightmare and he would wake up soaked in his own urine safe in his bed.

They circled around Tyrone wrapping him up with barbed wire. The wire kissed his skin. Pain, fear, and dread were his only realities now. No matter of prayer or dreaming could take his focus away from the agony and terror that was upon him. Death had come for him.

Tyrone fell onto his face completely wrapped up. As he landed the barbs went deeper into him. His torturers dragged him by his legs into the center of them. They all wanted their crack at him. They stood around him rubbing the hatches in anticipation. All of the hatchets rose in sequence, then the beasts let out a cry that was far from human. Tyrone screamed his last as they all swooped towards him at once. The rusted hatchets began chopping away at the screaming log of flesh.

Splinters invaded David's hands as he scrambled on the ground looking for his gun. He heard Tyrone's screams diminishing in the distance. He knew when they were satisfied with Tyrone they would come looking for

him. He knew this was all his fault. He could not resist the power that this canyon had. The moment they drove into its borders, David became infatuated with the fear that was in its very being. It made complete sense to him why this place would carry such innate fear. The fear that was in the air was like the last print of the victims that had died here. The terror they experienced before being hacked like raw timber was so immense that it did not go away even after their demise. Instead it lingered in the air with a life of itself, warning all others who stepped into its dominion.

David could hear footsteps coming in his direction. He looked up behind him and saw one of the axe-murderers, completely drenched in blood, coming for the final kill. David panicked and shuffled at the dirt as fast as he could. With every heart beat, with every gasp of breath, death was a step closer to ending both. The assailant was almost upon him.

David then realized if the gun had fallen out when he fell, there was a possibility that it could be next to the torso that had tripped him. David reasoned he could have tipped it under the torso with his foot when he stood himself back up. David shined the light at the torso and saw no gun. He had to take a chance. If he just sat there and waited he would eventually become another torso for future adventurers to trip on. The torso laid right between David and the hungry hatchet. David leapt at the torso and shuffled under it for his gun. Plump maggots spilled onto David's hands. In his mind's eye he envisioned the torso grabbing on to him, laughing at him as the hatchet cleaved into his skull.

The blood soaked cloak was before him now with its right arm raised into the air. As the arm swooped downwards David found his magnum, raised it and pulled the trigger. The beast's chest exploded as it fell backwards. David stood up on both feet trembling, grasping his weapon and looking down on his kill.

There was no time to savor the kill. The scream of the gun had made the others aware of his presence. There were three times more of them than the number of bullets left in his gun. He knew he couldn't kill them all. On the other side of them he could see the girl. She just watched him as she stood next to a tree. She was his only chance of survival. She knew the way back to the road. If they made it back to road, they could find the car, and be free of this death trap once and for all.

The only way to make it to the girl was through the hatchet wielders. David mustered up his courage as he charged at them letting off some shots as he ran. Three of them that were in front fell backwards into the throng. David used this to his advantage by charging through them.

Their hatchets just barely missed him and caught onto others as he forced his way through. David turned around and shot more as he ran to the girl.

“Lead me to the road! We gotta get outta here!” David yelled.

The girl nodded her head and took him by the arm. They ran through the dark woods with the assailants behind them. They could not see any path in front, only endless stretches of dead trees. They ran so hard that their calves were on fire and their breaths dried their throats. David turned around and saw a beast chasing in front of the others. He quickly aimed and shot. The body fell face forward making some of the others fall with it. This had bought some time.

The girl stopped then running and tugged onto David’s arm at another open field of moonlight. David couldn’t see any road in sight.

“Where’s the road?” David asked in between gasps.

The girl pointed downwards onto the dirt. There were two wooden doors on top of the ground. David rationalized to the best of his potential at the moment. “This door must lead to the road right?”

The girl nodded her head, opened the doors and scrambled her way in. David turned to see if they had any followers and stumbled down the stairs backwards. As soon as he got all the way in he bolted the doors shut. This would buy him some more time to make his escape.

Hatchets began chopping at the doors from the outside. One made it through the wood and split David’s already bloody hand in two. He let out a cry and squeezed the remains of his left hand. David turned around to face the girl and froze in place. If there was any urine left in his bladder it would be trickling down his pant legs again. There he stood in what looked like an underground altar. There was no escape tunnel; there were only four concrete walls that surrounded him. There before him, dozens of mutilated rotting corpses scattered the floors. There was a hand drawn pentagram inked in blood on the farthest wall. Unholy scriptures were written in human blood all over this cement coffin. The girl stood in front of David with no expression. Her eyes were just as hungry as the beasts outside.

David didn’t know what to do or what to think. It was only a matter of minutes before the furious hatchets would make it through the doors and claim him to be one of the many that showered the room. Suddenly the mutilated bodies began to rise. The ones that had legs stood straight up, while the ones that didn’t crawled and dragged their entrails behind them. This did not make any sense. David thought he was going mad. They all came up behind the girl and gazed into David’s fright. The girl

Wa\$te

Kurt MacPhearson

the sun of my mistakes
multiplied
by your lack of forgiveness

took steps backwards to join her kin.

David finally realized the truth. When Jose and Tyrone were murdered, they were being led by the girl. She purposely walked them into the range of the hatchets. The predators outside ignored her the whole time because there was no point in them re-killing someone they have already killed. She had been one of the dead this whole entire time. Now David was trapped inside the underground church with the dead, while death was on the other side of the doors trying to make its way in. This was way too much for his mind to bear so he put his magnum in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Click.

He must have used up all of his bullets while fleeing in the woods. The congregation of rotting flesh was before him. Their arms were wide open accepting him as their brother. Soon he would too join the same misery of their deaths. Why else would the girl have led others to join the same fate? After all, doesn't misery love company?

Fo\$ Gold

Ben Barton

A golden nugget
glistens in my sweaty palm
Pure cod liver oil.

iDLING

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

Beyond a knot of trees in the parking lot, the hospital looms like a great, white bandage masking illness and gore, and shielding you, Dad, whose face I'd barely known before; features originally thinned by emotional vacuity, now whittled by cancer and aggravated by an unwillingness to live-- having merely glided through existence, you'd given up long ago when you were still whole, disregarding your own life and family, both overlooked like a small, new-colored mole. Now, your submissive bones mold their shape to these walls. Through the halls, the sterile silence is deafening; murmurs of nurses voices and rolling gurneys hushed only by the sound of waiting as minutes blend into hours, and days fold into nights that never change. I see your face through every door I pass; figures covered beneath sheets praying for salvation, medication, sleep. You could be any one of them. I tremble as I near your bed, that vacancy called 'Dad.' the fact that I am part of you is frightening, enough, but your empty gaze tells me that you do not care... and I've wasted a trip to let you know

I'm here: the gas gauge had tipped
at 'E,' but I drove blindly to get
to you, to let you know you're still
family...but that is dismissed with
your wordlessness; letting go, letting
the whole thing drop as you turn from
me towards the wall, that blank retreat
that holds you safely, expecting nothing
in return...and I must leave with your
reply to guide me, to get me through that
door back out into the light of day,
into the world truly numbed, no longer
feeling the warm sun on my face, and
hoping I have enough ammunition to coast
through the stretch of afternoon in
search of gas before the engine stops

*Previously published in **Underground Voices***

Unruffled

by Jenny Newman

when i tell them
i'm not as infallible as in my youth
i expect they see me as another person
not the woman, the bad influence
the drunk, the slut, the poetry spewing
free spirit i played at for a while, but
this fragile girl beating herself up
and afraid of everything i used to laugh at.
i want to shake them, scream and tell them
i'm seconds from slipping back into that
little black tank top and tight jeans
writing and judging and dancing too close
laughing much too loud
staying out all night and forgetting my limits
i want to.

buuuuuuuut
i tell them it will all be ok.
i'm ok.
things happen the way they do
for a reason and i'm exactly
where i need to be and i'm
still writing.
but it's all
in hindsight.
somehow i've always believed that
growing older would turn me more
brazen and independent.
i have been mentally burning my bra
since the first day i wore one.
now i'm planning to learn to use
(get this)
a crock pot.

what the fuck has happened to me...

Duality

BY AND EDITED AND WITH THE HELP OF

HOPE and Taxes



Janet Kuypers

Janet Kuypers,
from the book "Duality"
and the chapbook "Dual"

1

I went through my tax forms this year and well, It should be one big compliment because I didn't even work last year and the federal government understood this and they told me that I didn't owe them a penny.

and the state government, well, try to put out of your mind the fact that we are in the state with the second largest city in the country here, they told me this year that I owed them more money In taxes than I have ever owed them - even when I even had a job.

and all I keep thinking here is that it's just not fair, and well, I don't use the cops ever and I never use the fire department and well, I PAY health insurance, I don't use the hospitals unless I need to. But it is beginning to look like I am paying for too much and that I should just stop having to pay for it all.

I'm beginning to like the fact that Montana has no speed limits. You're just supposed to use common sense when you drive, because the theory is that you're supposed to be able to have enough brains in your head to decide for yourself when you've had enough and when you've had too much.

2

I'm tired of having hope, that's all.

There's always something that is bothering me. There is always something that is getting on my nerves. There is always something that isn't fair to me, that is ripping me off, that is screwing me over. And then there is always something that is making me feel like I haven't given enough and that I have to give more, and when I have given enough they want to take more from me.

It's like when you're trying to take blood from a patient that has been

dead for a couple of weeks and the blood has dried out for a good week there. And you're thinkIng, if I just turn the pressure up a little bit on this little electronic gauge here maybe I can get a little more blood here and maybe we can conduct a few more experiments.

Well, maybe it's like this.

3

I worked for years at a nice corporation...well, a company, a nice company, with an owner that made a cool million every year wLth his glorious profits and he gave nothing to the staff.

In fact, he didn't want to give titles to the staff, because then they would have more reason to leave and you know, they knew they did the work (they did the work of more than one), and they knew they wouldn't get Christmas parties, and they had to fight for raises and they were always thought of as less than what they deserved.

And I know I sound like I'm ranting here but but give me a break, I deserve it after all this time. And I'm tired of feeling this way.

4

so this is my theory; I don't have all the details worked out so forgive me on this one but...if everyone can sustain their own can't we choose to be our OWN country? I mean, forget this gun-banning thing, forget this BANNING thing altogether, and let's just let people in on a first-come, first-serve basis, just the people that earned it, just the people that deserve it.

We need to just get an island here. and if we don't know what island to buy, I suggest that we just use all the yard waste that has collected over the years in this country alone.

I mean, I know of a guy who decided to keep all the junk mail he got in a given year and I wonder if he's still doing that if he has the space for all the junk mail that is usually sent to your house. Maybe he's doing it to show how much junk we have to deal with, or to show what a waste it is. I don't know what his reasons are but either way, you gotta think that it makes a good point.

We could use all of this trash that we get in our lives that we have to get rid of to create our own island, so to speak.

Well, maybe that would work.

There's got to be a few engineers out there that feel the same way I do that are sick of some of the same things that I am and maybe they would be able to come up with some of the answers here

I'm sure they'd be paid WELL for their services. I'm sure of it.

i Dreamt About You Last Night

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I dreamt about you last night. I called you on the phone even though you passed away over four weeks ago now. I don't know why I called, I don't know what I was hoping for, but when you answered your phone I said, "Dave?"

You said, "Yes."

And I asked, "How are you?"

You said, "Fine."

And I asked, "You're not dead?"

You said, "No."

"But I just told someone you passed away a month ago."

"Oh," you said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of it." And you sounded so - so relaxed. So peaceful.

They say that dreams are your chance to think over the things unresolved from your day. And I keep dreaming about you. Don't I think about you enough?

You're the one that left me. Why are you coming back, at night, when I let my defenses down, slipping in through my window and working your way into my dreams?

I dreamt about you last night. We were sitting together, about to go out for the evening. You were wearing a black t-shirt and black jeans. We were running late, and you were angry. "I wanted to wear this, but I wanted to put more black on - I wanted to wear my black vest and my black jacket." You know, I thought it was always funny, how much you cared about the clothes you wore. So I said, "But Dave, you look fantastic in your jeans and t-shirt." And you smiled at me and kissed me.

I wish I could have told you more in life how good you looked. I'm sorry, Dave. I'm so sorry. I wish in life I could have told you the things you wanted to hear.

I saw you today. You were in a black car and you were wearing dark sunglasses. He could have been you, if I closed my eyes and squinted just slightly. You pulled up in the lane next to me as I was driving to my sister's



house. You were about to turn right and I watched you look at the oncoming traffic, waiting for your chance to leave me again.

Let me think that it was you, driving, living. Let me think that you're just ignoring me. Then I can be angry with you.

I dreamt about you last night. I was on a cruise ship, and you were working as a waiter. You wore one of those silly short jackets for your uniform. It was a sea blue. And every time I thought I saw you you would turn away to do your job. All I ever caught were fleeting glimpses of you, walking away.

All I keep thinking is that my days are finally free of you but they're not. I keep thinking of you. And it isn't enough. I still can't escape you at night.

joe Putz-a-vucki

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

My mother told me about one of my father's clients, ed kazinski. he had a stutter and you couldn't mistake his voice.

well he called the house one night and my father was out with the boys and so my mother decided to play a trick. she told ed "my husband is out with ed kazinski and he won't be home for a while"

and ed stuttered, tried to make an excuse, cover up for my father and said, "uh, well, tell him joe putz-a-vucki called" and he quickly hung up the telephone. thought my mother didn't know his voice.

later he told my father he covered up for him and my father said, my wife knows your stuttering voice, silly. everybody can recognize your voice. she was just playing a joke. and by the way, who is joe putz-a-vucki?

ed told my father that putz-a-vucki was polish for "under the sidewalk" and it was just what came out of his mouth when he didn't have time to think.



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