



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

v.048

July '07

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A lesbian couple  
crosses the street.  
The boy, Levis, jean jacket,  
and Chuck Taylors.  
The girl, wavy hair and colors,  
eyes a passing guy.  
The boy stares him down  
and tightens her grip  
on her girlfriend's hand.

## Sweaty Palms

by Raud Kennedy

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Scars art, pages 42, 44. Cover art  
of a girl on a swing in central  
Illinois. This photo was also the  
third page feature photo in a local  
newspaper.

# Autumn Camp

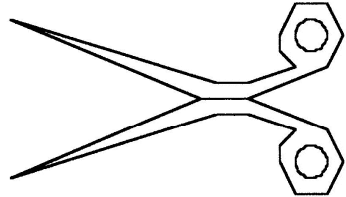
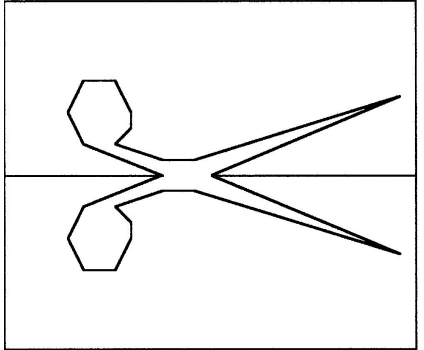
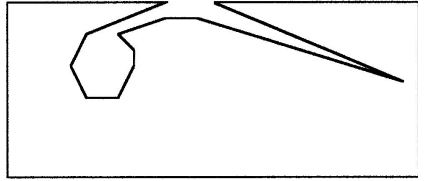
Pat Dixon

To the best of my knowledge, none of the guards has ever been personally cruel, at least to my wife or to me. Given Jessica's delicate beauty and easy availability to them, each month I have been thankful to be told that none of them has yet raped her-if indeed she is telling me the truth, which I am certain she does to the best of her ability. I admit that sometimes she gets quite confused now and cannot remember details of her life, or what has occurred just moments earlier, or even how to perform certain simple tasks like buttoning up her sweater.

For most of today the air has been crisp and dry. Frost was on the yellowish stubble this morning, and some of the men slipped, falling to their knees, while making the trek up the long shaded approach to Wives' Camp. During our trek today, two of the men said they think that we are about forty miles from Denver, and I chuckled and asked them, "What is your evidence?" They looked as if I had slapped them, and one began to weep. I think they do not even know what evidence is.

Judging from the position of the sun, it was about 9:30 or 10:00 a.m., local time, when I finally found Jessica. This time, it took me almost two hours. Today there seemed to be twice as many women here as men, and yet at noon some of the men were still wandering around, seeking their wives without success. I asked Jessica about the changes, and she smiled and shook her head without answering me.

An older woman, rather heavy-set, overheard my question and said angrily that the wagons which had brought her and about a hundred others last night had been partly refilled with outward-bound women who had been in a corral near the gate. I told her to speak more softly, because my wife got upset when people shouted. One of the horse guards looked at the new woman, pointed with his index finger, and shook his head. Jessica tightened



her grip on my arm so that it almost hurt, and I patted her hair and held her against my shoulder for a short time.

For perhaps half an hour, the older woman wandered aimlessly, looking at dozens of other couples who were talking alone, like Jessica and me, and at the numerous small groups of unattached women. I saw that she had troubled my wife and tried to soothe Jessica by filling her in on what I had done and heard during the past thirty days. I wish we were allowed writing materials at the Visitors' Camp where I have been staying so that I could keep a diary of some sort or even make a list of things to remember. I told her about the guess that this camp is near Denver but omitted mentioning how I had made one of the men cry, for that would have troubled her, and I now felt ashamed of myself for doing that.

I noticed that the older woman was slowly circling us, getting gradually a little closer each time. I put my arm around Jessica and began walking towards the Testing Tent, which was perhaps a quarter of a mile away. The woman, keeping roughly twenty feet between herself and us, walked slowly in the same direction, making a big show of rubbing her neck as if it were stiff or aching.

"Sir," she said, "just a word or two--please." Her voice was low, and her face was averted from us, but no one else was half as near as we were.

Without looking towards her, I said, "What is it?" Exasperation was in my tone.

"You and the other men walked here today. How far did you come? Where from?"

"Bout seven miles," I replied, "We trekked about five miles north and then turned east. Our camp is perhaps a thousand feet lower than yours is."

"Ah! And about two hundred thirty of you came in today--."

"Two fifteen," I corrected. "Last month there were three hundred and twelve of us, and two months ago it was--oh, about fifty more. Some leave the camp during the month, and some new men appear, but the numbers seem to be dropping--although one cannot generalize well about any pattern from such a small sample as eighteen months. That's how long I've been at the Visitors' Camp."

I coughed and hugged Jessica against my side as one of the horse guards rode past us. The older woman bent over and picked several short yellow stalks of grass and put one of them into her mouth to chew on.

When the guard was about seventy feet away, she spoke again: "How long has your wife been here? About the same?"

I laughed at her ignorance.

"Where have you been, lady?" I said. "It took me almost two years to locate the camp that first held my wife and another six months to find out where she'd been transferred. Then it took me almost a year to get placed into the Visitors'

Camp that's nearest this one. These matters are very complex, you know."

Her face stared at mine. Again I felt as if I had slapped a person without intending to do so. She stopped walking and sat down on the now dry stubble. A short distance from us was the Testing Tent, with tall reddish stone cliffs rising behind it, bright and almost shadowless in the sun. The sky above and to the north was cloudless, although I could see a low, gray thunderstorm on the horizon to the south. At short intervals, tiny threads of lightning struck the ground or lit up small portions of the dark storm. It was too far away to hear any of the thunder today. I noticed a sudden picking up of the constant breeze and wondered whether we would also have a storm shortly. Almost every day a brief storm passes over us--some days there are two or three--some days, even four. I clutched Jessica's hand and tried to speed her up a little. I didn't want her to be rained on if it could be prevented.

Outside the Testing Tent, people had formed a short line. Soon I noticed that several scores of people were behind us, perhaps similarly minded to find shelter. Or perhaps they merely wanted to get this month's testing over with.

We waited in line outside the until almost noon, and at last the line began to enter the tent. A young man just ahead of me suddenly shouted, "Hey!" and pointed up at the large streamer above us, running most of the length of the tent's interior, and said, "My wife's a Jew, and I'm an atheist. What the hell's that about?"

I glanced up at the now familiar streamer--"JESUS IN THE ONLY KING YOU NEED!"

As I expected, there was a loud cracking sound, followed by an anguished scream. The young man held his cheek and mouth, trying to ease his pain. The guard to the right of the doorway, as I could see with my peripheral vision, was calmly coiling up his dark brown bullwhip, which I estimated to be eighteen or nineteen feet long. He pointed its thick handle towards the young man and his wife and said in a loud but unemotional voice, "Both of you--fall out and stand together with that group near the barrels there."

A few people looked towards the barrels, but I gave my wife's shoulder a gentle squeeze and urged her forward without even a quick glance at them.

The Testing Tent is huge--about twenty yards wide and over a hundred yards long. Seven rows of tables run the length of it, although only two rows of them were in use today. The Testers' uniforms are white, of course, and they wear white hardhats with "U.S.T.S." printed on them in large dark red letters. This month the test involved doing something with waxed paper, I observed.

With the number I had been handed--516--I led my Jessica towards the far end of the tent, almost to the very end. At Test Table 516, I helped her be seated in a folding wooden chair. Lying flat on the table in front of Jessica was a single page of instructions, printed all in dark, bold capital letters. She

# punctuation as a second language, iii

© devin wayne davis '07

semi-colons allow one to keep on going --pontification; defecation; eliminating the need for an and. when you were a kid, everything was a part of a bigger picture; ripping pages from a drawing pad, you can just fill infinite space; and ...

stared at them without moving--without even seeming to realize she needed to absorb them and perform the task they directed.

The Tester behind our table pressed a stopwatch as soon as Jessica had been seated. I began to feel anxious again. In the early months it had seemed to me that my wife had been able to perform all of the

testing tasks perfectly and with reasonable speed. In recent months, she had slowed down considerably and often seemed as if she failed to understand what was being asked of her.

Five months ago I had tried to prompt my wife with some hints, but the Tester had stuck me repeatedly with her cattle prod, and then I was not permitted to visit my wife for the next two months. Even a man as old as myself is not likely to forget the price of attempting to coach another.

To me, this month's task seemed a simple one, but I did not know what was going through my wife's mind as she looked at the instructions today. It may be that she has some deficit in her comprehension--or it may be she is engaged in a silent protest--or a silent surrender.

Today there were three wheat crackers set out on the table before her. The largest was square, approximately one and a half inches per side. The smallest was also square, about one inch by one inch in size. A triangular cracker with equal sides, each about an inch and a quarter long, completed the group. A sheet of standard waxed paper, approximately a foot long, was to the right of the crackers, and a small pair of blunt tipped scissors, such as children used to be given in elementary school, was to the left.

The instructions told her to do three things:

1. CUT THREE SQUARES OF PROPER SIZES FROM THE LARGE SHEET OF WAXED PAPER.
2. WRAP EACH CRACKER PROPERLY IN ONE PIECE OF WAXED PAPER.
3. STACK THESE CRACKERS PROPERLY ON THE TABLE BEFORE YOU.

For months I have been certain that these tests will prove that my beloved wife is indeed a U.S. citizen. Today, for the first time, I could feel tears begin-

ning to well up in my eyes as I watched her sit there motionless, minute after minute. Out of the corners of my eyes I could see some wives similarly sitting motionless, while others were busy cutting or folding or stacking. My fingernails dug deeply into my palms, and I bit both of my lips to keep them shut.

Finally, after almost ten minutes, Jessica picked up the sheet of waxed paper and carefully folded it in half. Next she made a hole through both halves of the waxed paper by forcing one of the blunt ends of the scissors through. Then she began to cut a round hole approximately an inch in diameter in both halves. I glanced up at the Tester and thought I saw a flicker of a smile on her face. Jessica is doing this all wrong, I thought, beginning to panic. I opened my mouth, aching to shout a warning word to her, but I found I dared not risk it.

Slowly and deliberately, Jessica began making longer cuts in the waxed paper, beginning at the center of the folded edge and running diagonally towards one pair of overlapping open edges. Before quite reaching the sides, she sharply reversed direction and headed back towards the folded edge, but again she changed direction before reaching that edge. With a series of short straight cuts, she made a kind of loop around the holes she had made, as if each were an eye encircled by a narrow solid strip. Finally, on an angle, she cut back and through the folded edge, thus separating the waxed paper into two main pieces:

\*

I could see what shape Jessica had made even before she opened the smaller piece and flattened it on the table top. I raised my hand to pat her shoulder but suddenly saw the disapproving eyes of the Tester were on me. I put my hands behind my back.

The Tester took the small blunted scissors off the table and put them into a large wooden box. Then, on the sheet of scoring paper which had the same number on it as that which was now tattooed across my wife's forearm, she made a neat check mark in the square marked "FAILURE." Finally, in one of those few instances of pleasure I have seen a Tester experience, she hit the large scissor-shaped cutout with her fist and said in a soft, firm voice, "Rock breaks scissors." Then she tore the sharp points off the ends of Jessica's cutout, crumpled it in her hand, and dropped it back onto the table top.

Mutely, my Jessica reached towards it, perhaps wishing to take it with her, but I took her other hand and guided her out the far end of the Testing Tent. It was just beginning to pour, and I was thankful that my tears would be unseen by her and the horse guards--and any of the other "campers," as they call us.

I hope that I shall be able to find Jessica again next month, which I think will be November.

# THE IMPOSTOR

Mel Waldman

The phone rang five times before he picked it up. "Hello."

"Is this the doc?"

"This is Professor Charles Sampson. To whom am I speaking?"

"A friend, doc. With a V.I.P. message."

"Yes?"

"We got yer buddy-Harry Winston."

"Impossible!"

"Nothin' ain't impossible, doc."

"Let me speak with Harry."

"Harry's indisposed."

"I don't believe you!"

"Too bad, doc. Cause in a little while, Harry's gonna be dead."

A long terror stretched across the professor's face. "Please let me speak with Harry."

"No."

"Is he dead?"

"Not yet."

"I don't believe you!" shouted the professor, his dark eyes leaping across the 57<sup>th</sup> Street duplex apartment. And he slammed the receiver.

Soon, it rang again. When he lifted the receiver, he heard: "Get here by noon or else!"

He knew it was a setup and yet, he had to go. It was virtually impossible to find Winston's Long Island home in the Hamptons. So how had they found him? He was walking into a deathtrap because of that book. The lethal book he and the others had written—"Espionage: Current theory, research, and application." And of course, there were three chapters on the social psychology of brainwashing. The book wasn't due for publication for another three months and already, the Angel of Death had arrived. Which side had sent him? What difference did it make?

He had turned down all offers of employment. He was an independent. And so were his co-authors who had adamantly refused to speak with the others. So it could be any side and the end result would be the same: a one way ticket to Hell!

Winston lived near Sagaponack, on the South Fork, in the heart of the Hamptons. It was his place to be alone. Yet they had found him.

Sampson drove past a stretch of rolling potato fields and lush farmlands. He knew where the turn was and he made it. Then he made three more turns along the way and passed a natural bird sanctuary.

Soon he came to the two-story house of weathered shingles. It was hidden behind privet hedges, scrub pine, and rows of hydrangea bushes. Hidden deep and still, they had found him.



Momentarily, he looked in the rearview mirror of the old Plymouth Fury. No one had followed him. Of course. No one had followed him today. But maybe... Perhaps, he had been careless.

He entered the rustic house through the back kitchen door. Nothing. No one seen, nothing heard. He removed his loafers and walked toward the living room. Stop. The door was ajar. He drifted into the two-story living room. Barefoot on the marine-blue floor, he walked along the edges of the room. At the far end was a large floor-to-ceiling window with divided panes. To his right was a spiraling steel staircase which led to a balconied second floor study. In the center was the sprawling owl-rug.

The eyes of the owl seemed to hypnotize him. The dark eyes pulled him in. He couldn't look away. Couldn't.

Soon, it started. Something weird and scary. The dark eyes changed. A kind of metamorphosis occurred. The eyes became red. Flaming red and then... The owl also became red. And he sauntered to the center of the owl and stood motionless.

He saw the red dripping down-dripping onto the owl. Suddenly, he looked up. But it was too late. The bloody corpse, which had been suspended from the high ceiling, rushed downward and knocked him unconscious.

He woke up. He forced his eyes open and noticed he was entangled with a well-dressed corpse. Slowly, he severed the tie and struggled to his feet. His head swirling and his legs weak, he took a few shallow breaths. He looked down at the corpse but quickly averted his eyes.

"This is not Harry Winston!" shouted Sampson. "You killed the wrong man!"

He slithered to the phone at the far left and dialed 911. "There's been a murder. Hurry." He took a deep breath. His hands shook uncontrollably. He whispered into the phone and gave directions. He hung up the receiver. Seconds later, he blacked out.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the monolith looming over him. As he started lifting himself up, the blond giant said: "Ya betta not, Dr. Sampson. Ya might have a concussion."

Sampson rose defiantly and asked: "Who are you?"

"Officer Jennings."

"Show me your ID!"

"Gee, doc. Fer a little guy, ya got alota spunk. We oughta getya checked out at the hospital."

"No!" The short, rotund Sampson glared at the gargantuan stranger and said: "I'm almost five foot two, Officer Jennings, if that's who you are..."

"Officer Al Jennings at your service. And here's my ID!"

Sampson studied it. "Okay. Now, how did you know my name?"

"Ya told me when ya called me. So here we are."

“We?”

“My buddies are in the other rooms. Still lookin’ around for this here dead body we can’t find.”

“He’s dead!” Sampson announced as he handed the ID back to Jennings.

“Winston’s dead?”

“No. Some stranger’s dead. Winston’s missing.”

“Oh.”

“And how’d you know Winston’s name?”

“Ya told me, doc.”

“I don’t remember...”

“See. Ya oughta letus takeya ta the hospital.”

“It’s not necessary.”

Momentarily, Sampson’s eyes darted across the room. “Where’s the rug?”

“What rug, doc?”

“The bloody owl-rug.”

“There ain’t no rug, doc.”

“I see.”

There was a long silence. “Well, what do we have, Jennings? I’ll tell you. The facts are simple. A corpse has vanished, along with one bloody owl-rug and my friend Harry Winston.”

“If you say so, doc.”

“It’s the truth! Unless I’m a raving lunatic or a liar.”

“Yeah, doc,” Jennings grinned sardonically. “A helluva mystery. So who do we look for? The corpse or the killer or Winston?”

“Stanley Miles. He vanished a week ago from his Brooklyn Heights apartment.”

Later, when Sampson drove home, he kept looking in the rearview mirror. Maybe they were following him. Maybe. But he saw nothing. No one was tailing him tonight.

In the morning, Sampson went to Roosevelt Hospital and found out he had suffered a concussion. He’d live, the doctor told him. Sure he’d live-unless someone murdered him.

In the evening, he was still on edge. He scurried off to Hell’s Kitchen to his favorite bar-The Razor’s Edge.

Inside, he saw the gorgeous redhead sitting alone in a booth in the back. He sat down at the counter. If only he had the nerve. Then, she looked up and smiled at him. He blushed. He looked around to see if she was giving someone else the eye. But there was no one else at the counter.

He ordered Scotch on the rocks. Once. Twice. And by the third round he was ready to make his move. With his Scotch in his right hand, he went to her booth and said: “May I join you?”

“Yes. I’m in the mood for company tonight.”

“Terrific! My name’s Sampson. Charles Sampson. Haven’t seen you here before.”

“My name’s Dolores. Just plain Dolores. And I haven’t been here before.”

And it began. But there was nothing plain about Dolores.

They drank ceaselessly. Eventually, Sampson let the cat out of the bag. He got silly and with lusty eyes, he asked: “You know what kind of man I am?”

“Tell me.”

“I’ve got this incredible secret. No one knows but me.”

“Oh, Charles. I just love secrets.”

“Well, maybe if you’re sweet, real sweet, I’ll tell you.”

Dolores smiled seductively and Sampson confessed. Later, Sampson was bloated with booze and bolder than before. “How about coming to my place?”

“Sure,” she whispered.

When Dolores rose, Sampson noticed she was tall, very tall, and long-legged like one of those Playboy centerfold bunnies. God! He had scored tonight! But in the back of his mind, he remembered that nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

Dolores sashayed to the door and Sampson followed. Soon, they were in Sampson’s apartment.

Sampson didn’t trust what was happening. But Dolores was for real. They made love twice. And the second time almost killed him. She was an insatiable animal.

“One more drink, Charles. And then maybe...”

“Well, sure, Dolores. One more drink. But if we go one more time, I don’t know.”

“Come on, Charles. Don’t you love it?”

“Of course.”

Sampson made two drinks and started the toast: “Well, here’s to...”

“Oh, Charles,” interrupted Dolores. “I need some more ice in my drink. Would you get me some cubes?”

“Sure.”

Sampson slithered down to the kitchen. It was a large duplex and in Sampson’s present condition, the trip seemed to take forever. When he returned, he toasted: “Here’s to us-Charles and Dolores...”

Suddenly, he spilled part of the drink on his underwear. “Dolores, could you go to the bathroom and get me a towel? Don’t think I can make it.”

And Dolores, without a stitch of clothes on, shimmied to the bathroom, shaking her buns like a real pro. But for Charles, she was giving it away for free. After they toasted, Charles turned over and was asleep.

He thought he was dreaming. Maybe. But it didn’t seem like a dream. Dolores was talking to someone. Someone in the room? No! She had made a call. And she said her name was Mary Lou. Well, what difference did it make-Dolores or Mary Lou?

Now, she was laughing. Laughing real loud about his secret. Ha! Ha! Ha! And sure, she’d keep him there until so and so arrived. Yeah. She’d come down

and unlock the front door and... Maybe it was a dream. Maybe.

The front door was unlocked, but she wasn't there. "Dumb broad," he muttered as he entered the first floor of the spacious duplex. "Musta got scared an' skipped out on me."

He waited until his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Then he headed for the spiraling staircase. He passed the owl-rug on the way. "Yeah. Just like Harry Winston's rug. Except it ain't bloody and no corpse lying in it. Dumb burglar. In the wrong place at the wrong time."

He had a .45 Magnum with a beautiful silencer attached to it. Gripping his steel baby, he climbed the staircase. He'd enjoy killin' this joker-secrets an' all. An' up he went.

At the top of the stairs, he turned left. Third room over she had told him. He slipped through the long corridor and stopped at the third door. Triumphantly, he opened the door and blasted the sleeping target to kingdom come.

He strutted to the bed and took a close look. Christ! It was Mary Lou!

Suddenly, he turned around. But it was too late. Sampson killed Jennings with the first shot and kept filling him with lead until there were no more bullets.

Standing over the corpses, he announced: "The two of you were impostors. But not as good as I! Sure, I had to create my fictional colleagues-Harry Winston and Stanley Miles. My elaborate scheme kept me alive. They needed me to get to my co-authors. Until they knew for sure."

Sampson stared blankly at Mary Lou and said: "Didn't trust you. So I switched drinks. And you went out right after the phone call."

His mind drifted off. It floated here and there. Into a faraway dimension. Phantasmagoria. Later, it returned.

Sampson glared at Mary Lou and announced: "You made me into a fugitive. Have to leave in the morning-before the others realize and... Change my identity and keep running. Well, I'm the great impostor! Right?"

Sampson staggered out of the bedroom and drifted down the hallway to the guest room. Inside, he sat down on an old rocking chair.

"Can't be too paranoid these days. Nothing like a healthy paranoia. And tomorrow..." Rocking back and forth, he fell asleep.

Downstairs, the others arrived. A second force in case Jennings had failed. Passing through the darkness, like a hungry pack of wolves, they found the staircase and climbed it. Joyously, they smelled the odor of death down the hall. Soon, very soon, they would feast.

Surreptitiously, they moved toward the proud impostor, betrayed by his small, weary body, his ever growing ego, and his shrinking paranoia.

# Kali to the Nth

Ken Dean

Gjord Olaf's Swedish background had left him very family oriented. It was everything to him. Growing up in a small, close-knit village surrounded by mountains and nature was idyllic. He was blessed with a love for people and community. This closeness and love he also enjoyed with his American wife Maureen and son Gottfrid.

That had all been blown to bits now. The funeral for his ten year old son, Gottfrid, was about two hours ago. And the funeral for his American wife, Maureen, was held ten days ago.

Maureen had been called up two months ago as a Marine reservist to go to Iraq. During a routine convoy, a roadside explosive device had killed her instantly. Poor Gottfrid had been kidnapped five days ago on the way home from school and killed by a sexual predator that lived in the area; closer to the school than the law should have allowed.

Gjord had come to America from Sweden to study biochemistry at the University of Chicago and eventually obtained a PhD. in the field. He was considered the top dog in his area of expertise and was doing secret governmental research work on advanced viral strains and mutations at a facility the US government maintained near the University. During his studies he had met Maureen, married and had a son. She had done a tour of duty as a Marine before she met Gjord and joined the MARFORRES as a reservist afterwards.

The first funeral had devastated Gottfrid and himself. And Gottfrid's death had pushed Gjord to the breaking point. He was blasted into the real world where mans inhumanity to man was all too apparent. Gjord's family in from Sweden and Maureen's from here in Chicago had tried to console him, but after the second funeral he had taken off to a hotel where he couldn't be found. He just wanted to be alone. There was too much grief; it felt like his mind was being stretched apart like taffy. He sat in the hotel room; crying, rubbing his face, tugging at his hair. His mind was starting to turn the agonizing grief into anger. It was too much to bear. Someone had to take the blame for this agonizing life change, the pure hell he was going through. Screw it; everyone was to blame! Every human on the planet was evil, and he would make them pay. The white-hot anger was turning into a vengeful snake that would reach out and pierce everyone with its destructive venom. Gjord had reached the point where he still felt sane, but in actuality; he had gone quite mad.

He called the research institute and said he would be on sabbatical for several months after the deaths of his family. They didn't make a fuss; someone else could carry on the research in his absence.

Maureen's and his own family would probably keep looking for him or turn him in as a missing person, so he decided to rent a house on the outskirts of Chicago. The home was already furnished so he wouldn't have to bother. As long

as there was a full sized basement; that was fine with him. He had plenty of resources with his savings, the life insurance they had on Maureen, etc. All of this he took out of bank accounts and closed them. Using cash until he acquired some fake ID wouldn't leave any traces.

He had to pay a shady character a large sum of money for a set of fake identification papers, licenses, etc. for what he needed to do. If he bought the kind of equipment he needed for his task as himself, it might be flagged and traced. Shady was a disgusting character to say the least. He just had that look: greasy, smelly, evil. He had to meet him at his low-rent apartment, if that's what you'd call it. More like a rat hole. It had a bad stench of unwashed things, cat smell gone bad, stale beer and cigarettes, etc. After exchanging cash for the fake identification, he faked some questions on its use. Gjord maneuvered behind Shady and managed to bash in the back of his skull with a heavy ashtray he picked up from a table. He bent down and checked his pulse for a few minutes to make sure he was dead. A secret is a secret only if one person knows it. He needed to stay anonymous. Shady had put the wad of cash in his pocket while still living which had kept any blood from getting on it. Gjord took it out of Shady's pocket and put in his own.

Gjord went about buying all types of bio-engineering equipment and placing it in the large basement of the rented house. He was ready to begin his project that he always knew was possible but was something that sane Gjord wouldn't have imagined doing. But he had already crossed the line to crazy madman, throwing ethics and morality to the wind, so that anything was possible for him now.

He started to work on his grim project, only sleeping when he had to and having food delivered to the house when he was hungry. Driven was the word to use for Gjord. He had to make sure that they all paid for killing his family.

The task was almost done; just experimentation left to perform. Along with insuring lethality, he had to make sure the antidote worked so that he would be protected. A makeshift isolation room had to be fashioned for the experimentation. Group trials were the best way to go. Several antidotes were made that might cover the range of the virus. Then a group of homeless winos and junkies, whom he had lured back to his house with the promise of a drink, fix or cash, were inoculated at gunpoint. They were then put in the isolation area and infected. Gjord was amazed; he got it on his first try. The virus had the desired result on all the subjects except for one that lived past five days. And that was well past the lethal time frame. He had to kill the surviving derelict though; couldn't let her live to tell tales of what was going on in his makeshift laboratory.

Gjord could now inoculate himself and have no fear of his own lethal creation. Once inoculated, he was free to take apart the isolation area and dispose of the bodies. He buried them in the part of the basement that had a dirt floor. He sprinkled the bodies liberally using a mixture of a viral/chemical dust of his own design before covering them with dirt. This would eliminate any biological decomposition or smell that would normally occur. He didn't want any snooping neighbors smelling death before he could implement his plan.

He had engineered his own lethal virus to look like an innocent white powder. This way it could be kept in any prescription medicine gelatin capsule that you were able to open.

It was much easier to transport in this manner; easier to disseminate into water supplies or open air also. The virus was dormant in this form. As soon as it encounters moisture, it activates. (Water, saliva, mucus membranes, oils on human skin, etc.) If only one particle of the powder were to touch human skin or be inhaled, the virus would activate. Human skin was no barrier to it either; it would replicate rapidly and burrow through the pores. It attacked the central nervous system much like nerve gas, then paralyzed and death occurred in about thirty seconds. Upon death, it would then cause the diaphragm muscle to spasm violently. This expelled even more of the virus from the lungs into the atmosphere, causing it to be spread amongst humans at an ever accelerating rate. Reaction time of the authorities to the virus wouldn't be fast enough to stop its spread. Even if a select few were smart enough to find a cure, it wouldn't be in time to save anyone. But Gjord was smart; he had made sure that the virus was resistant to any kind of cure save the one he tailor made for it. Only fire would kill it. And it would spread faster than anyone's idea to use fire to burn the corpses.

This had all been in-house engineering to start with. Now Gjord had to begin the really dirty work. He called a major airline, used his fake ID and booked flights to several major cities on all the continents. The North and South Pole research communities would be another question. They would probably die off from lack of delivered supplies once there was no one to bring them. He would use several pharmacy prescriptions with gelatin capsules emptied out and refilled with the virus powder. Airport security and customs shouldn't make a fuss over a man's medicine. A capsule or two per city should be enough to start the spread. Then he would be off on an airliner before the outbreak became too pronounced. He didn't want to paint himself into a corner.

He made stops in several major cities; London, Moscow. Peking, Sydney, New Delhi, Jerusalem, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Berlin, etc. Then back across Fairbanks, Seattle, Los Angeles, and finally his chosen Chicago. In each city he found the local water supply and threw in a capsule, plus he would find a high building downtown and try to get on the roof or failing that, find a window to open. Crushing or opening a capsule would release the powder into the wind to be blown about the unsuspecting population.

In Chicago all it took was throwing a capsule into Lake Michigan. By the time the gelatin dissolved and the virus multiplied it numbered in the billions. That was before it was taken into the intakes of the water purification plants. The water cleansing process didn't phase the virus at all, just gave it more time to multiply. He then talked his way onto the roof of a relatively tall office building in Naperville. Far enough east of downtown Chicago for the wind to spread the powder in a easterly direction.

The spread of swift death was following him around the globe. He watched

the newscasts from some of the major cities or would listen to shortwave broadcasts and chuckle with glee as each one in turn would eventually go silent. America was last to go. The government put up a vain struggle to combat the swiftly spreading death, but to no avail. The reaction time was far too slow to even begin to think about producing a vaccine.

Gjord was sure there were a select few, especially in the government, that would take refuge in airtight, underground bunkers. But they would have to stay there. To venture into the open air meant sure death.

He had taken up residence in the Hancock tower on the lakes edge where the view was the best. Signs of chaos could be seen in every direction for a while. Occasionally he would hear sirens, or if he opened the window, even some screaming. Fires were burning in parts of the city, but these were out of desperation. Hopefully none of the fires reached his home here on the edge of Lake Michigan. They burnt out before reaching downtown. The smell of death was everywhere, but this too eventually faded.

Gjord had gathered enough non-perishable food items and water containers into a nearby floor in the Hancock. Probably enough to last him for years. If it came to it, he could always hunt for food. All the animals were still alive; his virus had been fashioned for humans only.

Using binoculars and a telescope, he could see the encroachment of animal life back into the city. He had raided a military compound a while back for weapons to protect himself against any wild animals that might think he looked a little too tasty while venturing outside. Usually he carried a full-auto Glock all the time. If he went outdoors he added to that a mini AK-47 and a riot shotgun. There was always the possibility that there would be survivors of the virus. That was just natural selection, and he needed to be prepared for it.

It had been six months now. It was a bright sunny day on the roof of the Hancock. The only things he could smell now were fresh air occasionally punctuated with some animal odors drifting about on the wind. He had his bottle of water beside him out of his supply of thousands from downstairs. Of course there wasn't any power now. He was getting healthy climbing stairs. Reclining on his lounge chair, he kept tuning to all the major cities around the world on his battery powered shortwave. He had doing this for a while, listening for signs of life. Nothing but dry static, as far as the ear could hear. This was his world now, he thought, chuckling to himself. All the evil was gone. Everyone had paid for his family with their own.

Gjord couldn't help himself. He jumped up and did a victory dance of his own design, occasionally letting loose with a burst from his AK or auto Glock into the air. His ears eventually stopped ringing from all the gunfire. He thought he heard something else on the very edge of his hearing. A very faint ripping noise, as if air were being torn apart.

Gjord looked skyward and was amazed to see five sets of jet contrails abreast high up in the sunny sky, heading westward, with a glint of bright sunlight off shiny metal.



# All the Magical Things That She Shall Never Know

*Brett St. Pierre*

“Where were you just now?”

Where was I? Momentarily distraught.

Partially bored, mostly defensive, I had found a design in the carpet that held more than a striking resemblance to Adolf Hitler if he had suddenly grown luscious breasts; at second glance I found that he was sodomizing Shirley Temple and that they both seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. And I disappeared.

As my therapist spoke in an attempt to break my malingering I became utterly confused by the fact that all three of them turned to me as one and simultaneously asked three separate questions. I sat with my arms across my chest, motionless and waiting patiently for only of them to repeat their inquiry so that I knew exactly which one to answer.

But no one else spoke, merely waited.

“Could you repeat the question?” My voice was low and timid and my throat was arid, my words cracking and by question becoming almost nonexistent.

I sounded so pathetic. Six feet tall, one hundred eighty pounds, and I could barely make myself audible in front of a short, decaying woman who couldn’t see a goddamn thing.

My whisper was saved, however, by the deafening, solid emptiness of the room that we were in that made every sound so intricately apparent; saved me from having to repeat myself, which I wasn’t sure I could do at that point.

July and I was fucking shivering.

“You disappeared there for a second. Were you daydreaming?”

“I was doing a myriad things.”

“Doing? Pretending? Dreaming?”

“I don’t think that I understand...”

“Doing a myriad things in your head? Were you . . . daydreaming? You know, where you...”

“I know what daydreaming is you fucking ignorant goiter.” Finally, a sentence that we could both understand came out of my mouth.

“I was trying to say that I don’t always understand, that I can’t always tell the difference, anymore.”

“Between daydreaming and reality?”

“Between anything and reality.”

She wrote down a few notes that I perceived to be nothing more than senseless skittering in the corner of her legal pad while she weighed her options for secure advancement.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The screams in the other room. The lions behind it.”

“No, dear, I don’t hear anything.” Shit.

We stared off into our own little spaces of nothing for a few moments before she, again, broke our silence.

“Do you at least understand what you came back to achieve? The last time that I saw you, we were fighting severe depression with many psychotic features. But you disappeared before either of us could try to break them down and understand them. Is that why you came back here, now? To try and understand?”

“I’m not really sure of anything anymore. But, I think that I wanted to come back to try to get back to where I was before I left the first time.”

“And where is that?”

I imagined it but never spoke- not to this woman. She didn’t have any answers for me, not then. Not after what she knew . . .

That smug smile, she was about to make a premature inference wasn’t she? Wasn’t she, that fucking bitch.

She flipped back over her notes and read calmly for a moment before telling me what I felt.

As if she knew anything about me, what goes on in my head. I should just punch this bitch in the throat and go home.

“The last time that you were here you seemed to be dealing with a lot of the same things, but they seem to have more control over you now. Has anything in your life changed since then? Something difficult, something ... important to you?” She fucking knew.

“Don’t bring that up, you don’t know anything about it.” I was growling through clenched teeth and I wasn’t even sure why.

“About what?”

“What, did she tell you, too? Before she even fucking told me, did she tell you?” Why? Why this?

“The last time that you left you had control, Brett. If you want to get back to that point you need to try for a little more control.”

“Don’t fucking talk about her then. What, did she tell you, too, that I was crazy? That I needed help? What, do you think I need to be here? I don’t need this shit. You can’t fucking help me, only she can.”

“She?”

“Don’t you fucking talk about her anymore! She has nothing to do with this.”

“Brett, you need to try for a little control. You need to get a hold of yourself.”

The anger didn’t slowly boil, it immediately nagged and bubbled over but as I paced around the room I thought to myself, ‘this isn’t even me, this isn’t even fair.’

I started to bawl. Becoming light-headed.

“I fucking hate you!” I pointed with a stern finger as she sat, unwavering.

Six feet tall, one hundred eighty pounds and I couldn’t even strike fear into an elderly woman.

“Why do you feel that you hate me, Brett?”

“You can’t make me do this. You can’t force me to let her go.”

“Is that what this is about? Is this about the girl that you would bring with you before? Is that what has changed about when we meet now? What makes it so difficult to deal with these issues?”

Don’t.

“I’m not fucking crazy.”

“Brett, you need to sit down.”

“Stop fucking talking about her and I will. You just fix me and I’ll fix that whole thing. Don’t even worry about it.” My head hurt something fierce.

“Please, just sit on the couch and we’ll start wherever you want to, okay?”

“You want to talk about her? Fine, she fucking left. You want to talk about closure? Fine, I never had a chance at any. You want to fucking find her and fucking choke her to death, (love), before she . . . (love), just fucking left? You want to know why, why we were engaged and she just disappeared?”

I was throwing anything anywhere. I was screaming and I was calm and I was cold and dripping sweat.

I was scared and tired of not being able to hear her breathing next to me at night before sleep.

I was tired of being lost and tired of trying to blame anyone for everything that I couldn’t understand.

I was tired of being the one that suffered because I wasn’t allowed the knowledge. I was tired of not being allowed anything in this.

I was tired of others having more control over me than I wanted to admit.

I was tired of her being in control but not wanting it anymore.

I was tired of loving her.

I was tired of needing to love her.

Fuck, I was tired of needing her.

I was just fucking tired. Tired and I wanted her back as a better man.

But, of course, she heard none of this. And all she saw were the tears and the drool and the sweat and the blood that started to appear on my knuckles.

And all she knew were my ranting screams through clenched teeth that

she couldn't decipher- but never the aching need that pressed me forward as I felt I needed to destroy everything before I paid for my session and left for the day and never came back.

She never knew exactly why I needed this- that I needed to purge myself and somehow become something perfect so she would want to come back. That I was out of ideas. That I was here because I needed someone to give me a panacea and tell me I was ignorant and they had the way.

But, of course, she heard none of this. All she heard was me hitting the floor. Suspecting, though, of why. I'm sure.

"Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes, yes, she is, Torvald."

"What's her name again?"

And then I see her somewhere in Georgia. There's high grass everywhere, and we're standing on the edge of a pond. Trees generously splay its continuity at random intervals, and she's dangling dreamily from a homemade swing that's attached to the largest, most matriarchal oak of them all by fraying, ancient rope; watching the grass sway as she does gently in step. In slow motion.

She wears a flowered sundress with violets that dot the white as often as the trees do the high grass that surrounds us. Her hair drifts awry with each gentle gust of wind that also makes the dress wrap gently around her shoeless legs. There are her beautiful blue eyes that always shimmered with a thousand tales every time she smiled. I stood off to her left side with my hands in my pockets and tried to find one of those tales, but she gently turned away, blushing as she always had when she noticed the sense of bliss that always smeared itself across my face whenever I saw her smile.

"I'm going to find out eventually, you know."

"Find out, what?"

"The reason why you watch me when you don't think I know you are. The reason why you run your fingertips gently over my naked body after we make love."

"Because I'm taking notes for times like these?"

"Yes, but what times are those, Mr. Brett?"

"Whenever I need to be somewhere beautiful; somewhere less...grotesque than reality. Less grotesque than myself."

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"Always ... are you blushing?"

"Maybe. But why me? I'm not that special."

"No, you were always just a dream."

# Earth Stew

*Cheryl Lynn Moyer*

Turn the atmospheric convection oven  
to a slowly increasing simmer.  
Melt the glaciers and ice caps  
to a flooding gruel. Stir millions  
of displaced humans and expiring species  
with increasing tornados and hurricanes.  
Sip slowly this bitter broth.

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# Charlie's son's story

*Laura Bontrager*

in the darkness, the leaves change, turning  
over into fragile red tokens. nature plays  
poker with a merciless face; the cards  
shuffle through the fingers of fate and  
flip fast to the table. raw deal and we  
(the family players) gather our hands close.  
mother is in debt; my sister and I  
are unaware of the rules;  
my father is a frightened man.  
he has two chips and a needy grip. he has a knot  
of cancer in his belly which aches whenever he loses.  
he chews an antacid and bluffs high with  
combination chemicals. the deal is against him.  
mother knits her brow, contemplating the cards,  
and fools us all. she rakes in her winnings like leaves,  
then quits the table, looking for higher stakes.

# Before you come

*Aya Jbrahim*

The sun  
Will come back one day  
Searching for meaning  
Behind our daunting teeth  
But dear Sun all the meaning  
We swallowed, and all sentences  
Are now gone, beyond recognition  
Beyond the thin mucus of  
Our priceless dry red hearts  
We have searched before you  
And we had hidden  
What meaning and what hot  
Sand grains, smelling like fire while  
Igniting dust, what hard dead  
Leaves, what sick old tree, what  
Vague salt in a dying sea.  
Yellow rays that swim in air  
White teeth that swim in blood  
Sun, oh, Sun, what meaning  
You seek our dearest Sun  
You have been there before us  
Don't you remember, when we  
Buried death, when we watched  
The last drop of water evaporate  
And that huge red stain  
On a horizontal earth

---

# Three Days

Randall K. Rogers

Three days  
That's what they put you in for depression  
During that time you are fed anti-depressants  
And liquid valium is pumped into your veins  
The drugs don't seem to do much  
But just being in the hospital  
Seems to have a curative effect.

# TO OLGA

Nathaniel S. Rounds

This is a Waltham gold fob watch,  
heirloom from your paternal grandmother, pawned  
innumerable times by her contemptible husband  
to compensate for income lost  
to three-day drunks. It bears, inside,  
this inscription:  
To Olga, Oct 12, 1916,  
as well as several rows of rudely etched numbers,  
one scrawl for each time it was pawned.  
Incompetents from subsequent generations  
pawned it, then reclaimed it--  
a talisman for inherited failings.

# What to Do When You're Related to a Social Cripple

*Fredrick Zydek*

Expect next to nothing from them. Don't look for understanding, logic, sympathy, good works, or questions about what is going on in your life. About all they can usually talk about is their own small world and how, by being gruff and mean-

spirited, they manage to keep their employers, bosses, supervisors and directors in line. What they do is at the center of the universe. Everything else rotates around them and points in their direction. I know one who was so sure her own two children

were keeping her from discovering the meaning of life, she left them when they were two and four in an attempt to find sexual satisfaction and upward mobility. Fifty years later, she cannot understand why they both need occasional psychological

counseling and don't spend much more time with her than they do with their dentists. To hear her tell it, what she does as a clerk-typist in the secretary pool in the Federal Building saves the planet two or three times a week and none of the generals makes

a decision without running several top-secret bits of information past her before they write them in stone. She has a great niece who will soon turn a year old. She hasn't seen her yet because they named the child after someone else and she suspects it was on purpose.

# Bright

Katie Hocevar

My bed was rocking on its foundations. I cracked my eyes open to bright sunlight and Meredith flailing around the room from foot to foot, head banging to a song I was too groggy to identify. I closed my eyes defensively against the garish light, and instead saw the vibrant red sea of my inner eyelids. I still heard Meredith stomping around the room, beginning to sing an off-key version of “Welcome to the Jungle.” I groaned and flung my blanket down to my feet. Meredith, I had quickly learned, blazed through life in a whirlwind of mischief, adventure, and activity that baffled my more sedentary sensibilities. I could fight the current and exhaust myself, or climb out of bed and join Mer’s impromptu karaoke session. I clambered out of bed, grabbed my hair brush, and began rocking out.

Mer jumped up and down, applauding, when we finished our duet. I turned to her and bowed, and saw her lovely gap-toothed smile sparkling. I felt my heart flutter, seeing the excitement and approval in her eyes. “Thanks, Mer,” I mumbled. The way Mer shined in a room, I always had a sense that I ought to just disappear, so everyone could concentrate on her. “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” blasted from Mer’s computer speakers then, and she began her silly flailing dance as she made her way to the shower. I could hear her singing in the shower, and I heard her boisterous laugh as she dropped the bar of soap twice, a third time. Steam poured out of the bathroom, like tendrils of daybreak fog on the nearby Charleston Harbor.

\* \* \*

I’m not really sure what I was doing, the last time I saw her. As was always the case when Meredith was around, I was more concerned with Meredith than myself. I don’t know what I was doing, but I clearly remember what she was doing. She was crying. I know that, because it was the first time I ever saw her not beaming brilliantly, like the sun.

\* \* \*

I watched Meredith as she leaned over the pool table. She wore Levi’s and a garnet tank top, and I could see the tattoo revealed on the small of her back as the shirt crept up. She had told me about it a while back, a Gaelic symbol. I remembered the animated motion of her hands better than the explanation. Her hand motions were large, joyful. At one point during her description, Mer



touched her fingers to my forearm, and they were icy cold. When she withdrew them, the chill burned into my skin.

Mer lined up her winning shot and sunk it cleanly. She smiled brightly and dashed briskly to her opponent, who looked taken aback when she clasped his paw in her delicate hands and kissed his cheek. I couldn't hear her voice over the bar noise, but I watched her speak animatedly, glowing with enthusiasm towards this grizzled man who had tried to take advantage of her in pool. I watched as he melted under her blue-flame gaze, as he stood helpless against the irresistible impulse to fall in love with her. By the time she sauntered away, he was enamored. His eyes followed her around the room for the rest of the night.

\* \* \*

Meredith's mother showed up at our door last night at 4:23 AM. I was staring sleepless at the digital clock when the pounding began. I ignored it for a while. I was not interested in facing the awful shock awaiting me on the other side of the door. Mrs. Casey thrashed at the door continuously, only pausing to roar at our neighbor, Charlie, who had emerged from his apartment to meekly protest the noise. His complaint was ignored, and Mrs. Casey continued to beat at the door. By 4:44, I convinced myself that maybe Meredith was okay, that maybe I should just answer the door.

\* \* \*

Meredith never looked lovelier than the evening after her sister's funeral. She refused to wear black, insisting that her sister would have detested so much morbidity. She arrived instead in a scarlet jersey wrap dress, which draped along her stunning curves and made her cerulean eyes glow. Meredith's mother was clearly humiliated by her daughter's lack of decency, and refused to stand near her. Mer came to me instead. Throughout the service, she stood with her head erect. I sensed an aura of hollowness about her; I felt that her pride was the only flimsy vessel that kept her head above water. We left the service holding hands.

That evening we went to the waterfront park at sunset. Mer was still wearing her lovely red dress. She had a black-eyed susan tucked behind her ear, its merry face flashing against the backdrop of her white-blond tresses. She had brought me there, she said, to celebrate her sister's life. She clasped my hands, and we danced barefoot across the grass. We splashed in the fountain joyously, and then sprawled out across the lawn, drying ourselves in the warm Carolina air. Meredith laid her head in my lap, and we stayed that way until the sun set. As dark settled in, Meredith left me. I glanced at her delicate face under the glare of the street lamp before parting ways, and saw that she was crying.

\* \* \*

# Grown, Rich, Poor, Kid

*J. Williams*

He was a chauvinist,  
that loved women.  
He was an atheist,  
that talked to God.  
He was cold yet bundled up,  
he was warm though nude.  
He was faceless,  
when looking in the mirror.  
He was harmless,  
even when shooting his gun.  
He was disabled,  
even though able.  
He lived externally,  
while dead internally.  
He was under medicated,  
but always overdosed.  
He acquired too much,  
Far too quickly.  
He was a far too rich,  
which made him a little too poor

When I finally unlatched the door for Mrs. Casey, she immediately barged in and began screaming at me, at the walls, at the world outside the window. Meredith, her lovely rose of a daughter, had disappeared. There was an inevitability about the news. Meredith had defied the order of the universe by weeping openly; the only appropriate action she could take was to vanish into thin air. I sat dumbly at the kitchen table as Mrs. Casey charged around the apartment. Occasionally she paused to fling invectives in my direction. She had decided to drag me back to her house in Summerville. I mutely followed her.

\* \* \*

Mer and I attended a friend's Halloween party last autumn. At one point, I looked at Meredith from across the room. She smiled gaily at the crowd of people around her, all captivated by her argument to establish a citywide recycling program. She caught my eye and winked. She was glowing. I adored her.

\* \* \*

We arrived at the Casey's at 5:29 AM. The sky was growing gray from the arriving sun. As I stepped on to the driveway, I realized that I was still wearing my pajamas. I almost laughed, but the weight on my mind trapped any lightheartedness that might try to escape. We walked through the front door silently. I saw Mr. Casey sitting on the loveseat with his forehead creased, anxiously biting his cuticles. When he saw me after a moment, he sprang up from his seat and rushed to embrace me.

"Meredith," he cried.

I remained limp inside his arms.

"Oh, God, Meredith, we thought you were gone..." he trailed off.

His warm embrace infected me. I squeezed back.

# MERRY, GERRY, AND LARRY

*Allen Dale Olson*

Meribelle finally figured it out and turned boiling mad. She just realized that Geraldine, at the hairdressing salon, was having an affair with her husband. Why didn't she sense it sooner, she wondered. Every Friday she would hear Gerry tell her beauty operator about the lovely evening she and Larry were planning. After listening to several such conversations, Merry concluded that her Larry was the same charming Larry, the architect with "cute blonde hair, a love of baseball, and great taste in wine," who could come to her only a couple times a week because he's married.

Larry is an architect, a died-in-the-wool Cubs fan, and a wine aficionado. He also works late every Tuesday and Friday evenings. His office is on the ground floor of a downtown building with apartments on the upper floors. Merry had heard Gerry often describe her apartment on Astor Street, the same street as Larry's office. "It all fits," she said, as her anger mounted. Not just anger. Pain. Humiliation.

She began stuffing clothes into a suitcase. "Should I confront him and walk out," she mused aloud; "or just leave?" The question gave her pause. "Leave for where?" It gave her reflection. In seven years, she and Larry had created a beautiful suburban home in a very affluent neighborhood. She moved in an elite social circle, had plenty of spending money, luxurious vacations, and could get her hair done every week at one of the city's finest salons. Besides, Larry was good to her and, at least till now, had been good for her. All of this would be hard to give up, especially as she thought about explaining Larry's dalliance to friends and family.

Her head was clearing. "There has to be another way to deal with this," she thought. And she was right....

... Three weeks later Merry and Gerry left the salon together. They were going to lunch. During the intervening three weeks Merry had become friends with Gerry. She would join conversations and occasionally ask Gerry about her relationship with Larry. Their personalities had clicked, so they were off to lunch where they would share their intimate secrets, Merry about her husband, Gerry about her lover, totally unaware they were talking about the same man.

At lunch Merry asked Gerry what kind of evening she was planning. "Very intimate," Gerry replied. "He can never stay long, so we get romantic right away. Tonight he'll walk up to my apartment and ring the bell. When he opens it, I'll be there in a black, lacy slip holding a bottle of Moet & Chandon champagne with some Vivaldi on the phonograph. We'll sip on the champagne and fondle a bit, maybe even have sex. Depends on the time. He loves beautiful lingerie. Tuesday I think I'll greet him wearing a high-necked sheer white blouse and lacy white panties and play some Mozart. I try to make every minute interesting for him..."

... It was about 9:30 p.m. when Larry came through the kitchen door from

the garage and stared in astonishment as Merry approached him in a lacy black slip carrying a bottle of Moët & Chandon. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* sang from the hi-fi. "You look startled," she cooed. "You caught me off guard," he said; "This is a totally unexpected surprise. Wow!"

His astonishment that Friday was nothing compared with the reaction the next Tuesday when Merry came to the car before he even got out. He could hear Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* through the open door. She was in a frilly white blouse and sheer white panties. His face almost matched the panties. "You don't look well," she murmured.

"I'm ok," he stammered; "just a little tired from the drive." But he didn't comment on the wine or the sandwiches. He stared at Merry but seemed deep in thought. He had not yet suspected anything more than coincidence.

At the hairdresser's on Friday, Gerry showed Merry the pale blue Italian panty and bra set she had just bought. "For this evening," she giggled. "I also have a piece of French *foie gras* and a *gewürztraminer* from Alsace. This'll blow his mind."

On her way home, Merry made a couple of stops. Larry almost choked when he walked into the living room to find a blazing fire in the fireplace and Merry prancing in a pale blue panty and bra set. "Guess what," she sang, "I stopped at the French Market and bought some *foie gras* and *gewürztraminer*."

She expressed surprise that he had no appetite for one of his favorite dishes. "I'm just not used to this," he said. "Really?" she replied. "That's too bad. I was hoping you'd like it."

Merry and Gerry were now getting identical hairstyles. Larry was becoming more and more shell-shocked as he experienced two look-a-likes twice a week in the same undies, the same hairstyles, the same cosmetics, offering the same food and wines. He knew that Merry knew he was very uncomfortable, and he was becoming less certain that she was unaware of the reason.

Gerry mentioned it first. She indicated to Merry that her Larry didn't seem to be feeling well. Then she said outright to Larry that she was worried about him. "You don't seem yourself," she said, pointing out that he no longer talked about the wine, that he only toyed with food, and that he seemed pre-occupied.

Imagine his discomfort when Merry brought up the same things. "Maybe you should see a doctor," his wife suggested. His partner at work recommended a vacation. By this time both women were so much alike that his psyche was becoming very disoriented.

Gerry wasn't surprised when Larry suggested that perhaps they should stop seeing each other for a while. She was disappointed but realistic enough to know that affairs with married men seldom have futures. She agreed, and not long after she found another apartment – and another lover...

... Three years later Larry has regained his health and peace of mind. Merry continues to see Gerry but doesn't seem quite so interested in her new lover. On Tuesdays, Larry presides over the local Lions Club, and on Fridays he and Merry go with a neighborhood gourmet club to dinner. Only Merry knows the whole story.

# MY CHEATIN' HEART

Philip Loyd

From the very beginning, I knew I would get caught. Even so, I just couldn't help myself. And with my wife's sister of all people. How could I have been so bold; how could I have been so stupid? On top of everything, I did it right here in our own house, in our very own bed, while my painstaking wife was but in the next room. I was as quiet as I could be, but still, I was bound to get caught.

My sister-in-law is nothing like my wife. She is crass, kinky in cast, foul-mouthed, and from everything I've heard, easy to the touch. So it only makes sense I would favor her, so wanton and at hand. And she was that easy, only an arm's length away. It's not that I don't love my wife, we've been married nearly seven years and have two wonderful children together. It's just that, well, things aren't what they used to be. I know that ours is not the only relationship to ever sputter after a sprint, and mind you we had one hell of a roll. But now we seem to have hit such a spell that the well's run dry. I've tried everything, but nothing seems to put her in the mood anymore. And that's what hurts the most. I really believe I could have walked the Sahara from grain to grain without so much as a drop of water if only she would have been there waiting. From her complete lack of interest and preoccupation with the kids, well, I just couldn't go it alone. I would never say this aloud, but I do believe it was her fault. I never would have done what I did if it wasn't for her. And if it wasn't her fault, then it was God's. It certainly wasn't mine.

It all started quite innocently. Her sister had sent a picture of her most recent vacation, to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. This was her fifth marriage, but no one in her family ever said anything anymore. They would simply wait, usually just under a year, then they would lend a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on. It would happen just as it had happened before, and would again. She was the very picture of trailer trash, drunk with a cigarette in her mouth and wearing—of all colors—red. There weren't many of the primary colors left. Her new-found husband was wearing a crimson tuxedo leftover from the seventies with ruffled lapels like huge wings and a straw cowboy hat with a feather in it. He was smoking a cigar. Hard to believe, I thought, that she and my wife were sisters. One so familiar with the back seats of cars, the other cross-legged and dainty, graceful in her every stride and soft-spoken to elegance. One so vulgar with stained, crooked teeth, the other with the manners of a Miss and sparkling, pearly whites. But I just couldn't look at my wife anymore. Disdain would be the best word to describe it. And none of her friends would do, they were too much like her. Her sister was just right, the perfect picture to drop a back-load of hormonal frustration upon. There would be no fear of falling in love; there would be no respect at all. All the obscenities choking me up inside would come rolling off

my tongue in an orgy of verbal discharge. The fact that she was her sister did seem to complicate matters some, but I am telling the truth when I say that my intention was not to hurt my wife, at least not my conscious one.

It was a bad time of day for such a tryst, but then again, who's to say when's a good time. I'm sure my sister-in-law would have the whole low-down. From movies I remember, bad television dramas geared toward lonely, suspicious housewives, these sordid affairs did actually seem to happen in the middle of the day—weekdays. So I guess the time was right, at least, it seemed right. It's just that I didn't think the whole thing through, like would-say a kidnapper or a hijacker. But then again, in my own defense, I didn't consider this a crime. What was the big deal anyway? It was my business, not hers. What did she have to do with this? I used to do this sort of thing all the time before we were married. I did it before I met her and before I met my girlfriend before that, and before that. Who was going to get hurt? Maybe it was that sort of thinking that got me caught. Like a sobbing TV evangelist, I felt above the law, God's law. I could do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Besides, this wouldn't be the first time since we were married. Twice before, both times in the later stages of her pregnancies, I had stepped out on my own. There was just one big difference: I didn't get caught then.

So there I was with my sister-in-law by my side, trying my best to forget about her brute of a husband who could probably kill me with his bad breath alone. It felt so dirty and depraved, and I liked it. My wife was only earshot away, napping so pretty as I had looked in on her just moments before. The phone rang twice. I knew it had awakened her. But I couldn't even begin to explain the thrill, so dangerously close. I looked into my sister-in-law's eyes, so bloodshot and cheap with make-up smeared and streaking down her cheeks. There was just that look about her that pleaded "fuck me." It wasn't heaven, but it sure wasn't hell. It was a place distinctively lost and seldom spoken of. As long as my sister-in-law remained a whore, it was a place I wanted to go. I knew I could count on her; she would never let me down.

We live in an ante-bellum, Acadiana-style house with creaky wood floors and almost any other time I would have not only heard my wife's feet hitting the floor, but the squeaking beneath them as she made her way slowly towards our bedroom. I was in too deep, though. I was in that state, that place where heads change the lead and not even a shotgun blast would have made me stop. I was almost there, like a mountain climber with muscles so sore but the peak just within view. And just as she turned the doorknob and entered the room I exploded onto the sheets, a smile on my face so short-lived as to not even have grinned at all. There she stood, her hands covering her mouth even though she couldn't have uttered a word. Then she looked on the bed next to me, at her sister. "How could you?" she said to me, hysterical and crying on her way out the door.

I sat back in bed for a moment, not knowing what to do or even if I should do anything at all. What had I done so wrong anyway? What was the big deal? It was my business, not hers. Then I thought, maybe it wasn't so much what I did or where

I did it, but whom I did it with. Maybe if it had been with someone she didn't know, that I didn't or couldn't possibly ever know, maybe then it would have been all right. I didn't know what to do, but it did come over me like an involuntary response to give chase. So I pulled up my pants and tossed the photo of her sister onto the floor and headed out after her. Her sister was still in Gatlinburg and I knew the first thing she would do would be to call her. I had to stop her. I turned around and looked at the photo once more. No sir, I had to get to her first. I couldn't afford to have her sister's Johnny Cash-looking husband find out that I was jacking-off to his trashy wife's photo; and I really couldn't afford to have him think I was masturbating to him in the picture as well. He may never believe that I had covered his face with my thumb. He might think I'd gone faggot and then he'd kill me just for the good of his fellow man. "Honey!" I screamed, mumbling to myself that I would never again do what I had just done. Never again, though I still wasn't sure exactly what it was I had done wrong.

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# I have lived with unschooled men in the south

*Andrew Grossman*

the religion of guilt does not rule them,  
neither do they question past or future,  
they are rude, they are prejudiced,  
they smell of gasoline and cigarettes,  
not one I met was wise, or had traveled far,  
with them I forgot time and ambition  
and the envy of fine living,  
they did not ask 'what do you do?'  
or the merits of my mutual fund,  
they asked me to work, to sweat,  
in the shade their sweet tea was pleasant

# What It Wants

Randall Brown

His hand does things he doesn't want it to. Waves at the racist neighbor. Grabs mixed nuts off the shelves. Reaches for an ABBA CD. At work, he keeps it deep in his pocket, lest it salute, strike out, slap someone on the back, pinch a passing lump of flesh. Then it reaches for his balls and he has to sit on it, type with the one hand that listens to him. Anyways, he can't let it near keyboards.

I want to hold it, Sally has said for months—and he's told her he can't trust that hand. Maybe it needs love. Maybe it doesn't want love, maybe it wants to dig into flesh until the thumb and index finger touch.

So, Sally writes this letter to the men upstairs about his hand and shows it him, says she'll send it right up to them unless he gives her what she wants. He thinks of the handshake he'll need for a new job, all his hand might do inside his pocket or unloosed.

So it comes to pass that Sally sits in his cubicle. He pulls his arm attached to his hand up and out of the pocket and Sally grasps it, turns the lifeless hand over. What do you think it'll do? she asks him.

I never know.

She interlocks her fingers—church, steeple. It doesn't want to play. She squeezes the fingertips. She reads the lines. She kisses each finger, then sucks his thumb. She places it under her shirt. She rubs it back and forth across her nipple.

It's a good hand, she tells him when she's done. I'd give anything for such a hand.

I've got to tell you something, he says. My mouth doesn't do what I want it to.

Yeah? My heart's like that.

She wheels the chair over to his mouth —and then the hand rises between them, pushes her hard, so the chair takes off like a go-cart and then his hand, fuck, it's waving.

Bye, bye.

No.

It's locking the door.

Oh God.

He's got his hand that does what it wants. It wants whatever he doesn't. A terrible, terrible hand.



# THE RETURN OF O.D. SUSKIND

Mel Waldman

## I

"Looks like we'll have to operate, Oscar," Doc Delight announced.

"What kind of operation will I need?"

"We'll have to cut into your brain."

"Just to get rid of those lousy headaches?"

"You've got a brain tumor, Oscar."

"So now we know what's been causing my migraines."

"Yeah."

"Is it...?"

"It's not malignant."

"So I'm gonna live?"

"You bet, Oscar. You'll live to be a hundred and five."

"Hope you're telling the truth, Arthur."

"Mother called me honest Art."

"If you're lying, I'll come back to haunt you, Arthur."

"It's benign, Oscar."

"Okay. When can we operate?"

"Next Monday."

"Sure."

As O.D. Suskind walked to the door, he turned around and said to Dr. A.F. Delight: "Arthur, who's gonna operate on me?"

"Dr. L.M. Jones. He's the best surgeon around. Imported him from New York City. We'll operate at Cape Cod Hospital."

"He's not gonna butcher me, Arthur? Will he?"

"Leroy's the best. Trust me."

"Only in God, Arthur. Only in God."

## II

After the operation, O.D. Suskind felt better than ever. The headaches were gone. "I've been reborn," O.D. told his wife Eva. "I'm as strong as a bull. And now I can get a decent night's sleep."

For three weeks O.D. slept like a lamb. Then one night O.D. screamed in his sleep: "Help! Help me! He's trying to kill me!"

"Wake up, Oscar!" Eva cried out. "Wake up! You're having a nightmare."

O.D. jumped up in bed, his eyes popping out as if he had seen the Angel of Death.

“Looks as if you saw a ghost, Oscar.”

“He was strangling me to death.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. Couldn’t see his face. I was clutching a dead dog and then I smelled the burning sulfur. Behind me, a stranger was fumigating the house with burning sulfur. As I turned around to see him, he grabbed my throat and...”

“Oscar, it was only a dream.”

“Yes, Eva. It was only a dream. But...”

### III

The same nightmare returned every night for a week. So O.D. went to ol’ Doc Delight who thrust a long thick needle into O.D.’s left arm. Wearing a big fat grin, the doc said: “I’ve given you an injection of strong stuff. It oughta do the trick.”

“What is it?”

“It’s The Cure!”

“Sure it’ll work?”

“You bet. Just trust me. Trust in ol’ A.F.”

“I’ll try, Arthur.”

“Believe me, Oscar. The nightmares are gonna vanish. You’ll see.”

### IV

And the nightmare did not return for a month. When it did, O.D. went to the doc and said: “It’s back, Arthur. The guy’s strangling me and I can’t see him and I smell the burning sulfur while I’m clutching the dead dog. I’m going crazy, Arthur. Help me!”

“You need a stronger shot of The Cure. Give me your left arm, Oscar. We’re gonna get rid of that nightmare, just you wait and see.”

Dr. A.F. Delight gave O.D. Suskind a stronger dose of The Cure and O.D.’s nightmare vanished for a while.

### V

In the meantime, O.D. quit his old job with S.S. and C. Corporation. One day his new boss, Nat A. Samuels, called and said: “Well, it’s time O.D. I want you to take a trip to Brooklyn, New York. I want you to visit Penelope Faith, the President of the House of O. She lives in a place called Sheepshead Bay.

“Never heard of it.”

“Well, you’ll love the place. It’ll be home to you. Trust me.”

“Only trust in God, Mr. Samuels.”

“Well, that’s a shame, O.D. cause a fella’s got to trust a few of his associates or he’s up the creek. Get it?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway, I expect great things from you, O.D. You’re gonna sell Penelope a lot of guns and knives and bows and arrows and any other weapons her heart craves for. Get it?”

“Sure do, Mr. Samuels.”

“Fine, O.D. Come over to the office in an hour. I’ll give you a few maps and a more extensive orientation.”

“I’ll be right over.”

“Fine, O.D. And I hope... Well, don’t disappoint me, O.D.”

“I won’t, Mr. Samuels.”

“Terrific! I knew I could depend on you. Looked at your pockmarked face and said to myself: ‘There’s a God-fearing man. A man of...’

“I go to church every Sunday except when I’m on the road.”

“Of course, O.D. I never doubted you. Said to myself: ‘There’s a man of character. A man who could make a great weapons salesman.’ Yeah, that’s what I said to myself.”

“I won’t disappoint you, Mr. Samuels.”

“Of course you won’t, O.D. I trust you.”

## VI

That night O.D.’s nightmare returned. He went to the doc who gave him a mighty injection of The Cure.

“Thanks, Arthur.”

“Sure, Oscar. This oughta hold you until you return from your trip.”

## VII

On the road to New York, O.D.’s mind went blank. He couldn’t remember who he was or where he came from. Panic-stricken, he parked his ol’ Fury on the side of the road. Then he looked in his pockets for his I.D. but he had none. “Damn it! I’ve got \$10,000 in cash on me but no I.D. What’s going on? Who am I?”

Suddenly, O.D. fell into a deep sleep. When he awakened, it was pitch-black. O.D. shrieked through the darkness: “Aha! My name’s U.L. Caesar. That’s who I am! Good ol’ U.L. and I’m looking for the House of O. That’s where I’m going.”

O.D. started the ol' Fury and drove off to the nearest Holiday Inn. He signed his name-U.L. Caesar. Traveling salesman from Ithaca, New York.

## VIII

For the next few weeks, O.D. traveled through Massachusetts, Vermont, and Pennsylvania searching for the House of O. Although he asked a lot of strangers, no one had ever heard of the House of O. Then one morning, O.D. was sitting in the House of Pancakes in Pennsylvania having delicious blueberry pancakes. A gargantuan young man wearing a cowboy hat walked into the restaurant. When the man smiled at O.D., O.D. cried out: "My name's U.L. Caesar. I've been looking for the House of O for weeks. Ever hear of the place?"

"Sure. But it's not a place. It's a company. Buys and sells the best weapons in the world. Main branch is in New York City."

"Terrific! By the way, would you like to join me for breakfast?"

"Okay. My name's Charles B. Dexter. I'm from the greatest place on earth-the land of The Cattle of the Sun."

"Where's that?"

"Texas, U.S.A. Out there-things are big, bigger, and biggest. A man's got a lot of space to himself. Take me, good ol' Charles B. Dexter. Six-foot-six and a half and getting bigger every second. Now, I can wander for twenty miles in any direction and it don't matter. I'm home. It's all mine. Understand? I'm home. Be back there next week. A man shouldn't be away too long."

"Sure. I'm going home too."

"Thought you were going to the House of O?"

"Yeah. That's right. That's where I'm going."

## IX

When O.D. arrived in New York City, he went to the Manhattan office of the House of O.

"Who do you wanna see?" the receptionist asked.

"I don't know. My name's U.L. Caesar. I've come home."

"I see. Well, just wait here a minute."

A few minutes later, the receptionist returned. "Mr. Faith will see you inside. Go right in."

O.D. went into the executive office. A slender, muscular giant greeted O.D. "I'm T.M. Faith, Vice President of the House of O. May I help you?"

"I'm U.L. Caesar. I believe I've been expected."

"Sorry. I don't think we've been expecting you, Mr. Caesar. Are you

sure you've got the right company? This is the House of O."

"Yes. I've been looking for the House of O for weeks. And now I'm home."

"Home?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't quite know myself, Mr. Faith."

Suddenly, the giant looked at O.D. and said: "You look familiar. I've seen you before. I've seen you... It can't be! Is it you, Father? Is it you?"

"You think I'm your father?"

"Yes! You've got his azure eyes. Father was about 5'10", sinewy, and very strong. Few men could match his strength. You're about Father's height. And you've got his muscular frame."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know. He worked for the Government. He went on secret missions. He never returned from the last one."

"Was he a secret agent?"

"I suppose you might call him that. He was a man of many titles."

"You really think I'm your father?"

"You've got those same azure eyes. As deep as the cerulean sky."

"What was his name?"

"O.D. Faith."

"O.D.?"

Suddenly, O.D. looked quizzically at T.M. and said: "That name sounds familiar."

"It ought to. It belongs to you. Welcome home, Father. I've got a lot to tell you and time's running out. They're planning to kill me and take mother's fortune."

"Who?"

"The suitors."

"No one's gonna hurt you, T.M. Not as long as I'm alive."

"Thank God you've returned, Father. We've got to plan our strategy. Tonight's the Party. There's gonna be a contest to determine which suitor gets Mother. We've got to stop them!"

"We will, son."

"Should we tell Mother you're home?"

"Not yet, T.M. It might endanger her life if she knew. By the way, what's her name?"

"Penelope."

“Oh yes. Sweetest name a lady could have. A lovely name as old as the ancient myths.”

## X

T.M. took O.D. to Sheepshead Bay. “We live at 666 Shore Boulevard, Father. You used to live there many years ago.”

“The mansion looks familiar. But you see, T.M., I feel as if it’s all a dream.”

“Be patient, Father. Your memory will come back.”

As T.M. opened the door, the old dog Argus jumped up to greet him. Then it flew into the arms of O.D.

“Christ! This is one helluva dog.”

“Your favorite hound, Father. He’s been waiting for you for years. Stay with Argus a few minutes. I’ll go up and tell Penelope my old friend U.L. Caesar is here. I’ll be right back.”

O.D. played with Argus. Suddenly, the old dog fell to the floor and died. Clutching the old hound, O.D. cried out: “I’ve just returned and old Argus is dead. What’s going on?”

After holding Argus in his arms for a few minutes, O.D. smelled the burning sulfur. Hands encircled his throat, strangling him from behind. O.D. grabbed the lethal hands and ripped them from his throat. A voice cried out from above and looking up, O.D. saw a tall statuesque blonde strolling down the spiraling staircase. Then a sharp blow to his head jet-tisoned him into unconsciousness.

## XI

“What happened?” O.D. asked, looking up at T.M. and Penelope.

“Someone tried to kill you. Must have been one of the suitors. Penelope scared him off. I came when I heard Mother’s scream. Mother, this is U.L. Caesar.”

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Caesar. Sorry about this. The House of O is in turmoil. So tonight I will choose a new husband. I can no longer wait for my husband to return. O.D. has been gone for many years.”

“Perhaps O.D. will return before you make the choice.”

“It would take a miracle.”

“Trust in God, Penelope. Trust in God,” O.D. said.

## XII

Penelope went upstairs to freshen up before the contest. In the meantime, O.D. and T.M. went into the dining room where the suitors were at their banquet tables.

When Antinous, the leader of the suitors, saw O.D., he cursed him and hit him with a footstool. O.D. cursed Antinous, who strutted to the other side of the dining room.

Later, another suitor named Ctesippus insulted O.D. and hurled a bone at him. O.D. sat quietly and did not respond.

### XIII

After several hours passed, Penelope brought the great bow of O into the hall and announced the contest to the suitors. She said: "He among you who is able to string the bow and shoot an arrow through the twelve axes will become my husband."

The suitors accepted the challenge. "Let us go into the room of O which has been locked for many years." Penelope announced.

In the room of O, T.M. aligned the twelve axes. Then Penelope said: "It is time. Each suitor may try."

Now, the suitors each had an opportunity. But however they strained and despite their attempts to soften the wood by greasing and heating it, not one of them could bend the mighty bow. Finally, Antinous suggested that they postpone further efforts until the next day.

Although this was agreed to, O.D., who had been sitting in a corner of the hall, asked to try the bow. The suitors were indignant at his request and refused him.

Then Penelope said: "Let him try. If he wins, I will not marry him."

T.M. ordered his mother to leave the hall and then sent the bow to O.D.

O.D. took the bow in his hands, pretending not to hear the abuse of the suitors. Effortlessly, he strung the mighty weapon and expertly fitted a bronze-headed arrow to it. Slowly, and seemingly without concentration, he let fly the arrow. The arrow swiftly shot through the row of axes. As the suitors sat stupefied by disbelief, T.M. took hold of his sword and spear and stepped to his father's side.

### XIV

With a shout, O.D. leapt to the threshold of the hall. He killed Antinous with his next arrow. Then he announced: "I am O.D. Faith, the Master of the House of O."

"Odysseus!" one of the suitors cried out.

"Yes! It is I!"

"It was Antinous' fault. He led us astray. He was responsible for our misdeeds," Eurymachus begged.

"It is too late. Each criminal must die!" Odysseus announced. Then

with his next arrow, he killed Eurymachus.

One by one, Odysseus and his son T.M., a.k.a. Telemachus, killed the suitors. Then the scene of the battle fumigated with sulfur.

## XV

Later, O.D. and Penelope made love, their son Telemachus returning to his room.

## XVI

In the middle of the night, O.D.'s nightmare returned. O.D. clutched his old dog Argus. The stifling odor of burning sulfur filled the room. And behind him, someone approached. Suddenly, the stranger was strangling him to death.

O.D. awakened. He was clutching the dead dog Argus. The odor of burning sulfur permeated the room. From behind, someone was strangling him. And Penelope watched as nightmare became reality.

O.D. grabbed the huge hands, forcing them loose from his throat. Suddenly, O.D. leaped up and turned to face the attacker. "My God! It's you, Telemachus! You!"

With almost godly strength, O.D. leaped through the air, grabbing Telemachus' thick throat. O.D. strangled him to death while Penelope watched. Then he turned to Penelope and asked: "Why?"

"It was part of the ritual."

"What ritual?"

"The holy ritual of Odysseus!"

"This is not the way it was written by Homer."

"Homer was not a member of the Holy Order."

"What are you talking about, Penelope?"

"You are the new Odysseus, member of the Holy Order-The House of O. And this is the way."

## POSTSCRIPT

Penelope did not confess that she had slept with Telemachus. She did not reveal her incestuous love for her son. Or his-for her. Motivated by obsession and the need to possess his mother, he had attempted patricide.

Penelope hid her dark secrets within her treacherous heart. Odysseus would never discover the truth! Or would he?



# Cried Alone

*Alexandria Rand*

I have always cried  
alone

I couldn't help but  
find a place to myself  
and that I would no longer have to  
swallow the tears

The salt water  
burned my face

The silent pleas killed me

I couldn't escape it

The past came to  
haunt me  
and it didn't care  
how much it hurt me

It just laughed  
when I thought I was free  
and it waited  
for the right moment  
to twist the knife

To tighten the noose

And I quietly took the pain

I decided I had to  
move on

I had to pick up the  
lingering parts of the past  
and put them in their place

Where they belong

But I  
couldn't do that alone

I wanted to remember the  
unclenched fist

And when you helped me  
in the fight  
I actually felt strong again

And I don't cry anymore

# Andrew Hettinger

*Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"*

I never really liked you. You never revealed yourself to me, and why would you: you, who never had anyone, you, who always had the bad breaks. Everyone looked at you as different. Where would you have learned to trust? Who would you have learned it from?

I never really liked you. I met you through a friend and he explained to me that multiple sclerosis left you with a slight limp and a faint lisp. Faint, under the surface, but there, traces of something no one would everknow of you well enough to fully understand.

I never really liked you. You never revealed yourself to me and I never wanted you to; you scared me too much. You, plagued with physical ailments. You, with a limp in your walk. You, with a patch over your eye. You, who stared at me for always just a bit too long.

They told me the patch was from eye surgery with complications and now you had to cover your shame, cover someone else's mistakes, cover a wrong you didn't commit, cover a problem not of your own doing. The problems were never of your own doing, were they.

I heard these stories and I thought it was sad. I heard these stories and thought you had to be a pillar of strength. And then I saw you drink, straight from the bottle, fifteen-year-old chianti. And I saw you smash your hand into your living room wall. This is how you lived.

The house you lived in was littered with trash. Why bother to clean it up anyway. It detracted you from the holes in the wall, the broken furniture from drunken fits. This was how you reacted to life, to the world. You didn't know any better. This is how you coped.

I never really liked you. You would come home from work, tell us about a woman who was beautiful and smart that liked you, but shewasn't quite smart enough. And I thought: We believe anything if we tell ourselves enough. We weave these fantasies to get through the days.

I never really liked you. Every time you talked to me you always leaned a little too close. So I stayed away from the house, noted that those whom you called friends did the same. I asked my friend why he bothered to stay in touch. And he said to me, "But he has no friends."

This is how I thought of you. A man who was dealt a bad hand. A man who couldn't fight the demons that were handed to him. And with that I put you out of my mind, relegated you to the ranks of the inconsequential.

We parted ways. You were reduced to a sliver of my youth.

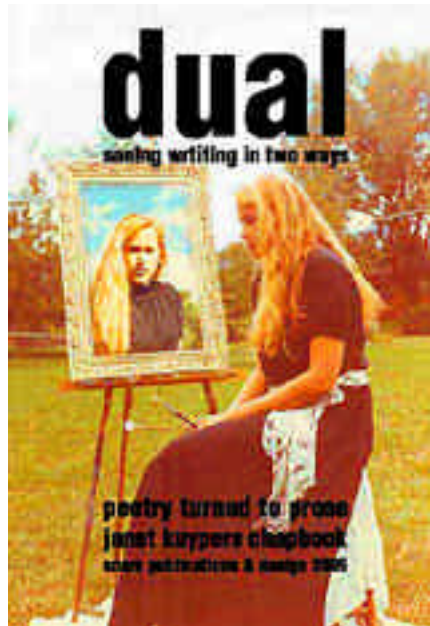
I received a letter recently, a letter from someone who knew you, someone who wanted me to tell my friend that they read in the newspaper that you hanged yourself. Your brother died in an electrical accident, and after the funeral you went to the train station; instead of leaving this town, you went to a small room and left us forever. Strangers had to find you. The police had to search through records to identify your body. The newspaper described you as having “health problems.” But you knew it was more than that.

And I was asked to be the messenger to my friend. The funeral had already passed. You were already in the ground. There was no way he could say goodbye. I shouldn't have been the one to tell him this. No one deserved to tell him. He was the only one who tried to care.

I never really liked you. No one did. But when I had to tell my friend, I knew his pain. I knew he wanted to be better. I knew he thought you were too young to die. I knew he felt guilty for not calling you. He knew it shouldn't have been this way. We all knew it.

I never really liked you. But now I can't get you out of my mind; you haunt me for all the people we've forgotten in our lives. I don't like what you've done. I don't like you quitting. I don't like you dying, not giving us the chance to love you, or hate you, or even ignore you more. My friend still doesn't know where your grave is. I'd like to find it for him, and take him to you. Let you know you did have a friend out there. Bring you a drink, maybe, a fitting nightcap to mark your departure, to commemorate a life filled with liquor, violence, pain and death.

I never really liked you, but maybe we could get together in some old cemetery, sit on your gravestone, share a drink with the dead, laugh at the injustices of life when we're surrounded by death. Maybe then we'd understand your pain for one brief moment, and remember the moments we'll always regret.



# burn it in

*Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"*

Once I was at a beach off the west coast of Florida. It was New Year's Eve and the yellow moon hung over the gulf like a swaying lantern. And I was watching the waves crash in front of me with a friend and the wind picked up and my friend just stared at that moon for a while and then closed his eyes. I asked him what he was thinking.

He said, "I wanted to look at this scene, and memorize it, burn it into my brain, record it in my mind, so I can call it up when I want to. So I can have it with me always."

I too have my recorders. I burn these things into my brain. I burn these things onto pages. I pick and choose what needs to be said, what needs to be remembered.

Every year, at the end of the year I used to write in a journal, recall the things that happened to me, log in all of the memories I needed to keep, because that was what kept me sane. That was what kept me alive.

When I first went to college I was studying to be a computer science engineer. I wanted to make a lot of money. I wanted to beat everyone else, because burned in my brain were the taunts of kids who were in cliques so others could do the thinking for them. Because burned in my brain were the evenings of the high school dances I never went to. Because burned in my brain were the people I knew I was better than, who thought they were better than me. Well, yes, I wanted to make a lot of money, I wanted to beat everyone else, but I hated what I was doing. I hated what I saw around me. Hated all the pain people put each other through.

And all of these memories just kept flooding me, so in my spare time to keep me sane, to keep me alive, I wrote down the things I could not say. That was how I recorded things.

When I looked around me, and saw friends raping my friends — I wrote. I burned into these nightmares with a pen and yes, I have this recorded. I have all of this recorded.

What did you think I was doing when I was stuffing handwritten notes into my pockets or typing long hours into the night?

In college, I had two roommates who in their spare time would watch movies in our living room and cross-stitch. I never understood this. In my spare time, I was not watching other's stories or weaving thread to

keep my hands busy. I was sitting in the corner of a cafe scribbling into my notebook. I was sitting in the university computer lab slamming my hands, my fingers, against the keyboard because there were too many atrocities in the world, too many injustices that I had witnessed, too many people who had wronged me and I had a lot of work to do. There had to be a record of what you've done.



Did you think your crimes would go unpunished? And did you think that you could come back, years later, slap me on the back with a friendly hello and think I wouldn't remember?

You see, that's what I have my poems for, so there will always be a record of what you have done. I have defiled many pages in your honor, you who swung your battle ax and thought no one would remember in the end. Well, I made a point to remember. Yes, I have defiled many pages, and have you defiled many women? You, the man who rapes my friends? You, the man who rapes my sisters? You, the man who rapes me? Is this what makes you a strong man?

You want to know why I do the things I do.

I had to record these things. That is what kept me together when people were dying. That is what kept me together when my friends went off to war. That is what kept me together when my friends were raped and left for dead. That is what kept me together when no one bothered to notice this or change this or care about this — these recordings kept me together.

I need to record these things to remind myself of where I came from. I need to record these things to remind myself that there are things to value and things to hate. I need to record these things to remind myself that there are things worth fighting for, worth dying for.

I need to record these things to remind myself that I am alive.

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