

down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets



v.036 July '06

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Scars art, pages 14-17. Cover art of a flag on the side of a Pennsylvania barn.

Touching the Sand but Feeling the Snow

Michael Shannon

She feels so cold. *Brrr*. Cold like an icicle, like snow, like ice cream. Cold. Very cold.

Too cold.

It's August. August in Pennsylvania. It's hot. Humid. The temperature is easily over ninety degrees. And she's wrapped up in blankets, in her room, alone, the sun sifting through the window's blinds and infringing on her solace. She hates the sun, mornings, daytime.

She likes things to be black, dark, night. Nighttime's the best, even though it's colder.

At dusk, usually, she leaves her bedroom and takes a shower, drinks soup, drinks wine—to stay warm. During the day though, it's just blankets and tears and shaking. Shaking from the cold that comes from somewhere as the sun beats about ninety degrees of heat on her bedroom window.

Today she feels different though.

Today she feels like shopping, maybe for a red dress. She never had a red dress. She thinks that maybe she'd like one. Red like an enormous apple. Or red like the cold cheek of a frozen child, playing alone and making a snowman in the pure, soft snow of January. She likes red; sometimes it reminds her of fire though, which *does* remind her of heat, but she likes it anyway. She just simply likes red.

She likes things that she doesn't like. She's one of *those* people. She likes being sad, being sad makes her happy. One of *those* people. But, she doesn't feel that way about the cold, that's the only exception. She truly hates the cold.

Brrr.

Her name, ironically, is December.

Her own name reminds her of snow and Christmas and Santa Claus. She always shivers when someone addresses her. She loathed roll call in school. She even hates her dead parents for naming her that.

She hates her name.

She hates the month of December too, but loves Santa Claus—she thinks he's adorable, cute. She even likes to pretend that she still believes in Santa, but she knows, verily, that she doesn't—even though she leaves cookies out for him every year, which she eats before he gets a chance to.

She figured out one day that if the month of December never exist-

ed—if it was called Bubember, or anything else—that she'd never have her name. She didn't want to be called Bubember either though. She really didn't want to be called anything, especially not a whore, or a slut, or a liar and a pig.

She didn't think she deserved to be called names, not at the age of thirty-four—which was two years ago. She's now thirty-six, single, alone—alone, but not lonely.

In high school, yes, name-calling was acceptable. But, at thirty-four-years-old it wasn't acceptable.

But, William, her old boyfriend, is now gone—living with some girl in a trailer park in New Hampshire. She wants to replace William with someone else, but only someone from the movies—someone nice, not someone who will debase her and hit her when she's wrong. She wants Brad Pitt. She knows that Brad Pitt wouldn't do that. Brad Pitt, to her, is the quintessential man. She loves the movie *Fight Club*.

So, today she figures she will get that red dress. She'll walk out of the house with the ninety degree sun beating on her face, her shivering body wrapped in a shawl, go into a department store, and simply buy the dress. Maybe she'll wear the dress home, allow all the guys to stare at her in her car.

It can, and will, be that simple.

She'll probably, she thinks, buy a bottle of Chardonnay, and throw in a Brad Pitt movie when she gets home. Maybe *Fight Club* again.

She'll sprawl on the couch with her legs spread as wide as they'll go, her red dress ruffled up around her hips, a glass of cold wine trapped between her smooth-inner thighs, just watching Brad Pitt and all his muscles, and forgetting, hopefully, for a bit, about everything outside that's real and cold.

THE UPROAR

jm avril

Eternal landscape
Where the old age
Of the stones
Has, of the cemetery,
The dark peace
Of the corpses.

And I notice
The lawless and godless
Young and mischievous
Digging up the corpse,
Questing for the number;
Early morning coolness.

The children's uproar
Trouble the old folks,
Greedy for nursing homes,
Sparing of vices,
The nomads are mad,
And the sedentary life-less.

I, the keeper
Of sepulchral dust
I like the Black Grail
Of the lawless and godless,
King-like youth
For me the terrestrial.

BIG HIT AT THE LONE WOLF

Gerald E. Sheagren

My mother, Mary Elizabeth Frye, graduated with high honors from the University of Hard Knocks. My father – whom she affectionately called “honey bunny” – was killed at the age of thirty-one, having been crushed by a road-grater while his construction crew was working on the new interstate. Strapped for money – with little time to grieve – Mom had no other choice but to join the work force, taking a ten-hour-per-day job at Henderson’s textile mill in order to support myself, a younger brother and two older sisters. And – believe me – it was touch and go for a number of years with the very barest of essentials.

After thirty-four years of hard and loyal labor, Mom retired on a modest pension and Social Security, and due to all the lint that she had inhaled, with a portable oxygen tank that she was forced to use whenever she got angry, nervous or excited. And – believe me – that was a good ninety-percent of the time. It was fairly easy at home, but when she was on the road, it was part of her attire, just like her oversized handbag and her odd assortment of frumpy hats.

Her first four years of retirement were ordinary and humdrum, or as she phrased it, “This is boring me out of my frigging gourd!” But all that would quickly change when an Indian casino sprang from the happy hunting grounds a few miles out of town. The tiny reservation had been there for years – far off the beaten path – with a handful of tribal members living in rust-scabbed trailers and a dozen or so ramshackle houses. But when the Injun casino boom took hold – starting with Foxwoods in Connecticut – the tribe started its long legal battle for federal recognition. There were billions to be had and they wanted their fair share, plus some.

I’m not sure when Mom got hooked, but it happened with a suddenness that put my head in a spin. Pulling a slot machine lever became as commonplace for her as engaging the flusher on her toilet or stabbing the little number pads on the remote control. When the pension and Social Security checks arrived, she was in seventh-heaven, off in a flash to the bank, where she ignored her checking and savings accounts in favor of cash. Then she would round up Daisy DeLuca and Mavis Beecher, her gambling cronies, and off the three of them would go to the Lone Wolf Casino.

I was on winter layoff from my construction job when I received a

desperate phone call from my mother – early on a morning in mid-February. It seems that her clunker of a car wouldn't start and the Three Musketeers needed a lift to the Lone Wolf. I tried to reason with her, advising that she spend her money to repair the car instead of feeding it to the slots. But, as expected, she wouldn't have any part of that foolishness, and after playing on my sympathies that I was her only child still living in-state, I gave in and headed for her place.

When I got there, I found Mom busily primping herself in front of the bathroom mirror. After all, a woman had to look her absolute best while the casino fleeced her for every cent she was carrying.

"C'mon, Ma – what say I take you out for a nice lunch and we can catch a movie of your choice? Everything's on me. To hell with the Lone Wolf – it's gotten enough of your money."

She shot me a look that could have spot-welded two pieces of scrap iron. "Oh, sure, ruin my day. Why should an old lady have any pleasures?"

"Spending some quality time with your son isn't a pleasure?"

"I spent enough quality time with you when you were a kid." Her mouth puckered as though she was sucking on an extra-sour lemon. "Worse yet, when you were a teen."

"Well, thanks a heap, Ma. All that I'm trying to do is stop you from blowing your money at that damn casino. The Indians get richer and you get poorer. How about the electric, cable and phone bills? Not to mention your blood pressure medicine and oxygen refills. And – God forbid – those repairs on your car."

"Go ahead – deprive me of my fun."

"Squandering your money is fun? Why don't you take up bingo or crocheting?"

"For thirty-four long years —" She held up her arthritic hands, wiggling her knob-knuckled fingers. "— I worked these poor hands to the bone, so my kids could have food in their mouths and clothes on their backs. And, now, I'm supposed to sit in some sort of old age dementia and do what – cut out paper dolls and string them along the ceiling."

"Jeez, Ma."

"Or maybe I should squirrel away every penny so you and your siblings can live it up when I croak."

"I'm not like that, Ma, and you know it. Hell, I hope you live longer than me."

"Oh, sure, break an old woman's heart." She started to gasp for air and dashed to her oxygen tank on wheels, placing a forked, clear rubber

tube into her nostrils. “See — huff, puff — what you’ve gone and done. Get me all riled up — huff, huff — and I can’t catch my breath.”

“Okay, okay - have it your way,” I said, taking a long, weary breath. “Feed those one-arm bandits so the two-armed bandits can live in the lap of luxury. That is absolutely okey-dokey fine with me. I have no problem with that, at all. Uh-uh. Not this guy.”

She had her hat and coat on before I could say “jimmy cricket”, tilting her oxygen tank onto its two wheels and heading for the door. “Let’s get this show on the road. We have to pick up Daisy and Mavis.”

Five minutes later, I pulled up in front of a brick ranch and honked the horn. Daisy DeLuca – all three-hundred pounds of her – came surging out the front door, smiling and waving as she waddled down the walk. Her little dark eyes had always reminded me of two raisins pushed deep into a mound of dough. When she plopped into my rear seat, I heard my suspension creak, followed by a long psssst from my shock absorbers.

“Hey, Mary Elizabeth! How ya doin’, Howard?”

“Fine, Daisy.”

“Thanks for the ride. We would have had to taken a taxi, otherwise.”

I had to laugh to myself. They had oodles of money for the slots, but a three-way split for a taxi was unspeakable.

I cut over three blocks and found Mavis Beecher eagerly awaiting our arrival on the front porch. She was the exact opposite of Daisy – a small, frail, wizened woman with a frizzly mop of white hair and the inevitable cigarette drooping from the corner of her mouth. She smoked three packs of cigarettes a day – four if she was on edge. How she had ever made it to the age of seventy-three was one of the wonders of the world.

“Howdy, girls.” She gave me a swat across the back. You too, Howie.”

“Good to see you, Mavis,” I lied. “How’s everything?”

“Ah, ya know. George nags me about the yellow curtains and my doctor tells me that my breathing sounds like the African Queen. Otherwise, I’m just peachy and ready to win a bundle.”

Ten minutes later, I dropped the Three Musketeers off at the front door of the casino and found a parking place as close as possible. When I found them, they were standing in line, waiting to swipe their cards through one of the computerized terminals set up near the entrance. The Lone Wolf sent thousands of these cards out through the mail, enticing their customers with the chance to win money or cars or all-expense-paid trips to Vegas. The catch was you had to be at the casino in order to win, and, while you were, chances are you would get the urge to squander away

a few of your hard-earned dollars. My mother swiped her card and a “Sorry. Try again tomorrow” flashed across the screen.

“Drats! I’ve never won anything yet.”

I chuckled. “And you probably never will.”

“Well, thank you so much, mister know-it-all.”

“It’s nothing but a gimmick, Ma.”

“You’re an inspiration, Howard – you really are.”

I heaved a weary sigh.”

“Just like when you were born. You were an inspiration not to have more kids. But did I take heed?” She rolled her eyes. “Oooohhh nooooo!”

“You know, Ma – you can be terribly cruel, at times.”

“At times?” A cackling laugh. “I must be losing my touch.”

We made our way into the hustle and bustle of the casino. All I could hear was the ping-ping, ding-ding and ting-ting of thousands of slot machines. I noticed that a good eighty-percent of the people were sixty-five and older. Hurrah for Social Security! The casino was decorated with eagles and wolves, feathers and beads and dream catchers. Chuckling to myself – I wondered why not a few wampum belts.

We decided to rendezvous next to the huge bronze wolf at exactly three o’clock and the three women went their separate ways. I tagged along with my mother, watching as she exchanged a twenty for two rolls of quarters and sat down at a bank of slots, placing her handbag on the chair to her right and her hat on the one two her left. Sweet Mary and Joseph – if one wouldn’t take her money fast enough - she was going to try her luck at three! After taking a long drag from her oxygen tank, she placed her comp card into a slot, a long, telephone-like cord attaching it to her wrist. There were points to be made for meals, lodging and goodies at the shops, and she wasn’t about to miss out on them. Five or so minutes into her ménage a trois, a young guy came along and tried to feed three quarters into the machine to her left. She slapped his wrist, knocking the coins to the floor.

“Hey, lady, what gives?”

“That happens to be my machine, sonny boy. Are you trying to deprive an old lady of her livelihood?”

“Uh — jeez — I’m sorry.”

“And well you should be.”

Snatching up his quarters, the guy beat a hasty retreat.

“For crying out loud, Ma – you embarrassed the hell out of me.”

“Oh really? Well, not half as much as you embarrassed me in the

delivery room.”

“You know – I’m getting mighty sick and tired of being your whipping boy.”

“La-dee-da.”

I stomped off – thoroughly disgusted – and tried to kill some time until the rendezvous at three. I nursed a beer at one of the bars; wandered the casino from one end to the other; even tried my luck on a few spins of a roulette wheel. When we met at the wolf, I could see by the sour expressions that nobody had won.

I just had to ask: “Well, girls, did anyone break the bank?”

“Hey, you win some, you loose some,” said Mavis, her cigarette spewing smoke like a steel mill’s chimney.

Daisy shrugged. “We’ll hit it next time. I could feel it in my bones.”

“That’s your rheumatism,” quipped Ma. “I think these damned machines are rigged.”

“Well, the next time the three of you need a ride, don’t call me. I don’t want to lay eyes on this place again.”

As we were taking a short cut through a small eating area, my mother glanced around. “You see any cameras, Howard?”

“Why?”

“Never mind ‘why’ – do you see any?”

“No.”

My mother snatched a dill pickle that had been left on a plate at one of the tables and concealed it in her hand. I was about to ask what was up when she jabbed in the ribs with an elbow. It wasn’t long before her game became all too clear. In an area where the carpet briefly turned to hardwood, she dropped the pickle, stepped squarely on it and went down in the best choreographed fall that I had ever seen. A Hollywood stuntwoman couldn’t have done a better job. And there she laid – moaning and groaning and wheezing for air. The woman should have won an Oscar.

“What in the hell is going on here –huff, puff – leaving food all over the floor. My back, my back! Oooohhhh!”

A tall, gray-haired manager leaned over her. “Are you okay, ma’am?”

“Do I look okay, you idiot! Huff, puff, puff. Call me an ambulance! The pain – the pain is terrible! Get me my oxygen tank!”

My mother was transported to the hospital where she quickly hooked up with an ambulance-chasing lawyer by the name of Leroy Barnes, and, nearly as fast, a four-million dollar lawsuit was filed against the Lone Wolf. Pain and suffering; mental anguish; the worsening of a pre-exist-

ing health problem; the whole enchilada. A mere three weeks later, the casino – fearing a long, dragged-out legal battle with oodles of bad publicity – anted up a cool two-million dollars towards my mother’s retirement fund. It was a fortune to her, but pocket change for them. Twenty percent went to Leroy Barnes.

Within the next four months, my mother sold her house, furniture and car, and with little more than a quick “goodbye”, she caught a flight to Phoenix, where she hoped the dry climate would help her lungs and to be near my thrice divorced sister, Miriam, and her seven kids.

I went to visit her just before Christmas – where she was living in her new condo – and discovered that she had bought a candy-apple red sports car and a closet full of designer clothes. And – to top it all off – she was dating a guy nearly ten years younger, who favored a pony tail and oodles of turquoise jewelry. His name was Gordon Youngblood, and guess what – the gigolo was a full-blooded Pima Indian. Native Americans seemed to be playing an important role in my mother’s new-found life.

Jealous, and feeling a bit left out, I started to hit the Lone Wolf at least twice a week – searching for my own bag of riches. So far, I haven’t had any luck, but Dasiy and Mavis tell me that a big hit is just around the corner.

The Yellow Fox

Christian Ward

The forest is silent as an image
from a postcard, our only audience
here are trees and falling snow.
As we start to renew the tracks

we made yesterday, I hear sunlight
rummaging through the branches,
following us like an invisible fox
to places that will soon be forgotten.

And as the snow melts, all that’s left is you -
a poem shaped out of things I never
knew I had.

Untitled haiku

Michael Levy

Now you see me
now you don’t
waving to particles.

BLACKOUT

Mel Waldman

I followed the intoxicated private eye into the bleak streets of Coney Island. Christmas Eve, and I trudged through the heavy snow. The night was long and white and maybe holy. Brooklyn was covered in deep snow for the first time in decades.

The guy I was tailing tonight was my client. He had hired me to find out what he did after dark when drunk and into a blackout. The money was good and I couldn't afford to turn down another job. Recently, I said no to some freaky clients. I'm hungry but not dumb. But I don't mind following a fellow P.I. after hours into a few bars. So I took the gig.

He drifted from bar to bar and swallowed a lot of whiskey. He didn't see me in the dark corners where I drank Scotch on the rocks. But I guess somewhere in the postern of his wet brain musta been a faint memory of the blob he hired. Maybe.

A few hours into the night and he picked up this flaming red whore. They staggered into the icy night across the deep snow past Nathan's and into the House of Horrors, not the fleabag hotel nearby. I waited a while but not too long. Especially after the slut rushed out of the joint alone.

I watched the bitch scurry off. I entered the House of Horrors.

Killing lights assaulted me, surrounded me, and swept me away into a kaleidoscopic ocean of unreality. I staggered across the sprawling room and saw the ghostly form in the distance.

Beneath the exhibit labeled *The Pit and the Pendulum* was my client. Bulging eyes of terror looked quizzically at me from another world. I leaned over, gazed compulsively at the corpse and said: "Dead!" And then the lights went out.

They didn't kill me. Eventually, I woke up. When I opened my eyes, they smiled wickedly at me.

"What do you want?" I asked feebly.

"You!"

"Why?"

"There are reasons."

"Reasons?"

"Yes. But they are irrelevant right now."

THICKER THAN WATER

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

I can tell you're ready to snap--
living with Mom would do that
to anyone

"I see. And if I
refuse to cooperate?"

"You have already
suffered consequences."

"Because...?"

"A matter of some
freaky clients you
rejected."

"What do you want
from a small-time PI.?"

"Nothing. And
everything!" They
sauntered off.

"What do you
want me to do?"

"Wait!" they said
in unison, as they
moved toward the
door. "Just as your
predecessor did. We'll
contact you soon.
Code name is *Blackout*.
We're a secret organi-
zation. Officially, we
don't exist but ... We
are everywhere."

no, I take that back:
you have to be related by blood
to be affected by that woman--
she gets under our skin
because she knows she can

she knows well every sore spot,
every wound,
and wastes no time filling them
all with salt

I had enough of her craziness
as a youth;
even being on my own I've much
therapy ahead of me, still,
trying to unfuck what she screwed up
and the last thing I need is more
reminders around here...

bro, I'd take you back in a heartbeat,
but one suicide in the family's enough

Previously published in My Favorite Bullet

Before they vanished into the white night, I cried out: "Did he know?"

Never looking back, they reached the exit and asked dispassionately,
almost imperceptibly: "Do you?"

“It’s all relevant,” said _____ .

kamuran kelly

1+1=

The brown bagger at the end of the aisle is causing a commotion
In no subtle way, on this smoky day, he is exploding cans of soda.

The girl on the other ends pulls the c(h)ord across her middle
She presses shiny thumbtacks into her shoe soles
and begins to tap, tap, tap.

He says, “waste not, want not.” He hides the plastic ones behind
the cereal boxes in aisle five. They know nothing of his plan.
They don’t hear his smirk.

She is a step beyond oblivion. Her shoes silvering the tap.
Tripping the light fantastic; her work a Vermeer in waiting.

(He says what she knows, because he says nothing.
She knows what he knows, and that is something).

1+1+1+1=

In the gallery, she seizes the monochromatic picture
and names it monosyllabic. Her artful dodging of pertinent
questions, leads us to believe in art.

His eyes dart back and forth along the stretch of road.
His mind collapses things that have strong resolve.

She glues boxes together, a platform to the sky.
On hinges wooden hangs, on wings transparent glides.

He is a fool without the foolery.
He has a tooled leather belt.
He wants to whip the world with it.

(He knows what she knows, because he says nothing.
She knows what he knows, and that is something).

SPRINGTIME & FRIED CHICKEN

Jaz

Something about the winds blowing
made me think of you tonight
It reminded me of your scent
But the winds were calm in their flow
and brought me back to the place
When we were perfect like
hot cocoa on a winters morning
When there was no loudness between us
and no pain in our stance
back when our funerals
weren't being planned
back when we were new & just born
and everything was a wonder
This night took me back to when
we could stare in each others' eyes for hours
without the truth of betrayal looking back at us
This night brought me to a time
before we stayed together too long
and made a mockery of everything we once were
before we wore out our welcome with love
Before every emotion came out as rage
This brought me to a time
when we knew we would walk in
this world always together
Before lies festered and choked
A time before there was no one
else in existence but us
Something 'bout the winds blowing
made me think of you tonight
It reminded me of your scent
Springtime and Fried Chicken.

SENSATIONS

Ryan Downey

I ate my past today.
Mixed it with acid
Dissolved its layers.
It tasted like shoes.

I smelled my present today.
As it wafted into my nose
Scent mingled with smog.
I couldn't quite define it.

I saw my future today.
It was dancing all day
Looked like happiness.
I must be going blind.

Friday Night

Pat Dixon

1

Leroy Shanker downshifted his \$53,000 customized off-road pick-up as he made a left turn onto Center Street. None of the regulars had yet appeared, he noted, but it was barely sundown, and some of them were probably putting in some overtime at the mill. And most of the others, he thought, were probably still trying to get permission of some sort from their wives or gals. "Not like me," he muttered under his breath, recalling the argument he had had half an hour before with Thelma Lou.

She had wanted to go to the picture show at the Buena Vista drive-in, but he made it clear that it was Friday night, and nothing was going to divert him from his accustomed pastime.

"You been wi' me b'fore," he had said. "An' y're invited to come on out wi' me t'night--if it suits you. If it don't, then stay home. It's my truck an' my gas, an' it's my call on Friday night."

As he cruised down Center Street, a three-lane blacktop running the length of Buena--pronounced Boon-a--Vista, Leroy's blue eyes squinted furtively up each side street.

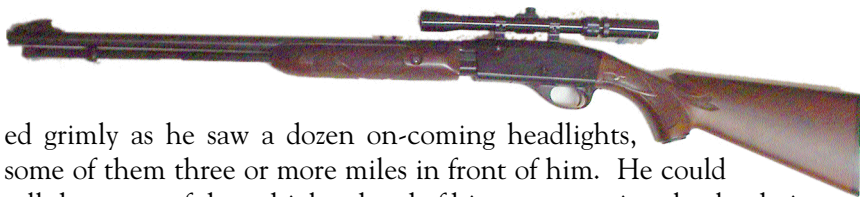
"No sign o' that turkey, Billy Bob Singleberry. Leas' ways, not yet," he muttered.

Leroy turned his air conditioner up another notch and reached a fresh Coors



out of his built-in refrigerator. There was a bit of chatter on the CB this evening, some of it just truckers up on the interstate, but most of it from locals in their trucks or home in their so-called dens. He turned down the volume and turned up the volume of his short wave receiver that brought in police and ambulance calls. In the background, mournful twangy music came from the six speakers hooked up to his elaborate CD player, but Leroy scarcely heard it.

When he reached the lumber yard near the outskirts of town, Leroy made a U-turn and headed south, back the way he had come. He squint-



ed grimly as he saw a dozen on-coming headlights, some of them three or more miles in front of him. He could tell that most of the vehicles ahead of him were moving slowly, their drivers similarly cautious about whom they met and who was near them.

Leroy's palms were sweating as he and the first two vehicles approached and, with no eye-contact on their drivers' part, slowly moved past each other in opposite directions. As they had drawn abreast of each other, each expressionless driver had nodded his head once and had raised his right index finger from his steering wheel in a ritualized greeting. Leroy suspected that they, like him, had their left hands tightly clutched around the customized pistol-grip stocks of their sawed-off shotguns.

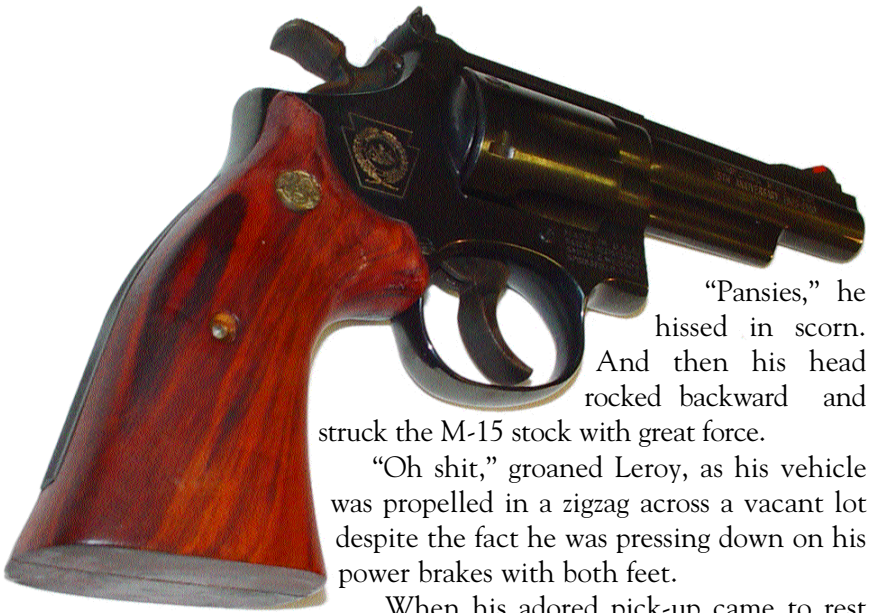
Leroy slowly licked his lips and glanced over his shoulder at the pair of double-barrel shotguns and the M-15 in the rack behind his real-leather seat. Then he took a quick pull on his beer and patted the .357 magnum S&W whose moose-hide holster was strapped to his left leg just below his knee.

When couple of head lights appeared behind Leroy from a side street, he flicked a switch on his dash and bathed the possible pursuer in the intense light of the two dozen large lamps mounted on the top rear of his cab. "Moron," hissed Leroy, as he recognized the half-blinded face of one of the Cutler boys from nearby Strong City.

"Pull on around me, kid!" he said into his dash mike, and the twin speakers atop his cab immediately conveyed his order via 150 decibels to the pale teenager. "Do it slowly--an' don't y' ever creep up b'hine me no more!"

The young man complied, and Leroy could see the fear in the kid's face--which made him feel good. He shut off his rear-facing lamps and, for fun, turned on the three dozen lamps which faced forward. As the Cutler boy winced under the intense light shining on the back of his neck, Leroy laughed aloud.

Two expensive trucks in the on-coming lane passed Leroy, and, as he raised his finger in greeting, he mentally compared his own vehicle. These were both newer models than his, with more horsepower, and they had larger, deeper-tread tires, but his had a better paint job--midnight blue with air-brushed pictures of life-size topless blondes on his cab doors--and he had seven silhouettes of pick-ups painted on the left side of his hood, while neither of them boasted of even a single "kill" yet.



“Pansies,” he hissed in scorn. And then his head rocked backward and struck the M-15 stock with great force.

“Oh shit,” groaned Leroy, as his vehicle was propelled in a zigzag across a vacant lot despite the fact he was pressing down on his power brakes with both feet.

When his adored pick-up came to rest against the brick wall of Miller’s Hardware, its right fender crushed in and his right front axle bent, Leroy tore off his seatbelt and threw himself down on his back across the leather seat. Bright lights from atop the cab of another vehicle shown intensely on his pale hand as he reached up to pull his shotguns and M-15 down from his rack. Then Leroy’s ears were assaulted by the loud laughter of Billy Bob Singleberry coming from a pair of 250-decibel speakers.

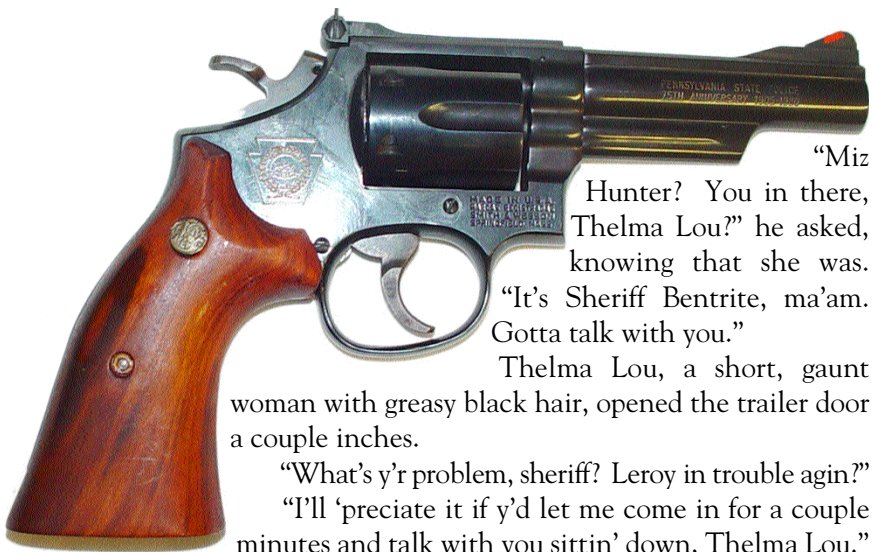
A single shot grazed Leroy’s wrist as he pulled down his M-15.

“Come on out of there, Pea-woy!” said the speakers behind his truck. “Put ums ‘ittle fingers on top o’ y’r haid, Pea-woy! Out o’ that heap o’ junk--now!”

With his .357 magnum in one hand and his sawed-off shotgun in the other, Leroy dropped through the trapdoor in the floor of the passenger’s side, crouched, and darted behind his truck’s huge right rear tire. Instantly he began firing at Singleberry’s truck, and the firing continued like a hailstorm for nearly forty seconds.

2

At 10:42 that spring evening, Sheriff Manly Bentrite pulled his car into the gravel driveway of Leroy Shanker’s trailer and shined his spotlight around the area. Then he opened his door and carefully lifted his middle-aged overweight body from the seat. As his feet made crunching sounds on the driveway, a light came on inside the trailer and a nose and eye appeared behind the dark green curtain of a small window.



“Miz Hunter? You in there, Thelma Lou?” he asked, knowing that she was. “It’s Sheriff Bentrite, ma’am. Gotta talk with you.”

Thelma Lou, a short, gaunt woman with greasy black hair, opened the trailer door a couple inches.

“What’s y’r problem, sheriff? Leroy in trouble agin?”

“I’ll ‘preciate it if y’d let me come in for a couple minutes and talk with you sittin’ down, Thelma Lou.”

When they were both seated in the small kitchenette, the sheriff heaved a long sigh and said, “Better straight from the shoulder, Thelma Lou. Leroy’s gone and got hisself killed tonight.”

There was a long pause while Thelma Lou Hunter absorbed this information.

“What done him in?” she asked simply.

“About three or four hundred rounds from five kinds of automatic rifles punctured just about ev’ry organ in his little body, Thelma Lou. He probably didn’t feel a thing after the first two rounds. Sorry to bring you this kind o’ news.”

Thelma Lou heaved a big sigh, went to a small broom closet, and opened the door.

She returned with a thick cardboard box that was about twice the length of a box of facial tissues and plopped it heavily onto the kitchen table.

“That dang fool, sheriff. It was a clear case of suicide. Leroy was a retrograde technophobe. He just couldn’t bring hisself to enter the modern world by switching his arsenal over to fully automatic. I tried to give him this fr his birthday just last Feb’ry--but he wouldn’t even look at it!”

Sheriff Bentrite gazed admiringly inside the box at the clean, oiled weapon and sighed.

“Dang right, Thelma Lou. Leroy’s death def’nately was a case o’ suicide.”

He sighed again, patted the shoulder of her thin cotten bathrobe sympathetically, stood up, and quietly let himself out the door of the shabby trailer.

Sexual Relations & The Class Struggle*

Christopher Barnes, UK

There's psycho kinesis/in balmy air,
the phase change of Revolution./53 Campville Rd.
Realpolitik teases/the art of the thinkable,/deadlock/
then three cheers/to the plausibility of change.

My house-warming friends are Polytechnic Reds,
with piled-on theatrics./The She-Artist,/yellow-black like a beautiful
boy.

The peeling queen,/window-rattling with asthma
and the He-Harlot/with the hoodlum family.

The chemosphere tests summer/as we ripen ourselves
through incest,
run-amock loves/and distracting clothes.

'You're using this hutch as a fuckhouse!'
she said as she ushered in another man
while I/unzipped Malik to mahogany
a kaleidoscope of releasing hormones
through the grey matter of my head.

*essay by Alexandra Kollontai, Russian Revolutionary
who theorised 'Free Love'

Proclaimer of Mendacity

Jen Pezzo

What were those words you left
festering upon the dinner table?

Ones I would not eat

though they came from your lips,
your self professed gospel,

a façade that had cracks.

I cannot pull them from memory
save for the odor of delusion.

Crunched Leaves

Umesh Ghoshdastider

Lying on tired bed alone
I see the glimpse of endless future.
I see the smiling birds
singing home away.
The sky is moving in the darkness-
the clouds are busy
in hide and seek with the moon and smoke.
I see the boundless blue horizon
that would never be seen by anyone else.
I am pleased too much yet crying
for I am unable to find myself
as crunched leaves.

The Moment of Glory

Brendan Connell

Twelve of them dropped at the volley of musket fire, but it was ineffectual. Others, to take their places, emerged from the rich, green line of jungle which bordered the field, surrounding the fort. The Aztecs were no longer afraid of the smoking sticks or those who carried them, who they now knew were men who could die, and not the gods they had imagined them to be.

The Indians were clad for war, many with rich headdresses of feathers, and elaborate, brightly coloured costumes. Some held javelins and bucklers, while others carried slings for throwing stones. They advanced on the fort in waves, uttering chilling cries of death, strange and ferocious. In those grave hours there was not a man among the Spanish who would not have given up all the gold they had won to be out of Mexico, at home, in safety.

The eastern side of the fort had been set fire to the previous day and was now charred and half broken through. Six of the thirteen arquebuses were being used to defend it, as well as a number of muskets and around forty archers. The western side was under the command of Pedro de Alvarado, with three arquebuses and over sixty men.

The sun had not yet risen over the line of jungle. The light was the sombre, almost mystical light of early morning. Birds and monkeys cried out from the trees. The Aztec warriors were heedless of the dead which littered the field and advanced, many running, spurred on by the desire for vengeance.

“Fire!” de Alvarado screamed to the arquebuses.

The fuses were lit simultaneously and, a moment later, the cannons fired, two at the same instant, a third slightly after. The balls leaped into the oncoming crowd. One ball fell short, landing in a puff of dust at the feet of the advancing enemy. Another took off a man’s head. The third, like a bowling ball, knocked over several men, leaving them bloodied, dead or senseless.

The Aztecs cheered and surged forth. They seemed to take delight in the battle and the knowledge that they had many men to spare, while the Spanish were relatively few.

De Alvarado’s whiskers bristled with well mastered fear. Strands of long black hair came out from beneath his helmet and clung to his brow and cheeks, which were clammy with sweat.

He could clearly make out the features of many of the Aztecs. One, obviously a lord of some sort, waved a sceptre in the air and rallied his men

forward with angry cries. His white teeth formed a slash on his face and the sinewy muscles of his forearms could be seen.

De Alvarado ordered the archers to shoot. A flock of arrows sprung in the air, whistling as they left the bows. Over half the arrows found themselves embedded in human flesh. About fifteen men had either been killed, or fallen with serious wounds, but the Aztec's number did not seem in the least diminished. Those in the forefront, seemingly the most savage, neared the fort and began slinging stones which fell like hail within, some crashing against the armour of the Spanish, one or two even knocking hard against exposed flesh.

The muskets were reloaded. With a strange, metallic taste in his mouth, which he knew to be the taste of war, Pedro de Alvarado ordered them to fire at will. The men kneeled, took aim and fired through the ramparts. The lord, with his white teeth still showing in a vicious grimace, was hit by a ball in the throat. He reeled back and fell, blood trailing across his breast and marking his chin.

“Bravo!”

De Alvarado turned. It was Cortes.

“Yes,” he replied. “But for every one we kill there are a thousand more waiting. They don't believe Montezuma is alive.”

“I do not believe he will be for much longer.”

“Then we must fly.”

The Aztecs were already scaling the walls of the fort, constructed of mud and timber. Soldiers with pikes cautiously leaned over and speared them as they neared the top, aiming for their heads, necks and bellies.

What Cortes said about Montezuma was true. He lay prostrate in a dug out room surrounded by four guards. Shivers coursed his spine. His skull was cracked and his hair stiff with dried blood. The rock which hit him had come, unwittingly, from one of his own men, three days earlier, as they pelted the fort.

His mind drifted back to the early days. In order for him to assume the position of emperor, Montezuma had had two-thousand eight-hundred neighbouring lords murdered, including his own brother. For his coronation war he took five-thousand one-hundred prisoners for sacrifice. When he returned to his palace, he had the entire staff killed, even those he had smiled and laughed with, because they had seen him in the role of a human.

That first sacrifice was a blood bath. He was adorned with a bright, down cape, his legs and arms decorated with dried turkey feathers. He stood at the top of the sacred pyramid and watched as his minions dragged the victims up the steep steps. Some howled in terror, begging for mercy.

Others, those who were not cowards, came forward without argument, ready to meet an honourable death.

One by one they were tied to the sacrificial table. With a knife made from the sharpened snout of a swordfish Montezuma performed the rights. He plunged the blade into their chests and plucked out their still beating hearts, then held them up to the sun, dripping with blood, as an offering. Laying them on tortillas of corn he consumed them, the warm essence of his enemies sinking into his belly.

The people down below danced and sang, waving their arms in the air. The young men, aroused by the blood, chased the laughing females and pleasure girls off into the jungle. Montezuma had the flesh of his enemies divided amongst his people. The women cooked the meat in large clay vessels and served it, decorated with golden squash blossoms.

Montezuma, drunk with death, continued, hour after hour to participate in the sacrifice. Some, frightened out of their wits, tried to crawl away on all fours, like animals. With these he was particularly cruel, flaying them alive and draping their skins over his back while they looked on, eyes crimson with terror. When he cut open their breasts the blood would sometimes gushed forth, spurting high in the air, and then resided into a slow gurgle, like a brook running out of the wound. He rejoiced in this and plucked and consumed the hearts until, exhausted, he could no longer stand, and his stomach protruded, gorged with the fruit of his cruelty.

Montezuma grinned as he remembered this, and his last breath parted through those twisted red lips.

“We have no choice but to retreat,” Cortes told de Alvarado, when it had been ascertained that Montezuma was dead.

The other did not disagree. Over half of his men were wounded and a great many were dead. They were better armed, certainly, but they lacked the necessary forces. The Spanish were terrified and weary beyond words and every man wanted nothing more than to carry away with him his own life.

Together, in a band, they retreated through the eastern side of the fort. There were not enough horses to go around. A number of soldiers, as well as the single Haitian slave who was the property of Cortes, were compelled to go on foot. At first the retreat was orderly, de Alvarado staying somewhat to the rear, with a band of mounted musketeers in order to defend the retreating flank.

“Kill as many as you can!” he shouted to his men. “Put fear into them!”

But it was not the Aztecs who were afraid. Many dropped dead, but others ran forward, with bucklers and waving javelins, aching to see every Spaniard drowning in blood. And more came. They surged out from the

jungle. The most virile formed aggressive cliques which ran on ahead, leaping through the undergrowth and over streams in order to cut off the retreat of the conquistadors.

“It’s no use,” de Alvarado cried to his men. “Move – Move as fast as you can!”

And, lashed with terror, the Spanish galloped away, leaving those without horses to fend for themselves, to avoid the stones and javelins of the Aztecs as best they could. The army, decimated, tore away, propelled not only by the fear of death, but by the fear that, if they were captured, they would most likely be sacrificed, their hearts ripped from their heaving breasts.

Those who were left behind were simply killed however, and none taken captive. Their blood mingled on the field of battle with that of the Aztecs, of whom thousands had been sent from this earth with musket balls cracking their skulls and arrows piercing their necks.

The Indians did not pursue the handful of horsemen who rode hell for leather through the dense jungle. Instead they gathered around the dead, to tend to that sea of flesh and glory in their victory. It is true that some women and children wept, but for the most part there was much joy.

The body of Montezuma was tossed in a ditch in disdain. He was dead, so it was now obvious to his people that he was no deity. Later they drew his bloated corpse out of the water and revenged themselves on it, tearing it to bits, burning it and sending the dust to the wind.

From the field, beyond the fort, came shouts of glee. Word passed from mouth to mouth that a strange discovery had been made and the Aztecs (warriors, priests, lords and peons) all ran to see what it was.

A group of young men stood, smiles stretching their faces, a frail body poised between them, which they passed back and forth. All the people examined it and chuckled to themselves. They were amazed at the texture of the hair and the blackness of the skin. They had never seen a being like this before.

The children hooted and danced around. The women wiped the tears from their eyes and could not help but grin in turn. The young men stuck out their chests and bragged to each other about their feats in the battle and debated as to the origin of this strange prize they had acquired.

It was the Haitian slave, whose spine had been broken by a hurled stone. Little did the Aztecs realise that this, their moment of glory, was the beginning of their final defeat. For this prize, this man they jeered and laughed at, carried with him the small pox, which would kill off in striking numbers both man, woman and child, and thus trumpet the end of their civilisation.

Sounds of Silence

Kristen Howe

Two lovers watching a sunset, as they camped underneath the stars,
They love to embrace nature with its natural environment and elements,
Holding hands, they embraced each other and watched nature,
The weather was right to camp into the backcountry of the park.

To commune with nature, it's majestic to see it at its finest,
Silently, they looked up to the clear night and saw constellations,
High above into the night, a first quarter moon glowed,
The moonbeams shined into the lake water, descending down from the heavens.

All around them, they heard chirping sounds of cicacads and grasshoppers,
In little flashes of yellow, fireflies fluttered into the night,
For these love birds, they snuggled up in their sleeping bag,
A portion of their tent was opened, except for the mosquito net.

Crackling sounds were heard from their campfire,
If they needed help, they can make smoke signals too,
Within a distance, a falling star shot across the twilight,
The sounds of silence surrounded them with golden memories.

Two hearts were beating as one, dancing to a different drum,
As these two lovers were caressing each other with passion,
Memories are made of this to last forever for them,
When they fell asleep in each other's arms, smiling.

Curious Eclipse

Brett St. Pierre

There seems to be this insatiable
Need to speak endlessly of substance-
That there needs to be more of it
And more on the surface for us to steal;
That we demand to be handed everything
Even if it wasn't built for instant liberation.
Sometimes I wonder if we discuss
The idea mainly as an effort to redefine and ignore
That which we can no longer understand;
If we've become so internally stagnant
That we demand that we are forced to
Live vicariously through only those that
Refuse to let us search-
And only if they refuse to allow us anything
That resembles true life:
With apathy strewn across the beginning and the end;
With nothing but a shadow of a purpose sought through details;
With nothing ever of ourselves to admit
That we were never truly involved-
And with everything in between built only of bullets and rules-
We search for our own themes and meanings
Without being told to.
It had once been what had made us real,
(This incessant need to taste what we cannot touch),
But now- even that is gone.
Taken from us by something we are not even sure we want to identify.

A Mistress Without Mercy

T.E. Kidwell

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

JOHN KEATS

Major Robert Childis opened his eyes to the sun's bright white light shining down upon him and the street's gritty, black pavement. Its glare was intolerable and he immediately shut them again. A giant yellow-green globe danced in the orange haze behind his eyelids and he knew he had failed. From the smell, he could tell that the wound in his right leg was festering. His head throbbed from a gash over his right ear that he'd suffered when his helmet shattered. During his brief instances of consciousness since the fight, Robert had done what he could for himself, but he wasn't a medic, and Raul was dead.

You really got yourself into a fix, Robert thought. A real, goddamned, brilliant fix. Stupid boy, real stupid.

Childis felt about with his hands, not opening his eyes, and trying not to move too much. He found that his rifle was still nearby, grasped it and pulled it in close to his chest. He was finding it harder and harder to swallow now. He thought of his empty canteen with mild regret. It wasn't something to get too worked up over. He simply hadn't any water left and no way to get more. Robert's rifle rested heavily upon his heaving chest. The large bore barrel smelled sweetly pungent, and felt cool as he pressed it to his cheek. You should just end it now, Childis almost said aloud. That's right. Just do it. You've been left behind. No one knows you're here, alive. And there isn't going to be anyone coming back for you any time soon. Just the clean-up crews, and you'll be long gone by that time anyway. Just have done with it. No, it's no good. You've never had respect for anyone who's gone that way. It's shameful. If you were going to die, you'd be dead by now. It's just not your time yet. When it is, you'll know. And you won't be the one pulling the trigger. Yeah, but you want to. Not the point. Stop bringing it up. You're not doing it and that's that. Scared, huh?

Gritting his teeth against the pain, Robert grasped the barrel with both hands and drove the rifle butt into the ground, using the gun to help him sit up. Dizziness whirled the world about his head. Up side back down forth. He wanted to puke, but there wasn't anything left in his stomach to retch. Childis sat, chin on chest, eyes half-closed, willing the dirty street to stop its bucking and the blasted buildings to quit their twisted see-sawing. From the corners of his eyes, Robert could see the bodies of the men under his command--men entrusted to him, whom they trusted--lying in heaps, where they fell dead. Raul wasn't more than a couple meters away, lying on his side, eyes open and staring. He could see the legs of Crup and Wylie sticking out at odd angles from beneath a pile of concrete and steel. And Mitch. Oh God, he thought. He could clearly see the dried stain where Sergeant Glavis Mitchel had last stood. About three meters away, the sergeant's right arm lay in the street, complete from shoulder to hand, still clutching his pistol.

A sob wracked Robert's body. Where did you go wrong? Hey buddy, no recriminations. You did what was needed. Things just didn't work out the way you would have liked. Quit talking to yourself like this, Childis. Who else am I supposed to talk to? Mitch? Raul? No, they're long gone, and they have you to thank for it. Just stop it! Get a hold of yourself. His eyes closed and he was at peace for awhile.

It's time to dig deep, Robert.

When he opened his eyes again, Childis couldn't see the sun anymore. It had disappeared behind the roofline of the buildings along the street. He was partially submerged in shadows, and their cool touch made him shiver. The ground shook beneath him and Robert could hear the rumbling echoes of two distinct explosions somewhere else in the city. Seconds later, the air was split wide by the screaming engines of two black, swept-wing, DX-22 atmo-tac drones as they scudded overhead and almost instantly disappeared from sight, blocked by the surrounding buildings. More of the concussive thudding that accompanied an aerial bombardment sounded in the distance. Childis realized the battle was back on. They hadn't been repelled after all. That meant that there was at least some chance for rescue, no matter how slim. It also meant that maybe the deaths of his men wouldn't have been in vain. But it won't matter at all if you're dead before they can find you, he said to himself. Need to sit up and take a serious look at that leg.

Clenching his teeth, preparing himself for the wave of nausea that he knew would sweep through him, Childis sat up once again. His vision swim-

ming, he looked down at his legs with curious revulsion. The explosion had sent shards of concrete and rebar ripping through his thigh and calf muscles. And then a lucky shot from a Ferdeletti's carbine had torn through his hamstring and shattered his femur, a piece of which jutted out of his fatigues about six inches above the knee. The cloth of his leggings was nearly black with blood, but happily, no arteries had been hit. Had one been, he would have died within minutes of his wounding--especially without Raul there to patch him up. Well Robert, that one ain't going to do you a whole hell of a lot of good anymore. No, no it's not. The question is what to do with it. Robert poked at the bone sticking out of his thigh. Its end was sharp and snagged the glove on his hand. Shock had worn off, and now, even at the slightest pressure, he could feel a spike in the pain. He couldn't be sure, but Robert thought there was a good chance that the Ferdeletti was shooting septic slugs. He knew wounds could foul in a hurry, but his went south damned fast. But what to do about it now?

Robert wrenched himself around so that his back was toward Raul's body. He lied down, holding the rifle to his chest. Then, after drawing up his left leg so that its foot was near his buttocks, he pushed it out, digging down hard with the heel of his boot. Tilting his head back, Robert could see the dead medic's body next to him, close enough to touch. He repeated his push and then rolled over so he could use Raul's body as leverage to move himself about. It was hard, painful work. Even in the cold shade, sweat streamed down Robert's forehead, into his eyes and off the end of his nose. Sitting next to Raul, Robert pushed over the medic's turgid body and began going through his packs. It's like looting the dead, Childis thought. Yeah, but there's useful stuff to be had. Stuff that's gonna keep you alive. Maybe.

He found Raul's hypo-gun and three unbroken doses of Ravlix-7. Although it could deaden any pain and keep you going no matter how badly wounded, there could be severe psychotropic side effects. He tucked the hypo and Ravlix-7 doses in a pocket beneath his hauberk. If he wasn't mistaken in his thinking, he'd have a need for it later on. He rummaged past the titanium alloy splints. A little late for those, he thought. He found two large rolls of bandages, still sealed in their clear, plastic bags. Robert laid one of them in his lap, discarding the other. Then he saw what he was really looking for: a slender black case about eighteen inches long. Painfully, Childis worked the strap of one of Raul's medic bags over the dead soldier's head. Into it went the black case, the roll of bandages and a few FLIN patches. He slung the bag's strap over his head and secured its flap with both plastic buckles.

The pain in his leg was making him sick again. Leaning on Raul's body, Childis closed his eyes and tried to ride out the wave of nausea. You gotta get out of this street. Yeah, I do. But just a minute, okay? No, now! Robert slapped himself hard in the face. C'mon boy, pull yourself together. This is nothing. You can get through this. His breathing hissed through his clenched teeth. The pain in his leg was nearly unbearable and the stink that wafted from it assailed his nostrils.

Summoning what strength he had left, Childis gathered his good leg beneath him. Using his rifle as a crutch, the butt planted firmly on the pavement, he heaved himself up into a standing position. His right leg straightened and the shattered remnants of his thigh bone ground together like two wet tree branches. Tears seared his eyes and he screamed from the pain despite himself. He could see fresh blood streaming from the ragged tear in his flesh. It was all Robert could do to keep himself from falling back down. The ground trembled beneath him. The deep, sonorous growls of artillery fire grew more constant and gradually, very gradually closer. He couldn't hear small arms fire yet, and was happy for it.

A cool hand touched his forehead and a slender arm slid beneath his, lending him support. Childis started, opening eyes that he wasn't aware had closed. Even as he instinctively reached for the pistol that was no longer at his side, Robert Childis looked into the brown-green eyes of a girl with long, pitchy hair and smooth, tanned skin. She looked at him without fear and gently steadied him so that he wouldn't fall, her slender but strong body pressed next to him, his arm draped across her shoulders. Childis couldn't make heads or tails of it for a moment, and then he remembered--the mission objective. This was the person that his team was supposed to recover. He had lost track of Miss Coorinward during the battle and assumed that she had been killed or captured.

"Come Major, we must get into that building there," she said, inclining her head toward an open doorway, dark and inviting.

They took a shaky, painful step together.

"How did . . . ?" he managed to gasp.

"Later." Her voice was strained, probably from having to support him. "We get inside first."

They proceeded to the door, meter after excruciating meter. They both collapsed to the floor just on the other side of the doorway. The pain had caused Childis to let go what little he had left in his bladder. He was too tired and hurt to feel embarrassed and the girl didn't say anything to indicate that she'd noticed. She closed the door and slid a

chair and table in front of it.

“It’s not much in the way of security, but it’s better than nothing.”

Childis managed a nod. It was hard to decipher her words from the melodic tone of her voice and the ringing in his ears and the fuzzy rumbled scratching behind his dizzy wandering eyes. But he thought he got the gist. She knelt down beside him, relieving him of his packs and pouches. She started to move his rifle, but Childis put his hand on it and shook his head emphatically. Between the two of them, they got his hauberk off and loosened the bodysuit beneath. It felt to Childis as if the world were a hundred degrees cooler. She looked at his leg and gagged a little.

“Yeah,” Robert said, trying to smile, “don’t get to close or the smell’ll getcha.”

“This is bad, Major. Very bad.” She leaned away and coughed twice, covering her nose and mouth with her hand.

“I know. If something isn’t done soon, I’ll die from it.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

“We don’t have a surgeon here. What do you want to do? Find some rebels?” She arched her left eyebrow.

“No. I’m not so keen on the gentle ministrations that the rebels are known for.” He pointed at the medic bag lying nearby. “Look in that. You’ll find a long black case. Yeah, that’s it. Bring it here.”

With the black case in his hands, Robert noticed that he was shaking perceptibly. Let’s get to this, he thought. The case’s latches yielded to him with two hollow pops. Prying back the lid, Childis saw the instrument he sought, within. It was nearly as long as the case, with just a short four or five-inch glossy, black handle. It had a small switch that could be depressed to turn it on. Protruding out of the handle for little over a foot was a thin, shiny arc of metal. It appeared to his eye that nothing was connected from the end of the metal arc to the handle. That was wrong though, and he knew it. The space that looked like empty air was the danger zone, even when the device was off.

Childis looked over at the girl. She watched him intently, her eyes fixed on the strange implement. Did he detect worry in her glance?

“Do you know how to load that hypo there?” he asked. She nodded. “Well, load it up. You’re gonna give me an injection right in the neck.” Do you trust her to do this right? Where was she after the attack? Why did it take her so long to come get you? She was scared out of her mind for God’s sake! Look at her! I wouldn’t want to run around the streets either. You never know where rebels are hiding. She could have been

recaptured and . . . then what?

“Alright, it’s ready.” She knelt down beside him with the hypo in her right hand, awaiting his word.

Robert’s heart thudded hard, painfully in his chest. Don’t lose your nerve now. This is the only way. You know it. He depressed the button in the handle of the instrument in his hand. It vibrated ever so slightly in his hand and whirred quietly. The thinnest of red lines, hard to see at any angle, connected the tip of the metal arc to the handle. The titanium alloy monowire saw was now searing hot. Robert had only seen the saw used, never used it. He never contemplated having to.

“This will cauterize the wound as I cut, so there won’t be a lot of blood. I won’t be able to do this if I’m hopped up on Ravlix first, though. So, as soon as I’m done, you’re gonna inject me. Okay?”

The girl nodded, her lips pressed firmly together.

“Once that’s finished, you’re gonna take the FLINs and place them all over the wound. Don’t worry they’ll adhere on their own.”

“Flynn’s?” She looked at Robert, questioning.

“FLINs—Flesh Like New. There’s a bunch in that bag. Peel’em open and apply’em to the wound. It doesn’t matter which side is down.”

“Okay.” She nodded her head again.

The saw whirred happily in his hand. He spread his legs as wide apart as he could, unwilling to take the chance that he’d jerk the saw and cut into his good leg too.

“There’s not going to be much left when you’re done here,” he muttered under his breath.

Robert grasped the handle of the saw firmly in his one hand and placed the other gently on its metallic bow. He inched it closer to his thigh. There was a whiff of burnt cloth as the blade, just molecules wide, cut through a wrinkle in his leggings. His armpits were wet and sticky. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He wanted to look at the girl for reassurance but didn’t dare take his eyes off of the saw. Then he pushed down. Childis ground his teeth and keened with the anticipation of pain. The saw scored through his flesh with the ease one passes their hand through water. There was only minor resistance when the saw bit into bone. The stink of broiled steak emanated with a small bit of smoke. The saw’s metal arc disappeared into his leg. Beneath his hand he could feel the separation between what was left of his leg and what had once been his leg. Then it was done. The saw came clean through the other side of Robert’s thigh. He let go the saw’s handle and clutched the stump of his leg.

“Now!” he howled, his voice unrecognizable to his own ears. “Now! Give it to me!”

“Hold still!” She grabbed his head with one hand, pushing it up against the wall and drove the tip of the hypo into his exposed neck.

The pain disappeared almost instantly. Euphoria gripped Robert and the room spun away from him. He tried to steady it, but with no success. The concrete floor was soft and yielding beneath him. The wall clutched at his arms, trying to swallow him up in a warm embrace. His vision swam red and yellow, never bleeding to orange, putting everything in stark contrast to everything else. Ravlix-7 had some wicked side effects, but he had never experienced anything like this before. Robert tried to dig himself out of the hazy drug-induced dementia back to the real world, but the chemical was just too strong for him to resist. Kicking to the top was impossible. His mind was too thick to move, drowning in a spinning, hyper-saturated honey-hued world. How was he supposed to fight like this? Where was his rifle? Where was his squad? Sleep, Major. The words leaked down to him from far above, thin, greasy and nearly meaningless. What did you do? His mouth opened but the words were incoherent. Childis tried to thrash but was held fast in an amber prison.

Sleep.

You need to wake up! But I don't want to. It's so nice here. It's warm, except for the chill every now and then. If you don't, you're going to lose Miss Coorinward. Her name is Thalia. The mission can still succeed. Can it? She saved you, you know? Robert Childis opened his eyes.

Large eyes, completely devoid of irises or noticeable pupils stared into his.

“He's awake.”

Childis glanced about and saw that the small room he and the girl, Thalia, had taken refuge in now held nearly a dozen Ferdeletti rebels. The one crouched in front of him was heavily muscled. His head was shaved, although dark stubble was beginning to show. The man smiled at Childis, his dusky features contrasting eerily with both his teeth and expressionless, white eyes. The only illumination in the room was the dying light of day that filtered in through the shattered windows.

The earsplitting howl of attack drones ripped open the air in the street and caused the walls to vibrate. Glass tinkled delicately as triangular shards fell from window casements and broke on the floor. The thuds of artillery and bomb blasts were more constant now, coming nearly one on top of another, creating an almost constant wall of puls-

ing noise. The rat-tat-tat of automatic weapons could be heard as well. The fighting was getting a lot closer.

“How’s the leg,” breathed the white-eyed Ferdeletti. He nudged Childis’ stump with the muzzle of his rifle. Robert winced from the pain and thought he detected a slight smile on the man’s lips. “Like that, do you?”

“Varrin, that’s enough.” A tall man stepped from out of the shadows. He was easily the tallest man that Robert had ever seen. He was dressed from head to toe in sand-colored fatigues that only partially concealed the body armor beneath. A short, white cape hung loosely from his shoulders. A cigarette clung precariously to the corner of his mouth, as if it were there more for decoration than utility. Unlike Varrin, this man still had the eyes he was born with--penetrating and icy blue even in the dim light. He nudged Varrin in the back with his knee, saying something that Robert couldn’t quite make out. The hulking rebel rose, still smiling, and strode across the room. This tall guy was obviously in charge.

“Do you mind if I sit?” he asked.

Childis snorted air out his nose.

“Be my guest.” He could feel his face stretched into a sarcastic smirk.

As the rebel leader sat down on the floor next to him, Robert caught sight of Thalia. She was standing, hidden behind the tall man. In the twilight, she seemed to Robert a statue of silver and jet rather than a person of flesh and blood. Her steady gaze lingered on his face, and he saw resignation in her eyes.

“Well, Major Childis, it seems that we have a dilemma.” The tall rebel inhaled deeply through his cigarette and, removing it from his mouth, exhaled with a low sigh.

“There doesn’t seem to be any dilemma. Looks like you’ve got your captive again. There are rules to war, whether we acknowledge them or not. You have to do what you have to do.” Childis didn’t see any reason to try to sugar-coat the situation. The rebel wore a short beard. He obviously hadn’t the time to shave, or didn’t care to. He was dirty from battle and showed signs of having been in a number of skirmishes. No coward, this one, he thought. Not too old though. Robert looked back at Thalia, crouching now at his foot.

The thunder of exploding shells became louder. The men gathered in the room shifted about nervously. Four were posted at the windows and doors, keeping a keen eye on the street, while others tended to their wounds or talked lowly to each other. They were all battle hardened. Their weary look was simply that--a look. As soon as the next engagement occurred,

these men would be in fighting form, no doubt about it. Marvelous what believing in a cause could do that training couldn't. Thalia looked so out of place among these ruffians, but she was so at ease with them. She seemed almost familiar with them. Probably knows what I know, he thought. Why fight with the end so near? She's so similar to them.

Then he knew.

"You were never kidnapped," he said, some surprise creeping into his voice.

"No. I chose to join them. What the government is doing to the colonies is wrong. All they want--all we want is our freedom. If SecCor would give it to us, we'd make peace." She looked Robert in the eyes, her expression one of wanting understanding and wanting to be understood.

"Your father knows that you joined them, doesn't he?" Childis didn't need her nod to confirm his suspicions. There was more than the chance that the Chancellor could be blackmailed. His daughter could come out against the war. The political ramifications would prove disastrous if it was known that Thalia Coorinward had joined the colonial rebels.

"I'm sorry, Major. I don't want to go home. You didn't leave me many choices." Thalia looked at him with what he thought was genuine regret.

"No, I'm afraid we didn't." Memories from the previous days came rushing back to him. He heard Mitch and Wylie joking back and forth during the drop. He remembered the briefing. Orbital reconnaissance had been able to pinpoint Thalia Coorinward's location just seconds before the rebels had erected a jamming net that blanketed the city and made communications into, out of or through its entire area impossible. It scrambled digital imagery screens and satellites hadn't used optical lenses for nearly a century. Robert remembered making a crack about it at the briefing and getting raised eyebrows from the senior brass. Mitch liked the joke though.

They dropped them in and it took them two days of searching to finally find their mark. The rebels had been onto them from the beginning, and kept moving Thalia around. No wonder, the Ferdeletti knew that they were coming. Finally though, they were able to surprise the rebels and force them into a fight. But that wasn't it at all. They hadn't surprised the Ferdeletti. They had set-up him and his men. Anger swelled in Childis' belly.

Robert understood her motives. She wanted to get away. The best way to do that was to get her captors killed--lead them into an ambush. His understanding didn't wash away their blood. She had played the helpless victim. She had lulled all of them into a sense of chauvinistic chivalry. They were the brave knights rescuing the damsel in distress.

Thalia Coorinward had played the part of the princess to the hilt too. She had every difficulty, from sand in her shoes to scraped knees and elbows. How he hated to be fooled.

“You were just lucky that you weren’t killed in the process.” Robert couldn’t conceal the bitterness in his voice. Part of him wished she’d been killed. But did she really deserve death? Whose fault was it for going into a street that showed all the signs of a killing zone? She didn’t order it, merely suggested it. You could have chosen another way, buddy. You know it.

“No Major,” said the tall rebel, “you saw to it that she wasn’t.” He put the butt of his cigarette out on the concrete floor.

“My mission was to rescue her,” Childis replied, with some difficulty, “not to let her die.”

“Quite the dedicated soldier, aren’t you?” The tall man’s tone was sarcastic and denigrating.

Childis was starting to recognize the rebels from the ambush in the street. He remembered most of them only in quick glimpses. There were many more than this when they attacked though. There were at least twice as many raining down rockets and pulserifle fire on his head and those of his men. Childis remembered the one called Varrin as the man who all but vaporized his friend, Sergeant Mitchel.

“I know that one over there is Varrin,” Robert said, inclining his head toward the bald Ferdeletti. “I’d like to know the name of the man who’s going to order my execution.”

“That brings us back to our dilemma.” He stared at Robert without blinking.

“His name is Rantz,” Thalia offered.

“Well Rantz, I must say that I don’t understand the dilemma. We’re soldiers. I know what the job is. Don’t leave an enemy at your back.”

Rantz looked a little puzzled. He blinked and then gazed at Thalia.

“I don’t want him to kill you,” she said. “I just saved your life. I don’t want to see it ended so soon.” There was a wavering in her voice. She wasn’t used to combat, to killing. He didn’t know why, but Robert was touched by her sentiment. God knew he didn’t want to be.

“Thalia,” he said, “I knew what the possibilities were when I joined up. I’ve been doing this for a long time. Might as well happen here as some other planet.”

“I’m not, you know,” said Rantz, absently. “I’m not a soldier. I’m an accountant. I worked for Ebenschriebcorp, as an accountant. I never wanted to fight. I don’t even own a gun.” He lifted his rifle and held it

out, between him and Childis. "I carry one. But it isn't mine. It wasn't issued to me. I didn't buy it. I have a gun out of necessity, that's all."

What the hell was going on? His brain still lethargic from the Ravlix, Childis was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the situation. The sounds of combat were inching ever closer, and the Ferdeletti were beginning to look anxious. It wasn't safe for them here anymore. It was clear that the rebels wanted him dead. It made sense to kill him. So what were they waiting for? Certainly the sentimentality of a mere girl wasn't going to stop them from doing what needed to be done? No, that was exactly what was stopping them. Because of Thalia, Robert was still alive.

"Just kill him Rantz," Varrin said. "He's seen you. He knows about the Chancellor's daughter. Let's just gag him and get moving."

There were sounds of agreement from the other rebels in the room.

"It's not that easy, Varrin." Rantz was obviously in the midst of some inner conflict. What was it?

"It is that easy," Varrin said, forcefully. The big man moved and stood over Childis, pressing his rifle barrel against Robert's head. "Like this, see? I kill him. We go."

Rantz pointed his rifle nonchalantly at Varrin's groin. "Back away from him. Now." There was no mistaking deadly intent in the rebel leader's voice. Varrin snorted and exited through a darkened doorway which led farther into the building.

"Some of us are soldiers, however." Rantz smiled to himself and ran a hand through his short, topaz-colored hair.

"Look Rantz. I don't know what you're playing at." Sudden pain flared in his stump and Robert's voice caught in his throat. "I can name you," he went on with difficulty. "They can find out who your family is, who your friends are. They'll come at you however they think they can. They'll put the pressure on you wherever it can be applied."

"And how is that different from what's been happening up until right now?" The rebel didn't look impressed. "I've no family left. They are all dead. I've no friends who aren't already here, with me. What more do you want to do to me?"

"Then what are you waiting for? Get it over with!" Robert was fed up. His leg was really starting to hurt and he didn't want to mess around with these guys anymore. Whatever they were going to do to him they'd better do it and quick. Yeah? Or what? What are you going to do to them?

"Major," Thalia began, "this isn't about killing. Everyone here wants peace. Killing is SecCor's way, not ours. We only do what we're forced to

do.” She stood up and looked down at him. “I’m sorry that you are so thirsty for death, especially when such a short time ago you fought so hard to live.” She turned her back on him and Rantz rose too.

“I want to live,” Childis said through clenched teeth. It felt like he was begging for his life.

“Then you shall,” said Rantz.

Thalia looked over her shoulder and smiled slightly. She looked relieved.

“You know it’s the right thing to do,” she said sweetly to Rantz. “It’s the moral thing.” She scooped up a pack and strode toward the door Varrin had disappeared through.

“Yes,” Rantz said, softly. He raised his gun and shot her in the back of the head. Thalia Coorinward, Chancellor Coorinward’s daughter, crumpled to the floor. Childis opened his mouth in a scream of horror, but nothing would come out. Tears sprang to his eyes and an agonizing sob crushed his chest.

Rantz turned and trained his gun on Childis.

“Tell SecCor that if they want peace, only complete withdrawal of forces from the colonies will be accepted. We’ve tried time and again and were ignored.” He motioned to Thalia’s motionless body. “This should convince them that we’re serious, even though the bodies of your comrades and hundreds of thousands of others scattered across a dozen worlds could not.”

Hot tears sprung from Robert’s eyes. Miss Coorinward’s dark eyes stared at him, wide with the shock of her final moment.

“Do not grieve for her, Major,” the tall rebel said. “She traded her life for yours. I think she suspected this is how it would turn out. Wars don’t end unless they mar the lives of those who cause them.”

The low thrum of a diamagnetic drive suddenly echoed down the street. One-trillion-candlepower spotlights swept up and down the street’s length and poured the buildings full of illumination more powerful than the sun. The Ferdeletti rebels efficiently emptied the room, Rantz being the very last to exit. He tossed Raul’s hypo into Robert’s lap, with a capsule of Ravlix-7.

“For the pain,” he said, pointing at Childis’ stump. “You shouldn’t need it though. A recon team is on its way.”

“It won’t end with this and you know it!” Childis spat, his voice raw and angry. “You’ve just signed yours and every rebel’s death warrant!” He could hear soldiers calling out to one another in the street.

A stentorian voice blared into a loudspeaker: "All Ferdeletti into the street. Any Ferdeletti found in buildings will be branded rebels and executed on sight. This is your only warning."

Rantz walked through the door and disappeared into the dark beyond, but his words floated back to Childis.

"War is a mistress without mercy, Major. Only with blood can she be appeased."

Insomnia (Help! - God's picking on me!)

(Insomnia's destination is God)

John Murtagh

Waterfall words splash tired closing mind -
eyes flicker - churning - relentless search

Conceived in frames - each passing nook
each threaded coil - my shambled knot

Soul access mad to bodies' voice -
a vice of chains - cloaked bluff to man

No peaceway path - lest price of pain
A passage eschewed - demented - lost

Our jailor gave us - free to will -
go laugh to ours not - free in learn

Go trouble me on faith return
show stars my eye that quell my heart

Go poke me with religious zeal
most elaborate routes - contrived to one

Now mindwash my temple I'm primed for enduring
the nightly bolts of your whim -

you make me laugh - now let me sleep.

DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS

THOMAS J. MJSURACA

As June made the coffee, she thought about the teenage delivery boy she coaxed into her house Saturday morning. She thought of how it chilled her to feel the boy's bulge grow beneath the crotch of his jeans. How easy it was to unzip them, reach inside and pull out his dripping member. How she knelt before him—

“Good morning, June,” Bob entered the break room, his hand wielding a coffee cup that had not been cleaned since last Friday morning. “How was your weekend?”

“Pretty uneventful,” she told him. “Spent some time in the garden. And yours?”

“Too quick,” he said. “As usual.”

He had another argument with his wife Friday night. He wanted to buy a boat, but she didn't think they should get into debt for such an unnecessary item. Bob stormed off to his local bar. The more he drank, the angrier he grew: he worked full time so she could have the things she wanted, so he deserved the damned boat. When he got home, he woke her up and hit her until she fell off the bed and hit her head on the nightstand. He spent the rest of the weekend boat shopping.

“Party over here!” Nick announced as he entered the room. June poured her coffee and left.

“Say, Bob,” Nick changed into work mode. “Did you get a chance to look at those figures I left you on Friday?”

“Not yet,” Bob said. “First thing this morning.”

“Great. That'll give me time to recover. This weekend was one party after another.”

“You gotta calm down there, buddy,” Bob patted him on the back.

Nick spent most of the weekend playing chauffeur to his great aunt. She was in her late eighties and still wanted to go places like antique stores and museums. Nick enjoyed doing these things with her, but also knew if he kissed up to her, she'd leave him a good sum of money when she died. Besides, he had nothing better to do.

Nick took his coffee and returned to his desk. After a few minutes, the clerk, Ronnie stuck his head into his cubical and asked if he needed anything.

Nick held a file out to him, “Can you photocopy these in triplicate?”

“Sure,” Ronnie said as he took the file.

“Did you catch the game this weekend?”

“No,” Ronnie said. “I missed it.”

“It was a good one,” Nick was able to watch it while he had tea with his aunt. Though he had to keep the volume down, she hated the sounds of sporting events.

Ronnie spent the entire weekend on the computer looking for pictures of naked men. His hard drive and hundreds of zip disks were filled with gay pornography. He sat at the computer, stark naked, jerking off whenever his erection returned.

He stopped his photocopier to let the proofreader, Ellen, make a copy. He always thought of her as weird. She very rarely said anything and was the least attractive woman in the office.

Ellen knew she was ugly, but God made her so for a reason. She knew she was God's vessel. She went to every church service on Saturday nights and Sunday morning. She studied the Bible and followed all its rules. All around her were sinners, even here in this office. They would all burn in Hell while she looked down at them from Heaven.

"Good morning, Ellen," her production manager, Peter, placed some more work in her in box, then returned to his desk.

Peter was always open and friendly. Even when he was not at work. He loved all his co-workers, his family and friends and always did what he could to help them out.

There was a message on his machine from his supervisor, Paula. She was going to be a little late for work. Not an uncommon occurrence. She always stayed late into the evening. And Peter was sure she was up to all hours of the night working on her personal business.

Truth was she'd awoken in a strange apartment with some unknown, filthy man. She knew he had supplied some heroin for her and probably fucked her when she was under the influence.

She had to run home, shower and get herself ready for another day. Making sure, of course, her turtleneck sweaters covered the track marks on her arms and neck.

She called her secretary, Michelle and reminded her that the new employee would be there after orientation.

Michelle had already noted it. God, Paula was an idiot. She knew it was a matter of time before she took over her position. Nobody was better than Michelle. She went to bars over the weekend and allowed men to try to pick up on her, then shot them down at the last minute. She loved having power over people. And soon, she would have power over every person in the office.

"Excuse me?" A meek voice called Michelle away from her fantasy.

"What do you want?" Michelle asked the overdressed young man who stood before her.

"I'm supposed to start work today," he told her.

"Yeah... right," Michelle mumbled as she pulled together the paperwork all new hires needed to fill out.

As Gary sat in the chairs by the front office, filling out the paper work, he watched people scurry busily around the office. He was looking forward to meeting his fellow employees and hoped he'd also be making some new friends.

an outline to the apex of rites of passage

*Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"
this also appear in the book "Duality"*

It was one of those rites of passage. A Bah Mitzvah of sorts. But this was bigger, much bigger than shaving for the first time or getting your period. This was the chance for all young high school men to lose their virginity and a chance for all young highschool women to dress up, feel like adults, look pretty. Everyone felt the driving need to go through this rite of passage, to not be left out, to be a part of the group. Either way, you got to take a day off of school.

But like every rite of passage, the high school prom is probably more traumatic than fun, because no matter what, you feel like you have to go, and the entire time you have to look like you're having fun. Especially for the photographers. You have to have a perfect record of your perfect life so you can upstage everyone else.

With every aspect of prom, there was always a conflict, an expense, or an irony. I mean, this is supposed to be one of the best times in your life, and it's wrought with confusion. First, find a date. Has to be someone socially acceptable, otherwise it would be less embarrassing to just not go. Then, go through the trauma of asking your prospective date to actually go with you, or if you're a woman, wait to be asked, which is almost more cruel. Then, see which of your friends are going, organize what group you'll go with to your prom.

Then you have to start working on the details. For men, this meant transportation, the cheapest tuxedo, what kind of corsage to buy, something that pins on, something they wear on their wrist, or something they carry, like a bouquet. Oh, and don't forget the most important part: enough liquor and/or condoms. Note how suddenly the prospect of multiple hookers performing anything you'd ever want is both less expensive and less of a hassle than this quote-unquote "date." For women, the details meant picking out the right dress, the right shoes, the right purse, the right jewelry, the right perfume, the right make-up, the right hair style. Note how you have to then coordinate your clothing with your date. So much like real life.

Then, beg your parents to let you wear the dress you picked out, or keep the make-up and hair style the way you wanted it. Beg your parents to let you borrow their sports car. Beg you parents for enough money to pay for the limo, the flowers, the clothes, the film for the camera. Beg your parents to let you

stay out past curfew, how about 6 a.m., just this once. But, come on, it's prom.

Then the Big Day arrives. Ditch school, because you know, getting you hair done can take hours, and you want to spend some time in the sun, so you don't look as pale as a ghost for the pictures. Then, after getting ready for an inordinate amount of time, meet up and take the pictures. Urgh. This usually entails the man picking up the woman, taking pictures at the woman's parent's house, then going back to the man's parent's house and taking more pictures there. It's almost worse than a wedding.

Then finally arrive at Prom. Take more pictures. Talk to as many friends as you can there, compliment their dresses and tuxedos. Find out what everyone else is doing after prom, see if anyone is doing anything better than you. Note how many women are repeatedly pulling up their strapless dresses so they don't fall out of them. Note how many men are already drunk, and look, it's not even dinner yet. Take lots of pictures with your instamatic camera. Let's do a group shot. Oh, let me take a picture with so-and-so.

Then eat. Try to figure out how to eat your salad without using your knife. Check to see how little all the women are actually eating. Note how many women go to the bathroom in groups. In any case, whatever you do, don't stop feeling awkward. But keep smiling.

Then the dancing. Try to remember what your father taught you. Try not to look stiff. Try not to sweat. Dance in a box. Right foot forward, feet together, left foot left, feet together, right foot backward, feet together, right foot right, feet together. Or go for the high school standby; wrap your arms around each other and sway, occasionally making out in the middle of the dance floor. Note how many women have their lipstick smeared across their cheek, or on their date's collar. Note how many bow ties have loosened.

Then collect your things, say your good-byes, take a few more photos and head out for the after-prom activities. Possible options include a late dinner, a four-hour boat cruise, a walk along the lake, a bonfire, bowling, a hotel party, or the back of dad's sports car. Note how disheveled you look by six a.m.; try to clean yourself up in the car before you get to your driveway, in case your parents are waiting for you. Don't make out for too long as you say your good-byes in front of your house.

Then, get in the house as quietly as possible, drop all your clothes into a pile in the middle of your bedroom floor, and collapse on your bed. Here's a helpful hint: drink a glass of water and take a vitamin and some aspirin before crashing; it will help with the hangover. Try to get some sleep before the day-after-prom amusement park trip, and keep in mind that even though prom is over, your friends will be rehashing it for at least a week. This is the ritual. Now go to sleep.

one summer

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

1.

Kevin. You went off to work, I was alone in your apartment, an apartment on a street corner in Washington D.C., my first trip alone. You gave me your key, said you'd be home after work. And so I left, closing the iron gate door I was so fascinated with behind me. I walked through campus, stretched out in the sun. I tucked the map in my pocket, walked through M street, took the correct turns. I remember someone on the street complimented my shirt. Being there, I was almost sure I had been in this town before.

And then I met this fellow, tall, unlike you, and we went out, and I knew I didn't have a care in the world, all my ties were almost broken, I was almost free. And I'd never see this man again. Maybe I'd let him kiss me. And as I walked down the street that night with him, I skipped. And he liked me that much more.

2.

Sheri. The heat of Arizona smelled like burning flesh. I met your roommate, your friends, drank at the Coffee Plantation, iced mocha coffees. And I met you-know-who, I still don't want to say his name. He kept me occupied, no, he made me feel alive, alive to someone who had never lived before, alive those long five days. I could still mark the day on my calendar, the day my life was supposed to change, the day I was supposed to be free. But it was supposed to be something good, I was supposed to start caring for myself. Then why does a part of me regret it?

He bought me a rose the day I left. And you took pictures of us. I thought that morning that it would be justice to never hear from him again. To leave it at that. But then I had to call him from the airplane on the trip home. Why?

3.

Joe. You had to be cruel to me, just this once. I thought we had been

through enough, went through our own little hells already because of each other. I know we had our differences, but I was looking forward to seeing you, to seeing southern California, the stores, the glamour, the beaches, the commercialism. And you, you had to cart me away with your religious troops to the wilderness, leaving me at a campsite while you went off to church. And I sat there for days, watching us, watching us become bloodthirsty, we were trying to hurt each other, we were like animals, you starting your life with me in tow.

And I saw the redwood forests.

4.

Douglas. I never imagined how beautiful the east coast could be, rolling hills curling one state into another. We'd drive up a hill in your truck and I would lift my head, my chin as high as I could in anticipation to try to see the other side, the sloping down of those hills. I remember walking along the beach in Maine, restored buildings lining the rocky shore, the fog so thick you couldn't see fifty feet in front of you. And people were suntanning. And I photographed the lighthouse - how do they work in the fog like this? It's so thick, thick like the cigarette smoke coming from the inside of your truck when we would drive to antique shops in New Hampshire. Thick, like a powerful force overcoming someone, that holds you there, that doesn't let go. Like us.

5.

A week before the smoke and the hills I was in the Midwest and my father was screaming at me, two weeks before I was thousands of miles away dreaming of someone else. And it wasn't a month ago when I was skipping past the old Kennedy house, where movies were made, where this all began. And now, in this truck with you, I lean back, watching the scenery traveling past me streamline into blurred lines of color, and I think of marriage. Maybe with you, if time wears on, but probably not, I just think of marriage, to someone. Marriage, streamlining life into a blur. Settling down. Settling. It's funny how your surroundings change you.

And soon, I know, I will go back home, carrying my possessions in a tweed bag with duct tape on the handle, to get back to something. Driving through the plains to go back to life, it will all be the same again.



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