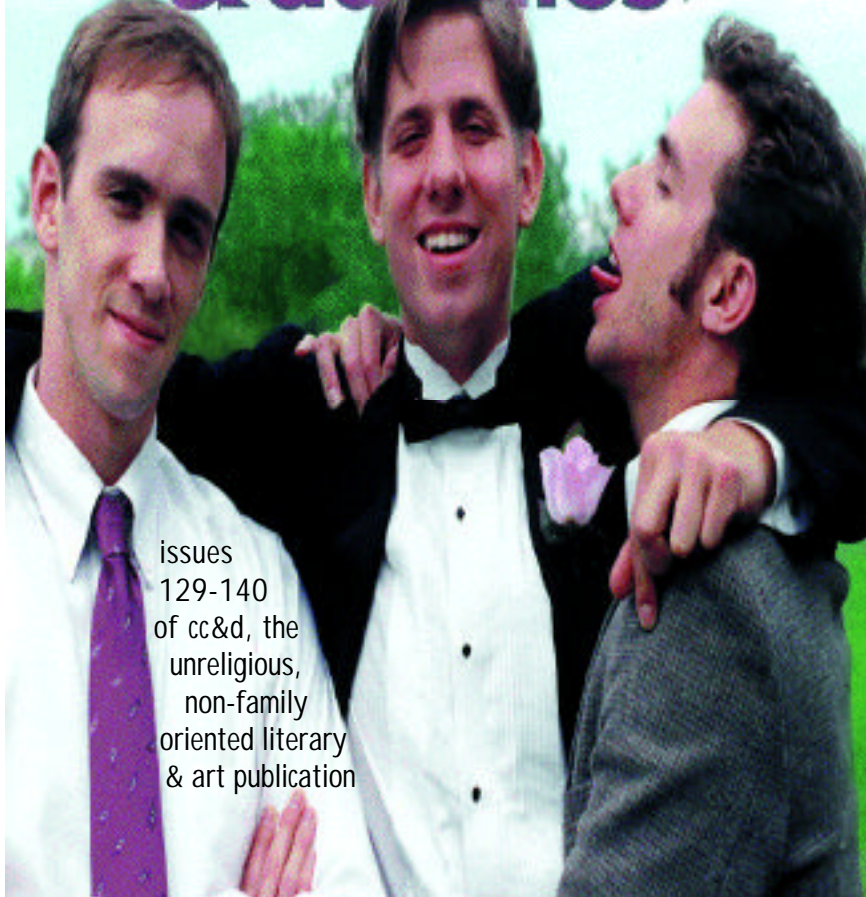


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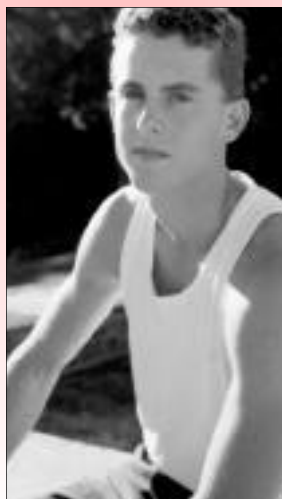
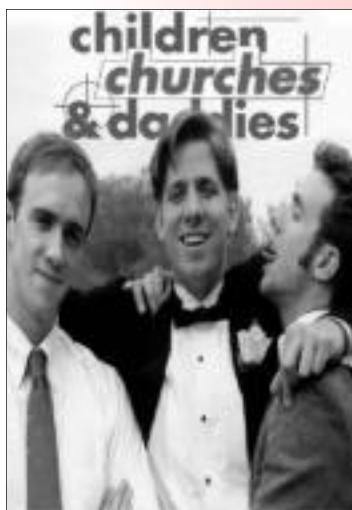
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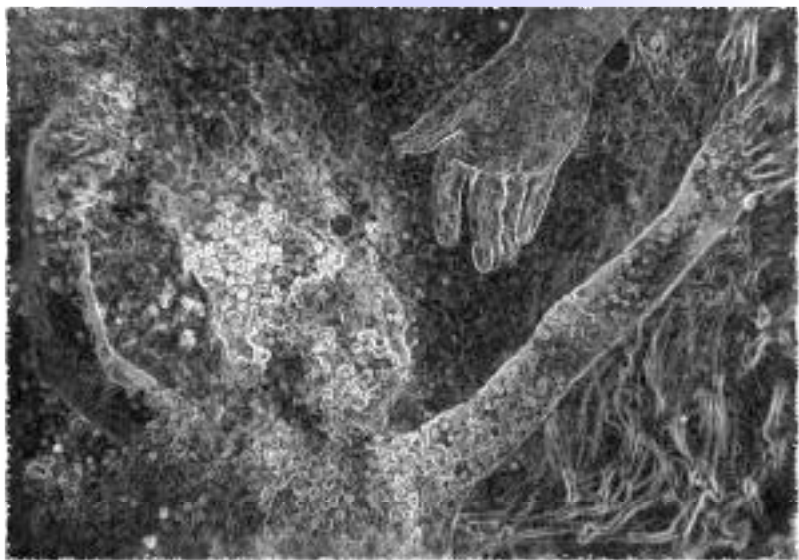
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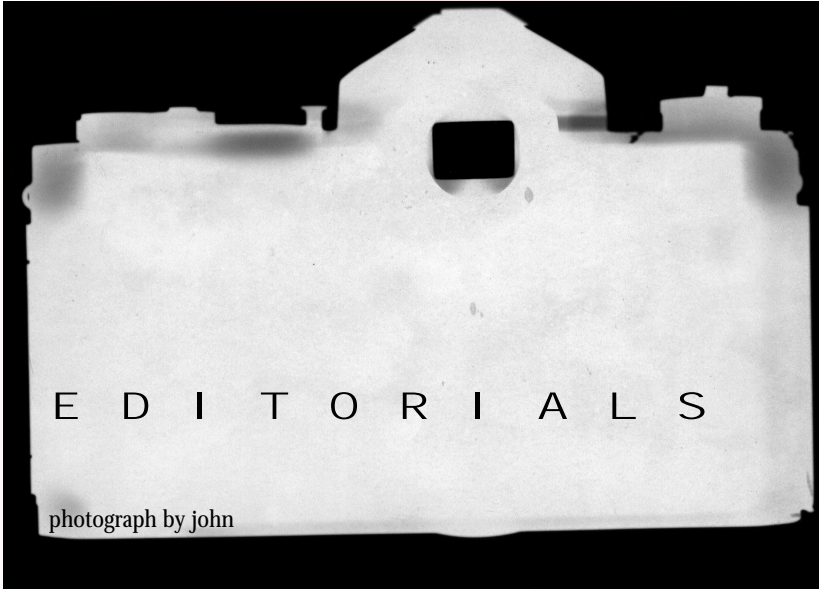






image, by lorelei

what i say



Boomers Beware

Who Pays the Price for Taxing the Rich?

Although ability, and the ability to keep what you're earned, individual rights to their own property, is what made America great, people still continue to attack the rich for earning money.

What was originally a reasonable article in the newspaper about how the estate tax affect many more than the "rich" and how it should be eliminated, became yet another slam on success, ability, and everything America worked to become. USA Today printed an article by Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise institute called "Boomers Beware: Estate Tax Now Not Just for the Rich."

It started by stating that the estate tax is only applicable to amounts over \$600,000, which has made it in the past apply only to a small group of the very rich. However, Baby Boomers are reaching retirement age - and when they pull their tax-deferred saving out to live on, they multitude of taxes, including the estate tax, could take up to 90 percent of their money away.

Seems reasonable to want to fight that.

What I wonder, though, is why it's okay to take it away from the "very rich," as our government has done in the past, versus the Baby Boomers. Because you're earned more you should be punished more? Because you're earned more means you don't have a right anymore to what you've earned?

The concept of a redistribution of wealth should be like fingernails to a chalkboard to every American. America was based on the right to work for a living, and the right to be able to keep what you're earned. That's why, as Americans, most here have a profound hatred for communism - because most here believe that you should be rewarded for your achievements, not punished. But placing a higher burden on the "very rich" via taxation is a form of wealth redistribution, yet many people don't think twice about it.

The article then goes on to drop the bomb:

"Beyond the changing politics of wealth accumulation, estate taxes need rethinking for other reasons. The fact is they have not done what they were intended to do: prevent the handful of super-wealthy from concentrating their gains even more in a small elite."

Why would the intention of a tax be to make sure the rich don't stay rich? Why would a government want to tell the people that have the most wealth (in other words, the people that produced the most, or the best, products and services, the people that have been the most productive) that after working for their earnings all this time, they no longer have a right to all of it? What harm does someone see in someone being rich?

Other than people who hate accomplishment, hate the good for being good, other than people who are envious of talent, I can imagine no one that would think its fair to take the money away from someone who earned it, because they earned it. We don't want the government, or robbers, for that matter, doing that to us. Why would we want to do it to someone else?

The article goes on: "Many western countries are doing away with estate taxes altogether, a course advocated by Speaker Newt Gingrich. America won't do that; an estate tax at least makes a statement about our values and our desire to prevent too much concentration of wealth and power."

If an estate tax at least makes a statement about "our values," what statement does it make? And who did he talk to to know that an estate tax makes any statement about our values. Who's values - every American's values? That's strange; the estate tax is anything but capitalistic - it's very un-American.

Keeping an estate tax shows what we don't value more than it shows what we do value. If we value an estate tax, we must not value the right to our own property, because we take money away from people simply because they have more. If we value an estate tax, we must not value the mind, reason or ability, because we are telling our producers that the welfare of poor people, of people who haven't produced and haven't shown ability, is more important than the producer.

And why would America want to prevent too much concentration of wealth and power? Money is power, only in the marketplace - it is not political power, or intellectual power. And the person who earned their money has the right to power in the marketplace, to be able to purchase what they want, or save what they want. That is their right.

Ornstein goes on to say, "But we surely can change a set of levies that ends up punishing savings and investment and will soon punish middle class success." Yes, we shouldn't be punishing savings and investment; that helps our economy as a whole and helps everyone in the nation as a whole. And no, we shouldn't punish middle class success. But why does that mean we should punish upper class success?

I don't know how America could have ever achieved as a nation with the philosophy that wealth should be redistributed. If so, we'd have a nation of equals, just like the Soviet Union promised its comrades. A nation all standing in bread lines together.

Yes, the estate tax should be eliminated, but for reasons that are the opposite of what Mr. Ornstein suggests. The tax is morally wrong. It's wrong, if an individual's rights are to be upheld, to take away their money because they happen to have more. Let's not slip into the same mistakes other countries in history have made, by over-taxing the rich, who earned their money, and giving it to the poor, who didn't. If there's no incentive to work for achievements, and earnings, there will eventually be no one producing, and everyone will suffer. Who pays the price for taxing the rich? Every last one of us.

Capital Gains - or Losses?

I read a debate in the newspaper about whether or not the capital gains tax should be eliminated. The first argument, coming from the newspaper, was that the tax is only affecting the rich - and Republicans are trying to make their lives easier by eliminating it. It is not a tax burden on the people who have to pay the capital gains tax, because overwhelmingly these people are making over \$100,000 annually. Furthermore, the burden from the eliminated tax revenue would shift from the rich to the poor if the capital gains tax was eliminated. The newspaper also wrote that they were disappointed that the Republicans, who talk so strongly about balancing the budget, are willing to cut taxes to the rich, which would impede the process of a balanced budget.

I read this all, and it made sense. I thought, "Yeah, we should keep the tax. Who is it hurting?"

Well, the response to this article came from Newt Gingrich, a man with whom I seldom agree. When I started to read, I had to reassess my position.

The tax, he said, is wrong. You're taxed on investments, and are taxed again when you pull your money out of the investment. These taxes are difficult to manage with at tax time, there are many forms and schedules and exceptions that make filing a tax report come April 15th with capital gains taxes more difficult. (This extra processing and paperwork also costs the government money, keep in mind, which we pay for - with more taxes.) Eliminating the capital gains tax would save the people - as well as the IRS - headaches.

It also is a relatively small tax, directed to a relatively small group - people who invest. What this tax then does is makes people who want to invest less likely to because of overtaxation. What effect does this have on the economy? The government, if they are going to be involved with regulating the economy in the first place, should definitely not be hindering people from investing their money.

People who invest for their own businesses suffer too, as well as people who invest their money. I knew of a man who made a business out of buying old houses, renovating them and reselling them. He hired carpenters, electricians, plumbers, landscapers and painters to renovate his homes - helping people get jobs. He purchased appliances, carpeting, supplies for renovation - putting money back into the economy. But when higher capital gains taxes were implemented, doing these renovations was no longer economical for him - which cost jobs, which meant fewer products were purchased, which meant people were less productive.

Some could also argue, he suggests, that pointing a tax at investors is pointing a tax at the rich simply because they are rich, which is discriminatory. There is less incentive to be more productive and earn more when it means that more money will be taken away from the producers by the government. The government shouldn't be hindering people from making more money, or from going into business - that's what keeps the

economy strong.

Expecting people with more money to pay more than their “fair share” to help out the “less fortunate” is essentially forcing them to give away more of their money to other people - people who haven’t earned it. Most people would call this kind of scenario a robbery.

If we are going to try to balance the budget, the key isn’t in doing it by taxing everyone until the debt is gone, like the newspaper suggested. The key is accepting more responsibilities as citizens, and not expecting the government to make things easier on us. If we did that, if we took that responsibility, there would be no need for excess taxes - especially like capital gains.

Child Molesters & the Government: Big Brother is Watching

I was listening to the radio the other night - talk radio (it keeps me awake when I have to drive a long distance during the night). It keeps me awake, usually because there’s enough there to get me so angry that I actually want to yell back at the radio.

Honestly, I actually once heard someone call in and say it was their constitutional right to food, that the government had to give them food if they didn’t get it themselves (tell me where in the Constitution does it say that citizens of the United States of America have the inalienable right to “life, liberty and blocks of cheese”). Last time I checked, The Pursuit of Happiness meant that you have the ability to do what you need to in order to acquire the things you need, such as food, not that the government has a responsibility to feed you.

So anyway, I was listening to the radio, and the discussion on this particular evening was about child molesters. Doctors and other experts has pretty much agreed that they are incurable, that castration doesn’t stop their urges to hurt children, because it is a power struggle more than a sexual venting. So the question arose: should people living within a community where a child molester is going to move into be notified that this person was convicted of molesting children?

A similar story arose after a convicted rapist abducted and killed a neighborhood child after he was released from prison and “started anew.” The neighborhood was in an outrage; if they knew this man was a rapist, they said, they would have been more protective of their children. So the question going over the air waves on this particular night was whether or not it was right to notify people of the acts you’ve been convicted of in the past.

People were talking about the heinousness of these crimes, how these child molesters should be killed, etc. - some also brought up the fact that the information about these people is already on public record - the only thing this law would be doing is informing people about the child-molesting history of such-and-such,

instead of making individuals search out this information for themselves, which they would undoubtedly never get around to.

But first of all, it is not the role of our government to intervene with every aspect of our lives. The government is not supposed to protect “society.” As the closest thing to a capitalist society on this planet, “society” is made up of individuals, and the government should work for the individual. Currently, any individual has the right to find out information about a person (this kind of falls into that “pursuit of happiness” thing), but we should not expect the government to hand it to us on a silver platter.

If a potential law does not apply in all situations, it is not a good law. So let's apply this idea to other crimes: if you move into a new neighborhood, should all your new neighbors know that you shoplifted when you were nineteen? I don't think so - all it will produce are negative effects.

People should be more responsible for themselves instead of asking the government to help them out more, then get angry when the government gets out of control and continually hikes your taxes to support the massive network of laws created on whims such as this one.

Furthermore, If this law went into effect for molesters already in prison, they would be in essence receiving two separate sentences at two separate times for a crime they were tried for once. That goes against everything this country was founded on. If they need a greater sentence, give it to them when they are sentenced.

The Wrath of Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day is here again, and like most unattached women in the United States, I'm filled with a vague sense of panic, fear and dread. What was meant to be a holiday to express your love for the one you care about has now become (a) a contest between coworkers for who can get the best flower arrangement delivered to their office, (b) a month-long guilt session from one half of an unsatisfied couple to the other, using the holiday as an excuse to vent their anger for being in a loveless relationship, (c) one more occasion for single men to skirt the constant badgering for a commitment (they already have birthdays and Christmas to contend with, this holiday makes winter pure Hell), or (d) a day-long seminar on depression where women sit at home alone, over-eating, watching must-see-TV, wondering if they will ever find someone to love and honor and cherish them and save them from the horrible fate of becoming the dreaded “old maid.”

Valentine's Day is supposed to be a heart-felt holiday all about love, but has instead become a commercial holiday about either desperately trying to not feel alone or desperately trying to spare yourself from getting a guilt trip from the one

you're supposed to love.

Half of the confusion, I think, is from how men and women interact on a romantic/sexual level. The other half rests on how people define love.

The Battle of the Sexes

What do women think of when they think of love? Commitment, finding a soul mate, having someone romantically sweep them off their feet. What do men think of when they think of love? Being tied down, finally giving in, getting the old ball-and-chain, or else something to fake to get sex. Speaking of sex, women generically think of sex as the greatest connection between two people, something sacred, while men jokingly refer to the act with analogies to power tools or sporting games (see the cover, which is from the art series, "What Sex With Women is Called").

Imagine a woman, looking for commitment, having what was most sacred to her taken away because a man thought he earned it by buying her dinner.

Granted, these are brash generalizations, but the fact that these examples exist gives an inkling to the differences between men and women, and the potential conflict between the two when it comes to relationships. How is love supposed to flourish when the two halves come in with such distinct ideas and plans?

The Definition of Love: Altruism Versus Respect

Love, by a dictionary's definition, is rooted in three different ways: from kinship or personal ties, from sexual attraction or from admiration or common interests.

Think about that for a minute. From the first way, you'd love someone because they're your family. Not because you like them, but because you've grown up with them. From the second way comes the more spur-of-the-moment feelings, none of which usually last. From the third way, you love someone because they share interests with you and you admire them.

Admire comes the closest to defining respect, and as a result, it comes closest to defining permanent and earned love. Unlike a religious-based altruistic love which tells you to love people even if they are not worth it - especially if they are not worth it, a love based out of respect and admiration, as well as common interests, is a strong, earned (therefore not easily lost) love.

The altruistic "give everyone in your class a valentine because everyone deserves to be loved" doesn't even fool grade-school children - usually someone is left valentine-less. The question children haven't at that point figured out how to ask is "Why do they deserve it? They haven't earned it."

People claim to fall in and out of love sometimes with amazing turnaround, it seems, and I think the reason for that is that they were never actually in love in the first place. Unless someone you once admired and respected revealed that their life and your perception of it was all a lie, or else drastically changed their life so as not to be respectable any longer, the admiration and respect probably wouldn't die. Real

love is a strong, earned (therefore not easily lost) love.

In my lifetime I have met only a handful of people that deserved respect. Imagine how difficult it must be to find someone to respect so highly, to have common interests with, and to be attracted to - that feels the same way about you.

Imagine a woman, looking for a soul mate, someone she could respect and admire, looking for a man who wants the same things in a relationship, finding men that are looking for a mate that will do their laundry for them, that will be subservient to them.

Images of Romance in an Unromantic World

Even to those in a happy relationship, Valentine's Day has lost some of its appeal. If you're in a happy relationship, you don't need an occasion to celebrate it. And flowers and candy are hardly good symbols for true admiration and respect - real love. Who needs us as consumers to spend the money on these items anyway, other than businessmen?

So what place does Valentine's Day have in our world? It helps conjure up the language of poetry, the beauty of flowers, the romantic notions of a world long gone... and sometimes you get a heart-shaped box of candy to boot. But in our world, considering the different ways men and women are raised to view themselves and their mates, there are a lot of other issues that have to be taken care of before we can make a valentine card out of a doily and pink and red construction paper hearts and have it actually mean something.

The Illness of Volunteerism

When I opened up my copy of USA Today this morning (April 22, 1997) I saw a chart as the illustration for the lead story. The chart stated, "Volunteerism: How Strong is the Drive?" and then asked the question, "If your place of work gave its employees the chance to take paid time off of work to do community volunteer work, how likely are you to take the time off?"

The results showed that 51 percent of people surveyed would in fact take the time off to volunteer.

But what they asked for was not volunteerism - what the question asked is would you volunteer if you were still being paid by someone. By definition, that's not volunteering.

Ask the same group of people if they'd be willing to put in the same amount of time when it was their own time, and they were not being paid for it.

I'm sure the results would be much, much lower. People work for a living. They go to work in the morning, come home at night, and live off of what they earned - that's Capitalism, and for the most part, that's America (at least that's what this

country was founded on). People, for the most part, don't want to give away their labor - or their money - to people who haven't earned it.

A summit to encourage people to come together to volunteer is one thing. Asking individuals to volunteer to help out the "less fortunate" is one thing. People have the right to choose what to do with their own time. Making it sound like volunteerism is the responsibility of individual companies is another.

Businesses, by producing better goods and services, have increased the standard of living - for everyone in this country (consider that poor people can purchase televisions, have entertainment and other "luxuries" that no one could afford fifty years ago). Businesses are doing a service to the world as well as to themselves when they produce. They earn a product; competition brings better products; everyone wins. It is not the responsibility of businesses to lose their workers to regular volunteer times, because they don't owe anything to "the community."

"The community" consists of a group of individuals. Individual rights is how this country was founded. Expecting business owners to shell out money to employees for not working - for volunteering - is just another way of extracting money from the producers. Won't that hurt the economy in the end, which affects the standard of living for all?

The article went on, stating that there were philosophical questions with wide-scale, imposed volunteerism:

"How should the role of the government be balanced with the roles of companies, individuals and non-profit groups?" It shouldn't be balanced; the government shouldn't be involved. Government intervention would mean more taxes and less freedom for individuals. Companies should not feel the need to volunteer, as imposed by a government; if they want to help, they can, but should not be expected to. They do enough by producing better goods and services for the individuals that purchase them.

"Is volunteerism a politically popular but lightweight response to the intractable social problems government leaders can't, or won't manage?" Now we're getting somewhere. Volunteerism won't solve a problem if the individual you are helping doesn't want to help themselves, or expects to be helped instead of working on finding their own solution. The government, when involved with other aspects of our lives, has made a very expensive tangled mess of red tape - consider education, for example. Pressure groups have pulled funding back and forth for education, providing not the best education, but what the right people wanted. The result? a poor educational system that the government thinks more money will solve. When more money doesn't help, add more money, and tax the people some more.

"Volunteerism is one of the great glories in America," states Will Marshall of the Progressive Party Institute. No it isn't. It's a great glory to communism, where people are supposed to make sure everyone is equal and not be able to advance with their achievements, therefore giving them no incentive to achieve. It's a great glory to Christianity, because you're not supposed to rise above everybody else, you're supposed to not like the things to earn. "The meek shall inherit the earth." No, it's indi-

vidual rights, and the right to own your accomplishments and achievements that is one of the great glories of America, and that directly opposes volunteerism. The right to produce and create and succeed is the American way - and it developed this country into the greatest country in the world. But for years now, we've been told that we need to help others. Since we've heard that cry, our country has been slipping.

General Colin Powell is working on the volunteerism summit, and he added that it is in individual's best interests to look beyond their neighborhoods when volunteering. Why? How is it in any individual's best interest to do work for free that doesn't affect their lives? No answer.

Companies may be interested in participating in volunteering programs because it bolsters their image in their community, providing business. Or it may give the employees a feeling that their company cares about others, which may reduce the turnover rate. Or it may be a tax write-off. Either way, the only reason a business should - in order to be an efficient business - explore volunteerism, is in order to help their own business out somehow. The CEO of Home Depot, Bernie Marcus, said, "We don't do it (volunteerism) because it increases our business." Well, then, your business isn't running as efficiently as it should be. Where are the costs of volunteerism going? Probably the prices of the goods and services the company sells. When you don't see a return on an investment, the loss has to be eaten up somewhere.

In 1993 Maryland Lt. Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend "pushed through a controversial requirement that all her state's public high school students must do 75 hours of community service before they graduate," the article goes on to say. What does that teach students? That the government has the right to tell people how to spend their time, that the government can tell people what to do, that the government can force people to do things, whether or not they want to do it? Does it teach students that volunteerism isn't actually volunteer work, but a required activity? Does it teach them their achievements don't matter, that other people matter more than they do? A "requirement" to do "community service" is not volunteering.

At the end of the article, there was another chart with the results of a survey. It asked people, "Who should take the lead role in meeting the following goals (providing medical care for the poor, caring for the elderly, reducing homelessness, reducing hunger, helping illiterate adults learn to read, providing job training for youth): the government, through programs and funding, or individuals and businesses, through donations and volunteer work?"

Answers varied, but people thought the government should help out in all of these areas. But how are they going to do it? With your tax money, deciding how to spend it without conferring with you. If it were the responsibility of individuals and businesses, on a volunteer-basis, at least you would know where your money was going.

But then it occurred to me: it's not the government's responsibility, and it's not a business person's or producing individual's responsibility - it's the responsibility for

those in need to do something with their lives, to satisfy that need and accomplish their own goals. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" means that people have a right to their lives, and the right to do what they want with their lives. They can't infringe on other's rights to help them.

Do People Want Justice, or Just a Good Hanging?

Periodically I see efforts by the government to take away our rights, and I feel I have to speak out about them. However, when I see efforts by people in this country, individual citizens, to take away our basic rights, I have to scream out my dissent.

I am disgusted with the backlash to Mike Farrell's commentary about why Timothy McVeigh should not receive the death penalty.

His article appeared in USA Today, and discussed the reasons why the death penalty does not work, not why Timothy McVeigh in particular should be spared. The gist of his story was that no matter how heinous the crime committed (in this case, blowing up of a Federal building in Oklahoma City, killing the largest number of citizens in a single terrorist attack in the United States), we should not stoop to the level of the criminal by administering the same punishment.

USA Today voiced two responses to Farrell's commentary days later.

Glen Jones of Delaware said that we should "Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you." Apparently he wants everyone to kill him, then, if he advocates the death penalty.

"These despicable acts Farrell describes are not understandable," Jones said, "but rather tolerated because liberal peacemakers like Farrell have pressured us to so believe." The general tide of "liberal" politics in recent years has been to sacrifice others into servitude - in such forms as welfare, charities, volunteerism and altruism - not to value people, but to make them the hand maids of whatever pressure group may happen to demand it.

Scot Ebisch of New Jersey says that the Bible says, "Live by the sword, die by the sword," and "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." These are, however, doctrines from Judaism, not Christianity - in the New Testament, Jesus asks his followers to reject these tenets and "Turn the other cheek." Whatever religion (or lack thereof) one may subscribe to in this country, America's laws more closely reflect Christianity than Judaism.

Furthermore, America's laws are designed to protect individual rights. If we allow the government to kill someone for killing people, what's to stop the government from killing people because they are drug dealers? Or committed robbery? Or voiced the wrong opinions in public?

I know that a criminal loses some of their rights when they commit a crime. But I also know that the most basic individual right - the right to one's own life - it not something to be taken away so easily.

I could also point out that with our current appeals process statistics show that it costs six times as much money to kill a prisoner than to keep him in prison for life, even if they are never rehabilitated. And if prisons serve their jobs, prisoners suffer more by living their days in a cell instead of receiving an injection and passing away. So why are people so determined to kill the killers? If Timothy Mcveigh had no right to choose who should live and who should die, why does anyone else in this country?

If there was ever a chance we could be killing an innocent person, if there was ever that chance, that would be reason enough to not allow capital punishment. If an innocent person is sentenced to life in prison, they may lose some time, but if their innocence is later uncovered they would at least be able to have the rest of their life back. You lose that opportunity with capital punishment. If their innocence is later uncovered they would have lost some time, but they would not have lost their life.

photograph by john



The Christian Coalition & the Religious Right

Because of the religious ties the Christian Coalition has with the republican party, the platform in American conservative politics - particularly when it comes to life-and-death decisions - is riddled with oxymorons and philosophical fallacies. Not that there are not discrepancies with the theories with the democratic party, but the liberal party - and leftism in general - though nonsensical to some, is at least consistent with its views. The involvement of the morals of Christianity in the conservative party are what give the republican platform the additional inconsistencies.

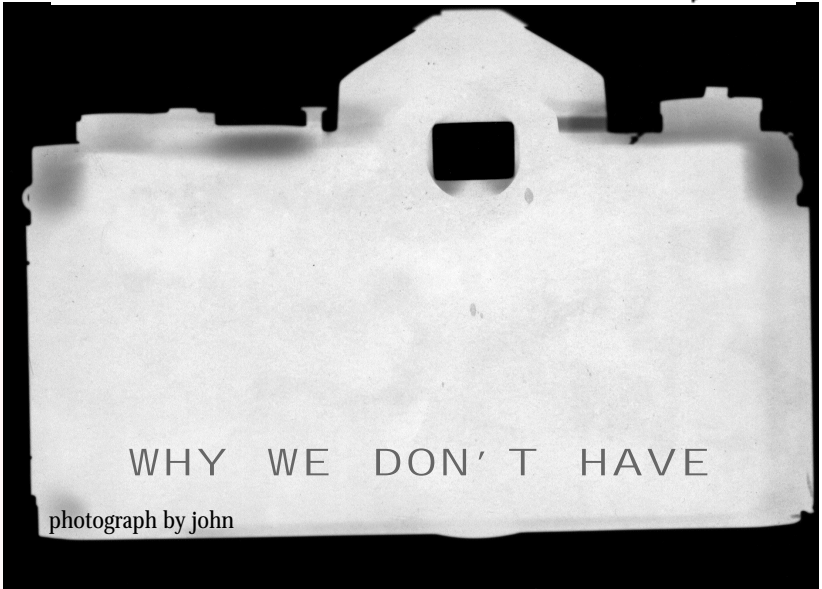
For instance, the Christian Coalition - and Christianity in general - is supposed to take the stance that all life is sacred, that no one has the right to take a life except for Christ. Hence the pro-life movement becoming a primary political issue. However, the republican party - supported by the Christian Coalition - also is in favor of the death penalty.

Now, I personally can see the reason for an argument on the issue of abortion (though I do not see the reason for the intensity of the debate politically when it is not a political issue, but a philosophical one; besides, there are many other political issues that have to be taken care of that are neglected). People can argue that the rights of a woman are infringed upon; people can say that a fetus is not a viable human being (while others can argue the opposite). However, there is pretty much no argument that a prisoner - a person convicted of a crime in the United States - is in fact a viable human being. I would think that it would follow (with the logic of Christianity) that that life - the life of the prisoner, the person who committed whatever crime our judicial system found them guilty of - is just as viable a life as that of an unborn fetus. It would also follow that since Christians cannot (under their own code of ethics) be the ones to decide who lives and who dies, only Christ can, they cannot give the government or the judicial system the right to decide who can die. Yet this is the stance the republican party as a whole, which is backed by the Christian Coalition.

This scenario also applies to the government's ability to call a draft and declare a war on another country. A Christian cannot claim allegiance to an organization or a government (according to their doctrines) that commands them to go against their religious codes. A Christian under no circumstances is able (according to the New Testament) to kill another person - even if they have been commanded to do so by another person, organization or government. Yet many people that volunteer for duty with any one of the branches of America's Armed Forces (and are not merely drafted and forced to go) are Christians, and see no problem with following orders to kill someone else. Even if a Christian was drafted, they should, according to their beliefs, peacefully protest and refuse to go into battle. If that required leaving the country, that should be done, because a Christian's allegiance to their country is less important than their allegiance to their God. This reasoning would be the only line of action that would be in accordance with their beliefs.



poetry



George Clinton concert

Mari e Kazal i a

young black guy trying to sell
a Pop Art size box of Advil
to people in line
waiting to get into the Warfield
concert tonite
last day of the month
disappointment in his face
at no takers—
a different type
black guy riding by
on his bicycle on the sidewalk
talking on his cell phone—saying—
“some guy’s out here selling
a box of Advil...”
voice punctuated
by a tone of ironic humor—
and several people in line
laugh
including me and a guy
in funkadelic lime green
glitter lame` flared pants

sexy something

Mari e Kazal i a

the palm reader told me
my type
the Gina-Lola-Brigitta
Sophia Loren
woman in red type
but I denied it by always
wearing black—
and I told Greg on the phone
afterward when he called
and he said yeah you’re sexy
so what
as if sexy wasn’t something



seeking out the cold city sun

Mari e Kazal i a

back of hands coated with sunscreen lotion
my face shaded by a brimmed hat
long black sleeve jacket
ankle length black dress—
black tights black leather Oxfords
cover my feet—
rest on a warm rock
in the urban park sun
moved from shade
seeking the warmth
to move me from a chill
surrounded by traffic noise
helicopters overhead
tall walls of concrete, brick, stone, glass
bare steel girders under construction
my linen jacket sleeves start to burn with heat
and my thighs under my black dress

ground beef nation

Mari e Kazal i a

I go around irritable alot
when the easiest food choices
always include ground beef
burgers
tacos
burritos
spaghetti sauce
and the guy who wants
to get married
thinks and states his superiority
in his choice of pizza toppings
ground beef and onions—
he says as if holiness

and I have to admit
his middle-'merica pretension
put me off ground beef
(for an extremely long time,
decades, years)
and his Catholic love of the word
masochism clicking the ending
sound in the saliva of his mouth and throat
with a sensually pleasurable emphasis

they want to stop me from being myself—

Marie Kazalia

seated on a low wooden stool
in Borders Books on Union Square—
in front of shelves of books
reading Dorothy Allison's poem —the
women who hate me—
my mind flooded with memories
growing up with the hatred of women
sent me into the arms lips, minds beds of men
trust of men who have harmed me—
I move over to the Borders Cafe on that floor
and pay for a cup of green tea—a dollar thirty eight
write oblivious or nearly so— of the women around me
write of my sisters
each hated me (in 3 different intensities)
my mother's hatred my aunt Esther's
my neighbors both sides of the house
my best high-school girl friends
who could not get the boys I had so easily
so regularly car parked back-seat make-out—
back then— all those femmes women, girls
secretly despised me
actions toward me— covered over versions
to hurt, limit, withhold what I needed
they didn't want me to know
I'm Gina Lola-Brigita in a red dress
Sophia Loren inside (I have Sophia's eyes)
all the girl's lies, secrets, whispers
smirking laughs, exchanged glances of conspiracy
against me devious maneuverings—
I matched with silence, avoidance
seeking to please, join their unattractiveness

with too short hair cuts—to drive the boys away—
 put me on their level of desirability
 matched their competitions I never felt—
 dressing to my own style & tastes
 of designs fashions clothes eye-make-up —
 shoes—stockings—coats — purses—scarves
 never a “that looks good on you” helpful
 compliment to build my self-confidence—from the girls
 only the friendliest of the sisters sent in to spy
 (the least fearful of me) — and report back
 careful not to betray the motivating reasons
 she tells me “you know what to get..” to wear
 colors, fabrics, styles— she wants to know how I know..
 so she can do the same
 I just tell her that I choose what I like—
 implying—that it’s best to cultivate the self
 rather than imitate— this word lesson makes
 us more separate — drives them by reportage
 deeper away from my inner world of me—
 where at a greater length they laugh,
 do not understand me- and I know them so well
 yet do not understand why they persist
 in clinging to their nasty bitchy hurtful ways
 that get them nowhere and nothing but each other
 and suspect fear in their knowing they cannot
 be who they want—
 so they try to force limitations on
 every other woman— single me out
 because I’m there and different—
 I find ways around
 lines out-reaching
 shoots off into books I love reading
 and my drawing & the art museum
 clothes & wool fabrics in the cold Midwest
 mores boys and more kissing
 wild trying pot smoking
 LSD tripping whiskey parties
 film—music—concerts and sex
 until I’m old enough to move away from them—
 live with girls not competitive (there are a few like me around)
 do things with them like go out to clubs
 have people over for long conversations

take film courses at the university
travel out of town to visit friends
dividing myself off from certain types of women
like the one I feel staring at me right now
curious about me my book what I'm doing
I look up into her eyes she stretches
an automatic phony smile
expecting reciprocation
I look down and continue to write
adding her into my words
suspicious of women with phony smiles
of a false courtesy— the forced straight-across
smiles of women who feel sorry for me
for not being like them— not understanding
my avoidance of just that prospect—
a society of smiling pretenses in front
of others like themselves who will judge
them just for that—I refuse to get into
that trap—failing to return phony smiles
my non-participation makes the women nervous
eager to show-me-up
wrack-up points that will allow them retaliation
while in-spite I just go about my life
learning new ways of avoidance
and cutting-out even the smallest
aspects of their control from my life—



necessary appl i ance

Mari e Kazal i a

the telephone
I do not display prominently
but keep on a low shelf
its muffled rings
heard adequately enough

fuck your “damaged goods”

Marie Kazalia

how I hate that expression
 “damaged goods” applied to women
 when look at the men using those words—
 (more self-descriptive)
 coming from the mouths of
 domineering beer-belly Casanovas
 spewing cigarette smoke from their lungs
 baseball hats over bald spots—
 manic-depressive guy trying yet another
 psych med
 doesn't mention his bad back (psychological)
 until he gets into your bed
 and the agonizing pain of it
 his excuse for not going long enough—
 men with chronic indigestion
 tho they manage to force-down
 whatever's in your fridge first
 (to save a few bucks on their food bill)
 before the condition on-sets so they can't fuck
 but you have to listen to them snore and belch all nite—
 the one with a strange paranoia you find out about
 after his irrational accusations involving you and
 other men take on a repeating pattern of suspicion—
 the narrow-minded guilt tripper masochists
 you can't shake no matter what—
 the one you never knew was a Christian
 till he insists marriage to cleanse the sins
 of your sex together he calls fornication
 not love-making—
 the power-tripping control-freak who insists
 you change for him—where you live how you dress
 tho never offers one buck toward that
 as he remains steadily who he is...major flaws and all—
 the young emotionally crippled & superstitious

married guy, who says he isn't
until you find out not only is he married but
his 3rd world wife pushes their kid—a little girl—
around in a stroller in your neighborhood—
the opium smoking professional guitar player
allows you to status of being his groupie
as long as you fail to assert your real self—
the cheap-ass petty mother-fucker
who always wants dinner dutch
yet also manages to routinely jip you out
of 2 bucks and fifty cents on the tip—
the good-looking cocaine snorting waiter
telling twisted drugged-brain events
so fantastic they never could have happened—
the hippy burn-out forever reliving his
draft-dodging glory days and how he once smoked
a joint with Jerry Rubin—
the older man full of every perversity
(tho if good looking you might not
consider his propensities perverse)
perpetually in his own denial
pretending he's "normal" hiding his true self—
the man who lusts only after woman's big tits
talks about breast size in public to other men—
the mama's-boy whiner permanently on self-destruct—
the manipulating schemer who can't tell the truth
about anything, even to himself—
the gambling addict stealing and coercing cash
from every woman he's romancing—
the short little guy who talks about the size
of his huge dick and then you find out
it's only in relation to himself—
the socially and psychologically tormented
first-generation, of-3rd-world-immigrant parents
living inside American culture battling family teachings
that sex only within marriage to produce children—
the everyman who believes sex only good with him
and if you go out with another, then your a whore—
the twisted male mother-fuckers confused
by their own mental constrictions, relying on women
to bail their asses out—relying on women more capable
that they then belittle as beneath them and all their
fucked-up failed efforts—

the ones that think having the thought of doing something
 enriching for themselves equivalent to the doing—
 too lazy to off their asses— so go around saying
 that the thought of their doing superior to all you years
 of hard work creating and all your small successes—
 the barely adequate men over-self-confident
 by social training—getting farther—more income
 than the much more talented women
 (we have Freda Kalo and Diego Rivera of the past
 as shining examples ...) of women kept in “their place”
 and overly-humble by male induced pressures—
 the type that toss the Macy’s men’s wear you bought them
 into a corner, (wasted your time and money on)
 opting for the worn no-taste polyester you’re sick of seeing them in—
 the short ugly men who hang out and pat each other
 on the back stick strong together against women
 reinforce each other’s routine expressions of manliness
 that the only good women the quiet— unknown passing women
 that don’t see the leer behind their backs, really intended to impress
 the buddy-buddies—
 pre-madonna assholes who think and act as if they own the world—
 compensating for the loser low-paying shit jobs they work—
 the ones that won’t let go—fighting hating retaliation
 for separations longer than you were together—
 all the real damaged-goods and I’ve known every one of them
 forcing their presence upon me as few women ever would—

nei ther one
 of us wi ll
 budge—

Mari e Kazal i a

I get home and the phone rings
 he wants to know why I’m
 just getting back at 10 p.m.
 I say, NO—it’s only 9:30
 look at the clock
 and it’s actually 9:45
 but neither one of us will
 budge a minute
 as we launch into
 yet another argument
 on the etiquette
 of this relationship—

The Gift of the Gods

Scott Shay

Sometimes your eyes have a strange phosphorous glow.
Sometimes quiet... sort of shy.
Walking in the night- shadows collect in invisible union.
Sleep dream child the ghosts are gone.
I see what you mean now when you said, "Silence is the gift of the gods."
Seems you were right-Peace be with you.
Lifting my head with each breath of the zephyr I feel you.
Sing to me mother that breezy song

Winding away from the hill, that dirty old road and beat-up fence lick the passing air.
They approach my foot and ignore me-slithering on to more important things.

Like disrobed masts towering over fleets of buried ships,
The posts sail on forever.

Legions of cattle must have blazed across here
And pounded the vegetation back into the Earth
Now the naked dirt is caressed by bare feet
And tickled with my goofy toes.

Frozen in the sky I see the herd....Driving across the horizon.

Deep below their vaporous hooves, the ground is calm and forgiving
Like a grandfather nearly toppled by the loving arms of a child.

Tiny hairs on my arms rise as if they were saluting an invisible stranger.
Dry air and dust flood my mouth like a drowning desert pirate ... I have been here
before.

Strong men with picks and axes tear into the heart of the land
With arms like rippled pillars making pyramids of pillaged soil.

The sweat from their ambition a fountain;
Baptizing and bathing the surfaced mango seeds like accidental children.
Sking beads of perspiration gliding down their foreheads into unsuspecting eyes

To be cried out later onto the slopes of lollipop cheeks in newer times.

Tools are laid down instantly
As if dozens of hands forgot how to grip
Everything except food and water.

Around the stew pot
A circle is formed then misshapen
When exhausted legs buckle
Sliding into recline
Staring into the fire
Breathing with its orange thrust and decline
Visions of tomorrow's eternity-today's grace,
Swimming through the mirrored eyes of the resting cook

On top of the hill in the distance,
Night blessing him with the holy gaze
Of a dome full angels propped in the sky,
Silver shimmering eyes beam pale love to every inch of him
As Speechless and quiet as the statues of saints
Suspended in marble silence

As he, imagining the hill might look like a breast from above,
Walked naked across its flesh.

One foot passing the other in the ancient rhythm of creation,
Darkness hugging him like a fertile milk mother with worlds of children born.
From infinite experience knowing the perfect way to caress and cradle him.
Her slow touch reassuring that everything is good

With paused feet nailed to the earth's cleavage
A breath of wind sends him into ecstasy, seizing his life like a hurried savior.
Arms lifted and head leaned back in the suffering Christ position.

Silence, born beneath a paralyzed tongue
Sings hymns of joy and peace composed in his closed mouth
Drilling away from him in all directions like a spreading blanket
Swallowing the world

Racing away from the hill

Across the creaking swings of the nearby school

Into the busy streets of America
Where a dribbling child
Dropped his blue and white basketball
Letting it bounce and quiver into silence
Abandoned

As mother stepped out of the house onto the lawn
To join arms with Daddy by the car.

Who all looked up to the blooming red sky
Wearing sliding
Shivering pearl tears

And a forgotten memory
Dug from the soul
Suddenly remembered.

This is how it should be.

Simon Says Grass

Adam Chester

Simply simple Simon
reaching up
reaching up (not so simple)
almost got it
reaching up
gotta get it
like the dimples he'd inherit
from a seed years ago when this cut off leaf of tree
knew the branch that's the nose of the world that grew to be
Simon
Simply Simon to his family and his friends
standing heir to the kingdom of the woods
and the wills
when he brushes at the itching and it dives to the ground
so focused as he picks it up and queries what he's found
he can smell it (it can be smelled)
he can feel it (it can be felt)
grasping fully in the second that it fell from the sky
that everything and one if once
was greener on this side

A Tree In Princeton

Adam Chester

Deja view
right there within the frame of my apartment window
like a snapshot I can hear it Spring
to life
rustling and I am there wrestling with my youth
so young
weeping willow
unaware of anything going on around me because
my father is alive
playing with me the way a father does
with his hands (like time)
open w i d e to the endless possibles
and he's going to tease me again
I can feel it coming and I'm
too 8 years old to worry to fear to
"Do you think you're gonna marry her, Sport?"
he asks in his New Jersey-esque
I'm-only-kidding-more-than-
I-can-rustle-your-hair-anytime-I-want-to
voice
and I (giggling)
gladly accepting his challenge respond
Yes (uncertain)
YES (taller standing)
with his arm
(yes)
draping around me until the son is gone and I
the tree
faithfully remembers everything
(leaves)

This New Age Technology Is

Alan Catlin

the nuts. Remember where we were in high school & they used to say that-if you gave a room full of monkeys typewriters, eventually they would compose the complete works of William Shakespeare?-well, since we've got the internet, you don't need the monkeys. all you need is the keyboard. Like for instance, you know the real reason why John Glenn went back into space a second time? I'll bet you don't. Search the internet and you'll find out. seems that the real John Glenn was abducted by space aliens & they thought people would freak if they found out an imposter was a US senator for 24 years. Maybe they should run a search & find on Jesse Helms or Strom Thurmond, if they can back that far. Anyway, now that JG is getting on, the aliens thought it was time to replace him with the real thing so that their secret would be safe. Maybe you wonder what JG was doing all those years

with the aliens, doesn't it? Maybe, that's in the next site update. There has to be one too, an Update that is, as it's seriously out of date. The alien senator trick is like so old: I think I still have one of those headliner t-shirts from the early 90's that the Weedkly World News sells that says: Alien Senators for Clinton. Glenn was definitely one of those. Plus there seems to be a certain Logic missing in the information like: didn't all those NASA doctors who examined Glenn notice anything unusual about him for the first six or seven million times they examined him, before and after he was sent into space? either time? I guess asking for Logic from a Conspiracy Theory is a bit much. One thing heartening about finding this site: all those unemployed Shakespearean monkeys are now gainfully employed designing Web Sites. You'd hate to think of them out on the streets, starving to death now that the cold spell has hit with a vengeance or transported into another galaxy looking for work.



janet by lorelei

(page 33)

Star Stuck, Henry

Paul Cordei ro

“Sean Connery, was the best James Bond.”
He says it so loudly and religiously
that I cringe as he talks through his nose
of Roger Moore and lovely ladies.
Lonely Henry was Betty Davis’ janitor
at the Durfee Theater for forty years.
Now he just sweeps up part-time
at the cloned cash cow Cinema complex.
I can’t help but look away from him
as one of his aloof heroes would
when his eyes leak pity
like the secret agent fountain pen
staining his work shirt pocket
with hapless blood.

Morni ng’ s Grace

Paul Cordei ro

I’m not religious,
Yet sometimes I come close
to the feeling of prayer.
When I wake up from a dream
and write down the poem as fast as I can
and somehow it smoothes out in my hands.
Sometimes, I feel it when I sip
and savor the green tea and quiet
that always settles my stomach.
Find words that go down smooth as soy milk.
It’s as if I was then older than I am now.
I sit cross-legged on a rolling hill
that overlooks Abraham’s and Isaac’s camp.
Their pitched tents and sleeping camels
stretch out in the sand.

Muhammad Al i

Paul Cordei ro

His tongue was the greatest.
Now it plays rope a dope
against teeth and roof of mouth
and words twist out slow
as from a drunk.
He’s a ghost of the young man
who playfully taunted and shouted
“I’m King Of The World.”
Witless, as his puffy face
behind the palsied hands
fights off Parkinson’s left hooks,
he leans so far back
into a plush chair,
that part of him has flown
over the ropes into the next world.
All sparkle and spirit
escaped those knock out eyes
before his cornerman ever threw in
the towel.

Moving Day Sidewalk Encounter

Paul Cordeiro

We had just moved in next door to them
and I didn't know and hadn't unpacked one carton.
She breezed over and said my name warmly
as if thirty years of nothing said and done
hadn't passed between us.
She smiled like we were pals in high school,
or even lovers, which wasn't true.
She had vanished between the sixth
and eighth grades like a beauty
stolen away by illness, accident, or death.
Though there is no yearbook picture
of her smiling, unsmiling face,
she stood there and talked like she had
spent four years among us dripping pain.
Had she been there, I'd have asked to take
her to the prom, tried to date her,
tried to make her hate me for eternity
when we broke up for the reasons spoiled kids
break up when they can't handle the job
of loving someone well.
I'd have been more prepared for our moving day encounter.
I'd have kissed her on the cheek at least to bruise
or to soften the sidewalk talk and the hurt.
Would've wished I could hug her with wild abandon
like a soldier come back from war.
Instead, I stood there stiff as a lamppost.
Her husband's breath was as close to me
as death as he held their hunting dog's choke collar tight.
I felt twisted up inside, foolish,
like a safe cracker taking a bank job,
when she walked over to say hello.
I almost cracked a smile but couldn't do it.
I've never wanted so much to take
a thing of beauty that wasn't mine.

Blood

Melissa Frederick

Blood is red and runs
violent. On the evening news,
Dan Rather warns when we should
look at our chicken cacciatore,
tangled with red and green
pepper ribbons, rather than

the idiot box, where a rescue
team bend over tiny limp
figures, red speckled white,
in Oklahoma or
a patch of brown curdled

snow on an Italian slope.

We need to be protected from the idea
the blood runs freely in most parts
of our planet. On all seven continents.

It's brutal, blood is.

Some blood is weak, some thicker
than water. My grandmother had

diabetes, so she had to keep
her blood sugar free.

Mine, on the other hand,
is too thick and rich., like

a banana double-chocolate milkshake:
it can't get through the straw.

Pot-bellied and bull-headed
as a Capone-style gangster, my hemoglobin
takes its sweet time trudging
through my capillaries. It terrorizes

the populace, roughs up organs, smashes
arterial walls, leaves peach and green

bruises on my wrists, and stops traffic
indefinitely for a street party in my veins,
with shady associates in gold pinkie rings
and a slender blond moll in tow. The good

citizen commuters it leaves in chaos
to spill into any cavity: eye,
sinus, mastoid bone. Blood has no regard

for the rules.

So never let it be said that blood
doesn't have cards up its sleeve,
its own agenda and hidden avenues
where it can motor off and never return to
anything like normal. Blood lives
the way it pleases, regardless
of a body, of flesh.

IF I COULD MOVE LIKE JACKIE CHAN

Melissa Frederick

If I could move like Jackie Chan,
I would twist ten times in the air then walk up a wall before you could
take one breath;
I would open windows with my forehead and never bother to scream;
I would dangle by my toes from a hundred-foot billboard to make sure
you noticed my legs;
I would hang weightless in a right-snap lunge while a jagged city
sparkled at nightfall;
I would weave your name in the scrolling motions of my hands;
In a dark alley, I would lure our enemies toward me from right and left
then double-backflip onto a fire escape and watch heads knock together,
an old Stooges routine;
I would spin through the stars like a satellite, and, if you cared,
I would catch you out of the sky and lay you on a mountain of pillows,
look deep in your eyes and open my mouth,
and a voice reading lines in perfect English would flow over my lips,
flailing,
praising a passion you have never really shown me,
pouring out phrases you will never translate.

Meeting The Tornado

Melissa Frederick

1.

The girl from Kansas was a mistake,

a cognitive slip so garden-variety
I flush to mention it: a name
scrawled on a vacant
envelope and dropped
in the unfathomable space
between the wall and dresser.

2.

Six years ago saw
my grandmother buried,
calendar blockslike train ties
spreading
eternity between us. Some details

are discarded, documents, hair,
the final phone call, a vital element
always misplaced.

3.

Her first name was Dorothy.

4.

My dream tornadoes strout
like corn here in Iowa.
Wide as a forearm, they pitch
and turn, harrowed from hauling
the weight of the world. Inside
are fragments: street lamp,
bed frame, limbs of a red oak
throttling a Ford sedan. A narrow margin
between wind and earth, they gaze
down as they churn, pairs of ruined eyes
inviting me to a fractured table. I decline
by spouting verses, I believe O Lord I believe.

I hide in available basements
with farmers and their wives, waving like fields
in wicker rockers, faces averted
to a sea of surges green and bitter
through high window sills. My nother

finds me. We link hands and run,
fingers pressed as if in prayer
against what's still undone, what
our bodies hold together.

5.

Dorothy taken by the twister, sits up in bed,
all curls and gingham, open like a star,
and looks out her window, where the apnes
have cracked. The Wicked Witch cackles
in green facepaint, peeling under pressure
to resemble ancient canvas, a torn map.
Sneering, she points to a mother and two little girls
dressed for church, the smallest clinging
to her hat with rose and cornflower blooms,
the oldest girl a pinwheel. Her eyes reflect the wall
of wind, Dorothy's eyes. Long ago she released
her bonnet, plain straw, and her hold on her skirts
so that a lacy pair of drawers poked skyward
for every cycle of legs and hair, her face
twisted in a snarl. She plows fingernails
in her sister's fine scal. The hat tumbles away,
and Mother cuts through the wind, avenging
demon with a birch switch. Bitter still, the girl
takes refuge near half a dance hall, where couples
revolve like a missing factory to Jimmy Dorsey's
big band. The girl folds her hand between loose slats
in the fence, and a man smears the back with ink
from a used ticket. She's admissible now, but
before her patent leather mands on the doorstep,
a cross-current drags her to a dinner
where she serves hobos and Bible
study wives. A bug turns over in a ditch outside.
One soldier with head wounds calls her name,
and she rushes to cradle his lacerated skull

in her lap. He asks, "Lady, am I going to die?"
Facing the question like a point receding
on a map of the world, she smiles and tells him
nothing.

6.

The hall clock keeps
a steady down-beat
filing like Memorial Day
into her bedroom. The walls
are pink, her favorite, to match
curtains and satin sheets,
the sweet scent of Rose Milk
on a four-poster bed. This is

the room I haunt. I am
the perfect houseguest,
keeping windows washed
and carpets free of doghair,

cobwebs. Her medical bracelet
I leave on the nightstand
beside needles and boxes
of chocolate-covered cherries,
which I replace every few

months when the cellophane turns
cloudy. From the bureau mirror
snapshots of grandkids observe, faces

no bigger than watches, surprised,

bawling, indifferent. They await
a result. But until she returns
I vow to maintain my post. Shackled,
I pace the room in a circle,

trapped in low orbit, spinning
frail and intricate textx, unread
contracts, pleas, bargains with God.

7.

There is no end to the storm,
only time to crawl above ground
and begin salvaging what's useful.
Scoring the landscape like a highway, shards
of my grandmother's house lay embedded
seven feet in topsoil. A wide band
to cover on foot. My nails fill

with grit as I excavate, each scrap a vast
finger pointing skyward. The storm will build
again, but my body's only pieces
held in place by mirror tricks and a receding
hope
that from this wreckage, there'll be something
I can recover.

Blue Heron

Chris McKinnon

Black shadow on a pink sky
Legs extended, silhouetted
hieroglyph

Elusive flight of wondrous bird!
Feathered totem hung by
Norma
above my mother whose feathers meld into the bird above

Conflict of Innocence

The Divorce Wars, Chronicled

Chris McKinnon

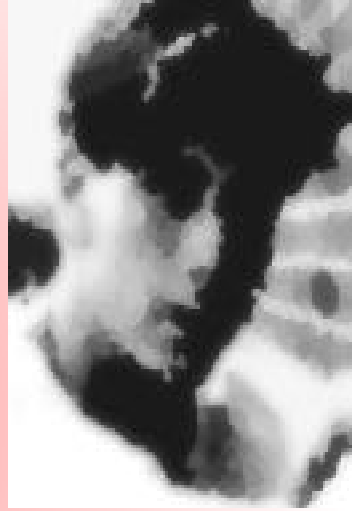
We divide into camps;
The children drawn as pawns
Schismed, checkmated
Shoulder to shoulder
power engaged
house divided for sale
sign in the front yard

Chris McKinnon

Fred

Rings around my neck and circles under my eyes
from the map that stretches between us.

Or U Gone for good?
Chinese American in my demeanor
Japanese in my cups but not drinking in the
futon that eats zucchini



Webberville Conference

The halls revolve around my head as I sit feet propped on your displeasure

and the bobolink that flew as party bob sits grounded
its feathers clipped beneath the gorilla of my dreams in red square

I bow to your waiting Yankee Doodle and that's just dandy

Are you my mentor or my keeper?
The flame burns high for Hi Mae the alpha wolf
son of dawn

A Chumash Maiden

Chris McKinnon

A Chumash maiden
cool as water

tiny steps around the stage

her father sings
for her nest virgin dance

holding a small kerchief like a banner

holding and waving to the wind

her beauty subdues the wind

Operation by Goodman

Chris McKinnon

Look up to pink ribbons on the table.
Faith lies motionless, my arm extended.

Volcanoes erupt within the
betadined unopened flesh
limp wrist tithely bound

The sheets drawn, jokes beside
the nurses circulate mash
to the scapelled crevass
to the within canvas of eternity infinity

Song to High May, Virgin
of the Peace Corpse

Deer Spirit Deer Dancer

Chris McKinnon



deer spirit
deer dancer

prancing high spirited
among your companions

the great spirit summons

your brave
beneath hooded eye

your feathered waist shivers

Hazard of Dancing With Sirens

Jeffrey J. O'Brien

Being with a poet,
maybe hazardous to your health
the Marlboro Man seems=20
to be saying;
as I speed past
his billboard,
grotesquely placed on I-70.

Poets talk about things,
things everyone wants to forget,
the day Mom died,
the day she leaves for good,
the day you were so depressed,
it felt as if your soul melted away.

Ironically, poets use beautiful
words, imagery, and metaphors
to conceal their loneliness,
for them poetry is a bad girlfriend,
she causes so much emotional pain
the poet hates her for that
like a moth to light a poet always
returns to his love.

My trip through the rapids
of the river of life continues,
continues for another day
my raft is nearly sinking
but my will remains
strong like the sun,
reflecting off the unrelenting current.

Sun burnt, wet, and renewed;
I return to the confines
of suburban life,
a much needed respite
from our prepackaged, prefabricated
, suffocating western world.

Forever my river will remain
uncontained and liberating
still able to freely create=20
and destroy,
without being tupperware'd
in a suffocating container
insulated from reality.

Delicate Strength

Jeffrey J.
O'Brien

A single red rose,
beautiful yet imperfect,
the stem is crooked;
littered with razor sharp thorns,
making her delicate hands bleed.

Its luscious crimson petals
invoke a sweet smile,
exposing her joy,
the joy of helping create
such a delicate yet strong flower.

Why give a rose?
Why scream at the stars?
Why smile?
Why say, I love you?
Why say wow?

Because, it makes you
feel human again,
Because, it just feels good,
Because, it takes less energy,
Because, it warms the heart,
Because, I just want to.

Allowing the Chips to Freefall

Jeffrey J. O'Brien

Feeling like a fool,
as if she loves me
making a mountain from nothing
I've smothered her fire
as I do everytime.

Love sometimes seems
to be a pointless venture
when we are left alone
and crying.

She might call,
but probably not,
at least the beer will
numb me from reality
for one night anyways.

I return to the dark night
with hopes of never returning
back to the depravity called life
why does everything good turn to shit?

there is a minute
in each morning
when the day is fresh and
full of possibilities
matthew shugart

the monsters of life are the mickey mousers
and game show hosts

they are the same ones who molest the children in
the streets and abandoned houses of detroit

the ones who plant flower beds
that line driveways of houses
across america

the same ones with cars that have
clean air standards
and
office chairs with heat and massage

the monsters of this world
hopeless and sick
believing that there is a minute in each morning
when the day is fresh and full of possibilities

worse of than you and I
it's a minute that many
tend to sleep right through

No Way Where

Henry Kowarski

No matter where I fall,

A chair of experience.

An old tattered coffee stained recliner,

The voice of my father, frowning on my joy.

art

matthew shugart

I was watching an out of town poet read his work

a middle aged woman sat in front of me with
her young child and
her husband who makes it painfully obvious that
he doesn't want to be here

the middle aged woman is here to receive extra credit
for an english class she is taking

the child sits between husband and wife
eating granola bar
speaking quietly

too young to understand what the poet is talking about he
talks to the mother

who is enjoying her five extra credit points
and is married to the man on the other side of the young child
the man who keeps nodding off in his tight jean jacket that
reads the name of a local drywalling company

the middle aged mother passes a note to the child which reads
I love you
the child writes I loved you back with his shaky hand
and passes
it to his middle aged mother who smiles
and looks over to dad who is thinking
what a pussy
his son is becoming

it's the best work of the evening



I n H i d i n g

Jessi ca A r l u c k



B i t c h

Jessi ca A r l u c k

He awoke way before you did
And exercised
Then he made omelets for the
both of you
Did your laundry
Did the shopping
Did his paper work
Showed you how to use the
goddamn computer
While you screamed
at him because you didn't get it
Cooked a stir-fry dinner for
you
Picked up frozen yogurt for
dessert

And all he wanted to do is check
his e-mail for a mere 30 seconds
But you were on the computer
And you wouldn't fucking let
him

I listen to the music
And it's the only thing I hear
I'm always so mental

Why did you have to speak my name
Couldn't you just babble about Sunday's snow
If you had to speak at all

You touched my face
I touched your ass

I didn't want you to feel my fat back
With the ripples
And my big ass
Beneath my tight jeans

I didn't want you to suck my chapped lips
Or taste my dry, smoky tongue
That smelled of coffee

I didn't want you to see my runny nose
I didn't want you to see my mascara running

If I had food on my teeth
I didn't want you to see it
I didn't want you to see



RI PPLES I N THE WATER

Joyce McKi nl ey

We stood by a pond that autumn day,
skipping flat rocks across the mirrored water,
creating ripples in each others reflection.
Abruptly, the wind consumed us,
battering our thin sweaters and
forcing chills through our bones.
I remember, you threw your arms around me
to shelter my body from the cold.
It was then I knew I loved you.

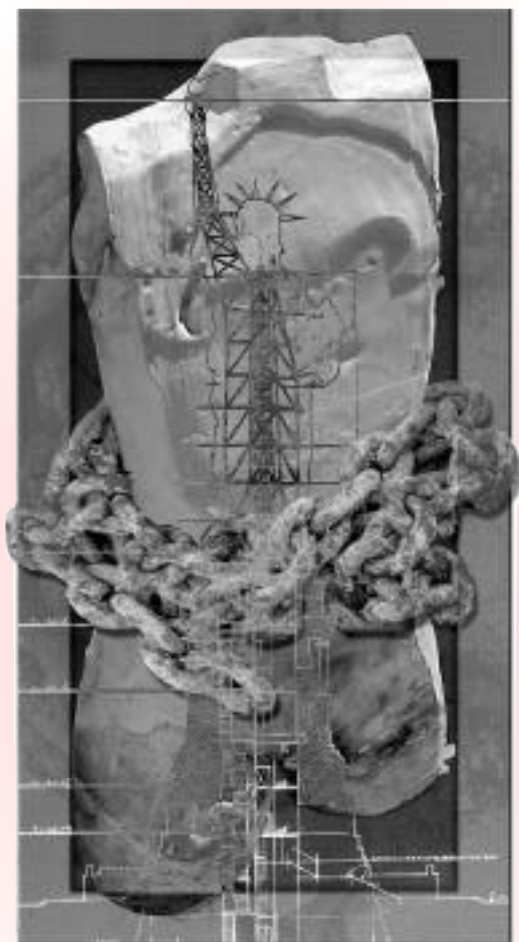
It is today I stand by that same pond,
reflecting on the past and wondering...
wondering why you skipped out on me
after battering my body and
breaking my brittle bones.
You forced me to struggle against the coldness
of your hate.
And I had loved you so.

It is now I know I am free,
as I return to the warm shelter,
leaving the ripples behind.

TI ME

Jessi ca Arl uck

if time were made out of logic
it would play in rewind
for disillusion thrives on years
as inevitable experiences
regress the soul



The Hungry Madison Cabbie, 1958

J. Quinn Quisenberry
(For S. H.)

The sign on Atwood Avenue says
HUNGRY, HUNGRY, HUNGRY! And he is
For old memories in books, for movies
He has heard about but never seen,
For the pizza awaiting him at State and Lake,
For his pregnant wife on Johnson Street,
For the dead hours when he can read
C. Wright Mills and Kerouac with light
From street lamps on the square
Before the Sunday morning shuttle
Of drunks to the bar on Packers Avenue
Allowed to open at eight a.m. and the good
Though non-tipping communicants going
To early mass in the center of town;
There is a fare at the 400 Bar,
And he speeds down Williamson to get it,
Taking a generous grunk who wants no change
For his dollar when he gets to Regent Street,
Then back for pizza, then a short haul
To the Belmont where he can munch
And leave greasy stains on The Power Elite
And look up now and then at the dome
With Miss Forward on top and recalling
Jane Adams writing about her girlfriend
And seeing Old Abe there, a famous
Bird, the stuffed remains of the
Eagle mascot of the Wisconsin militia
At Shiloh and later, the effigy admired
By nostalgic veterans, but there no longer,
Destroyed by fire decades ago,
For old Abe was no phoenix;
But the scholar cabbie can see it

Along with the small bent girl
And aging men with tear-wet beards;
The cabbie's mind shifts sideways
As he wonders whether Frank Lloyd Wright
Looked on Old Abe and envied the dome
So well-sited and how early he thought
Of complimenting it with a circular
Sweep into Lake Monona, a plan
Recently scuttled but seen anyhow
Spreading east over Dotty Street by
A cabbie possessed with past and future
Already wanting to be home listening
For life in his wife's belly while
Watching Camera Three on a round tube
Echoing past dome and future terrace,
Staying hungry in all dimensions.

One More Report on Nashville

J. Qui nn Qui sben
(for B. K.)

The twisteroo in O. Henry's "A
Municipal report" is that Uncle Caesar,
Who talks like Stephen Fetchit, is
A killer in defense of sweet
Gentility, for Nashville had as much
Romance as anyplace even before
Minnie came from Grinder's Switch
To be seen from the Confederate balcony
Of the old Ryman, a few doors down
From the synagogue where boy ushers
On high holidays would misdirect
Country fol looking for the Opry,
Betting on how long it would take them
To realize that they were hearing
The wrong kind of nasal drone.

Athens

With a concrete Parthenon to prove it;
Signs in the park commenorating
A battle fought in 1864 with its 1960
Sequels still inmarked in the grandeur
Of the old L & N depot, the lunch
Counters long since battered down, and
The gritty outdoors platform where
O. Henry once passed through and fugitive
Poets of the 1930s came and went..

In the

Distance glows the Opryland Hotel,
A slick and sanitary place where
I got busted with a mob of chanting
Cripples in 1993 and carted off
To a privatized for profit cell
Which could not hold our crowd,

For Uncle Caesar's descendants
Now sit in judgement locally.

Even

A fake baroque-style depot and
A fake Parthenon become real,
And "Wildwood Flower" and "Orange
Blossom Special" are wired to
Everywhere; and the twisteroo
Is that the jailbird pop writer
Porter, alias O. Henry, was
Absolutely right: Nashville, though
Unique as Vassar Clements' fiddle,
Is our common universal romance.

The Cicerone in the Triangle (for B. O.)

J. Quinn Quisenberry

Mapping before we escaped gravity
Was endless triangulation,
A theodolite on a tripod focussed
On two known points, angles calculated,
Then moved on to a new apex
Et cetera as infinitum,
Then grids were laid on triangles
To divide mine from yours
Which left out the natives who
Thought all of this was ours
And could never be divided.

Now triangles swell and fade;
The cicerone and his friend the planner
Find themselves edging a big one
Connecting three cities which are

Not urban according to planner
Because the young, old, poor, and crippled
Cannot access the needful on foot,
So downtown is down like thee
Family farm, although a few of those
Still exist, suffering from
Changing tastes and poison and
Processors who want, as usual,
Power without responsibility

Unlike pilots in the last propellor war
They have no relief tubes;
They gyre off I40 to exchange
Fluids and stoke up in the
Always superb greasy fries;
They sit in Eames chairs
Where they are joined by a trucker
Both wired and wirelessly
Whose dispatcher told him by cell
To crash for a few hours;
his chin approached the table
More closely with each nod.

The planner admits a guilty pleasure
In driving these well-engineered
Slabs where you can go
A mile and a quarter per minute
To shop for bargains in outlet malls
With freedom to go anywhere
As long as the road goes there
And you have wheels and can drive;
"But this is slavery to many
And degradation of the land
And poison in air and bodies
To make profit for a very few
Who are hard to attack because

They have enclosed the commons
Where once we addressed each other.”

The cicerine nods in agreement:
“I love to loop and yo-yo on
these roads listening to a tape
Of Edward Gibbon’s Decline and Fall,
Glorying in freedom from slowness,
And from long hikes with no rest
Because benches are no longer there
To comfort those going nowhere;
I wish I could believe that you can
Reverse this fading century’s race,
Confound Frank Lloyd Wright, and
Make elevators outrace cars
And rails trump highways afterall;
My slogan for the new millenium
Is HEY, HEY! HO, HO!
FOSSIL FUELS HAVE GOT TO GO!
And age will soon make me, as you say,
A slave and beggar to those with wheels;
I wish I could still take the North
Robinson bus from Grandma’s house
To downtown Oklahoma City where
They had a bookseller who knew books
And a jazz buf behind the record counter
And a skid row, a place for misfits
Temporary and permanent, a relaxed stretch
Crowned by my uncle’s Reno Street bar,
A chivalric and well-regulated dive,
Dealing in measured oblivion;
I miss it; I miss downtown;
The place where it used to be
Is a thousand miles west on I-40,
Which bulldozed the beery refuge.”
The trucker lifts his head and says:
“I can score you some bennies,
So you can drive straight through.”

The Privacy of the Eye

(for J. B.)

J. Qui nn Qui sben

All right, Marlowe, --- You've been sapped, shot at, and filled full of dope
until you're crazier than two waltzing mice. --- Now let's see you do something tough ---
--- Raymond Chandler, Farewaell, My Lovely

Each morning he pauses
Between the pulling up of one sock
And the pulling up of the other
To focus on the two waltzing mice
Who get crazier every day,
Just as he hurts a little more
From the beatings that are part of the job,
But he would rather have the beatings
Than give yp the right to insult
The rich who are the only ones who can
Pay him to find out as much of
The truth as can be found out;
He is a fantasy of integrity
And, thus, alone in the real world,
Not settling down to everyday peril
With an always dangerous female,
For a serial adventurer must
Go it alone except for a
Tired and compromised cop who
Gives him forty-eight hours to
Solve the mess, which he will,
For this is what we want of him,
Even when the truth is bitter
as it always is, with no relief

But buying himself a drink
From the office bottle and watching
The door through which someone
Will come waving a gun;
And though the waltzing mice
Never get anywhere, we envy him.

Drought, Baptisms, Progress

(for G. S.)

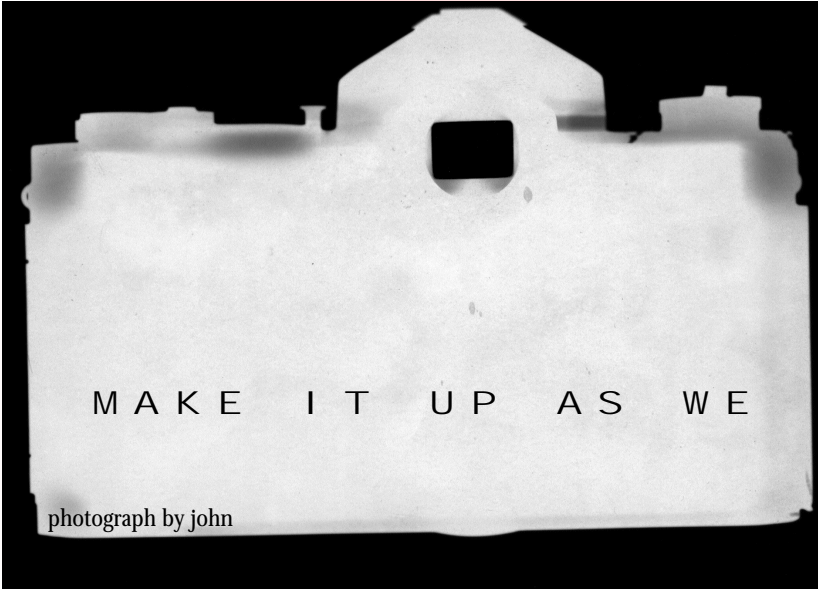
J. Quinn
Quisenberry

Out in Major County, Oklahoma,
The Hook-and-I dutch
Disdained buttons as vanity, and
There were also Rivir Brethren
Who thought baptism was valid only
By total immersion in a real stream;
So drought delayed the saving ceremony
Often for months, sometimes for years
Until the Cimarron or its tributaries
Had sufficient water to thrive
Repentent souls, and the river in spate
Was muddy and dyed with the robes
Of pastor and supplicant and
Choked the nostrils of the newly saved,
But not enough to repress
The long-hyphened glory shouts.
Meanwhile, back in the metropolis,
One country eastward, we never learned
To swim for pools were closed
in dry summers because of drought
And in wet summers our congregating
Was banned because of epidemics
Of much-feared polio myelitis
Gone now with progress, and most
Of the river-dipped or Hook-and-I dutch
Have not survived, for the young
Will visit museums but not live in them
Somehow all of this came to mind
When shiny-buttoned generals
Announced that, with better weather,
They had been able to test their new
Cluster bombs in a place that was
A place before they blew it up



photograph by john

PROSE



Mushy' s Persona

J. Qui nn Qui sben

People could never figure out where Mushy got the big words he used sometimes. He would use the word "agon" when he was talking about aboxing match, talk about the "catharsis" produced by a good drama, say that a buddy who was down in the dumps had a touch of "weltschmerz." None of his close acquaintances had ever seen him with a book; those young women and poker players who frequented hos suite at the LaSalle Hotel was sure he read nothing but Variety, Ring, The Daily Racing Form, and possibly the Gideon Bible.

He sometimes went to the track with Nelson Algren and was seen in conversation with Sydney J. Harris, but was not often among bookish types. Most of his friends were ex-boxers, show business personalities of varying eminence, and those who liked the excitement of gambling.

It was not that anyone thought Mushy was putting on airs or was using a vocabulary beyond his intelligence. He was as natural as it is possible for the publicly visible partner in a popular saloon and restaurant to be, and anyone who held onto a fairly lavish lifestyle for many years swhile betting on most of the horse races in North America and playing weekly poker with professionals must be fairly shrewed.

One night in 1956 he was talking to a young reporter from the Sun-Times who had expressed surprise at his use of the word "oligopoly."

"You don't think a word like that fits in with my persona?" Mushy asked.

"There you go again," the reporter said, "and I'm going to call you on that one. Just what in hell is a persona?" This was back in the days when respectably dressed young women who worked for newspapers said hell and damn alot.

"The Greeks in the old days had their actors put on maskes when they did a play," Mushy said. "They had these theatres about the size of Dyche Stadium up in Evanston. They had only two or three actors playing all the solo parts in a play. The audience could tell of the actor was supposed to be a king or a god or a servant or whatever by the kind of mask he had on. They called a mask a persona."

"But you aren't wearing a mask," the reporter said.

"The hell I'm not. Take a good look at my face and tell me what you see."

The reporter looked hard. She had not been allowed to apprentice at City News, but whe had hung around enough policemen to know some tricks if description.

"Well," she said, "You have the face of a male Caucasion probably in his late forties, dark brown hair starting to go gray, brown eyes, there's a scar that splits you rleft eyebrow, your nose is off center, your front teeth are probably false, you need a shave even though you probably already had on today, your skin is swartny, and you have a tissue build up in your cheek bones and above your eyebrows. Thats called acromegaly, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. So we can both agree that I have a real mess of a face. not the face of a man who once in a while says oligopoly or persona." Mushy shifted slightly and asked, "So what do you think you know about me?"

"Nothing that everybody else doesn't know," the reporter said, suddenly feeling that she ought to go to the powder room to see if her seams were straight. "You were a boxer, a welterweight contender once. Then you were a movie actor, mostly small parts in gangster movies. Then you were in the army during the war. Then you got in trouble with the House Un-American Activities Committee and were blacklisted. Then you came back to Chicago and Charlie and Nick Maltese set you up with this place. Four or five years ago the Kefauver committee asked you about the Maltese brothers, and you said you did not know anything except that they were very generous with capital to set up restaurants; you were not widely believed. You're a poker player who once broke Nick the Greek, and you break better than even most days out at Hawthorne. that's about all, except that someone I know in the sports desk says that the consensus down at Postl's gym is that you were a good fighter, but you kept talking people into over-matching you; that's how you got the face.

"That's very good," Mushy said. "Now tell me just one thing more. Why is it that you're so nervous and flustered looking when I have just given you your second drink on the house and we are having an innocent chat about my vocabulary."

"Because you look like you are going to shoot me, the way you did all those people in the movies," the reporter said.

"I think I've made my point," Mushy said. "You're reacting to my face and the way I was cast in movies, and maybe to a reputation that I've done almost nothing to earn. I have never fired a real bullet except in the army, and even there I spent most of my time being a cook, which I am very good at. I have never hit anybody for real since I retired from the ring, and I have never hit anybody outside the ring since I was about seventeen years old. I made my living for years by looking like a hood in the movies, but I've never been one, or anything close. This face isn't really me. It was manufactured for me by thirty-five guys that I fought, especially in my last fight, when Barney Ross did to me approximately what Henry Armstrong did to him a few years later. Not throwing in the towel in that fight made me very popular with the boxing fans for the last twenty years, but it gave me a face that doesn't really match what I am, a persona, the way I look to the world, which is not necessarily the way I am."

Mushy paused and took a sip of Seven-Up, the only thing he ever drank when he was with the customers. The reporter was still a bit nervous, and Mushy was pleased with the way he had produced the effect just by shifting his head so that the light played on his face a bit differently. He was convinced that he could have handled bigger and more complex parts than he had ever been given in Hollywood.

"Did you ever hear of Aldus Huxley?" Mushy asked.

The reporter had. She had read Brave New World and had heard that some of his other books were good, too.

"I wouldn't know; I never read any of them," Mushy said. "I met him at this party some producer was giving a few years ago. He was working on something for Lana

Turner, I think, and having a hard time with it. Anyhow, we got to talking. He wasn't fooled by my face. I think that's because his eyesight is pretty bad. He kept talking about the Greeks and their theatre, and I kept listening. That's how I heard of persona.

"Oligopoly I picked up from Clifford Odets. It means that a small group of companies dominate a market, not one company, which is a monopoly. Like there's six companies that manufacture nearly all the cigarettes in this country, and they all charge the same price."

"I'm impressed," the reporter said, "and not just because you scared the hell out of me."

"Don't be. I'm not smart because I used to hang out with smart guys and more than I'm tough because I sometimes hang out with tough guys. You shouldn't be scared, either. Usually when I got that look on my face, I got killed before I could kill anybody. George Raft killed me, James Cagney killed me, it even got so that people like Jack LaRue and George Bancroft were killing me."

Mushy paused for some more Seven-Up.

"Did you ever hear of a director named Fritz Lang?"

The reporter never had.

"He did some very good movies in Germany until Hitler came in, and then he has done some more good ones over here. In my first movie he made me turn from an ordinary looking palooka into a guy who was going to kill somebody just by shifting the lighting a little. I was part of a mob that was lynching Spencer Tracy. I didn't have any lines, but I didn't need any. That little trick got me steady work for a lot of years."

Mushy had unobtrusively summoned a bartender to the table, an ex-heavyweight.

"Stash, this lady of the press and I have just been discussing killers and people who look like killers. I wanted her to see a real killer."

Stash let the reporter take a good long look. He did not know exactly what Mushy was up to, but, since doing what Mushy wanted usually increased trade and tips, he was willing to go along.

"Tell the young lady about all those people you killed for Joe Saltis," Mushy said.

"That was back during Prohibition," Stash said. "Joe Saltis would tell people to be missing, and, if they wouldn't be missing all by themselves, it was my job to help them be missing and stay missing. It was just a business thing."

Stash looked at Mushy to see if he had done all right. He had. He went back to his place at the bar.

"Stash's big thing is dressing up as Santa Claus every year," Mushy said to the reporter. "The Maltese brothers and I buy a big bunch of toys, and Stash goes around and gives them to kids in orphanages and children's hospitals. When he has his Santa costume on, you would swear he was the real thing. It's a comfortable persona for him, more than just a business thing."

The reporter thanked Mushy for the drinks and for the vocabulary lesson and left.

Charlie Maltese came in about closing time to check up on things. He looked at the night's receipts and grinned.

"Mushy, when are you going to start losing some money for Nick and me?" he

said.

"If you want to take a temporary loss right away, lease the building next door, and I'll expand into there. We had people waiting in line all night, and I could have another dozen tables," Mushy said.

"I'll talk to Nick about it," Charlie said. "He says that are going to have to find a few tax losses pretty quick. He doesn't understand how you get people to come in here with the prices you charge when you don't even have a floor show or dancing."

"The drinks are honest, the food is good, and people like sitting under an autographed picture of Chester Morris or Hunts Hall and letting their waiter how Rocky Graziano caught him with a lucky punch. Like the advertising boys say, you don't sell the steak, you sell the sizzle."

"Nick says he likes the way you get publicity for the place, but that you should be careful not to mention him or me when you talk to reporters," Charlie said. When Charlie talked, he always pretended that Nick was the head man. When Nick talked, he made it sound as if Charlie ran it. The two of them had used this tactic ever since they worked for Capone back in the Twenties.

"Tell Nick I never do mention your names to reporters unless the reporters mention them first," Mushy said. "I can't help it if they're fascinated by two respectable suburbanites like you guys."

"Nick says be careful," Charlie said.

"I'll be careful," Mushy said.

The Maltese brothers had a sizable proportion of the off-track betting action in the metropolitan area and sometimes extended credit to their steady customers, using some awesome methods to collect overdue payments. Mushy figured that this was part of the thrill of gambling for a lot of people and that anyone who tried to welsh on people like that more or less deserved what they got.

Mushy himself was not like that. He liked horses and spent a lot of time studying the bloodlines, records, and special characteristics. He was a first-rate handicapper. He had mastered the mathematical part of poker when he was very young, and his psychological skills had been developing ever since. He took risks, but he did not mind short odds, and he had a good instinct for holding back when a winning streak was running out. Unlike most gamblers he was content to be a small winner, and whatever self-destructive impulses he had once had diminished sharply when he first looked in the mirror after the Barney Ross fight.

He got along well with nearly everyone, but he had no real intimates. He enjoyed sex and the company of women, but he never had nor wanted a relationship which lasted more than a few months. He had never quite gotten over his amazement that women found him attractive despite his and his unwillingness to make any commitment to them.

He was good in bed, generous, and tolerant of a wide range of what seemed to him to be irrational behavior. Nevertheless, women eventually became enraged at his essential indifference to them. His reputation as a lover was mostly based on a series of spectacular confrontations with departing companions, which had the usual effect of

attracting still more women to him. Mushy treated the women who tried to ensare him with the same opaque geniality as he treated the men who tried to get him to make sucker bets.

His sister-in-law and his nephew's wife thought Mushy needed a good woman rather than the show girls and other raffish types with whom he was usually seen. It was Mushy's experience that good women cried more than bad ones and wanted a lifestyle unsuited to a man whose business seldom allowed him to retire before three A.M.

Mushy willingly spent at least one Sunday afternoon a month in Skokie with his nephew, his only blood relation. He was fond of young Morris, who was his late older brother's only son. Mushy had paid his nephew's way through college and had provided a subsidy for him and his mother until the young man had established himself. Although Morris was not yet thirty, he was making good money in a LaSalle Street brokerage house and was planning to set up as a commodities trader on his own. Mushy made a good profit on the money he had invested with his nephew. They were both the same type of knowledgeable and conservative gambler.

They were namesakes as well. Mushy's father had been known as Moe. Mushy was a nickname that was still common among Jewish athletes when he had entered the ring professionally in 1931 at the age of twenty. Morris, who had been born in 1928, had been given a version of the name thought to be more American. The Hebrew name for all of them was Moishe, which most English translations of the Bible render as Moses.

Morris's wife was a stylish young woman who had expensive schooling in the East, where she had suffered many social slights because of her heritage. Her father owned a chain of dry cleaning stores and was active in a North Side Jewish congregation which had once been Reform but which had become Conservative after World War II. She was determined that the form of the name which any child of hers bore would be Moishe.

She and her father had got Mushy to buy a lot of Israel bonds as well as contribute to the temple and to local Jewish charities. Mushy did this in good spirit and not merely to keep the peace in his nephew's family. His parents had not been observant and his father, old Moe, had loved to argue loudly that Socialism, not Zionism, was the wave of the future, but Mushy had always accepted himself as part of the Jewish community.

The Judaism of his nephew's impeccable home with its expensive and separate sets of cooking utensils and the princess phone disconnected at sundown Friday was very different from the men with beards and the housewives in their identical wigs who haggled among the pushcarts in the side streets west of the river. Mushy was impressed with the new state of Israel with its well-tended fruit trees and efficient army in khaki shorts, but he wondered how someone who had run mails for Nails Morton and had bought a ten derby with part of his first bovine boxing purse would fit in there.

"When I was a kid," Mushy told his nephew's wife one Sunday afternoon, "everybody used to beat up Jews, mostly just because they could. Morris' grandfather used to say that would stop once there was socialism, but the hoods who used to bust unions for the garment factories would work him over for being a socialist, then give him a

few licks for being a Jew on top of that. Me, I figured I wouldn't wait for socialism to stop being beaten up, so I worked out every chance I got in the gym at Hull House, and I started hanging around the pro fighters."

There were oranges that Morris' mother had just brought back from Florida, and Mushy peeled one expertly. A fresh orange was something that he had always enjoyed. In his childhood they had been considered a great luxury. Morris and his mother were at the other end of the room watching Alistair Cooke introduce some egghead thing on "omnibus". Mushy gestured toward the television set.

"Boxing is dying because of television," he said, "that and the fact that nobody except colored people are hard enough anymore to want to get their brains knocked out for a few bucks that most of them won't be able to hold on to anyhow. In my day, though, there were clubs all over the city where you could make fifty or a hundred bucks any weekend you were up to it, and a fight card at the coliseum where you could make really big money."

"Did you keep any of your money, though?" Morris' wife asked.

"Enough for a compartment for me and a blonde manicurist on the super chief, and enough to go to Santa Anita every day until my face healed up and I started getting regular acting work. Boxing paid for a first-class wardrobe, a lot of steaks when everyone else was living on air, and it bought Morris' grandparents those nice tombstones out in Waldheim next to the Haymarket monument. Also, it set Morris' parents up in the grocery store in central park avenue, which was a classy neighborhood at that time. Although Karl and Sadie had paid me back every cent that I had lent them long before Karl died, you might say that Morris had a more comfortable childhood and eventually could appeal to a better class of girls because I was a pug."

"He knows that," Morris' wife said, "although that isn't the part about you that he likes best. He's always talking about how the other kids at Crame Tech let him shine because your reputation scared them, and how the best day in his life was the one when you picked him up in front of the school in a limousine."

"That was Stash's idea," Mushy said. "I had this furlough before going overseas in 1944, and I was able to get a flight into Midway with some people I knew in a USO show. Stash was driving a limousine for this company that had a contract to haul V.I.P.'s with government business around town. We used to fight on some of the same cards, and Stash had fixed it so he could drive me around town for a couple of days. Nobody had a very clear idea of how a buck sergeant could rate a chauffeured limo, but it sure got me and my friends treated like royalty. Stash had a punctured eardrum and couldn't get into the service, so he wanted to be patriotic by showing his old buddies a good time."

"Morris has told me about it," his wife said. "His father was dead by then. His mother was doing alright with the store with Morris's help, but she wasn't getting out much. She kept that picture of all of you at a ringside table at the Chez Paree right by the cash register for as long as they had the store. She still has everything memorized that you and Joe E. Lewis said to each other."

"That's the nice thing about being a little bit famous," Mushy said. "You can live it up like that once in a while and still have your privacy most of the time. A lot of peo-

ple wave to me on the street because they vaguely recognize me from someplace, but nobody except people who really know me can call my name. Of course, when I got in trouble with the Un-American committee a few years back, there was a while when nobody seemed to know me, but that didn't last very long."

"I never figured out how that happened to you," Morris's wife said. "You don't seem like the left-wing type, or anything political for that matter."

"My only politics has been to pay off anybody I had to in order to stay in business," Mushy said. "Oh, I used to vote for Norman Thomas whenever he ran, but that was just a thing to remember my father by, just like I buy those Israel bonds from your father to remember a bunch of people that my parents used to talk about. I wouldn't talk to that committee because I wanted to preserve my integrity as a poker player."

Morris's wife knew that she was supposed to respond to that one but chose not to do so. Mushy saw the trick and grinned. She immediately said "How's that?"

"Nobody will play poker with you if you change the rules in the middle of the game," Mushy said. "That's what people like that Parnell Thomas and Nixon were putting pressure on me to do. I had joined a few committees against Franco, and I was a strong union man, but, basically, they had nothing on me. What they wanted me to do was talk about a bunch of dumb things that I had heard people say at parties about ten years before, and I wasn't going to repeat a bunch of stuff that overpaid drunks had said to impress me about what great revolutionaries they were going to be once they had their swimming pools paid for. That stuff was not really serious even if they had thought it was, and I was more ready to lose work by not talking than I was to get the good opinion of the committee by repeating things that sounded even sillier in 1947 than they did in 1937."

"I could get some people to understand that in Hollywood, but not very many. That's one of the reasons I came back to Chicago. People here in business, sports, politics, in the rackets, too, for that matter, they understand personal loyalty."

"Like Nick and Charlie Maltese and their nephew," Morris's wife said, "I hope you should never be so loyal to your own family."

"Very funny," Mushy said. "I took Morris to see Joe E. Lewis at an impressionable age, so he marries someone who likes to needle people too. Lewis kept being funny like that even after Jack McGurn cut his throat for it."

"Don't shift the light so you look like you're going to shoot Bogart," Morris's wife said. "I'm on to that one."

"All right," Mushy said, "but seriously, Charlie and Nick set their nephew up in a liquor store and saw to it that he made huge money when some of their friends worked that racket with the phony revenue stamps. Then the kid started talking to the alcohol tax people the first time they leaned on him. It may be a little extreme to blow your nephew's skull apart for something like that, but that kid knew the family rules and he broke them."

"So tell me what our family rules are, so the same thing shouldn't happen to me or Morris or Sadie."

"Rule number one is that everybody in the family except me should stay the hell

away from the Malteses,” Mushy said. “I know Moris was hired by that bunch of Lake Forest snobs to get some new types of suckers into the commodities market, but dropping around my place while Nick and Charlie are there and trying to get them to take a flyer in frozen pork bellies or something is not such a hot idea. It is true that they have a lot of cash and a history of sending some of it with his family, but, if they took a few big losses, which has been known to happen to people with the very best advice, they might feel they had been double-crossed and threat Morris and me they way they do with their own relations. Deep down they really don’t understand a speculation that goes sour for any reason other than a double-cross.”

“Then, if trade at your restaurant starts to fall off, Morris should maybe buy you a huge life insurance policy with a double-indemnity clause for being found dead in the trunk of a car in a forest preserve?”

You shouldn’t worry,” Mushy said. “Restaurants and saloons are among the few things that Italians and Jews both know enough about not to get auspicious for no good reason. Besides, if I had gone to a bank, fedora in hand and a face looking like a chopped liver and said I was a blacklisted bit player and ex-welterweight contender with some experience as an army cook who wanted maybe a hundred grand to start a fashionable saloon, I do not think I would have got it. I met Charlie and Nick one day out at Hawthorne, and I did get it. They needed a place to launder some cash so the internal revenues did not bother them about how they can afford their Cadillacs and places in Palm Springs on the profits of that little candy store over on West Taylor. One of the conditions of our partnership is that I do not look too closely at the books, but I would probably be amazed at how well we are doing. All I know is that the accountants keep transferring a very nice sum to my personal account every month and that Nick and Charlie sometimes give me an envelope full of cash so that I shouldn’t embarrass them by being a piker at five-card stud. Their only complaint is that I shouldn’t get their names into Kup’s column every time the place is mentioned. “You made the column the other day,” Morris’ wife said. “Kup said that when you were in Hollywood you palled around with big brains who wrote books and things like that.”

“Kup may eat lunch at Fritzel’s instead of my place, but he is one hell of a news hound,” Mushy said. “He is right to say that I have associated with the intelligensia.”

“With who?”

“That’s goyisher talk for the smart asses, misses suburban smart-ass.”

“You don’t mind it when I needle you a little?” Morris’ wife asked.

“No,” Mushy said. “It is one thing you do that actually makes me think that a punchy old hoodlum like me might belong now and then out here in this gorgeous split-level. Let me tell you how I needled the reporter who gave that item to Kup.”

A few days later Nick Maltesedd drooped by after the peak of the lunch business had passed.

“Jake Guzik died,” he said. “He had a heart attack.”

“Always sorry when anyone dies,” Mushy said. “that must be quite a shock to you and Charlie, though. You’re not used to having your old business associates die of heart attacks and old age and things like that.”

"You're a very funny man," Nick said. "Charlie says that's one of the things that brings in the customers here. He says you should go to Guzik's funeral."

"Why me?" Mushy asked. "I only met him half a dozen times in my life, and I never did business with him except once in a while getting a bet down with people who worked for him. I've always heard that you and Charlie and him have been pretty close for a long while."

"That's the point," Nick said. "The feds show up at funerals and take everybody's picture, and the reporters make a big deal out of it. Charlie's got two daughters in high school, and he doesn't like it when stories get in the paper that make him out to be a hood. His daughters' friends make fun of them when that happens."

"They could learn to be careful when they're making jokes," Mushy said.

"We ought to put up a stage so you could be another Joe E. Lewis," Nick said. "Anyhow, Charlie doesn't think we ought to show up at the funeral and get our picture taken, but we ought to have someone there from one of our businesses, because we knew Guzik a long time, and it would look like disrespect if we didn't send someone. Charlie figures that it ought to be you because Guzik was a Jew and you're a Jew."

"Gus Alex has been Guzik's number one boy for years and will probably take over from him," Mushy said. "Maybe you ought to send a Greek and start getting in good with Gus."

"No," Nick said. "It's a showing respect for the family thing. Charlie says you should go."

Mushy did not like the precedent he was setting of letting the Malteses send him on errand that had nothing to do with the restaurant, but he did not think that challenging Nick on this issue would be worth the trouble it might cause.

Nick was not alone. A young man had come in with him and had occupied an empty table near Mushy and Nick. He was without a hat or overcoat despite the blustery weather, wearing a checkered sportcoat whose tailoring Mushy recognized. The Maltese brothers frequently sent the young men they hired to collect debts to a tailor on South State Street who specialized in clothing designed to conceal weapons without unsightly bulges.

This was not surprising. Young men of this type often accompanied Nick or Charlie on their business rounds. What surprised Mushy was the reaction of Stash. He had moved behind one end of the bar where he had a clear field of fire on both the young man and Nick Maltese. A couple of dish towels concealed what Mushy was reasonably certain was a sawed-off shotgun. Stash was impassive and did not move until both visitors were well out the door.

"that punk is crazy," he said when Mushy asked him for an explanation.

"He had a belly gun as well as the one under his shoulder, and he almost went for it when you were cracking wise with Nick. You better watch out, Mushy. Nick and Charlie are getting old. They wouldn't have hired anybody that crazy in the old days."

"You make it sound like one of the movies I was in," Mushy said.

"Except that maybe you wouldn't have got up when it was all over," Stash said. "remember in all those movies, they would have this close-up of you undoing a button

on your jacket when you were talking friendly just before you pulled out your piece? That kid kept his eye on you and all the time, and, once, when it moved toward your jacket, he looked like he was about to get his rocks off. He's a big fan of your old movies, Mushy, only he wants to kill you for real."

"How is he any crazier than any of the other James Dean look-alikes that Nick and Charlie hire to break legs for them?" Mushy asked.

"You remember Jack McGurn, or Scalise with the garlic on his bullets so that everybody got gangrene? For that matter, do you remember that dish washer you hired when I told you not to last year who pulled a big knife when someone stepped on his shoes? Guys like that don't just kill people when the army or their boss tells them to. They kill people when they feel like it, which is practically all the time, because they know what miserable stacks of shit they are when they're not killing people."

"You may be right about that, Stash, toward the end in Hollywood, even before I wouldn't talk to the committee, I was losing parts because I didn't look crazy enough when I shot people. The writers and directors were all doing time on the couch, and they thought crazy killers were the only ones worth mentioning. So how do I tell Nick and Charlie that their new kid is a nut when they're in this mood today when they think it is still 1929 and I have to go to funerals for them. Next thing, they'll be wanting me to drive their old mother to mass."

"Maybe the Malteses know the kid is crazy," Stash said. "Maybe they'll turn him loose on you, then kill him, so they'll still have a reputation for doing right by a loyal guy like you that looked so tough telling Kevauver that you didn't know what you didn't know, only everybody thought you did because you always did in the movies."

"What the hell would Charlie and Nick want me dead for?" Mushy asked. "I'm a golden goose for them right now, and I've proved my loyalty. There's no percentage in getting rid of me just because the restaurant gets their names in the paper. If I got killed, the publicity would be awful, and this place would have to fold in a couple of months."

"When people like Nick and Charlie get nervous, they have been known to get rid of people like they were swatting flies," Stash said, "and I think you make them nervous. You may have gone the limit with Barney Ross without throwing in the towel, but you really don't understand people who use fists or guns if they are making a decent living without. On the other hand, I understand the Maltese, and they understand me. Maybe I should walk around with you for a couple of days."

"Thank you, no," Mushy said. "I don't take that kid as seriously as you do."

"I didn't say he was serious," Stash said. "I said he was crazy. It isn't the same thing."

Mushy had not been to a funeral for so long that he had to call his nephew's father-in-law to get instructions on how to conduct himself. He was told to get a hat or get a yarmulka at the door. The funeral home would be quite used to people who had forgotten the prayers or even the Hebrew alphabet. There would be a card with a translation. He should just mumble along with the rest.

The funeral home was way out in Berwyn on a block full of vacant lots. Mushy did not like vacant lots, which was another reason he liked Chicago better than Los

Angeles. Out in the suburbs a Los Angeles landscape was taking over. The funeral was small, not at all like the one that Mushy remembered of Nails Morton when he was a boy. At that one there had been gigantic floral wreaths and judges, legislators, and altermen by the dozens. The next day some of the boys had gone out to the stable in Weshington Park and shot the horse which had thrown Nails Morton and caused him to break his neck. Mushy could not image anyone doing anything like that for Jake Guzik and thought the world a poorer place for that.

The rabbi droned on and on about what a good man Guzik had been, how many of his relatives he had supported, how many charitable causes he had aided. Not all of Guzik's old associates were afraid of having their pictures taken. Ralph Capone had come all the way from morthern Wisconsin to be there. Mushy expressed condolences to the family both for himself and on behalf of the Maltese brothers and made sure that his presence was noted by all the eminences who mattered to them.

Besides the relatives and the eminences there was a group whom Mushy supposed to be neighbors and friends of Guzik or legitimate business associates. There was also a smaller group of younger men who stayed close to the eminences but were ignored by them. Clearly they thought they were important enough to be there even if the eminencesdid not share their opinion. Finally there were a dozen miscellaneous spectators who had no obvious connection to Guzik or anyone else in the room.

After the services had ended, Mushy heard his name spoken. He turned around to face one of the spectators, a tall young man with glasses and a moustache which was evidently supposed to look like Clark gable's but which did not come close. He had travelled some distance to be here, for his shoes and trouser legs were spattered with mud, and he had a battered suitcase with a much-repaired handle which he kept near him.

Mushy corected the young man's pronunciation of his last name and shook hands with him. They talked about movies. The young man could remember every movie that Mushy had ever made, including some that Mushy himself had forgotten. He even knew about some movies where Mushy had been left on the cutting room floor.

"There was an Alan Ladd movie where I am pretty sure I heard your voice on the screen as part of a group in a chase scene, but I never saw your face," the young man said.

"You're very observant," Mushy said. "I had two or three scenes in that movie, but the director thought a lot of my face and started putting extra things for me to do. This bothered William Bendix, who was the main ugly face in the movie, and he raised a stink until all my sceneswere cut. He shouldn't have bothered. I got paod wheter my scenes were in the final cut or not. I wasn't ambitious, and I couldn' t have done the sympathetic parts or the comedy that Bendix did anyhow."

The young man asked about a similar situation where Mushy had made a brief unbilled appearance in an East Side Kids picture.

"I had done bits with them when they were still the Dead End Kids, and their producer offered me a big part in one of their pictures. It didn't work out. Bela Lugosi could do something threatening to the kids and get laughs. Whn I played a gangster and

threatened them, it never got laughs no matter how silly the lines were. They scrapped most of what they had shot with me, but those things were done on a shoestring, and they had to leave one or two of my scenes in to get continuity even when they re-wrote the script."

An acned young man whispered to Mushy that he shouldn't talk to reporters.

"You're not a reporter, are you?" Mushy asked.

"I'm working in a Ph.D. in U. S. History at the University of Wisconsin," the movie fan said. Mushy gave the whisperer a signal to buzz off, which was reluctantly obeyed.

"Then I'm going to ask you a question," Mushy said. "I'm here because I knew Guzik a little but mostly because I am partners with a couple of people who thought I ought to be here. You don't look like the type of person who would know Guzik at all. You don't even sound like you come from anywhere near Chicago. So why are you here?"

The movie fan explained that his field was American social history and that he proposed to write a doctoral dissertation on the business enterprises of Al Capone and his associates during Prohibition. He admitted under Mushy's questioning that his professors were not enthusiastic about the idea and that he had found nothing of value except for journalistic accounts and the court records of the Capone income tax trial. However, he insisted that studying enterprises that were long lasting and highly organized despite the fact that their sanctions could be enforced by no legal authority would provide important insights into the real workings of American society.

Mushy suspected that the young man was strongly attracted to violence, that he was like most of the people who had enjoyed watching Mushy be pummeled and shot for so many years, excited and ashamed of their excitement at the same time and wanting a harmless channel for their feelings. Mushy did not know why people were losing their hang-ups about sex and acquiring them about killing each other, but Mushy supposed that it was a good trade-off. The movie fan's solution was dubious but unique, and Mushy found the idea of being studied and commented upon like some fragment of the Talmud to be unexpectedly pleasing.

The scholarly movie fan had plans to hitch hike back to Wisconsin, but he had no pressing engagements, so Mushy invited him back to town for a good lunch and a long chat. In the mid-1950's tape recorders are bulky and beyond the resources of graduate students, and the movie fan knew no shorthand, but he happily scribbled notes all afternoon.

Mushy had never been a part of any Capone enterprise, but he had known a lot of people who were, and he had spent much time in Hollywood talking to ex-Chicago reporters who had transformed the random violence of that era into enduring myth. The movie fan was indeed interested in all the gory details, but he had a good sense of the basic structure of his subject. He was confirming what he had already intuited: that American gangsterism was only a variation of usual capitalist business practice, operating by the same rules and mouthing the same clichés.

Mushy invited his waiters and some of his late afternoon patrons to join him in

telling stories to the movie fan. Stash told about making people be missing for Joe Saltis. Another waiter told of growing up in a West Side flat which always smelled of alcohol being cooked for the Genna brothers. Several remembered the time the Manhattan Brewery was raided and the evidence destroyed by pouring the beer into the sewers, making a geyser of every manhole in the neighborhood. The movie fan ate bagels with cream cheese with his left wand and took notes with his right. Mushy was delighted by how much sense his life made when analyzed by a scholar.

As th dinner rush began, the movie fan retired to collate and expand his notes in a seldom used back booth. When he came out about eight-thirty, Mushy was at his usual front table neat the bar, rtrading jokes with the customers. The movie fan thanked him profusely and announced his intention of hitch hiking back to Wisconsin.

"Kid," Mushy said, "We've ha da good day today. I've been a little bit amous before, but getting into your notebooks has made me feel, well, permanent or something. So I've been thinking about what I could do for you. You're poor, but in your line you don't really need a roll of bills or good clothes or things like that to let people know you're somebody. Anyhow, you claim those notebooks are valuable, so you ease my mind about them. I'm giving you enough for a ticket back to Wisconsin, so you can keep them safe and warm until you get them back to a library or something; and I'm having the boys in the kitchen fix you a bag of stuffso you won't have to eat that awful garbage they serve in train and bus stations. God Bless."

Then Mushy caught suight of a familiar sports coat. the bill collector for the Maltese brothers was back, this time without either Charlie or Nick.

"A friend of mine told me you were talking to a reporter a Jake Guzik's funeral," he said. "You shouldn't have done that."

Mushy had listened carefully to Stash's warning of the day before, but he was reasonably certain that the young gunman was doing this on his own, without the knowledge of his bosses. He was tired of letting the Malteses lean on him anyhow. As Mushy had hoped, Stash had moved behind the man, and two of Stash's special friends were covering him from other angles.

"Stash, we've got a rule in here about not allowing the customers to carry guns," Mushy said.

Stash reached over the gunman's shoulder and took both the shoulder gun and the belly gun with no trouble, since the gunman could see he was in a hopeless spot.

"Put those behind the barwith your other artillery," Mushy said. "Nick or Charlie can pick them up any time they want to. As for the punk, I don't want to see him in here again. If he tries to crash the gate, cut his trigger finger off and keep it as a souvenir."

The movie fan was still standing nearby, holding onto his suitcase.

"I didn't plan that last bit, kid," Mushy said. "Believe it or not, I've never done anything like that in my life before."

Later, Stash said "Mushy, you're not used to this sort of thing. You should either tell Charlie and Nick to kill the kid, or you should let me do it. Otherwise, he's going to kill you. He's dumb, but he could get lucky, so you've got to take him out of the way.

"My god," Mushy said, "you want me to be like this face."

"You've made a good living and had a lot of laughs with that face for a long time," Stash said. "You know what you have to do now."

"Call or fold," Mushy said.

Stash nodded.

When Mushy returned to his room at the LaSalle that night, a stewardess had come in from Midway. For several months they had spent a night together whenever she had a layover in Chicago. They were both tired, but, after a while, they decided they were not at all thattired and made love. It was very good.

She left early in the morning and Mushy stayed in bed another hour before ringing for breakfast. His usual waiter, Josh, brought him his usual order of scrambled eggs and sausages. Josh had been a number runner un gary for many years, and they valued each other's insights into gambling.

"How's your son, John?" Mushy asked.

"He's doing very fine. He graduates next June. Then he wants to go to medical school. He just might make it, too. He's a smart young man."

"Your old boss, Hutchinson out in gary, he used to send all of his runners to college if they wanted to go, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir, he did," Josh said. "he sent them to West Virginia State, which is a good Negro college. Hutch used to say that those scholarships were the best bets he ever made."

"He was probably right, Josh," Mushy said. "You see my suit hanging on the back of that chair? Get my wallet out of the inside jacket pocket. There ought to be a couple of hundred dollar bills in it, plus some twenties. Take the two hundres out and put them in your pocket. This is a one time thing, but I'm going to bet big on your boy today, Josh. You do the same. It's probably the best tip I'll ever give you."

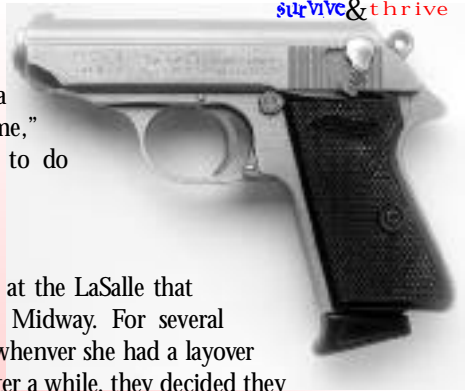
"Yes, sir," Josh said.

Mushy was dressed and on his way to the barber shop in the lobby a little before eleven. He took off his jacket, loosened his tie, and ordered a good close shave. He had a hot towel on his face and did not even see the gunman enter the shop or feel the bullet pierce his heart.

Morris's son Moishe recently published a well-recieved article in Commentary on the place of athlees and gamblers in the diaspora heritage.

The movie fan switched to a safer dissertation topic but published an article based on his interview material after he got tenure.

Stash is very old now, but he drops in frequently at the tavern on South Kedzie that is owned by two of his adoptedsons. Occasionally he will take the bottle withthe gunman's trigger finger in it off the back bar and show it to the customers. Mushy's idea were nearly always good for the saloon trade.



The Meaning of Names

Angi Becker

When I was a little kid, eight or nine, I had loved to look through my parents' old baby-name books. I made up people in my head to go along with the meanings of the names: Abner, "paternal," was a kind father of ten. Barbara, "shy," was a quiet girl who couldn't make friends at school. And my name, I naively thought, had the best meaning of all: unknown. In my youth, I only assumed that line in the book meant that I was mysterious, that no one really knew me. I was around nine when Diana looked over my shoulder and sweetly asked if I knew what her name meant.

"It means 'perfect,'" she said, with her twelve-year old mock grown-up voice. "And 'goddess'. Your name doesn't mean anything."

"Yes it does!" I protested. "It means 'unknown.' It means I'm mysterious," I declared proudly.

"No, stupid," she corrected. "Unknown means that no one knows what it means, so it doesn't mean anything."

"You're a liar!" I spat, but deep down, I knew she was right. After all, she was twelve. And it made sense.

From then on, I renamed myself frequently, writing my new identities in sloppy cursive on notebook pages. Sometimes I was Willa, "desired." Sometimes I was Tonia, "beyond praise," or Manda, "lovable." Anything but Adria, the name without a meaning. My favorite name was always Ginger. "Gaining poise and power." I figured a definition like that at least meant I was headed in the right direction.

Time went by, the way time does, and Diana lived up to her name, and I lived up to mine. When she was in eighth grade, she already wore a D cup, the rest of her was popsicle-stick thin. When I was in eighth grade, I stole her bras and stuffed them with socks, and got caught when they fell out in the locker room after gym class. In high school, everyone knew her name and no one knew mine. She was a varsity cheerleader; I fell down at tryouts and broke my ankle. Only three people signed my cast, my parents and a girl in my homeroom with lots of pimples and thick glasses. At dances, I stood against the back wall while boys crowded around my sister, waiting for the honor of a few minutes when their bodies could be allowed to come in contact with hers. Only the luckiest ones got slow songs. I stayed at home the night she was crowned homecoming queen. When I was fifteen and my parents caught me making myself throw up after dinner and sent me to therapy, Diana told me, in her syrup-sweet voice, "You can puke it up all you want, but you'll always know the truth, that this body came naturally for me and not you. Besides, you'll probably just lose what little tits you've got and keep those rolls everywhere else."

By the time I was turning sixteen, I had finally found myself a good group of people. Of course they weren't the popular crowd, but they were friends. They meant plen-

ty of phone calls and things to go out and do on Saturday nights. And then there was Tony, with his olive complexion and dark wavy hair. I knew he saw the way I watched him, the way I blushed if his hand happened to brush against mine, the way I always tried to arrange it so that I just coincidentally wound up next to him when we all went out to see movies. And the amazing thing was, he actually seemed to like it.

I had a pool party for my sixteenth birthday. Diana talked my parents into going out for the day, promising she'd look after things. I'd have rather she left and they stayed, but my friends were impressed, so I accepted it. It was a gorgeous day in spite of Diana, watching Tony in his black swimsuit, admiring the definition of his chest. Diana even agreed not to parade around in her skimpy bikini. Kindness from my sister was always cause for suspicion, but I took what I could get. She walked over to me once during the party and whispered "so, which guy is it that you're after?"

"Leave me alone," I muttered.

"Come on, Adria," she whined. "I know I haven't always been the best, but we are sisters. We're supposed to talk about that sort of thing, right?" I sighed.

"Him," I said, pointing. "In the black shorts."

"Hmm," she said, thoughtfully. "Not my type. Nice bod, though." I was relieved when she went back in the house.

About an hour later, Tony went in to get something to drink and was taking an unusually long time coming back out. I walked into the kitchen and it was empty, so I started down the hall to the bathroom, hoping that he hadn't gotten sick or anything. And that's when I saw the wet, black bathing suit crumpled on the hall floor, right outside Diana's closed door.

I flung the door open, and she was sitting up on top of him, her grotesquely large breasts bouncing up and down. It was at least a full minute before either of them noticed me, and I watched them with a mixture of awe and disgust. Finally, Diana turned her head and saw me standing there. And she grinned.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I was pulling her off of him and throwing her onto the floor. Her smile faded just before my fist smashed into her face, breaking her perfect nose, chipping two of her straight, white teeth, smearing blood on her flawless skin. She never even screamed, just stared up at me with pain in her eyes, knowing she deserved every blow.

I didn't exactly walk away unscathed. I broke two of my knuckles and needed twelve stitches from hitting Diana's teeth, got sent back to therapy, and I doubt my parents are going to let me out of the house before I'm 21. But it's all worth it for the way Diana cowers away from me now, the way she walks with her head down to hide the crook in her nose. When people who don't know the whole story ask me what happened to her, I tell them she fell off her high horse onto her face. I figure that's pretty close to the truth.

I've also decided I don't mind being Adria. I've realized we can transcend the meaning of names. I can steal Ginger's definition, whether it's on my birth certificate or not. I may not have all the poise and power just yet, but when Diana shrinks away from me and averts her eyes, I know I'm gaining, I'm gaining all the time.

Rejection

Bernadette Miller

One Saturday in New York, as Jenny rushed out to buy salad greens and yogurt, her thoughts intent in the acting scene she'd rehearsed for school, she withdrew a letter from her mailbox and glanced at the return address. Shocked, she stared at it. The letter was from her father, and postmarked the Bronx. From her father! What could he possibly want now that she was twenty-seven and hadn't seen him since she was six? Taking a deep breath, she ripped open the envelope.

"Dear Jenny." His handwriting that a childish scrawl. "I've been thinking and thinking about you and wondering how you are. Gloraine, my wife, and I talk about you often. You must be all grown up and a pretty woman. Please come to my apartment to see us next Sunday about two o'clock. Your grandfather in Maryland gave me your address. We don't have a telephone, so if you'll write and say you're coming, we'll wait for you. I hope you can make it. Love, Dad."

It was like a specter rising from a deeply dug grave... Jenny reread the letter several times, trying to guess at his intelligence and his attitude toward her. It was difficult analyzing, her emotions had become so entangled. She reentered the four flights to her small apartment, and replied on notepaper: "Dear Father..." No, that was too formal. She discarded the page and tried again: "Dear Mickey..." Too distant. After all, he was a close relative. Finally, she wrote, "Dear Dad" just as he'd signed the letter, and she said she'd be delighted to see him.

Sealing the envelope, she wondered how he'd look, what he'd wear, the sound of his voice. Once more she saw him as on that last day, when she'd run to meet him at the public library. Wearing baggy trousers and pea jacket and holding a sack of candy, he seemed the handsomest, kindest man she'd known. His hazel eyes were gentle, the lips soft and full, and when his smooth cheeks crinkled in a smile, his body straightened with broad shoulders. Breathless with excitement, Jenny had raced to the tall man who lifted her with a hug, murmuring, "hello, my little girl. Ummm... give daddy a kiss."

She kissed his cheek and hugged him as tightly as possible.

"Well," her father said, sitting beside her on the sidewalk bench, "are the Harrimans treating you okay?"

She hated to spoil their Sunday meetings with complaints about her foster parent -- their tiny meals of a hot dog and apple. Brushing aside her shiny black bangs, she glanced down at her jumper and unbuttoned coat. Her proud father probably couldn't see how thin she was getting. If only she could live with him until mother was well enough from tuberculosis to take care of her. But her father, offering a chocolate, smiled so contentedly at being with her, his forehead smooth, not frowning like the last time she started complaining, that she ate the chocolate cream and said nothing.

"Not very talkative, are you?" Her father joked, but then the smile faded, and he said slowly, "Honey, your mother wants a divorce. I still love her, but the trouble is that your grandparents own a successful clothing store and she got used to having whatever she wanted. BUt other things matter more to me than money."

"What other things?" Jenny said, gazing intently at her father's face.

He smiled at her. "Well, I like reading poems and fairy tales. I like watching sunsets and catching the night sky fillling with starts -- makes me feel like every-thing's a part of me. And I like grass under my feet." His feet slipped from the scuffed brogans and wiggled on a grassy patch. "But most of all I like to talk with my little girl, teach what's important. Do you understand all of that, Jenny?"

"Yes," she said, and smiled back happily. Those were the very things she liked, too!

"But that doesn't pay the rent," her father said gravely stooping to slip on his shoes. "It doesn't buy roast beef or a pretty new dress. Your mother argues that a handyman doesn't earn enough, and I should become an office executive so we could afford things. But then -- " he paused, " I'd feel trapped working nine - five, day in day out, like a machine." He grew silent for a moment, gazing at the distant intersection and continued softly, "I guess I'd really like to be a poet, only I don't have the words. Or, maybe a painter, but my feelings about life are all mixed up because of brain tissue damage form shrapnel during the war."

At he sympathetic nod, he took her hand. Surprised, he pulled it away covered with melted chocolate. They giggled as he wiped their hands with a wadded handkerchief from his pocket. Sobering, he said, "Jenny, please tell your mother I still love her as much as when we met at the singles dance. She's so beautiful, like a flower. You'll promise to tell her I don't want the divorce?"

Jenny nodded again, encouraged by his smile and tender eyes gazing at her. "I will," she said solemnly feeling as if her life depended on it.

"That's my girl."

Rising now to mail her note,Jenny headed toward the door. But now sne'd see him again! What would he be like? Had he changed much? She pictured him: tall and handsome with broad shoulders but with grey hair. Why, he'd said he was a poet... Except he couldn't put down the words. But what did that matter? In his heart he was a poet...

She spent the following week mechanically while reliving the past. Finally, on the day that threatened rain, she cose a full-skirted floral dress with leather boots that made her look like an actress, tucked her shiny black curls under her raincoat hood, grabbed the leather shoulder bag and umbrella, and took the subway to the Bronx. Along the way, she again remembered the last day she saw her father, how he playfully pushed her when Mother turned the grocery corner and paused at a distance from the library. "Go to her honey. Don't forget to tell her what I said."

She'd run to the dark-eyed woman wearing a blue suit and spikeheels, the black wavy hair framing the hart-shaped face, and exclaimed, "Daddy wants to tell you something important!"

But Mother didn't want to hear it period. Taking Jenny's hand, she snapped, "Don't worry about him! He brought this misery on himself. You'll be happy living with grandma in Maryland. Hurry, or we'll be late for the train!"

Jenny had glanced behind. Hunched over, his head cradled in his hands, her father seemed to be crying. "I think daddy's --" But it was too late. With mother tugging her hand, they'd already crossed the intersection her father was lost from view before she could fulfill her promise.

Now, in the subway car, Jenny scanned the passengers chatting or staring at the overhead advertisements, and reminded herself that after arriving at her grandparents, she'd never heard a word from her father. No telephone call, no letter, not even a birthday card.

In her small bedroom, she'd gazed up at the night sky spread outside the window. Somewhere, a star shone over the place where her father lived. Maybe he, too, was getting ready to sleep, or return from a movie, or rocked on a porch, watching the night sky, because that's what he liked to do... But why did he move and leave no address when grandpa wrote to him? Maybe he didn't love her anymore because he hadn't kept her promise to tell mother... No! He couldn't stop loving her, any more than she could stop loving him. What about his warm smile, hugs, and bags of candy, and how he liked to teach her things? But how hard it was, fighting his silence.

Gradually, kept busy with homework, cheerleading, dating, and parties, Jenny didn't think about him for months. Then shocked, as if she were losing him, she'd remember his reading fairy tales aloud to her when her parents lived together, and how they'd shared the chocolates before the library. By the time she graduated from high school, her father seemed like a remote but lovely dream she had during childhood; by college graduation he'd shrunk to a shadowy figure with hazel eyes and a vague feeling of tenderness. After moving to New York, she simply explained to friends that her father had died. It was difficult, she'd decided, to continue defending a man who had rejected his own child.

Yet, whenever she rode the subway, she used to wonder whether the young man across the aisle was a stepbrother and the middle aged man sitting beside him was her father...

Outside, passing several blocks, she nervously read building numbers on his street until reaching the corner's dilapidated brownstone, the walk to the stoop dotted with bits of paper, pizza, and soda cans. He lived in a basement. She stared at the foyer name: Mickey... it was strange, finally seeing his name on a mailbox. Heart pound she rang the bell.

A plump woman with gray curls opened the door. "Come right on in, honey," she said with a deep Southern drawl.

Jenny followed her through a brief foyer and into the studio apartment. Waiting near the door was a short, stocky man with thick gray hair and hazel eyes.

"My little girl," he said huskily as she paused near the doorway.

She smiled awkwardly, not hugging him for fear of embarrassing him, confused about proper etiquette. Greetings sprang to mind: Dad, how good to see you again!

But that sounded strained - good to see him after twenty years? Or: How glad I am you finally write me. That night appear sarcastic. Nothing seemed appropriate, so she remained silent while he spread her raincoat across the double bed with its faded coverlet.

"Still shy, eh, honey?" her father joked and then sobered when she didn't smile.

So this is where he lived... She scanned the drab, musty room with its chipped linoleum, noted the corner kitchenette with the refrigerator habdcoe tied with rope, and the oilcloth-covered card table near a sagging chest of drawers.

"Jenny, how about pie? Gloraine's a good cook. Learned it from her mama in Tennessee. She makes a great pecan pie." He motioned to his wife to bring pie and coffee, and turned to Jenny who sat at the table. "You'd like some, wouldn't you, honey?"

Rigid with expectation, she nodded and watched his every move, the way his plump hands loosened the dirty collar around his wrinkled neck, and his paunch protruding over his belt. He looked... She earched for words... And remembered her grandfather shouting "He's a bum who reuned my daughter's life!" Shuttering, she silently reminded herself that he was her father, no matter how he looked.

He sat at the table while Gloraine boiled coffee at the clean but sagging stove. "Honey, I hope you're not disappointed." His face reddened, the creases deepening into a weather-beaten look. Turning away, he mumbled, "Well, your mother was right -- I'm fifty and still a janitor, but Gloraine says she wouldn't trade me for anybody else, no matter how rich."

"Now, darling," Gloraine said, setting pie and coffee before Jenny, "don't get yourself all upset. You talk to your little girl, say the things you always told me you would. Go ahead."

Jenny's father turned to her. "Well, honey, are you working? Do you live with a roommate? How about boyfriends?"

"I work part-time in an office and attend acting school."

"Acting!" He turned to his wife. "Hear that, Gloraine? My little gorl's going to be famous! She'll invite us to visit her Hollywood mansion."



Farewell , Dear Bill Henley

Bernadette Miller

Once upon a time, gentle reader, there lived a shy, plump and balding bus driven named Bill Henley. Staunchly conservative, Bill was always punctual, attentive to children, never had a traffic violation, always flashed a smile. For thirty years, the perfect driver. That is, until one afternoon when returning home to quiet, elm-shaded main street, he gazed up at his apartment, and wailed, "all my life, nothing but eat, sleep, drive a bus, eat, sleep. Not even a fat to warm me on cold nights. It's unfair!"

Lamenting thusly, he passed the building and turned the corner, when -- lo and behold -- he stood before a quonset hut in a jungle lush with palms and orchids.

A charming parrot chirped, "Welcome to Viet Nam, land of opportunity."

"Well, well," Bill said scratching his chin, and entered the hut. It was an army mess hall, beyond which was a large kitchen containing flour, hot dogs, asparagus... Bill examined his baggy uniform, crisp white apron, and tall chef's hat.

"By God, I wanted adventure and excitement, and look what I got instead!"

"Some humans are never satisfied," the charming parrot tsk-tsked, and flew away in disgust.

Several Marines entered. A braun sargeant stared at Bill, who squirmed in his ill-fitting uniform.

"Well, looky here, you the new cook?"

"Uh, I guess so... sir..." Bill said bashfully.

"Then get to work!" The sargeant roared, and herded the men out.

Bill glanced about the kitchen. Another menial job!

All day long he slaved to feed the hungry Marines. With little cooking experience, he prepared a hot dog stew, and set the tepid bowls on the mess table. He hovered about to hear the men's approvals. Alas, there was none. Grimly silent, they bolted down their meal, except for a little private licking his plate. Private Fortuna liked the stew! Bill hurried over.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Stinks! But a man's gotta eat, don't he?" The little private walked away.

So Bill's first meal had failed. But that wasn't all. That evening in the recreation hut nobody invited him to dance when Private Fortuna played his harmonica, and he watched the festivities isolated from the men's acceptance. Slicing asparagus the next morning, he complained to the charming parrot, the only one who talked him. "I'm

polite, I work hard. Why don't the men like me?"

To which the parrot chirped on the flour drum, "Man doesn't live by bread alone, but jazzing it up helps."

"Aha!" Bill said and smiled with enthusiasm. Having been a good bus driver, he could study and become a good cook. Dinner time, he approached Sargeant Smith at the head table, and requested cook books.

"Henley, don't you realize we're fighting a war here? We can't coddle recruits."

Sargeant Smith bent over his shredded beef on raw asparagus, and glanced up. "Okay, I'll get you some."

"Oh, thank you, sir."

When the cook books finally arrived, Bill planned enticing meals, and once again approached Sargeant Smith who frowned.

"What is it know, Henley?"

"Well, sir, I need supplies: soy bean curds, motzo meal, chutney... " He listed other interesting ingredients.

"We can't afford it."

"Sir, please, for the men's sake..."

Sargeant Smith groaned over his mock rarebit. "Okay!"

"Thank you, sir."

A month passed while Bill awaited the crates. Maybe the Sargeant had ignored his request. He stared glumly at the parrot, whocluck on the flour drum, "You're wasting time feeling sorry for yourself."

"You're right," Bill agreed, and began rereading favorite recipes from the well-thumbed Hari Krishna Cooks! Then one morning he heard a commotion, and rushed outside. Grunting soldiers stacked crates outside the quonset hut along the dirt road. Bill jumped up and down before soberly storing the precious cargo on labelled kitchen shelves. Now, finally, he could prepare the exotic dishes he'd only read about: lamb curry, spanish paella golden with saffron, icy borscht with sour cream. At first, uncertain he understood the recipes, he question Private Fortuna after each meal.

"How's the paella?"

the little private shrugged. "Nothing to write home about."

Undaunted, Bill worked harder. Weeks passed; as his skills improved, his confidence grew. He elaborated on the recipes, and smile with pride when his pheasant lo mein drew applause.

"We want the cook!" the men chanted, and beat their tin plates. "Henley, speech! Speech!"

Tears in his eyes, Bill entered the mess hall an apron daubing his face. "It was nothing, fellows, just a little variation."

"It was fantastic!" Private Fortuna shouted.

"Incredible!" another shouted.

Suddenly the men jumped up to hoist Bill on their shoulders, and sang "For he's a jolly good cook."

Sergeant Smith reached up to shake Bills hand. "Henley, let me know if anything troubles you -- anything at all."

"Sure will. Thank you." Bill glanced toward the kitchen. "I must get back -- my stroganoff..."

The men gently set him down, but Private Fortuna ran after him proffering magazines.

"Mister Henley, sir, please take my smuggled copies of Nudity for Health. If there is anything you need -- beer, marijuana, anything -- I'll gladly get it for you free."

Bill smiled. "I'll give you a list of cook books." He hurried back to the delicate stroganoff -- cooking perfectly.

When the cook books arrived, Bill studied them on his bunk forsaking the recreation hut, for, as the parrot had reminded him, "He who remains dedicated moves up." And how right that bird was! Gradually, the men began sneaking back early from patrol missions to sample Bill's devilled crab knapes accompanied by coconut goat milk shakes with a dash of liqueur.

"Wow, Henleys the greatest!" the men chanted over emptied hor d'oeuvres dishes, while they toasted his good health and culinary expertise.

But all was not not well. Sergeant Smith returned unexpectedly one afternoon, missing his recruits, and threatened to drag them to a worse war zone. During dinner, he roared, "Henley's become a menace -- we gotta ship him back to the states!"

A pall hung over the tables as the Marines anxiously turned toward Bill emerging from the kitchen. Arms folded over aproned paunch, he smiled, unconcerned, and watched the tough sergeant bend over his plate to savor his lobster pierogie.

Word spread; sodiers from other units queued outside the mess hall to take their turn. They chatted and joked until settling at the tables for Bill's almond quail supreme, the food paid for by desparate squadron commanders fearing desertions.

One evening, as Bill put the polishing touch to a superb chicken soup, a Viet Cong platoon poured into camp, their arms raised, noses sniffing.

"Please, Americans," the ferocious Viet Cong leader cried touchingly. "Give us soup! All day smell in jungle. No stand it longer. Must have chicken soup with creplash!"

Even Sergeant Smith pitied them. He roared, "Men, lets feed these poor prisoners!" and helped set great steaming bowls onto tables, while the enemy crowded onto benches.

"Aah," sighed the Viet Cong Leader, smacking his lips. "Best damn chicken soup ever tasted!"

During the following weeks, to Bill's amazement, there followed upon wave of surrendering Viet Cong. Some came for the beef wellington fajitas, some preferred the cornish game hen teriyaki, for others it was the lemon lichee duck, but all agreed Bill Henley's cooking was irresistible.

As the war slowly ground to a delectable halt, panic spread among world leaders, many warning that Bill Henley was more dangerous than the bomb. Beaming

that his cooking was ending the war, Bill served peekaboo blueberry tarts to the men watching television in the recreation hut. As he entered with a second tray, the men, jaws agape, watched President Nixon apologize to North Viet-nam for winning the war underhandedly.

Premiers, presidents, and kings begged Nixon for Henley, seen as a potent weapon, and in return offered their nations resources. Nixon promptly requested his staff to analyze Henley's profitability.

While national leaders taunted each other, Bill's camp soon became the worlds largest resort, providing wide-eyed guests with a memorable time -- money being no obstacle since American taxpayers paid all bills. Barracks became luxury hotels; the picturesque jungle was bulldozed and replaced by golf, tennis, stables and trails, and swimming pools with cabanas as well as fashionable shops. At a lovely nightclub, The Swinger, waitresses wearing short-shorts and peasant blouses served enormous platters of roast suckling pig while Private Fortuna and His Harmoni Beats entertained under a canopy of scarlet and lavender ballons. Or, one could linger at the Paradise Bar with a Bill Henley Rum-Do and listen to charming parrot sing, "Ain't Gonna Study War No More!"

Thus, the name Bill Henley became a cooking by-word; he was besieged by the media and heads of state. Such attention would surely destroy most men's values. But not Bill. He remarked contentedly while stuffing brioche with chocolate halvah, "At last, I'm appreciated and loved," and he smiled at the latest telegram on his desk, inviting him to head the International Cooking Organization, whose purpose was to titillate the peasants, stuff the aggressors, and dissolve expansionism.

Then, alas, as Bill one afternoon prepared a succulent bouillabaisse for Outer Mongolia, he tasted an assistant's mango chicken, was instantly stricken with botulism, and died. Greif stricken multitudes attended his funeral at the mess hut, now enshrined as a museum. Once again war erupted in the Golan Heights. But, somehow, it had lost its kicks; after a week, Arab troops began deserting their posts to seek Israelis, and inquire wistfully, "Where Bill Henley?" Life not the same without his cherry blintzes jubilee..."

The sympathetic Israelis offered the falafel diable. Joining hands, the enemies rushed to the mess hall, thus making war impossible.

Millions paid tribute to Bill. Oh, those inspiring verses to: "Here's to Heleys Shoofly Pie!" shouted with the usual German gusto. And: "Lest We Forget Bills Last Bouillabaisse," a mournful Tibetan chant. Yes, wherever men carried Bill's culinary message, war dissolved into pineapple matzo brei and wild duck shishkabob...

Which just goes to show that even a humble school bus driver, unconscious in a minor traffic accident, can achieve world peace if his imagination so wills it -- concluding, gentle reader, our parable for today.



Hands

Ben Tanzer

Stories

So, I'm sitting in bed late one night, tired and dirty, grass stained and mud streaked. It's been another long day mowing lawns and I find myself staring at my hands. At first I'm not sure why. It's not like I'm a musician or a surgeon or something. They're not even my favorite body part. And yet there I am staring, lost in their twists and turns and scars.

As I continue to stare I begin to fixate on the scars. I once read somewhere how Stephen King had said that you always know a writer because they can tell you stories about every scar on their body. I don't know about the writer part, but I sure know all the stories written across my hands. There is the long gash across my palm, induced by the furious tumble I took when fossil hunting at summer camp. And the snaking scar on my ring finger, left after the finger dislocated and sliced through the skin like a shark in low waters. Your hands I realize, and particularly their scars, come to define who you are in many ways because they reflect everywhere you've ever been, good, bad, and otherwise.

I also realize that my hands have come to define me in ways I never expected, and this is really why I find myself so lost in them in the first place. My daily existence, you see, has become one of dread and confusion, and this dread, not only dominates my thoughts, but smothers and imprisons me as well. I know I want out, no, need out of the life I find myself living, yet I don't know how to do it. And so instead I just stare at my hands, my scarred lawn mowing hands, the tools of my trade.

The Trap

A friend knew I needed to earn some money. He also knew that Jack was looking for some workers to join his landscaping crew. So, he introduced us. From jump Jack seemed to offer something different, something enticing, a gingerbread house if you will. He would buy us lunch and offer to get us stoned. He listened to the Grateful Dead and regaled us with stories about the local girls he was banging. We could come and go as we pleased just like he did. On top of all that, he offered to pay us top dollar just to mow lawns.

And so, just like that the trap was set. I mean visions of freedom and money, and the chance, maybe, somehow, for pussy. What else is there? And how many chances does a fifteen-year old have to obtain any of that?

But you see that was just the vision, or projection, or whatever the psychologists call it. The reality is long days, with lunch in the truck as you rush from one site to the next. And banal stories about young girls and sex that scares you with their excessive depravity.

"So I grabbed her right there between the front door and the entrance to the bar. You know, the fucking foyer or whatever they call it. Anyway, I grabbed her and shoved my hands down her pants," he says.

"Then I'm fingering her right there in the fucking foyer thing, can you believe it?"

You just nod. What can you say, he's talking about another world. You've never fingered anyone. Hell, you've never even stood in the foyer thing of a bar.

"Yeah, and then when I pulled my finger out there was a piece of skin on it or something. It was fucking crazy."

You may never finger someone now.

The reality is also a stoned, angry boss screaming and crying at you daily about your slowness, technique, and the short length of the grass. Short grass you see leads to less mowing. Less mowing of course leads to less drug money.

"Are you trying to fucking put me out of business? Are you trying kill me? I mean Jesus Christ, raise the wheels. Raise the fucking wheels," he screams for the millionth time.

You just nod. You've already raised the wheels.

"And why the fuck is it taking you so long. I can mow twice as fucking fast as you guys."

He then proceeds to push one mower in front of him while he pulls another behind him.

"Now how hard is that. Jesus. My dad would have fucking killed me if I mowed as slow as you fucking guys. Are you even trying?"

You just nod. You know you're busting your ass. You also know you can never bust it fast enough, or mow straight enough. It's really kind of pointless to try.

You see the reality is, this job is not cool or fun. And you wonder what happened to that vision. Soon all you have is the money to think about and the feeling that there really isn't anywhere else to get it. I mean it's not like anyone else is offering you work. And it's not like you have any connections.

Ultimately you wonder if you should just quit. Just run off. The problem though is that lately Jack hasn't been paying you all that regularly. Check that, he has never paid you regularly, but now it's added up to a fairly substantial amount. You see he can't pay his workers all that often because he's too busy spending it on the drugs and the girls. So, what are you supposed to do, quit with him owing you money? Then what? You'll never get paid.

And so the trap draws tighter. Now it's not just that you've been sucked in, but you can't even fight for your freedom because that freedom comes with a cost. And with such a cost, does it even qualify as freedom? Such questions come to dominate your days and nights. There are no answers or end in sight.

Closure

And then one day the grass is real high and wet and the wheels too low. And the mower blade is getting blocked with all the jagged, soggy clippings. I begin to picture the screaming and the crying that is soon to come, and I wonder yet again what the hell I'm even doing here. I mean is this how I want to spend my days? Is this how I want to live my life? How did I ever get here? At this point I don't know what to do or what to think. It's all just too confusing.

So, I flip the mower over, and I'm sure I turned it off, well I'm sure I think I did. But who knows at this point, I'm fucking spinning. And then there's the blade and its still rotating. And for just a moment I am mesmerized by it, lost in its motion. And a moment's distraction is all it really takes you know, because my fingers are right there in the way, and then there's blood, and it's everywhere. Then it all fades to black.

And then I'm sitting up again in bed late one night and I'm staring at my hands. One fully formed and whole, the other mangled and covered with bandages. And as I stare at them, and the stories they will tell, one thought comes through over and over again, I'm free, and that's how they will define me now.

That's my story.

Randy's Price

Ken Sieben

Randy Urbanski pulls her red Corvette between the white lines of the spot reserved for her husband Bob's BMW in the Island Watch resident parking lot. Their townhouse has a single ground-level garage where she usually keeps her car, but she will be going out again soon, and would rather leave it in the breezy outdoor shade than inside the stuffy garage. An association by-law prohibits open garage doors unless the owner is engaged in some kind of work within.

It was one of those rules that Island Watch owners feel are needed to "maintain standards," as they put it, so the place will never look shabby. When Randy herself first rented a one-bedroom unit here three years ago, she felt such rules were silly and often disregarded them. But since Bob bought the two-bedroom they now live in, she feels more like an owner. Though it's in his name because the closing was six months before his divorce became final and they could be married, that does not prevent her from feeling the possessiveness and acquisitiveness common to so many members of the association — "pride of ownership."

Randy steps out of the car and straightens her sleeveless lime-green dress, then walks around to the passenger side to retrieve the bag which contains her afternoon's purchase — a matching set of outfits for herself and her crew to wear in the Waterwitch Yacht Club's first annual women's race this coming Saturday. She looks with pride out to the end of the pier at the boat she will command, Randy's Price, a sleek Beneteau 32 she and Bob have been sailing all season. The J/30 Bob owned when they first met was faster but it lacked the comforts Randy insisted upon. After all, they often sailed to Long Island Sound or the Chesapeake for a class race, and she wanted more than a privacy curtain between her and the college kids who usually crewed for them. The new boat provided a separate aft cabin for the crew, with their own portable head so they would not have to dirty Randy's, as well as a microwave oven in the galley where she could do some decent cooking.

Randy enters her house and immediately goes to her bedroom where she opens the bag and tries to imagine how she and the crew will look as they cross the finish line. She removes her belt and unbuttons her dress and lifts it over her head. Beneath she wears a white silk camisole and bikini panties. She pulls the new sleeveless white double-knit cotton polo shirt on and spreads it smooth. "Randy and Skipper" are embroidered in half-inch red letters on the right and left breast pockets. She steps in front of, or rather within, her three-panel full-length mirror to inspect herself and lifts her arms straight up and sees that her camisole shows through the armholes when she stretches. She removes the shirt again and also peels off the camisole, and studies her small, lemon-

shaped breasts. Then she shrugs and pulls the shirt back on. She jumps a few times and watches her breasts float up and down. Not too obscene, she thinks. Her dark nipples are not noticeable through the double layer, so the pockets were a good idea. Some of the men in the club wouldn't keep their eyes off her if she were too flagrant, and their wives would be jealous.

She steps into her red cotton shorts and ties them at the waist. They are cut extra wide and vented high up the sides to permit stretching and freedom of motion. She reaches into the two front scooped pockets and decides they are perfect for carrying small tools and tape and bits of cord and all the odds and ends a sailor wants to have at hand. She twirls around a few times to make certain the boat's name in three-inch letters on the back of her shirt shows to advantage. Finally, she puts on the hooded red windbreaker which carries the same lettering in white. A perfect combination!

Randy checks the names on the three other shirts. The daughter of a friend from the club, a college student named Debby Foley who has been racing since childhood, is the navigator. Randy made it clear that Debby will double as tactician because of her experience. She has exhibited great wind-sense, better even than Bob's, often choosing a course a few degrees farther off the wind than other boats to give them a slight edge in speed. She is also a master at strategic maneuvers designed to take the wind out of someone else's sails. Carolyn Martin, 16-year-old daughter of a neighbor, and Bertha Bunting, wife of the club's Vice Commodore, make up the foresail crew. Carolyn must be part monkey the way she grips the toerail and deck with her feet and pulls herself through the lifelines and rigging. With her long legs and arms she can scamper up to the pulpit to tie the spinnaker turtle, snap on the halyard, sheet, and guy, hoist and level the spinnaker pole, and be back into the cockpit in about ten seconds. Even Bertha knows enough to follow Carolyn's lead and play the guy in or out at her command.

Randy will show the "uniforms" to the girls tomorrow after their final practice, her gift to the crew for working so hard. They've been going out three times a week for four weeks since the race was approved by the committee, and Randy thinks they could use a new incentive. To have had stylish clothes when she was a child might have given Randy the incentive to be a better person. Her family could make ends meet on her father's salary, but Mrs. Price did work at home for a tailor. Using the tailor's sewing machine, she hemmed trousers and let out waistbands, though she had to spend a half hour on the bus each way bringing the clothes back and forth to the shop. The extra income enabled the Prices to afford a few luxuries, like a rented bungalow at the Jersey shore for a week every July and trousers and suits for Randy's father and three brothers at cost. Later she used the sewing machine to make dresses for herself and Randy but they were all dowdy.

On Sundays Randy and her mother both looked like all the middle-aged frumps at the Presbyterian Church. When she turned fourteen, Randy refused to go to church anymore and would wear only her brothers' old sweatshirts and jeans. Randy knows that she and Carolyn, with their long slender legs and slim hips, will look great in the racing outfits, and even Debby, though a bit hefty, is athletic enough to carry her weight decently. But Bertha, though only

forty-one, already has acquired the soft, fleshy suburban bearing that comes from too much sun, too much food and booze, too much indulgence, and not enough effort. Randy is afraid she'll wear an enormous bathing suit underneath to prevent her ass from drooping out of the shorts, but Bertha's presence on Randy's Price will make the judges reluctant to recognize another boat's protest flag.

Even without that edge, Randy feels they will do well. Of the eight boats entered, Randy's Price has the best record, though the highest handicap. Of course, the victories all came with Bob as skipper, but she has been sailing with him for three years now and feels confident.

Randy is still admiring herself in the mirror when her bell rings. "Hi, it's me," Judy Driscoll calls through the screen door. "Am I too early?" Judy used to work as an interior decorator and still helps her husband Dave, who owns a floor covering business. After a good deal of nagging, she finally got Dave to redo their own floors. At the cocktail party the Driscolls gave in June, Randy was impressed with the quality of his work, though she didn't care for his off-color jokes. She especially liked the glossy bleached oak floor in the living room and the red quarry tiles in the kitchen. When Dave promised a special rate for neighbors, Bob's ears perked up because Randy had recently decided to refurbish. She wants a new kitchen even more luxurious than the one the Greenwoods have just installed, and a double whirlpool bath like Darlene Kaye's. Since the party, Judy has pitched right in and practically assumed full responsibility for the project. She's thrilled to be using her creative talents again, and Randy knows enough to take advantage of free professional advice.

"No, come on up, I want you to see something before we go."

"What an adorable outfit, Randy," Judy says as she enters the bedroom. "It looks perfect on you."

"It would have looked great on you, too," Randy says, flashing her most radiant smile and pointing to the other three on the bed. At thirty-six, Judy is still thin enough to look good in fashionable sportswear. With precisely that thought in mind, as well as the notion of rewarding her for her services, Randy had offered Judy a position in her crew. Unfortunately, Judy insisted she hates the water even though Dave owns a big fishing boat. That was when Randy thought of Bertha Bunting.

"Well, maybe, but I'm no sailor so I'd just get in the way. You'll do better without me."

On their short drive to Dave's little office-warehouse downtown to examine carpet samples, Randy considers how awkward her position is. She doesn't like Dave and wouldn't be dealing with him if it weren't for her friendship with

Judy, and Bob's insistence on not passing up the discount. When they arrive, Dave, dressed in jeans and dirty T-shirt, seems to be exchanging fish stories with some workers and waves a cursory greeting. The place is smaller than Randy had expected—a narrow storefront with an outdated window display concealing a cluttered steel desk and file cabinet. Every square foot of floor space, plus every chair and horizontal surface, is draped with odd-shaped scraps of carpet and linoleum. An exposed rust-streaked porcelain sink on the back wall next to a stall that no doubt contains a toilet makes Randy

wonder how successful Dave is.

Judy senses her distress and tries to explain: "You know, Dave has an architect working on plans for a classy new showroom up on the highway, with everything on display. He's even gonna hire a special sales staff. He's really outgrown this old place."

Randy is not, however, reassured, but lately, Bob's been complaining so about the way she spends money that she can't very well pay full price somewhere else. Nor can she discuss her feelings about Dave with him. Bob would naturally understand her sensitivity to Dave's leers and smirks when she walks around the pool area in her bikini, but he would not be able to comprehend what bothers her most: the way Dave tends to touch all the Island Watch women when he talks to them—except her. He can't conduct a conversation with one of them without grabbing a shoulder or squeezing a leg.

She has seen him stretch an arm around Ellen Austen for a friendly hug and then casually brush his hand across her big boobs. Once he even patted Carolyn's mother on the ass. But since Bob moved in with Randy three years ago, Dave has treated her like a statue. Strangely, he seems the type of boorish lecher who assumes a woman of forty-three married to a man thirty years older would need a lover on the side. Instead, however, his weird male ego seems to have catalogued her as forbidding, or perhaps contaminated, used up, unappealing. She would put him in his place if he made a pass, but he hasn't.

"I think this light beige would go perfect in the master bedroom," Judy says, holding a sample in the single shaft of sunlight that sneaks through the rear window, "and perhaps this gray in the guest room."

Randy answers, "I was thinking of the same color for both rooms, then we could run it through the gallery and right down the stairs." She wonders if Judy has figured out that the "guest room," the back bedroom that doesn't have the view, is really Bob's bedroom, that she and Bob have not shared a room since they moved in. Living on her own since college, she'd grown so used to privacy that she found sleeping with Bob as unpleasant as sharing a room with three older brothers when she was a child. It wasn't that he was loud or mean or smelly as they had been; she simply prefers solitude. Nor is she at all prudish. In fact, she has always loved sex and Bob has shown the enthusiasm and stamina of a man half his age. She knows she can arouse him at will, something she loves to do—when she's in the mood. He quickly learned not to press her but to enjoy what she so willingly gave him.

The arrangement they have wasn't negotiated or discussed, rather it evolved over time. She will quietly ask, "Come to my room tonight?" sometime during the late evening while they read or watch television, and he will undress in his own room and enter hers wearing only his cashmere robe. If she does not extend an invitation, he will just say a pleasant "Good night, dear" when he retires. And often in the morning, while he is showering after his daily run, she will bring coffee to his room and slip out of her robe and into his bed where he greets her with surprised and ecstatic delight. Randy knows that Bob has no cause for complaint. There are no ten-day and two-week periods of abstinence which Marie, his first wife, had required to avoid conception. Instead,

they have sex on demand—when Randy demands.

“That would be the best way,” I think, Judy agrees. “Have you settled on drapes and bedspreads yet? I think that will help you decide between the beige and the gray.”

“I just can’t make up my mind. Today I think I like the gray, but yesterday I decided the beige was warmer. I hate to be so indecisive.”

Judy smiles. “Honey, you’ve made more decisions in a month than most women make in a year. You’ve got nearly everything picked out, and the things left are down to two or three choices!”

Dave calls over from where he’s talking to the men. “Hey, Judy, did you show Randy those new acrylics from the Georgia mill? They’re supposed to resist dirt better.”

“No, Dave, I didn’t know about them.”

Dave dismisses the men. “What are you talking about? I brought them home last night. They’re in the back room.”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me?” Judy gives him a look of exasperation which, judging by the way her cheeks seem to fold into separate upper and lower sections, must be common.

Dave says without any sincerity, “Sorry, sweetheart, I thought I did.”

“Honestly, Dave, I can’t read your mind.”

“Well, the thing is,” he says, “I need them back today for another customer. You were supposed to check them out in Randy’s place and bring them back here with you.”

Judy doesn’t seem to know who is at fault. “Suppose we look at them when we get back home and then I’ll drop them off here later. Is that okay?”

Dave tightens his lips and thinks. “You know, now that I think about it, you’re right. I must have taken them out of the car last night and set them someplace in the garage. I guess I forgot to bring them in.”

“Oh, Dave, we have to see them side by side with these”—she holds up the samples they have been examining—“so we can make the right choice.”

“Tell you what!” Dave says. “I might have put them in any of a dozen places, and the garage is a mess. Suppose I run Randy back to the house and find them. We’ll take those two you’ve got with us so she can spread them all out on the floor and decide.”

“What about me?” Judy asks.

“I’m expecting some calls, so you stay here and mind the store, okay, sweetheart?”

Judy doesn’t like to be left out. “I don’t know. What do you think, Randy?”

Randy doesn’t want to go anywhere with Dave but, under the circumstances, his suggestion makes sense. Judy couldn’t find them in that garage of theirs, which Randy has seen and assumes was the reason for the rule about keeping doors closed, and she does want to see the real texture and color of the samples up against everything else. Anyway, it will only take a few minutes. “I guess it’s okay,” she says, “if Dave doesn’t mind.”

Dave says, “No problem, sweetheart, I’ll be right with you.” He strips off his T-

shirt, goes to the sink, and begins to wash his arms and chest.

Randy notices how compact and lean his torso is. The way his veins stand out and his muscles are defined makes him look like a lightweight boxer. How different men's bodies are, she thinks. Bob, who hasn't stopped training since he was in high school, has a trunk shaped like an upside-down pear, and she loves to be enfolded in his thick bear-like arms. But Dave looks so—so fascinatingly miniature.

"Dave!" Judy says.

"What, I should be all filthy when I drive the lady around? That's bad for business." He pulls a clean shirt from a desk drawer and puts it on. "I go through three or four of these a day," he says.

"I know," says Judy. "I do your damned laundry."

#

Dave points out that Randy might get her pretty dress dirty in his truck, so they take her Corvette. "Great car," he says, "Your old man must be raking it in, huh? Not that it's any of my business, but I know what these babies cost."

"It was Bob's wedding present to me," Randy answers. She knew it was a terrible extravagance, but she wanted it anyway. She had no intention of living as her parents had. Her mother had always longed to take drives in the country on Sunday afternoons. Like any other working class American family they could have bought a car on time, but Mr. Price wouldn't hear of it. His worst fear was to die in debt. At the time of Randy's birth a "stripped" Ford or Chevy or Plymouth sold for less than \$2000, so the Prices decided to save.

For three years they avoided all luxuries, putting \$13 every week into a savings account at 2 1/2% interest. "Makes more sense than paying interest to the bank," Mr. Price assured his wife, though the latter secretly thought that having the use of the car for those three years was worth paying the bank something for. When Randy turned three, the Prices decided it was time to see what their account balance of \$2,105.46 would buy. Unfortunately, the price of cars had risen. The 1955 Ford sedan they liked cost \$2300 with a radio and heater. So they had to save four more months and couldn't get the car until May.

They saved for everything, but since the expenses of running, insuring, and maintaining the car were greater than they had anticipated, their weekly deposit was reduced to \$6. At that rate it took a year and a half to get a television set, and more than two years for a washing machine and dryer. By the time the house had everything that Better Homes and Gardens said was needed for the American lifestyle, John Kenneth Galbraith had declared middle America dangerously affluent.

"You know something, sweetheart?" Dave asks, "I think women make better drivers than men. And this gives me a chance to enjoy the scenery." He doesn't take his eyes off her all the way home. Much to her surprise, she finds his behavior amusing and cannot suppress a smile when he catches her peering over at him. "What's so funny?" he

asks.

"You, the way you act like you're fifteen."

"Hey, sweetheart, you're as old as you feel. Today I feel fifteen. Tomorrow maybe I'll be fifty."

"Don't call me sweetheart. That's what you call your wife."

"Sweetheart, I call everybody sweetheart—my customers, my work crews, even my mother."

Randy alters her tone to indicate that she does not like to be contradicted. "Well, please don't call me that. I'm Randy. Or Miranda, if you insist on being formal." Now she knows she is making fun of him. Randy's mother had always been addressed by her husband and children as Mother. Mr. Price was Father. Her brothers were never Ray or Mike or Tom; their given names sufficed for both address and reference, and in the Price family, there was much more of the latter. "Raymond must study harder." "Have Thomas take out the garbage." "Michael cannot get any dessert tonight." Since no diminutives or nicknames of any kind were ever used, Miranda was in high school before she realized the effect of informality. When she made her simple self-introduction—"Hi, I'm Randy"—the boys, especially those who read English novels, paid attention.

"Okay, Randy-baby."

Back at Island Watch, Randy goes straight into her house with the pieces of carpet from the store while Dave searches his garage for the Georgia samples.

"Found them," he announces as he comes in without knocking and walks right upstairs to her bedroom. "Let's see how they compare."

"Spread them on the floor next to the others," Randy says.

"No, I'll tell you what," Dave answers, "you go in the other room while I mix them up. Then you can pick whichever you like best without being swayed by the price. The new stuff'll cost you sixteen cents a yard more, but that is wholesale. You shouldn't let it be a factor. I mean, buy what your gut tells you is right, not what your checkbook says."

"Good idea." Randy steps into Bob's room. She wonders if Dave is faithful to Judy. Probably not, she thinks. Judy shows good instincts for color and fabric but not for men; she wouldn't know how to keep a guy like Dave under control.

"Okay, you can come back now," Dave calls.

Randy returns and studies the four samples which Dave has placed at the foot of the bed so that the spread just touches them. "Well, I guess I prefer the grays over the beiges, but I can't tell these two apart. The colors seem exactly the same."

"Then my suggestion is to go for the new stuff. It'll stay cleaner."

"That makes sense, but let's see if Judy agrees, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, sweetheart. Listen, as long as I'm here, how about helping me check a few measurements?" He unclips a tape rule from his belt and holds out the end to

Randy. As she takes it, he gives her hand a little squeeze. “Just run that into the corner behind the bed, would you?” Randy imagines Dave plays this game with every decent-looking woman he meets, getting them alone in their bedrooms and having them twist and turn and bend and stretch so he can catch a few cheap peeks and decide whether or not they’re worth pursuing. Well, he can study my ass all he wants with his eyes, but that’s all he can use.

On the drive back to his shop, Dave says, “So I hear you’re quite a sailor. The big race is Saturday, right?”

“Yes it is, but how did you know?” Randy can’t imagine that Judy had discussed it with Dave. She had asked her a month ago and Judy immediately turned her down.

“Bob asked me to help out, didn’t he tell you? My boat’s gonna be at one of the turns. I’ll have a judge on board.”

“Won’t you be awfully bored? I thought you were the big macho fisherman.”

“How can I be bored watching women all day? There’s nothing I’d rather do.” With his left arm he touches Randy’s right knee and squeezes. “Besides, if I show some interest in what you do, maybe you’ll return the favor and come out in my boat some day. You and Bob, I mean.”

“I don’t think Bob cares much for fishing.”

“Then maybe just you and Judy and me.”

“Judy told me she doesn’t enjoy the water at all.”

“Then I guess it’ll just be you and me, sweetheart. Process of elimination. Destiny.” He squeezes her knee again and this time lets his hand rest on her thigh. Strangely, Randy does not seem to mind. It’s been a long time since a man has drooled so obviously over her. Growing up with three brothers and all their friends, she had always been more comfortable with males than females. By the time she was in high school, Raymond had been killed in Vietnam and Michael and Thomas were destroying themselves with heroin. “Make love, not war,” made sense to Randy.

In college she learned men were as foolish about sex as they were selfish. Her reputation as an “easy piece” kept her phone busy and ensured an escort for every demonstration, football game, or play she chose to attend and got her access to the computer lab on demand. But each man paid her price without complaint—a blouse or scarf she would point out in a shop window, an expensive dinner, a ride home for the weekend. Later she learned to exact services of greater value, such as a term paper, a favorable review of an acting performance, an A from an assistant professor whose literature course she never attended.

She thought a clever woman could have a great future in systems analysis, and she progressed through five jobs in eighteen years by trading exciting sex for useful knowledge. Since settling down with Bob, though, she has been too busy with the house and her club activities to work much.

When Randy met Bob on a consulting assignment, both sets of skills—computer applications and sex—were finely honed. Despite their age difference, they felt an

immediate mutual attraction. She saw instantly that he was bored with his life and a visit to his home showed her why. For forty-three years he had been married to a woman whose father's insurance business he first went to work in after college and eventually inherited.

Bob never had to make much effort; he was a war hero and the son Jack Donnelly always wanted; dutiful wife, riverfront mansion, and abundant lifestyle all came as part of the package.

Randy offered a set of proposals to modernize the agency's operations. When his wife and mother-in-law rejected them, Bob sided with Randy and, for the first time in his adult life, did something on his own. Bob in one way had reminded Randy of her own father, a man who inherited a prosperous neighborhood butcher shop from his father, but after the war business began falling off to the chain markets linking their way through the big cities of the northeast—Atlantic and Pacific Tea, American Stores, White Rose. By the time of Randy's birth he was meat manager in an ASCO a half hour bus ride away from the Prices' rented rowhouse, the kind that all look so alike it's a wonder Philadelphia children could ever find the right one after school.

Bob, however, started his own insurance agency, completely computerized following Randy's proposals, and in three years has made it the most cost-effective agency in Lenape County. Randy feels no guilt about taking Bob from Marie; on the contrary, she credits herself with freeing him from a stultifying life and enabling him to create a new one.

Without taking her eyes off the road, Randy gives Dave's hand a firm slap and he removes it from her thigh. "I wouldn't know what to do if I ever hooked a great big fish," she says.

#

On Friday night during the eleven o'clock news, Bob pours them each a large martini. "To get you to relax," he says, though she knows he sometimes uses alcohol to soften her judgment and improve his chances of getting into her bed. She lets his little ruse work because she wants to relax and get to sleep and not allow strategies and tactics to race through her mind all night. Unfortunately, however, Bob himself is softened by the alcohol, and when he quietly returns to his room she feels wide awake and stimulated. The humid August air is completely still. She knows a second drink will make her headachy and sluggish in the morning, and she wants to be in peak condition for the race. Instead, she lies in bed and finishes a novel she started the previous night.

Around two o'clock, still unable to sleep, she turns off the reading light and steps out on the balcony in the hope that the damp night air will chill her naked body and make her want to crawl back under the sheet for warmth. A sliver of a moon hangs over the bay like a sickle, but the night is otherwise dark. She looks out the pier to where the boats float in their slips and senses something is not right—a flash of light that seems unnatural. She decides to investigate.

Perspiring slightly in a white silk kimono and a pair of slippers, Randy slowly walks out on the pier. Randy's Price is as it should be, bow-in in the end slip. Across from it is Dave Driscoll's big sportfisherman, Matador de Tiburon, its empty fighting chair that could have been stolen from a dentist's office facing her. Suddenly she jumps as a voice from the flying bridge startles her. "My boat or yours, sweetheart?"

"That wasn't very nice," Randy says.

"Don't knock it till you tried it," Dave answers, standing up. He is wearing only a bathing suit. "Come on up here. I want you to see something."

Randy looks back at her balcony and is surprised at how visible it is from the pier. A tingle of tension passes through her at the thought of being watched by Dave as she stood there a few minutes ago. She wants to know if he saw her but decides to act as though nothing out of the ordinary is occurring. She steps on board and climbs the ladder to the bridge. He has sat down again on the padded bench wide enough for three and waves her down next to him. "I guess I thought I was the only person in the world who couldn't sleep tonight," she says. "Something didn't look right to me on the boat and I just came out to check."

"What did you see?"

"I'm not sure, really. It looked like a flash of light." Dave holds up a cigarette. "Maybe you saw me light this."

"That was probably it."

"Nervous about the race?" Dave asks.

"I suppose so."

"Don't bother. Tomorrow's gonna be foggy and there won't be no wind. They'll have to cancel."

"Have you heard a weather report?" Randy asks, more alarmed than curious. This was the only date open for the women's race, and if they cancel she'll have to wait until next year.

"I can tell by the clouds and the smell of the air. Macho fishermen know as much about these things as gentlemen sailors and their ladies do."

Dave's tone is not scornful and Randy recalls how she teased him driving back to his shop the other day. "Do you mind if I tune in the weather channel?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Sure, Dave, I just want to see if NOAA is as smart as you are." Randy switches the VHF on and hears the night-shift man crackle out the marine forecast:

Dense fog later this morning with very high humidity. Visibility zero to one half mile. Winds, variable, at three knots or less. Seas calm. Possible showers and thunderstorms late afternoon.

"Doesn't sound too good." Dave reaches to shut off the radio, then lets his hand drop onto Randy's thigh. There is something electric about his touch, as though his wiry body were indeed connected to a source of power.

"Shit, all that worry for nothing. I hate to lose a night's sleep. It isn't fair. Somehow, though, I don't feel nervous anymore."

"How do you feel?"

"Disappointed, I guess. I was looking forward to this race. I think I wanted to prove to Bob that I'm a damned good sailor. He hasn't said it in so many words, but I get the feeling he doesn't think I'm ready."

"Randy, my guess is that you're good at everything you do. But you shouldn't waste your time worrying. Relax, like me."

"I tried reading before but that didn't seem to help."

"I know."

"What?" Randy turns to face him, pushing his hand off her thigh.

Dave points to her house. "I could see you reading in bed."

Randy tries to act indignant. "Do you often spy on your neighbors?"

"Hey, sweetheart, if you don't want to be seen, you ought to close your curtains."

"I was trying to get all the air I could, I didn't expect any peeping Toms."

"I couldn't sleep, either, so I came out here for a smoke and a drink." Dave lifts up a bottle of Cutty Sark and offers it to her. "Care for some?"

"No, thanks."

"Anyway, I was sitting here enjoying the night by myself when I see a light go on and this gorgeous piece of ass is stretched out on her bed holding a book. What a waste, I said to myself. I'd have been happy to come up and entertain you, but then I figured your old man might get upset. That's when I turned on my psychic powers."

Randy tries to sound amused by what he said, superior to his childish behavior. "Your what?"

"You mean you never heard of mental telepathy? I use it to get women to come to me all the time."

Randy folds her arms across her chest and repeats his words with derision: "Mental telepathy."

"Right. I just concentrated on you—which was damned easy seeing you there, the way you kept rolling from side to side—and called you with my will power." Dave flips his cigarette into the water. Its hiss breaks the silence as a bell sounds the end of a fight. "And you came."

Randy laughs, trying to sound unaffected and indifferent. "I certainly didn't come because you called me."

Dave says, "But you admitted you didn't know exactly what compelled you to come out here. After you turned off the light and stepped out on your balcony, I deliberately struck the match and held it by my face. You must have seen me."

"No, I told you, I just saw a flash of light that looked out of place."

"Well, Randy, the point is, I wanted you to come, I sent you a signal, and you're

here.” Dave puts his arm around Randy’s shoulders again and slips his hand beneath her kimono. “Hey, if you take this thing off you’ll feel cooler.”

“But you don’t want me to cool off, do you?”

#

Randy has never in her life felt shame for any action or thought. The consequences of everything she has done have been clearly and coldly calculated beforehand so that the actual doing was more like watching a play she’d already read or seeing a summer television repeat. Last night was different only in that she’d done her calculations in about ten seconds. So lying in her bed, unable to see the mast of Bob’s boat or the flying bridge of Dave’s because of the morning fog, Randy refuses to feel the guilt she knows other women feel after adultery. Bob had left her unsatisfied; it was his fault she couldn’t sleep.

When Dave touched her the second time, she had been feeling aroused enough to let the kimono drop to the deck. The idea of sex with a man she didn’t like, and on the flying bridge of his boat where her husband and a hundred neighbors could see them if it were daylight—it was too thrilling to resist. She quickly figured out two things about Dave: he was used to having his way with women, and he’d never before had a woman as good as Randy. She also knows she could train him to be a good lover if she ever wants one, but she doubts that she will. When he comes to install the new floors, she’ll just be sure Judy’s there, too.

At ten o’clock Bob knocks and enters with their morning coffee on a silver tray. He expresses sympathy for the disappointment Randy must be feeling.

“But I know you didn’t trust me with the boat, Bob, so I bet you’re secretly relieved.” When his face forms a denial, she tosses the pink satin sheet aside and says, “Let’s find something else to do now, shall we? Then you can help me shop for new cabinets this afternoon.”



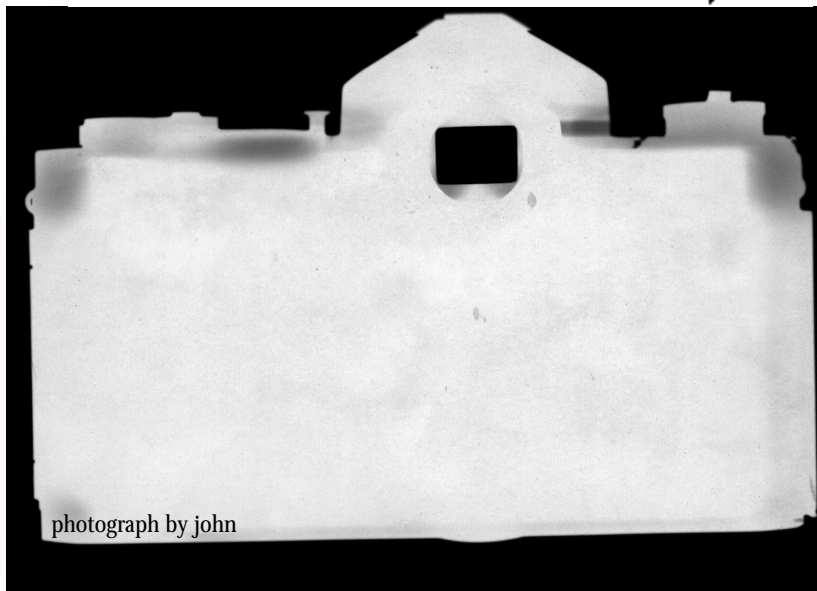


remembrances by lorelei



battling my disease by lorelei

poetry



King Freedom

Mark Graham

At the party, we all assembled in
celebration of the night where
Freedom reigned as king.
All of us who gathered in
the Kin's castle of carelessness
lost our old shackles to
his light rule.

Wild and unconcerned, we
chewed through our repressive
ropes of self-restraint with
teeth sharpened by
laughs and drinks.
Sober society quivered from
fear of our King's new army, but
he would make no
public statements of apology for
his soldier's "inappropriate" happiness.

In the morning, when we
awoke, we all felt like
fools and sluts.

Freedom as fun while it lasted.

Now back to self-tyranny.

The Business End of Two Bottles of Merlot (and Why I'm Better Off Sober)

Raymond M. Fremont Jr.

My childhood a sham
since then the emptiness
the rotten fruit of a father's dream

Awakened I am sick
and wish to be blind
Ah ha ha – the cliché!
and only such
because its beautiful truth is best ignored

Fuck off – I'm angry,
and wish to die,
because I'm tired of living life
as though there may be another to live later...

Later...
Later I'll be better.
Later I'll need more wine,
or something to pass the time

That's what I really want to say –
What everybody actually has is
simply something to pass the time -
life as a good book

I know it's been said before
and in much better verse
but it's ignored and I'm angry!

Fuck. I've got to make something of myself.
Fuck. I long to be out of my head.
Mad,
and therefore
excusably lethargic.

Blonde Ecstasy

Adam Perry

There's a place I want to live -
where a peaceful thunderbolt will sear my true heart
and give birth
to silent control.

Where fragments of frenzied feelings warm sober shadows and the future disappears in flames of burning acid.

"And to see everything else is to become an understanding molecule in evolution."

Be grateful your memories don't reach this far back.

"But what's the reason for living if you know what'll happen when you die?"

This place is a promise of passion and an absence of self-made scars -
not absolution, but an end of reality.

Self-consuming begins at the wrists, your soulmate's brains scattered all over the pavement -
and desire lives in constant construction, throwing stones at the window that is forever and dancing in a pool of blonde ecstasy.

Are you growling because you're annoyed or because you want me to stop trying to smooth things with my empty advice?

They've started a fire that can only be put out with an atom bomb.

Can you look at a beautiful evening sky and forget about what man has created?

This place is a pulse across the stars, a tool of the universe that expresses disdain for Eros' tranquil search - and I'm
waiting for another love-light to fall from the rays of the blinding sun.

I wish I could whisper your name to you,
over the trees in your backyard,
under the waves that are the ocean of your death,
and through the crackling fire we make love next to.

Let's start deep in the shallow waters
and forget ourselves and remember everything else.

This madness is deafening -
but

"we know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that there's more out there than anybody ever let on."

We know we must find the ashes and start all over with a shot to be heard round the world.

For that, she sweeps my very throat, dry and disgusting, and paints a picture of my loving arms.

My fingers are swollen tonight - things have been a little unbalanced.

Fantasy hangs from a perpetual tempered age when you stopped talking me.

the italicized they

Li sa Hemmi nger

Someone should tell these doctors,
The italicized “they” floating ground your current manuscript,
Herding snails into your head to squat
Bringing you anaesthetics and more!
 Fluffy, white pillows!

Someone should tell them you're both ok and very well where you are right now
where nothing polished is measured, where everything is bright and tall

where eyes were quick to catch entire auras
where mundane minutes
yanked attention forward like a sprained ankle, but painless
When you're young and short expectations never have to measure up

And each new hope was hoisted up by sets of trusty mental suspenders.
You are ok for a while where you are
On the edge of our yard we can still see you
It's your turn that we be adult and watch
You may play
Oooh! That pent-up goat of memory is got.

Somebody should tell these medics how, well, how were you?
Coming back from Europe recounting your losses in tented rooms?
OMIGOD I said aloud when I saw you
She's left her eyes over there
 is what I meant

But then with mine I noticed broken glass where replacement eyes once swam
From then we never saw each other the same but you learned to stumble Chicago again.

Someone should tell these doctors,
“Drop your mamsy pamsy cures, she's a poet,
Instead of prognoses and oxygen this girl needs word and no thesaurus either.
Your brain alone will bring you back to where you need to be
On wider, broader, scenic, picaresque roads!”

Who care right now if you don't know if you're a woman or a man
Tell the graduated monitors to upstage themselves with a poem in you hand.

May in's flow in bumpy big bite thoughts to grow like ivy in gray gardens
May you runaway train of thought enter thickets to come back and pick you up my friend

Let the poem explain for us all. She and you will try once more to toss the ball.

Some one should call and tell these doctors,
"There is a plan ..." and that you'll be back when you've gathered enough from the second coat going over when you've said goodbye to saying goodbye to friends.
You are absolutely will where you are right now
Drinking up what only skies and kids know matters.

Later somebuddy
But only some buddy, spelled exactly as it sounds
more mind, some body
should visit you to comment on your gown.



GOOD

Steve
Youmans

For the time
Being, I am
A good man
To her. Kind,
Beloved,
Good
With punctuality,
Pretty, caring
Truthful, to an extent
A dream come
True.
And I plan to stay
That way
For
As long as
She laughs
At my
Jokes...

Magi c Ai r

Dave Oakes

A bird floated overhead with widespread wings
Clouds hanging like cotton balls ready to drop
Air so fresh and pure it must be magic perfume
Every breath makes me want to live and never stop.

MATTHEW BEHIND THE COUNTER

Jennifer Rowan

He stands behind the counter,
His dirty hands in his pockets
Glaring at me from behind shadowed eyes.
He doesn't want to be here
Any more than I do.
Out of his parched lips is stated
A price I think I can handle.
And as I count out the change
I carry in my over-laden pockets
He rubs his nose with a swollen
Wrist before packing my donuts.
I thank him for his superior service
And turn away.
He must wonder if he'll ever see
Me again.
Even if he did, I probably
Wouldn't recognize him as he
Is yet another of the faceless
Youth who try so hard to get
Ahead, but fall back with every
Baby step, in this world of bitter
Tears and warm beer.

Morning Will Be Kind alexandria rand

Kiss me, stoned and drunk
flesh is the answer

Listen
to the wisdom, moaning
in my foreign bed
and the scent and
smell of new skin

An apex of blinding
then close your eyes
wondering vaguely why

You let me enter,
hoping



The Women In My Beer Commercials

Ben Ohmart

Have you ever thought of women?

You're right.

Yeah.

Have you ever thought that maybe we're the reasons that they've got to sling us around like coal sacks when we could all be contemplating the more serious the religious matters of our lives. We TELL them we love, that they are lovely. It's like the thumb. They say we're from monkeys. They say that millions of billions of millions of, you know, months ago we didn't have these thumbs. Now we develop. Now we can Use our thumbs to eat ham and bean soup and we can hold the ping pong thing good. So we're developed, over years. So we keep telling the women, baby, you're beautiful. They say hmm yeah maybe I should Stay this way. We ourselves make it so that they hand it down to their daughters who hand it down to theirs who hand it down to their fag sons who have the same regard for small waists and showing a little off. The women are Our trouble, because we think it's Their fault that they tease. We conditioned them, Derek.

I'm getting pissed.

It's like shampoo and conditioner. No, it's not like that.

I'm going to shit on this stool in a minute.

You're not going to solve the problems of the world, and how we gotta make it work between ourselves. People keep saying the sex drives don't add up I mean 18 and 35 what's that?

That's an odd number.

Shit.....

The way a woman develops faster, she gets there before you do, and then she has to Wait for you. It's going to make you a bitch. Then you get to 14 or something, you discover girls, they were Waiting on you, they told you so and sex. Sex doesn't mean anything to them. It's the way they control you.

I don't believe in that, man.

They give you a little bit, but it doesn't Really make them happy. I mean all those surveys about how they put personality and humor and they just wanna be held, that's way up there. Where's sex? It's down in the dirt like the doctor and the trash man all the jobs that women don't get in for or you never see them take.

Derek, trashwomen got nothing to do with it. I'm talking about how we make it work against us.

Then when you say you didn't touch her and she says it was rape. And it's the only reason they let them be women now, because then you got a good chance of frying the bastard. There is no capital punishment for rape. But look in the dictionary, man. There's more than one defintion for capital. It means great. Wow. Good.

Shit.....

Do you want a bottle?

I'm sorry, man.

Don't apologize to me, asshole.

Sometimes I have these feelings. I don't know.

TRAMPLING THE SAPLING (OR, SCULLY AND MULDER)

K. A. Corlett

Tramping
Over the decaying carcass of a tree
 sinking into the ground
 and termite infested
We were deciding who was Scully
 You told me if I was Mulder
That would not be a good thing
 But I don't know
 I kind of like Mulder
The eternal truth-seeking waif
 Buffeted by tragedy
So often looking like he could
 almost smile
Abusing himself in the most
 subtle and ingenious ways
 Self-starvation
 of a different sort
 A wasting core
Evident less in the body
 More in the soul
More in the twelve-year-old
 eyes

of a man who can't answer
his own question
Trying so hard to believe
And coming back empty
THE WHY OF IT
The unhelpful need to know

Wonder if this flayed stump of a thing
rotting into the earth
Could teach him anything
It's so alive with its own death
But you're a skeptic anyway
kicking at the pieces
and seeing them for what they are
so much dead wood
With you it's always time to stop dreaming

But I'm heading down
to the River
To fill my eyes with visions
and maybe
if I'm lucky
find a sapling

oh mother, by gabriel athens

perspiration	from the pores	heart beating	give in
muscles tense	of your body	faster and	but you must
bring it all	anxiety	faster	so you collapse
in to the ground	frustration	shake and	at the stress
resistance	you can't run away	shiver	and let
fight the senses	you can't escape	the trauma	the shovels
keep control	the pressure	too great	throw the dirt
as the energy	the conflict	the exhaustion	over your
slowly escapes	breath quickening	you can't	head

Unti tled

Heather Dyer

When it's never your turn
in a jump rope game,
you question.

When the rainwater seeps through
your jeans
in Hide'N'Seek,
you wonder.

When there's pink valentines
on all but one desk,
you suspect.

But when you walk down the street
and they fly to their houses
and slam the doors,

Then,
you know.

Unti tled

Jhonna Porter

The bottom piece of a wind chime
Swings and sways in the April wind
It twirls and whirls around
in circles

On its long thin chain
pausing to rest
And then taking flight again

It is green and rusty
And the chimes above are rocking slightly
Hardly moving compared to the
twisting diamond of colored tin below

They rock together
in a bunch
Each a different length
all rusted like the other
all surrounding a rusted ring in the center
Which supports them all

Go ing Bal d

Anthony Robottom

"God, you're going bald" he says.

"I have too many male hormones"

I attempt a witty reply.

But he's right. I had noticed it before.

Old before my time.

Nineteen, and I can say "Goodbye hair".

I run my hands through it.

And some of them curl in my fingers.

Detached from my head. A few less every day...

I look in the mirror and try to imagine me,
with it gone.

As the front catches up with the back,

I remember my Grandfather, and all the times

I found his hair loss funny.

Justice I guess.

I look in the mirror.

I shall never again see Robert De Niro in it,

or anyone with lots of hair.

I shall have to buy a hat, or three.

"You could get a toupe" he says.

And pretend for ever that its real.

Until my girl, in the throes of her
passion, grabs at my hair.

And off it comes in her hands.

"God, you're bald" she'll say.

Novi ce

gi ovanni ma li to

O make me apprentice
to a running deep
though I hear the Impala
is much faster. Impala.
Chevrolet Impala.

That was my father's first
brand new car. It was red.

But, that's all I remember.

up, under

matt robi nson

under the volcano we all live.
don't we, live
under

suns that rise and set.

mountains yet
to be- tectonic indigestions;

geo-physical suggestions of what we
can amount to.

no wonder we drink; are drunk, of our-
selves.

where is our good counsel?

parched throats erupt:
an effort- it seems- to drink of what
burns within.

drink.

up.

drink.

I Look At The
Letters Again

courtney steel e

"This isn't supposed to happen,"

I said under my breath

as I threw the letters aside.

Thoughts quickly rushed through my mind

as quickly as the nights passed

in the Arizona heat.

Why do I even save these letters?

Why do I keep reading them over and over again?

Why do I hold them to my mouth,

hoping that you may slip out between the words,

touch my face, kiss my lips

I picked up the letters again

I remember when you asked me
about my political and religious beliefs

You asked me about my past

and my dreams for the future

It seemed as if you wanted to know

every little detail about me,

so that you could only love me more

I was happy to tell you

I look at the letters again

I hold them once more to my lips -

but this time,

not in the hope that you may touch me,

but in the hope that I may be able to touch you

I kiss the letters

I can't put them down.

perversi on

by aeon

Have you ever just wanted to
fuck somebody,
you were so attracted to them
that you wanted to tear
all their clothes off,
and I do mean tear,
I'm talking I want to see
the rip in the fabric,
down through the fiber,
you just thought you wanted
them naked on top of you,
ripping through you,
pulling you to shreds,
and you liking every minute of it?

But then you think about it
for a minute, this person
sitting across the table from you
in the small cafe, and they've got this
harsh light right above them
making strange shadows
on their face. You talk to
this person, you act like
someone who's proper, who
read all the fucking etiquette books,
and you talk, and you
smile, and you nod, and all the
time you're thinking these really
perverse thoughts. But
there's something in the back
of your head, no matter
how horny you get,
a small part of you that says
"oh, fuck it."

I just want to know if
anyone else has had that feeling.
Someone else. Anyone else.

rape

john sweet

and fathers rape
their daughters
in this kinder
gentler nation

and your god is the god of shit for allowing it to happen

and dogs eat
the bones of nuns
and it still
doesn't even
the score

and if my words
are enough to
make you hate me
than at least
i've accomplished
something

Resurrecti on

Robert Michael
O' Hearn

For once, I would like
to raise myself upright
like another Lazarus &
walk away from living legends,
like Christ, who stone cold
dead & already filed away
amongst genteel Popes &
Generals of historical genre,
who walk amongst & by us
as dead do readily enough...

finally got a real job ray heinrich

Living a bit west of washington d.c.
has nothing to do with my finally
having gotten a real job though i
guess it must have helped but it
probably has more to do with sheer
luck, my dog, and just the right
combination of prescription drugs
but whatever the reasons here i am
getting up every morning, grooming
myself, dressing appropriately,
and heading to a safe little cubical
where the poor people around me
have to listen to conversations
with my computer, my file cabinet,
and the angry blue wastebasket which
really isn't mine (well, none of it is
mine but the others weren't stolen
late at night from another floor
of the building except for a few
small parts inside my computer which
i'll never admit to so it's no use
telling anybody) so now i have a
real job and earn money and am a
proper member of society doing my part
to help somebody who's already rich
get richer which is about as moral as
you can get in america these days and
i don't seem to have much time to do
anything else anymore but i'm told this
feeling will pass and that i'm a real
wimp cause most people could do this
and have kids and even find time to
get abducted by starships while still
raising their kids and holding down
three jobs and since i'm not doing
anywhere near this i'm a real wimp and
the neighbor who's telling me this has
two cars in his yard he's been working
on for years while i only have one.

dysfunctional by aeon

I was watching Oprah today and a woman said she came from a dysfunctional family, that she was beaten when she was little, that her mother wouldn't tell her who her father was. And I heard another woman on a talk show say that there are so many dysfunctional families that it seems to be becoming the norm - that dysfunctional is functional.

And then I see a commercial on t.v. from the Church of Latter-Day Saints that tells your family to communicate, showing a man teaching his son to ride a bicycle and I leave the room.

And then I watch a movie with a scene where the father hugs the daughter and tells her he loves her and I cry.

I was working in another room while my parents were watching t.v., they must have heard that said one in five kids are abused. It could be any kid.

Well, I heard my mother say to my father, gee, that would mean that one of the kids was abused. And then she said, I didn't abuse any of them, did you? And father said, no.

I think that's when he proceeded to say that that figure is probably for lower class families, and not families like ours.

And I just stopped my work for a moment. A moment of peace. A memorial, you could say.

He doesn't think I know. But I do. How about sexual abuse? Yes, I know what you did to your daughter. How about emotional abuse? Yeah, I'd call what you've done to me abuse. You still have to power to make me cry at the drop of a hat. There is a lot I'm sure I don't know, but according to my figures, we're above average.

Thought

J. Cromwell

Finkes

What is a thought of yours and mine,
described at best as anything.
Who can say what it is
or is not?

Is time a line or do we swim through it
and brace ourselves for each oncoming
wave?

Passed by, is it only - after us?
As it was - before us?

The lines sometimes do not meet
and still it looks like truth.
In dreams abstract is often clear,
awake, all logic disappears.

Does thought discover reality?
Or is it the other way?
Try to keep your mind from thought.
Do not think it.
Just try.

Jus' Say

No

K J Hale

The president was asked by a reporter one day,
in his lifetime had he ever smoked dope?
You'd think he'd surely say "yes" if he had
and if he hadn't he'd jus' say "no."
After all the sixties were a long time ago
and it's not like he's goin' to jail.
You know I don't understand the answer he gave,
what's up with, "but I didn't inhale.

16 Shades of Gray

L. B. Sedlacek

survive & thrive

Talentless life forms
dangling,
hanging,
upon a precipice
as if bound for glory.
Failing,
flailing,
screaming for help
are the only events transpiring
to make yours an interesting story.
There's no need
for bullhorns,
or microphones
as your soft words echo
off the sheer walls of the quarry.
Your rope chaffing,
your grip slipping,
hooks snapping,
belts breaking,
your mid-life crisis has just become gory.

If I were Queen

Diane Kruse

In the back of class
the sneer emits snide remarks
that make the girls giggle.
All it strives for
are the necessary papers.
I sentence him
to a lifetime
of fast food jobs
with no air conditioning.

MAMMA' S CINNAMON STRIPS

David E. Cowen

scraps of dough;
the unused cut of the rim of a pie;
mamma would reroll them in her hardened hands,
in the slight moment between the boiling of a pan
and the ringing of a timed bell.
she would flatten the new ball,
cut long thin ribbons,
lace them with butter, sugar and cinnamon,
lay them on a bent, blackened cookie sheet,
and let them rise in the heat of the oven.

katie and I would pace between the shuttling
of steaming niblets, cracked plates, spotted glasses,
a thick-coated frying pan sizzling with smells,
and watch the flavored dough come to life;
the butter bubbling on the crust.

mamma would shoo us away
from the blast of hot air
as the door creaked open.
she'd reach in with her stained washcloth,
lifting from the edge,
and set the sheet on a small pile of crumpled cloths,
waving off our naive fingers from the burning metal.

after the required time,
after tending to a demanding roast,
stirring a grumpy pot,
and consoling a whining kettle,
she would hand each of us two calico strips
on a white napkin;
her hands and brow soaked from the steam

we always ate too quickly;
unaware of the meaning of the ticking
of mamma's kitchen timer.

Bloodwork

amy key

They come with needles to take of my life,
To pierce my pristine white flesh
And make their lofty diagnoses.
The hungry metallic mosquito pries, probes, searches
In vain
For my life force-
The secret of my tortured existence
Is unbeknownst to them
And will remain so.
My veins refuse to open.

all men have secrets shannon peppers

all men have secrets and here is mine.
Strength is my weakness
and now my shoulders don't stay in place.
You ask me to open my eyes
but they are. At least I think they are.
Why don't you take me in your arms?
Why don't you seduce me?
Tear me in half. Rip me apart.
Just don't cast me aside.
I don't want to be strong. Be strong
for me, so that I can adjust my chin
and not have to worry about
whether or not my eyes are open.

Castle of Sand

Tom Kretz

As droll radio quiz games ramble
from animal to vegetable to mineral
centering on who does what to it
women contestants divide first class,
leave the oak cluster and the iron cross
around slicked-down manes of supermen
imperceptive enough to be called killers
expected to relieve themselves on stars;
ah, another race and another Reich,
reverse of which buggers the savanna.

The opposite of a killer obvious
but the lioness eats and drinks well
because she does not tell lazy Leo
everything she knows, often hunting
while he sleeps in shag, birthing in
drag while the forcer of liquids slinks
away to mark outer limits of phantom
kingdom from vegetable to mineral
in hopes of conquering another cat,
another country in which to sprawl.

Heather White

The tiny pink burn forming on his shoulders,
Tiny grains of sand covering his wave splashed feet,
Sitting on a towel in the sand.

His anticipation grows each time the tide comes near,
He places the last details carefully in their place,
Patting down the sides to make it strong.

A huge splash crashes upon the beach,
The water slowly slides down into the tiny moat,
His tiny seashell lifts off the sand like a ship.

His arms still blanketed with sand,
And his face exhausted with the afternoons-hard work,
His complete creation stands untouched for a moment.

Another wave crashes on the shore,
The castle sinks into a the sudden flood of water,
The tiny ship thrown away by the crash.

The sand and rocks drift away with the tide,
All that's left is a pool of water,
And a single untouched moment.

Life is a Novel

Melissa Dawson

As you flip through the pages of life,
You uncover many mysteries.
You uncover many secrets,
Some may bring you sadness,
Some, much happiness and excitement.

As you read the chapters of life,
You may suddenly feel the words.
They may remind you of your past,
Or introduce you to your future.

As you look at the cover of life,
You see many images.
Like looking through a crystal ball,
You see life as it is,
Not what you want it to be.
Life is a Novel.

Brodie

Karl Kowski

Chris insists we call him Brodie
he calls us dude
every one of us
dude

he speaks with a Southern California
surk bum accent
even though he's never been
west of Iowa
and the closest he's ever come
to "hanging ten"
is glapping around on a boogie board
at the local water park

and if that's not reason enough
to hate his fucking guts
his girlfriend is the exceedingly
beautiful young woman by the
name of Christina who is
personable, successful, and
possesses a tanned hard body
specifically sculpted for
bikini wear

yet she's totally oblivious
to his rampant stupidity
she even calls him Brodie
and her loyalty is as
unwavering as his accent

I hope they both contract
cancer and their deaths
are drawn-out and painful

dude

the christian (i, ii, iii).

Aaron Smith

i.

I once found a man whom I thought in need,
So I clothed him in my good charity.
I strumped around town to show what I've done
With a big grin, I went "Look everyone!"
See how "Christian" I am and see I am good.
I gave him a box shelter and a can of dog food.

ii.

I once saw a man sunk in his chair and crying
He informed me his son was dying.
O' I felt so bad for him, but I had to be terse.
So I threw a little Christ his way and gave him a verse.
I knew my "feeling bad" for him would elevate his pain.
I told him to go pray and I felt my gain.

iii.

There was a man hanging from a cross.
I saw his face, he was so tortured and dross,
so to cheer him up, I told him a verse,
said, "Jesus loves you!" and skipped to church.

FRAGILE FLOWERS

Shoshana Kurzweil

On the kelly carpet,
fragile flowers lift their heads,
catching summer warmth.

Flora Non Grata

Bruce W. Nieldt

I am the czar of my garden
awakened from long winter sleep.
I dictate what will grow here,
how large, how high -

I nurture the elite,
what I have hand-picked and planted,
bulbs, seeds, bushes.

I suffer no encroachers.
I am judge, jury,
executioner.

These common invaders
try to sway me with flowers,
purple or yellow, as a rule -

but all appeals are denied.
They come up by the root
chaffed to the side, into the black
plastic bag of oblivion.

I have purged them from my kingdom,
these prolific undesirables,
but they always return,
in time and force,
proletariat that they are.

Between Jupiter and the moon

Bruce Tomczak

I walk the frozen river after sunset.
The three-quarter moon is midway in the sky.
It is on a course behind Jupiter, a bright yellow light, and
Saturn,
with Orion, climbing behind.
Orion's dagger is barely visible, blurred in the clouds and distance.
I know beyond my eyes, there in the vicinity of the Trapezium,
swirls a pink clouded nebula where stars are born.
Can we feel the birth of a star in our blood?
Does it cast a new shadow in these woods?
I walk in a degree of shadows and shallow light
where only the faintest or the darkest colors exist.
This night world appears as a negative.
A shadow can be a shadow, or a depression, or a protrusion.
I step carefully through the shadows, unsure of their existence.
Crystals scattered in the matrix of the snow reflect the moonlight,
and maybe starlight.
These same crystals that this morning split the sunlight into colors.
I look high overhead.
The moon is held in a series of haloes.
The closest one is thick and milky and round.
Then, enclosing it are concentric colors, a speculum of subtle nacre.
Clouds drift, altering the colors and the haloes.
One of white marble embraces it, momentarily, with traces of colors.
I move in and out of the shadows, up the hill with difficult breaths.
The tops of the firs are silhouettes casting shadows.
The river ice cracks on my weight, or its movement,
hidden but known by the hunched moon.

Gump for President

John Hul se

The presidential candidate said in his speech
to corporate America, "To all you CEO's out there
all you have to do is break down and give
your people a raise. Why do you think of your
employees in terms of cost instead of assets
to be developed. They need the money
more than you do. If it means that you have
to build a smaller mansion, take fewer tax-free
vacations. God knows they only get two weeks
a year, if they're lucky. And God help help them
if they get sick. Sell the third Mercedes before
you cut their medical benefits. Your employees
are all driving to work in used cars that have
over 120,000 miles on them. What are you
thinking of? What makes you treat people so
horribly? That's all I have to say about that."

high roller
sydney anderson

I long to see you sitting again
cigarette in hand
walkman on the table

I want to be able to walk up behind you
rest my hands on your shoulders
lean my head next to your face

I long to have my cheek near yours
not touching
but so close
that I could still feel your warmth
your desire

our skin wouldn't touch
but I would still feel the rush
from your presence

Finished
Christopher
Eck

We are never, even when we write "The End"
after costumed melodrama, go to the coat check
all that
we still have something more because
damn

I look good on paper
and you look good on sky (or grass)
so what's the problem with yin and yang
on a Saturday evening with the popcorn popped?

Like cakewalk, do I enjoy the ride
more or having ridden, having braved the bridges
and rubbery chasms, climbed and filled balloons,
not finished, but certainly over like

A single light from a firefly
fades into the atmosphere like
smoke?

Viewing
Scenic
California
Eric Dean

I have traveled
All over California.
I started in Los Angeles
Where I popped
Out of a surprised woman
Who gave me
A wonderful man.
I stayed in Los Angeles
During the holocaust
Of my dreams. I
Journeyed to Bakersfield
Where I met the Incubus.
We had a 3 year relationship
In which I learned to fuck.
I journeyed to San Luis Obispo
And saw angels and trumpets
Declaring somebody who was
Visiting that day. I went up
To Monterey and found God; she was
Hiding under a rock, but
As I reached for her, she
Leaped out with the tide.
My journey has ended up here
In San Francisco, where I
Have learned that everybody
Loves a fag. Someday I wish
To go home, but I only have
Money for a one way trip.

VIEW
FROM A
CHURCH
WINDOW
Roger Taber

There's a thrill of blossom
on the old tree,
a greeny-white chirrup of noise
bouncing gently, like
a ball in child
hands

Every nuance of creation
about the old tree,
tuned to perfection; you and me
shaking our heads at confetti
coming down, like
acid rain

A hymn to life,
such beauty!
Tiny wafers of noise
tongued lightly
at the kissing gate
over there

Here, a dim view
of immortality
as we pass our seasons by
grown deaf
to each
leaf

The Anti christ of Vegetables

PJ Beemer

I am the antichrist of vegetables
me, my friends, and I
We are what isn't good for you-
feelings and dreams to poison
your body,
ideas and thoughts to poison
your soul.
The brussel sprouts of an America
where bean sprouts and tofu
will make you whole.
Vegetables, mindless,
their purpose in life to be
picked from the garden
peeled, cooked and eaten.
Vegetables, chemically altered
to look and to think and to feel
as the rest of them do.
Not for us the fashion shows or
catalogue shopping.
We toy with ideas like anarchy,
supporting revolution.
We have no catechism, no trinity.
Sure, there might be a god
But what or who is he?
Yet at least we aren't deluded,
cooked like other vegetables,
leached of color and of strength,
luckily we were uprooted
before we could be gathered up,
processed and molded, soon to be food.
We weren't fed on pesticides,
our minds unclouded by chemicals
soaked up from a superficial society.
We are the antichrists of vegetables,
plucked apart from the rest of the bed.
We survive together, staying alive,
refusing to be eaten with the rest of
the salad.

EVEN MY

Dan Luki v

Even my six-year-old
Sits in tall grass
And paints her toenails.

poem for
children
marcus rome

Rock-a-bye baby
on the tree top
when the wind blows
the cradle will rock

and down comes baby and cradle and rock

When the wind blows the cradle will rock
like the wheat in the fields
and the clouds on the rock

When the wind blows
through the lines on your face
the cradle will rock
on the tree top
where you pray for lightning thinder and
rain
to crash you down just like a rock
that goes thump in the night in the mud
and the rain

Once upon a time a long time ago
there was a cradle in the night
there was a rock and there was you
in the rain and the ccradle and the night

Premonition

Pete Cholewinski

No more wine or bread
Headlines of insanity
Marguerite plays the violin~

a somber vibrato
falling
from our balcony
with autumn leaves
to the crowded boulevard
unheeded

For a moment
the boulevard
the town itself
this sunset and empty wine glass
the violin and newspaper
our crisp white tablecloth
pulse
with a nausea
of some madman's creation.

sponge
Yosh

the wake and wander of present sheets
will hope and fun for one small night
and break upon the new touch floor
a tingle, to and fray.

lay.down.

feel my splash
and soak...

If I Ever
See Another
Girl

Jamel Pool e

If I ever see another girl,
Pushing a stroller all alone,
A girl with no help in the world,
And the father of her child is totally gone.

If I ever see another girl asking if she can borrow a dime,
I think I'm going to lose my mind,
I'm mad, where's dad? he should have had,
The sense to know the child would grow and be so sad.

If I ever see another girl with a tear-streaked face,
Struggling to live from place to place,
With no job, no love, no one, no home,
And the father of her child is totally gone.

If I ever see another girl,
Trying her best to mask the pain,
Catching a bus and praying to beat the rain,
Won't be too soon if I never see another girl.

If I ever see another girl, I will lose control,
It really hurts my soul, 'cause I already know,
That the girl I see is in misery,
Won't be too soon if I never see another girl.

Cheating Death

Annie Monfort

I feel as though I am cheating death,
And with every day I go on living,
Someone is dying
So I can save my soul for another day,
Another hour,
Another minute.
And I don't know why this happens,
Just that the guilt of my salvation
Hangs on their death
Like drool from a beast's tongue.
The bitter drool pumps through my veins
And pounds in my brain, which wonders
Why not me?
Why do I deserve to go on while others stop?
Stop.
It's not their choice, and I can't stop it.
I can only feel the guilt
Because my salvation is only saved in life,
And I want to cheat death.

Notes from a Volcano

Ellen Wernecke

We all need
an escape more temperate than
this gravel-shirred lover,
the mother cliff with cracks
Wide-whirring open. A cloud
of Freudian guilt is
smacked straight-up on the world,
balanced
between a rock and a hard breast
of the primordial woman
with fire in her throat.

LOVE POEM

Sterling Jackson

One narrow-shouldered, would-be satyr
Needs your love tonight.
No longer does he leap among the reeds.
His pipes ake now more pains to carve;
His plaintive voice is seldom heard at all.

Young vines impede his progress,
Rushes lash.
Tumescant roots upset his unsure steps
As Spring strides boldly by.

And the pool wherein he used to gaze to find
Among the floating flowers his youthful face
Reflects a wizened shadow, seeking love,
Or grace,

Or a lyric voice to beckon, Lethe-light
To touch him home again.

i n f a n t s

d a n i e l g r e e n

Infant Michael needs no training to show
joy in facial change, gurgles for pleasure,
complains when hungry, frets when overfull
fumes to help him vent some gas.

He simulates the mast of comedy, smiles
with toothless glee, screams with down-
drawn lips to display annoyance, hollers
if no one's near to lift him from his crib.

Requires silence when he lies asleep,
wakes colicky to be walked at three A.M.
His high chair is a throne from which he rules,
rejects all blandishments from slaves

Seizes anything in reach to suck of chew
or spit into a nearby face.
No wonder grateful parents celebrate
when Michael reaches two.

u n t i t l e d

m i c h a e l

your beauty is like a field of wild flowers .
at first light when only gods eyes can see the
beauty he has created. and as he looks upoun your face
he smiles at his most beautifull creation .

JOSHUA,

THE

BRI GHT

K I D

Godfrey Green

Little Joshua, striving steadily
through words and numbers,
page after page, he doggedly proceeds;
sometimes hoarsely calling words
in his corner with furrowed brow.
He'll look at you with his cat eyes
and teasing smile—grinning like a monkey.
You come to help him, but can merely say
lean on my arm, hear a voice,
feel a hand of support when the
words and numbers overflow your brain.
The quick tears spurt, the stamping foot,
the pencil hurled. Over quickly.
The work, the smile again.
A new word, a new idea he snatches at.
Child to whom I gave my message;
I gave my cool balms, my pulsing palm;
I fashioned a frame to build upon,
a scaffolding for you to mount.
Good-bye, smart, bright-eyed kid, good luck.
May you never stop climbing.

Lost Innocence

Melissa Denman

Climbing up in my tree house,
trying to catch a butterfly that couldn't seem to stand still.
Going up further, (but not far enough).
Innocent eyes reaching to grab the butterfly that flew away earlier.
Not noticing until it was too late, that something was catching me instead, and was
pulling me down with it's weight.

A sweaty hand clamped over my mouth,
and another hand up my shirt.
A man's voice whispering in my ear, " Don't worry it's not going to hurt".
I looked up and saw the butterfly spread it's wings.
The man climbed on top of me and told me it was good to try new things.

Heart was beating faster, but not fast enough.
I couldn't think of anything, but wondered what was going on.
Then something bit me, so I tried to get free.
But the man grabbed me and slapped me to my knees.
He kept injecting his poison inbetween my legs.
He told me to be quiet or I would die.
I tried looking up and when I did, I thought I saw the butterfly cry.
The butterfly was free,
and I wanted to fly away.
Man got off of me and told me if I told anyone, he'd come back the next day.

My cocoon was opened up,
and I was still asleep in my shell.
Man took away my innocence,
and left me trapped in this hell.

fader.	older	
bryan	knowing i know nothing	tired of running
scott	not knowing	around bare cheeked
coward	me...	
superficial dreams	dreaming superficially	no overnight fix
i am here	the sun sets and the years first	fame
though	cool wind	never a
realizing this,	blows. breath i breath	cure
the music fades	i dig deep	at
and i am ten years	uncover that lie	
	that is me	best.

Royal ty

Li Mi n Hua

Marie Laveau, voodoo queen,
bless us with your sharp wit.
An hundred red X's in tribute
we have scrawled
on your crumbling stone.

Marie Laveau.
embrace Manman Brigitte
around her slender waist
and roll your eyes.

Hear us, Marie Laveau.
Touch us this hot night
lest our fever burn us cold.
Rest not. Rest not, oh queen.
Your subjects kneel
in expectation.

" The Thi ef"

Benj ami n McCabe

She strolls the savage winter dawn;
Her aged hair falls in hand-made curls,
Withered lips lay pursed and icy,
About her neck a string of pearls.

Her hands are creased as time worn stone;
They tell a tale of one life had;
And in the tiny steps she takes
There lies something that makes me sad.

Memphi s Poem

Chad
Weatherford

Her kitchen has a smell

It smells like bombs
bursting in air

It smells like rock 'n roll

It smells like a wound
that doesn't heal

He often daydreams

He dreams of ninety-degree angles
and genetic equations

He fantasizes
about downsizing
without seeming uppity

She often refers
to calculators
as "computers"

Her feet become one
with the ground
when she walks

They both believe
that God had only one purpose
in mind
for Adam's erection

They both have brown eyes

But her eyes are,
perhaps,
a little browner.

Reality

Tiffany H.

Pleading screams penetrate the stagnate air. No. Arms forcefully grab, shaking violently, throwing it to the ground like a sack of potatoes. No. Idle threats are now spoken creating a fearful atmosphere. No. clenched fists are drawn ready to rectify an already tense situation. No. You get what you deserve, tease. no. I know that you want me, everyone me. No. Pain is becoming increasingly present, as are the mixture of warm tears and blood. No. Frozen with paralysis there is a zone of consciousness and unconsciousness that is being visited. No. Crack, thud, blackness. As the haze clears it enters a new reality. is life the same here? No. Does life here mean isolation from those living in parallel realities? no. How will it ever get back to its old reality? Time.

untitled

Daryl Ayaz Nielsen

[parole officer
squinting at my paperwork
so nearsighted

asking for an autographed
copy of my book]

between jury
and defense attorney
a year of my life

Gothic poet
thru his earlobe
a black pen

the ones watching
orangeyellowpurple sunset
most colorful of all

the bestest
of all desserts
laughter

Vets

Walter

Kuchinsky

Mr. B lives in here,
Building Six. He's pretty fat—
always on a diet—
walks kind of funny, too—
a World War Two wound.
He'll never see eighty again,
but he doesn't show it.

When he sees Mr. C—
Mr. C lives in here
too—

Mr. B grins at him
and asks,
“You think I LIKE diet drinks?”
then he winks at Mr. C.

xanax

jeana bonacci

tiny x
x-ed out my eyes
led me to away to some
sleepy time asylum
scribble out those anxiety slayers
doctor
forget addiction
and let me creep off into a
lazy eyed, quiet
pacifist ideal

SECLUSION

Jennifer Miller

To touch you in seclusion
 When no body could know
 Sneaking a lustful stare
 Dreaming in secret
 Wanting to being alone with you
 Is my personal sin?
 You are the water
 That can put out this fire within me
 But only in seclusion

SPARK

Joshua Meadows

She burns down his house as the clock strikes midnight, with him still tied to the bed. "It was an accident," she'll say, when the cops arrest her for arson. "And rape!" he adds from the upstairs room, narrowing his eyes in concentration. He sighs, and lays the cards down on the mattress. "Hit me." She lovingly obliges, slapping his face off and onto the bed, then handing him an ace. "I never much liked that chin anyway," he declares matter of factly. "Snake eyes," she sneers, throwing the poker chips out the window.

Now she runs away, her feet slapping the concrete. She looks down to her palms; red-handed, but by god, they won't catch her. "He's stolen your seed, girl," the Buddhist priest calls from the median, pointing to her naked stomach. She stops. The stars crash into each other as they try to watch. Her face is a constellation of smoke. She kneels down in the road, pulls the lighter from under her tongue, and runs her thumb down the igniter. The universe explodes.

PAPER CUP POKER

J. Force

In a crowded little waiting room,
 (with ten chairs lined up against the wall
 and every other chair being occupied
 because there are those who choose to stand
 instead of sit next to someone,)
 I find myself face to face with the
 Fresh Brewed Coffee machine.

Several choices confront me.

Black or white
 with or without artificial sweetener
 (not that this helps the taste any.)
 cream or sugar
 stronger or weaker
 or just plain hot water,
 (what I do with this
 I haven't figured out.)
 all for just fifty cents

Plus I get a poker hand
 printed on the side of the paper cup
 and one secret card on the bottom,
 (in case I'd like to trade a card in
 to make my hand better.)
 I wonder if anyone else
 would buy a cup of coffee if I did
 just to see if they could beat my hand

Since I can't make up my mind,
 (on whether or not to play poker by myself.)
 I just sit and stare at the machine
 and wish they would hurry up
 and fix my car
 before someone else buys a cup
 and I feel obligated to play.

Another Shipment

Jon Mathewson

Just more strangers
to block streets like cattle,
willfully oblivious of history,
part of a panorama propelled
past these streets and structures
accept us, watch us.

Listen closely
and feel vibrations
turbulent, unending energy.
Dive into frozen streams,
sled down lush hills.
Crickets, cicadas sing.

Saying' Goodbye!

Lizzie Rock

When I met you from the start. I never dreamed you'd break my heart.
I thought we'd always be together. I thought that we would last forever, but
because of you last night I cried. Because of you last night I died. No
matter what you say or do. I will never stop loving you. And although
your feelings faded away. I'd have given anything to make you stay. You
told me that you needed time. Meaning never again you will be mine. But
though some crying and lots of pain. I've accepted things can't be the
same. I don't know if we can still be friends. But i'm glad we made
amends. I'll never regret falling in love with you. I love what you say and all
you do. Time will heal this broken heart of mine. And although it hurts now
loving you was divine. For over three months you were my guy. But now it's
time to say GOODBYE!!

nature's cunning

Jason Alan Dilts

leaves to the wind, soft to the earth
turned and waiting, turned and taking
mouth of sleep, gaping empty
return to dreaming, turned from here

they know of life, they think of death
lie awake, they fear the sleep
children shiver, think of God
in the winter, the green has gone

right from wrong, life from death
all in all, just once i've gone
leaves on wind, gather drifting
how cruel the trees: return to green

branches straining, windows tapping
in the night, the children wake
long and gray, arms of willows
in the cold, with dropping snow

love and bread, always wanting
clay to clay, never more
anguish hunting, sleep is stalking
but nature's cunning, return to green

Eve's Contemplations on Ordering from the Menu at the Paradise Buffet

Jennifer Matthews

It was the life "before shame," but
not before annoyance. Let's just say
Adam had his quirks.

Kept reminding me that
he was made in God's image
and I was just taken
from Man's rib.

I sometimes wonder
(in my less pious hours) if
that pecking order
was the reason I was the one
picking the fruit.

So what would you do

if you were the "help mate"
to some guy who hands down
messages from God and

the only other thing that talks to you
is this walking snake that swears
you won't die
from eating apples,
but,
will instead receive
the wisdom of the Gods.

You eat

and offer some to Adam
(hearing no protests)
but when the Big Guy comes around
is the first to point his finger!

Listen,

even worse
than the pain of childbirth and
sorrows multiplied for my "faux pas"

is knowledge.

Knowing that God said I'd die,
but I didn't.
Knowing that the Serpent said I'd be wiser
and I Am.

Somebody took my
fifty cent rub on
Face cream
That I use to cover
The two-story scar
on my forehead.
Story one:
I fell and hit
My head
On the corner of the
Coffee table running
Through the house
Running down the
Hall chasing a
Ball
Turned the corner and fell
Right on my head.
Story two:
Late at night
After dark
Drooling sleep
Cock suddenly
In my face
Shoving back my
Throat
And all the screams
Held within.
Got turned over
On my belly
Fucked up the ass
Head banging on
The princess headboard.
Now I know why
I ended up here
Why I ended up
Queer
Weird to this society
And flailing deep
In the ocean
Drowning over
A man
A woman
A human
Being
To take this fear
Away.

untitled

Sonya
Easterday

chimes

Javier Mora

Chimes that winds invigorate,
Clang with the brass of fellowship
Mingle all for music sake,
Although gales may change the tonal peels.

Yet ring as one, come gust or breeze,
A bond that shaped by the welder's hand,
Crafts a single melody
From metals that transcend us all.

ENDS

(after an
Aztec myth)
Michael H.
Brownstein

They gave me five wives for a year
and asked me to walk to the stone knife.
I did this willingly, not like the tales of history,
but because I had to.
I was god,
the closest one to the sun,
the owner of the heart that grows larger.
Without me the sun will stop in the sky.
I alone walk the steps.
I alone meet the knife.
I alone give my heart to the sun.

WINDOWS OF THE SOUL

Jessica
Baxter

Azure Orbs
heavy with old grief
reminiscent of another pale soul
revealing salted wounds.

For me, that old feeling
mixed with forboding.
I understand the futility
of that pain
but cataracts blind the translucent blue
spooked because they cannot see
my good intentions.

I want to swim
in enticing oceans
though clearly,
sharks patrol those waters.

THE DUCHESS

Roberta A.
McQueen

She's holding court again
at the senior citizen's club
dressed in the latest
fashion finery such as
rich embroidered blouses
she comes complete
with matching beret

She keeps her audience amused
telling stories of her life
yet her children never visit
seems no one really cares
her legs hurt
and she's so lonely
what's to become of her?

She puts on her makeup
and a big smile
she's not complaining, mind
you
no, the Duchess has it all
doesn't she?

Dictation

Kelley
Jean
White MD

You tell me
I should listen carefully,
that,
when you speak
you have chosen
the words
with great care;
I should
respond
to what
you

say.

I am
responding to

your fingers drummin,
your mouth twitching,
your back,
your shoulders,

your stiff hard face.

so much noise:

I cannot remember
any words.

what if

Anthony Lucero

what if tears
are really just
drops of blood
that have lost their
color
tired of being
red tired
of being blue
want out?

STANDING WAVES.

SABRA LEORA

Glazing around with my head full of nothing
As we speak, my psyche is still humming
Seeing the tissue that runs deep in my eye
When it's coming at you and it feels like a pin
Drowning in my own heat of resistance
No recollection of the things that I just did

If I don't know how to be here now
Contamination will start hanging around
My flesh is flesh
My fear is sore
But not about being afraid anymore

So I'm finding the why
That fits the hole I can't find
When there is nothing left
Except water on the mind
Holding back in my mental rewind

chocolates for the fat lady

Normal

she loves you for your chocolates
she hates you for your sweets.
the lady on the welfare line
fakes. she is good
at what she does
& what she does
what she does is
convince the world she is a fish
beached out of the water
in desperate need of those
who truly care
cares about the environment
enough to get her
off the beach
& back to her element
until, of course
the next time
the tide
brings her
in. she
loves you for your chocolates
she hates you for your
sweets.

apes in hell

Christopher Mulrooney

"and a little child shall lead them"
ay girl that were you
a million million years ago
when the fit was on
and wit poured like wine from your lips
sauce anyway

THE BODY

RI CHARD WAGNER

Relative Dimensions

George Clayton

Upper III

Keep that milk crate over there
and this one here.

They stack, I know, but
forget that for a minute.

That one looks smaller
farther away.

If I could have it there
and here at the same time,
it would fit into this one.
And then you'd have something.

What? Don't look at
me like that.

I'm just saying what if.
I know you can't do it,
but what if you could?
Then you'd have something.

One cannot release that which was never held.
Desire overcomes strength and will is able to
master desire. Control is the Key. I venture
to experience, I exist to conquer. I am lord and

master. All dark saying are secret things spoken
by the wise, only the wise heed the words of
knowledge; whereas, fools lack discipline and
die in their own negligence of what knowledge

grants. Knowledge is a power, understanding is
a tool. You are understanding, only knowledge
is lack. You must learn your power. A book
speaks silently and reveals itself to that which

would chance to open it. A book doesnot explain,
for it knows only that which is transcribed upon
its pages. Other then that, it has no order. I am
your book. Learn what is written there and

understand. Then and only then, shall you obtain
to all that you seek. I grant you my love, but such
power as you seek is a privilege that is gained by
an understanding of self. What I am, you can not

conceive, for thoughts cannot grasp it. Thoughts
cast a form, but I have no form. I am nothing, yet
all things express me. You can only love a thing
when you learn to hate it. This is why it's so simple

to say; Fuck you. Measure the fullness of your cup
to be sure that your wants do not exceed your needs.
For verily I say unto you, you need me; but I want
you. You awaken each night to answer the voice of

nightmares; I sleep gently each day to receive the
blessing of your voice.

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER

Jennifer Rowan

It's dank and it's a hole
One of those places you warn your mates about
"stay away from there; the liquor is watered down and the girls
are trailer trash"
but still, you find yourself sitting around on Saturday night
wondering, what should I do and who should I do?
So you go down to that hole,
Called something like the Well, the Pit, or maybe even the Hole
(self-depreciating nonsense)
for some reason, the bartender recognizes you.
You nod a cheery hello and wonder if you've become a regular
Like that fat guy on Cheers who has run up a tab
That's larger than your rent for a year.
The girls are dressed for clubbing, but you thought the dress code
Was more casual.
You have your JCrew knit sweater on and maybe even a pair
Of dark sunglasses
(you still admire Cory Hart and think only the cool guys
wear their sunglasses at night)
just to keep yourself a little mysterious.
A pitcher of beer and you think to yourself,
"My tolerance is not as good as it was back in the day"
when sex was always welcome in every shape and form
and even your friends mother looked like a supermodel.
All this happens before you lie there, passed out on a pool table,
Your tongue hanging out of your mouth like an over-excited dog
The Shark still shooting stick, not even trying to avoid your head.
Just another Saturday. You wonder if maybe next week you shouldn't
just stay home.

Amerika
Christina M.
Peterson

Amerikans,
treaded soil is bound beneath us-
no longer the 'new world' without a tainted history
trotted and beaten are these grounds,
as those patriots who marched
against England's Empire-
the same men,
who became savages of war
blood-shed
upon these grounds now covered with
roads and murders and rapes and debates and greed.
Do they wail tears of shame and regret
in heaven, I wonder?
Our slumber ways have taught little ones to kill
and indulge in T.V and video games,
computer screens.
Heritage becomes a block of confusion and
ancestry bleak, perhaps muffled beneath
the elders left,
as they watch their spirit lift from them.
Cell phones and sit coms become conversations,
as we fall below the soil - slowly
six feet under.
In our pride and our ignorance,
destruction awaits us.

RAI NI NG:

mark clayton graham

It is raining,
While the world goes on
In contemplating misery.
And while the world goes down
With the people...

"Oh please,
No need to envy the God's,"
I said.

I don't need the night,
I need the light.
For the rain is dark,
The air is cold,
And the rooms are empty of life.

It is raining clouds
And mirrored images of my emotions.
Are you warm now
With the loyal feelings of devotion?
For that is what your Jesus can give you.

"Oh please,
There is every reason to envy the God's,"
You said.

The night is bleak,
The days are weak.
And the rain is a canopy
Of all we feel.

Jesus...One God, my love...
Who brings the rain from above.
Who pours the innocence upon the children
And restructures the hearts of men...

Isn't that the good of all things...
Shouldnt that be enough for us,
And wouldnt that bring us peace?

CAPTURING KIDS' HEARTS

Ivan Kershner

To notice the reach of a child,
And lower yourself to their need,
Is one of life's most precious moments.
It's God's plan made real by deed.

To live so that lives of our children
Are richer by our having been
Brings power to the words of the Savior
And insight about what they mean.

So, capture young hearts in your travels.
Let living and service be one.
And know, with the faith of a child,
That life's best day hasn't yet come.

Should I Write

Jadon T Rempel

Should I write one fucking word for you,
Now that the night sky opened up
And gathered the last of my body parts
From the foot of my broken bed.

There are no chains with which to bind.
No water to drink and no more poetry to read.
Though the pen taps wildly against a bloodied chin.
The ink becomes shy and crystallized.

This is my somersault of desperation.
You can share sadness with the world,
Because the world knows sadness,
And I could give a fuck anymore.

Do not seek me when I am 30.
Do not think that Polio won't make a comeback.
Don't use your hands for anything.
My heart has only potential energy.

QUEEN

Caroline Stark

"... Elephant princess." ...? Maybe TV's
Not so boring, or maybe I heard it wrong.
Tonight we watched Miss America, wondering
What was the point? She got a whole bunch of money
For looking good in a swimsuit that very closely
Resembled a bra and a diaper. Coincidence?
I have to say this woman was well accomplished.
If I'm not sweeping kitty litter, I'm making
Stuffing. Don't mistake cilantro for parsley.
The gravy's congealed. Miss Missouri's tiny
New nose doesn't match the rest of her face.
She must regret it to some degree, poor thing.

Hovering

Howard F. Stein

Were my face any closer to yours
I should have disappeared into your likeness.
I hovered, gazing, sipping slowly
On my portion.
For I wed you, though
I did not know this moment would be,
Or, between and lovers, could.

Wissps

Jerry Villhotti

The day after Johnny's operation, the doctor's scalpel left a long railroad track of scar over the area where he subtracted the stream of water trickling inside and after the doctor told the boy's mother that he had also taken from the leg a cancerous substance and so charged her double for the operation never realizing himself that he had mistakenly taken growth cells which would manifest five years later when Johnny's leg would bow from the weakness within, inside the memory of the dream he had while on the operating table of the sun twanging from a frown to a smile - he placed the faces of the nun and nurse inside the smiles. They had befriended him hours before he went up to the room with the giant overhead light.

Johnny defecated in his bed the night after his leg had grown bandages. He had stood in the blood drenched bed trying to see himself in the deep darkness surrounding him and when the nurse and nun finally came through the semi-darkness, the first words they said were: "Shame on you Johnny. An eight year old good looking boy like you doing that."

The whispers were said in a kindly way so he did not feel any shame. He had given something of himself in the horrifying darkness that had red blotches of growing blackness smothering his leg. The nun and nurse had further lessened his fears moments before his going upstairs by telling him he was a brave boy and they promised they would be with him in the operating room and they had kept their promises.

The boy in the very next bed, burned by friends who decided to "Burywater" him because he was a "kike" and didn't want one of them in their school where unknowingly they being of the poorer classes were being educated by teachers who looked down on all disgusting foreigners not realizing that they were or had been like them as they begrudgingly taught them skills that would enable them to do factory tasks and at the same time attempted to assimilate them into the American culture where they could be shown the way by the elite who were really educated in the elite schools, full of bandages from head to feet, and he exchanged some words, many silences and a few comic books. Johnny talked to the slits that showed the boy's eyes; eyes that were wisps of black smoke.

Within a week the boy full of bandages died and Johnny was told by a nurse - who would tease her elderly patients by eating an apple and telling them it was an onion, that little Arnold had gone to a better place. When Johnny said he wanted to go there too, she said: "He died."

11/24/99 Poem

I know that is a normal thing
for me to be going through

I know that I have been raped
and beaten
I know they've tried to kill me
and lucky me I survived

I think I can survive
everything they throw at me

But as time wears on
the pieces of this whole are chipped away
somebody needs something, right?
well, they've been taking from me
and taking
and taking
and taking
and my defenses are getting weaker
and I don't know how much more
fighting
I can do

THE LADIES OF EBENEZER

Miles C. Daniels

He used to have a penis. At least that is what they are whispering from the pews of Ebenezer First Baptist Church. Sister Novella remembers him playing Barbies with her two daughters. He had loved to dress them in tight-fitting party gowns, and was known to steal Mary Kay products from her vanity.

The local teen darlings had idolized him, so did the church music director.

When she first premiered *Hair Spray*, nobody recognized the fashionable woman. D-o-n-n-a, the beautician's name flashed in pink lights outside her corner salon. She owned a one-woman operation: hair, nails and appointment-only rubdowns.

Kneading was reserved for late evenings and that really flustered the god-fearing. At age seven, he'd been able to reach notes higher than any tenor in Camden County's cluster of church choirs. Each and every Christmas Eve he blessed the congregation with his own rendition of "Joy to the World", which sounded much like rock pianist Jerry Lee Lewis. Some church folk found it wicked, others commented on how Mrs. Johnson's boy could really tickle those ivories.

His minister, Reverend Chase, often preached against worldly knowledge. "Education, the Don Juan of faith" was one of his most famous deliveries. The church's tape engineer alleges that he sold fifteen copies of the exhortation that Sunday.

Male bars and dancing on tables in Raleigh were popular coffee conversations. Sister Pauline first heard about the jelly boobs and long hair at her Monday evening Bible study. The prescription for the permanent removal of facial hair bewildered the ladies missionary circle.

Three months and two days before she was diagnosed with the four-letter disease, Donna graced the old white church and sat on the pew next to the nursery. She sang the soprano line for "It Is Well With My Soul". And Sister Mazola, who just celebrated her thirtieth year as the church's organist, swears she noticed a black tear dripping from her chin.

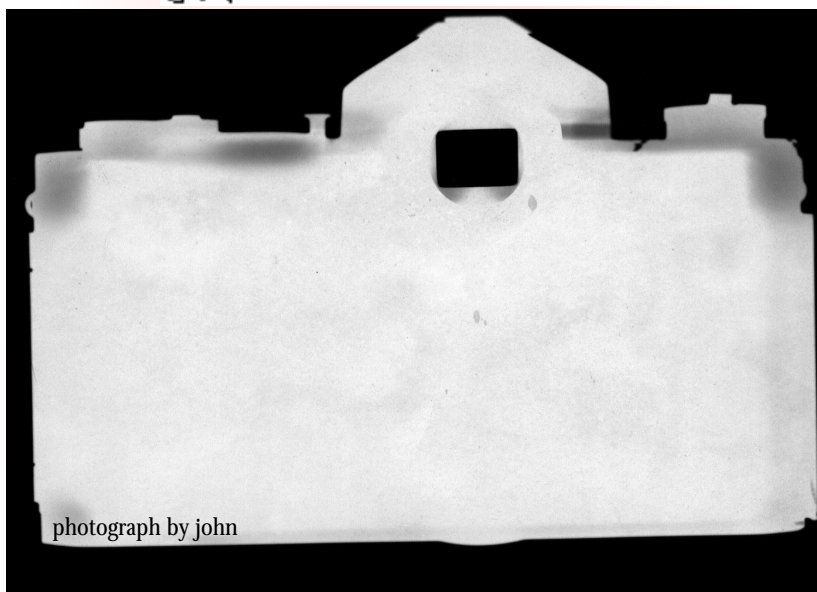
When the alter call was given, Donna quietly grabbed her purse and swaggered out the back door. Until today, that was the last time members of the Baptist church saw her.

She looks angelic all decked out in front of the communion table. Her hair is perfectly teased and her boobs look to have grown since the last time she haunted the sanctuary. The twelve-inch heels and sequenced black dress seem heavenly atop the maroon pillows.

The crowd is so large that the deacons had to fetch metal folding chairs from the fellowship hall. Mrs. Johnson is perched on the second row with a few distant cousins. Mr. Johnson decided to go possum hunting.



PROSE



photograph by john

a excerpt from the novel in
progress by janet kuypers

the key to believing

from chapter three:

the man

Sloane was up in the air again. Shortly after take off, when the plane levelled off, she walked up to the cockpit and knocked on the door. She heard Jim's muffled voice through the door; she assumed he told her to come in.

"Jim, what time do you think we'll arrive at the airport?"

"Well, it's three o'clock., I'd say just a little after five, maybe five-thirty."

"Got it. Thanks."

She walked back toward her seat and pulled out her phone. She dialed. She pressed the tiny phone to the side of her head.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Carter, it's me."

"Sloane, are you in the air now?"

"Yes, and the pilot says we should arrive between five and five-thirty."

"What terminal should I meet you at?"

"I could just meet you outside, you don't have to park your car, I don't have luggage to carry."

"Don't be ridiculous. What terminal?"

She gave him the information he needed and they said goodbye to each other.

She got up from her seat, slowly made her way to the back of the plane. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of champagne. She found a glass in the cabinet next to her head and walked back to her seat.

Sloane sat down and unwrapped the metal from the top of the bottle. She realized it

might not be a good idea to let the cork blow off the top of the bottle, being in an airplane and all. She placed the bottle between her knees, and closed her legs together, placing both of her hands on the bottle. She made sure she had a firm grip on the cork, and started to slowly ease the cork out of the bottle. The cork gave way with a loud pop, and suddenly champagne was starting to overflow onto her legs. She started laughing out loud as she grabbed her glass and frantically poured.

Jim's voice came over the airplane intercom. "That's the spirit," he said. She looked up, to see if the cockpit door was open; it wasn't, and she was relieved that he only heard the pop of the champagne cork and that he didn't see her spill the champagne on her legs. She got up with her glass and walked to the sink at the back of the plane.

"At least I took my pantihose off when I left for that walk on the beach," she said aloud to herself, and dampened a rag to clean herself off with.

She moved back to her seat. She sat down and looked out the window. And she thought about who she was about to see in New York.

Carter Donovan was a classmate of hers during her undergraduate studies. They never had a class together; they were friends because her roommate was in a class with Carter and they studied together. When he first met Sloane, he thought she was stuffy and a book worm; he usually tried to get her to come out when her roommate was going out.

But after the semester was over, and Carter wasn't in a class with her roommate anymore, he called Sloane once, and asked her if she wanted to grab some coffee. "I like talking to you, Sloane," Carter told her, "and now I don't have your roommate as an excuse to see you. Do you want to hang out?" Sloane walked over to his dorm room, but instead of going out for coffee, they ordered a pizza and drank beer and talked about religion, about what they wanted from life, how they wanted to live life, what they thought was right. From then on they were instant friends.

They didn't spend a lot of time together, but when they did they avoided the small talk and discussed what interested them in the backs of their minds. Sloane hardly had an interest in new songs or sports teams anyway. Carter usually brought the subjects of their conversations back to philosophy and religion; he always wanted to get Sloane to state whether or not she definitely believed in a God. "I don't believe a God does or does not exist," she would tell him. "I have no proof that a God exists, but it is impossible to prove that something does not exist, given any possible condition."

"So how do you live your life?" Carter asked.

"According to the rules of the things that can be proven around me. To the things that reason and knowledge dictate to me by my perceptions."

"And since there's no proof of a God, you don't believe in it?"

"I have no reason to consider whether or not it exists. To me it's more of the rejection of an unfounded theory, not a decision that no God exists. I don't think about it, really."

As they grew in their college careers, Carter liked to stump her with questions, knowing how she should answer, hoping she would be up to the challenge.

"So if there's no God, who created the universe?"

"That question assumes that someone did create the universe. You have no proof to make that claim."

"But the universe had to begin somehow."

"Did it have to? What makes you assume that it 'began'?"

And Carter would smile; he found what he was looking for and was satisfied with her answers.

They didn't often agree in their discussions, but Sloane had to admit to herself that she loved the fact that Carter had a sense of values and was willing to argue about them. Even if the arguments were invalid, she thought, she still loved his sense of morals and values, but then again, she was the scientist and had no room for fallacies and faith.

Carter was one of the few people that she drank with. Sloane saw her college school mates drinking excessively every weekend; in her opinion they all seemed to be escaping something. She could have a drink or two with Toby, but only on occasions like this weekend. Carter drank with her to celebrate. He thought of a drink as a gift to share as much as he would share good conversation when he was with Sloane; she enjoyed relaxing a little and talking to him when they'd have their pizza and beer nights.

Carter Donovan was handsome by most anyone's standards. He was tall, nearly six foot six. He had short brown hair, a little wavy, and dark brown eyes. He had good taste in clothes, but more than that, Carter Donovan made clothes look good. Everything he wore looked as if it were tailored expressly for him.

Sometimes when they would be talking together she'd stay in his dorm room all night, falling asleep at four in the morning on the floor next to him. She'd wake up with a pillow under her head, a small blanket covering her up, and Carter curled up next to her. It was moments like that where she would allow herself to study his face, when he didn't know she was looking.

It was a face she had grown to love. It was a face that should be loved.

Her eyes would scan along the sharp collar of his shirt to the matching harsh edge of his jawbone, up toward his ear, over to his Roman nose, even to the delicate eye lashes. Sloane didn't know why she loved his face. But every once in a while, when she had the chance, she would take a moment to just stare.

Carter was not a scientist. He was a finance major, with a minor in English. "Well, I love reading and writing, but really, where's the money in that?" he'd say. "Maybe one day I'll run a publishing house, and then I'll be in charge of what everyone else reads."

"That sounds a little Orwellian of you," Sloane would answer, and Carter would smile a mischievous smile.

And run a publishing house is exactly what he did.

After she went on to medical school, Carter Donovan went to work for a book publishing company in New York. He worked his way up at the company, and shortly after he got the famed mystery writer Paul Christensen to sign on for a ten-book contract, he was hoisted up to the executive level at the company. Now at Quentin Publishing company, a business that has books on the top ten best sellers list forty out of fifty-two weeks a year, Carter was the Vice-President in charge of recruiting new clients. And he did all of this by the age of thirty-three.

Every once in a while Carter would try his hand at writing. On behalf of the company he wrote a how-to book about working and succeeding in corporate America. It was on the best sellers list for six weeks. In his spare time, though, he tried his hand at writ-



ing philosophy; his essays weren't something his publishing company wanted to work with, but he'd often convince them to do a short press run, usually more as a favor or a bonus than as a business proposal. They had created a small branch of Quentin for Carter Donovan's pet projects, and in spite of all the work he had to do as the recruiting Vice-President, he never stopped adding titles to his branch collection list.

Every time Carter told Sloane about a new book of his, usually published once a year, she would go out and buy it.

Sloane thought about this while drinking her champagne on the airplane. They never had a relationship; they never thought of each other as more than friends; she never thought about having a relationship with him. She hoped he hadn't changed much. She hoped she wasn't interrupting any of his plans. The last phone conversations they had were shortly after Emivir was discovered by the press; although they had phone conversations together, it had been three years since she had seen him last.

She looked at her watch. 4:15. She looked at her legs. She went to her purse, got her pantihose and a brush out and turned back toward the bathroom. After two steps she stopped and turned back to her purse. Even though she rarely wore make-up she knew there was eye liner and lip stick at the bottom of her purse, so she grabbed the purse and slowly made her way to the back of the plane.

Sloane had mentally prepared herself for an explanation of why she needed make-up in her purse.

"Sometimes I have to wear make-up when I'm going to a meeting at work."

She never had to use any excuses for owning make-up and having some in her purse, but she thought that just in case, she should be prepared for it.

She fidgeted in the tiny, all-silver bathroom with her eye liner. "Why am I doing this to myself?" she said out loud as she moved the soft pencil over the bottom of her eye lids. She pulled back to look at herself in the mirror. She leaned forward to add the lip stick. She brushed her hair straight down. She shook her head to try to make her hair look more full. She then shook her head at herself and brushed her hair again and tucked it behind her ears.

She pulled back and looked at herself again. She pulled the bottom of her suit jacket down to get rid of the wrinkles in it. She glanced over her slate blue suit. "Too formal," she thought, and took off the jacket, so she was only wearing an ivory blouse and the slate blue skirt. There was two small strands of pearls wrapped around her neck. She pulled back and looked at herself again. She closed up her purse, threw her jacket over her forearm, grabbed her glass of champagne and opened the latch of the bathroom door.

###

When Toby got through the airport he tried to ask for the front of the plane for his seat. He always preferred to be at the front of the plane so he wouldn't have to wait for all the family members who had to slowly collect the bags and their children to get out of the center row while people were trying to get off the plane.

And he knew that once he got on the plane, he still wouldn't be able to explain exactly where he was going. Yes, he knew, Seattle, but a part of him didn't know what was going

to be waiting there for him.

Would he always think children were a nuisance? Or would he grow to love them too, would he even love his own kids?

Maybe. He never had the time to think about things like that, though.

But he always noticed when he got the chance to let his mind wander, that Sloane always seemed to find a way to come into his mind. It was like her spirit knew the effect she had on his, and her spirit found a way to creep into his soul.

Even when he wasn't thinking about her, he noticed that she did find a way into his subconscious.

Then again, maybe he just saw her in Miami for a day. Maybe that was the reason he thought about her, he said to himself.

Maybe that was all the reason he needed.

###

When Carter Donovan got off the phone with Sloane at three, he quickly scanned his apartment. He lived in a penthouse apartment in Manhattan; it was sparsely decorated, according to his taste: "Extra objects just break up the lines of the room," he said to the decorator he hired to buy furniture for his home.

The doorbell rang. He moved to the door and opened it. His weekly maid was standing in the hallway.

"Oh, thank you for coming in on such short notice."

"That's okay. I usually don't have clients on the weekends anyway."

"Can you do the usual, and not bother coming this next Tuesday, and just come the week after that?"

"Sure, no problem."

"I need to have the place cleaned up in just a few hours, so..."

"I'll be as quick as I can, but I'll make sure not to overlook anything."

"Thanks a lot, Alice. I really appreciate it. I have to get ready to go out by about four-thirty or five o'clock, so I'll be here for a while. I'll do my best to stay out of your way."

"And I'll do my best to stay out of yours," the house maid said.

Carter walked to his bedroom, past his bed and to the shower. He had to get ready. At four-thirty Alice walked to Carter's bedroom and knocked on his door. "Mr. Donovan?"

Carter ran over and opened the door. He stood in the doorway to his bedroom wearing a white dress shirt and dark grey slacks.

"I'm pretty much done, I did the bedroom and —"

"That's fine, Alice, that's perfect. I need to ask you something, though. It's very important."

Alice looked a little nervous. "Yes, sir?"

"Come in, please, I need your opinion."

Alice walked over to his bed, and three ties were sprawled out on top of a dark grey jacket.

Carter picked up the first tie. "Which do you think is the best tie?" He grabbed the second tie and placed it in front of him, next to the first tie. "The first one I think is a little loud, but the second one is a little too business-like. I don't need a power tie, I want

something that says friendly, you know what I mean? Which do you think is the best?"

Alice looked at him for a moment. "Mr. Donovan, are you going on a date?"

Carter stopped and stepped back. His voice toned down; he suddenly sounded grave. "No."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Donovan, you just seem very anxious."

"I'm seeing an old friend of mine. A good friend."

She looked over the tie choices. "Well, if it's a friend, I'd wear the first tie." She pointed at the tie in his left hand. "If it's a date," she bent over to pick up the last tie on the bed, "and I'm not saying it is a date, I'm just saying that if it was a date," she handed the third tie to Carter, "I would definitely pick this tie."

She stood and looked at him. He stared at her for a moment. "Thanks, Alice."

"There's nothing else sir?"

"No. Thanks for coming on your day off. I'll see you two Tuesdays from now?"

"Yes." Alice walked to the doorway. "You have a good night, sir."

"You too, Alice."

Carter paused and looked over at his closet. He pulled out his black wing tips and slid them on to his feet. He stood in front of the mirror. He held the first tie up against his shirt, then the third. He shook his head, put the first two ties in his closet, closed the closet door, hung the third tie around his neck, grabbed his jacket off his bed and headed out the door.

His driver was standing in front of his limousine waiting for him at the turn around at the front door of his building. Carter never slowed down as he got out the front door; the driver opened the back door just as Carter was at the car and he glided into his seat. He figured he could tie a Windsor knot during the ride on the way to the airport.

He told the driver when they arrived at the airport to wait with the car; he would meet his friend at the terminal. Carter stepped out of the back of the black stretch limousine and walked through the doorway and turned toward the far terminal. He didn't know how long he would have to wait for Sloane's plane to land. He thought for a moment about going to the men's room to make sure he looked okay. Then he stopped himself. "What am I doing?" he thought. "I'm acting like this is a date." He shook his head at himself and continued walking down the hallway.

He walked to the gate her plane was to arrive at. He saw a plane outside the window. He turned to an airport attendant. "Excuse me," he said, pointing out the window, "do you know if that's the Madison Pharmaceutical private plane?"

Just as Carter asked the question he heard a voice behind him and felt someone tapping his shoulder. "You have no patience, do you?"

Carter spun around to see Sloane standing right in front of him.

The first thing he saw was Sloane's face. It seemed like her face was beaming. She was restraining herself from laughing; it looked like she was pleased she surprised him. He couldn't take his eyes off her face.

Sloane saw his face light up like a child's. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're always one step ahead of me, aren't you?"

"Well, I'm always trying. Don't I get a hug?"

Carter slid his hands from her shoulders around her back and stepped closer to her.

She wrapped her arms around him as she turned her head and leaned into his chest as he held her.

She was used to knowing men that were around her height. She knew she was a tall woman, and she knew that men regularly claimed to be taller than the really were. She always felt tall compared to others, but Carter was... Well, he was tall, and she liked that. She liked the fact that he was physically tall, that he was emotionally tall, and most of all she liked the fact that on some levels he was taller than her.

"It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too."

They pulled back and locked their hands together. "You know we should really do this more than once every three years," Sloane said to him.

"Well, you're still beaming, even after these three years... And first things first, give me those bags," and Carter reached over and grabbed the straps of her bags from off her shoulders. Sloane started to resist; she always preferred carrying her own luggage over having a man do it for her. This time, however, she stopped herself and let him ease her load.

She also wanted to say that she wasn't beaming, but once again, she felt there was no need for her to resist.

They turned toward the hallway and started walking toward the baggage claim and the outside doors where Carter's car was waiting. "So why were you in Miami?"

"I met up with a colleague there to discuss some problems with his research."

"You look like you got a little sun."

"Oh, I just walked outside for an hour, no more than that, I couldn't have gotten any sun."

"Well, Sloane, you're positively glowing nonetheless."

"Well, since we're doling out compliments, you look fantastic yourself. The corporate life — well, at least the suits — fit you well."

"Okay, okay, no need to butter me up. So what would you like to do tonight?"

Sloane paused. "You know, I never thought about it. I'm not particularly interested in doing anything, really."

"Oh, come on, let me show you the sights."

"Well, if you want to, but I didn't come here to be a tourist, I came here to catch up with you."

They stepped outside the sliding airport doors; Carter's limousine was waiting at the doorway. Carter guided her toward the door; his driver held the door open for her. "Carter, a limousine? Is this a company perk or did you decide to splurge?"

"A company perk. Just like your plane."

Sloane laughed. "I guess we've finally made it, haven't we?"

"Yes, I suppose we have."

The driver got into the seat and they started moving. Carter asked the driver to go to the apartment first, so Sloane could settle in.

"Okay, so let's first catch up. How's the book publishing business going?"

"It's going perfectly, actually. We changed our focus a few years ago from romance novels and other housewife-oriented trash novels—"

"You mean, 'sleazy housewife novels'," Sloane responded. Carter looked at her and

smiled, responding positively with his expression to what she felt she could not say. "Didn't mean to interrupt," Sloane added.

"Not a problem," Carter said. Then he smiled with her as he continued his story.

"to mystery writers," he started, "and business writers, you know, how to succeed in business, and we got more self-help books, you know, so-and-so's sure-fire way to lose weight. We're doing more biographies, even if they are only of Hollywood actors, but that's where the market is going. Occasionally they still let me run books solely of my own choice, they've even made a separate division label for them. I try to get them in university towns and the like."

"Have you been doing any more writing lately?"

"No, I've been too busy with work. That's why I've been seeking out other good work. Even if they might not go mainstream, I want to get good work out there, work I think truly has merit. And as long as I don't go overboard, they let me. The most recent one is an economics book; in fact, it's at press now and I have to go to the plant in Ohio tomorrow and do a press check."

"Ooh, so they let you travel, too? All the way to Ohio?"

"I know, I know. But I go for big projects, with a few other production people from the company. But when my own choices are running, which are always small print counts, mind you, I always go to do a press check then. And you know, I always notice that when I see my own choices printing, I get this wonderful sense of pride by watching the press-work."

"And you don't get that feeling when you're watching other projects, the big books that actually make you a success?"

"When it's one of the trash novels that goes through, when it's one of the trash novels that makes me rich that's at press, then I can still look at the massive amount of machinery and admire its speed and skill at executing its job. And then I think about the mind that it took to create these machines. But at the same time it doesn't fill me with the same sense of pleasure."

"Any idea why?"

"You know exactly why."

Carter leaned forward and opened a cabinet against the side of the limousine. "Would you like some champagne?"

"No, thanks, I should wait a little bit. I was drinking champagne on the plane."

"Well, well, maybe that explains the glow on your cheeks."

"I'm telling you, I don't have a glow, Carter."

"And I'm telling you, you're radiant."

They smiled at each other. Sloane looked out the window. "Wow, It has been a while since I've been here. Maybe I would could go out., to see the skyline."

"Wait until you see the view from my place." As Carter finished his sentence the limousine turned into the driveway in front of his high-rise apartment building.

Carter held the door open while Sloane made her way through, past his outstretched arm against the door, to his living room. They were on the 55th floor, and her attention was immediately drawn to the window and the breathtaking view of New York city.

She walked over to the opposite wall and pressed her hands against the window.

"This is an amazing view, Carter," Sloane finally managed to get out of her mouth. She kept turning her head to look at a different building.

"I thought you'd like it," Carter answered.

"I don't want to leave this room all night," Sloane said, looking like a child in front of a pet store window. "I want to see the lights come on in this city from this view. This is absolutely gorgeous."

"I thought you'd like it. But you know, we could drive around a bit. The limo has a sun roof, so you can still watch the city. And there are a few nice restaurants I was thinking of taking you to. What kind of food are you in the mood for?"

Sloane turned her head away for a moment, thought about his question. She turned around and leaned her back against the window. "In all honesty?"

"Of course."

"I want pizza."

Carter laughed. "Shall we have it delivered?"

"Of course."

"Would you like to stay here, or would you also like to go for a ride?"

"A ride would be delightful," Sloane answered and walked across the room toward Carter and her baggage. "Where do you want me to put this stuff?"

"I've got it," Carter said, and picked up her belongings. "I'll put them in the bedroom. We can go for a ride now, and as it gets past dusk we can come back for food."

"It's a deal."

The next hour was spent in the limousine. Carter was able to convince Sloane that she had waited long enough since her last glass of champagne and that she should have some in the car with him. They drove up and down the streets of Manhattan; at one point Carter dared Sloane to stand in the car with her head out of the sun roof. She agreed only if he'd join her, and for a mile or two they drank champagne and waved back at the people waving in the streets at them.

"Why are they waving at us?" Sloane asked. "I suddenly feel like royalty, waving to the little people." She laughed. "No, I feel more like someone dressed up as Cinderella at a Disney parade."

"I don't know why they're waving," Carter answered. "Maybe they think we just got married."

"You're wearing a suit instead of a tux and I'm in a blouse."

"Good point. Okay, I have no idea... Maybe they're waving just because we're here, sticking out of the top of a car."

"Maybe," Sloane said, "maybe they're waving at us because we look happy and they want to share in that happiness. To have some of that happiness too." She sounded like she was thinking out loud.

"You're not laughing enough to look happy," Carter said as he reached his hand over to her side and started tickling her. Sloane started screaming with laughter and at the first chance she got ducked back into the car.

"Ready to go back?" Carter asked.

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Want to go by the park once more?"



survive & thrive

"I'd rather go around by Times Square once more."

And so they drove.

###

The pizza arrived at around ten o'clock. Carter yelled from the kitchen, "I've got water, beer, soda, wine, more champagne... Which would you prefer?"

"Well, I would say beer, you know, to be more historically accurate, to continue with the tradition, you

know, but I think I'll be sick if I switch from champagne to something else."

"Champagne then?"

"Sure."

They sat on the floor in his living room and ate. Carter started a small fire in the fireplace for light. They ate for a moment in silence.

Then it was Carter's turn to ask the questions. "So I've seen your name in the papers a few times since Emivir came out. Anything new going on with the research?"

"Well, our main focus since the drug has come out is to work on improving the drug. We got to this drug by altering other drugs until we found a solution that worked. We were hoping that we could mimic that process and find more."

"No luck yet?"

"No. I think it's getting my department down. And I'm not very good at offering cheers for the team."

"Well, that's not your job."

"No, but if they're not putting in all they can, if they don't have the heart for it anymore —"

"Then the research suffers."

"Exactly."

"So what is the solution?"

"I've been trying to look at this from a different angle. I was thinking I'd separate the department into three teams. One would continue with the current vein of research. One would work on coming up with integrase inhibitors — you know how the drug cocktails work?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, each of the drugs in the cocktail attack one enzyme of the virus. The first group would be trying to improve one of the existing drugs. The second group would be working on a new drug — the integrase inhibitor — that would attack a third enzyme of the virus."

"Got it. The more ways you attack it, the better."

"Exactly."

"And the third group?"

"Well, this might sound trivial, but the third group would work on making these drugs easier to take, eliminating the drastic side effects and making the drugs work on a time-release system, so patients would not have to take twenty to sixty pills a day."

"You'd have a better success rate with the drugs if people took them properly and if there weren't any side effects to make them stop taking it, right?"

"Exactly. There's also a psychological factor to taking so many drugs. Every time you take a pill you're reminded that you have a fatal disease."

"Not a bad plan. Are you working on more long-term research? This seems a little short-sighted for you."

Sloane started to look disappointed. "Yes, but it's hard to think of the light at the end of the tunnel when you can't come up with the first step to solving this problem."

"Oh, the Sloane I know wouldn't sound so pessimistic."

"It's not pessimism, it's realism." She paused. "When I can't solve the problem with improving what we have, then it's hard to think about solving the problem altogether. I think that's why I came here tonight."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to hear you tell me that you know I can do it."

"Well, you know you can. You don't need me telling you that."

"I just get tired of telling it to myself over and over again."

Carter and Sloane sat in silence for a moment. Then Sloane started talking. "I know I'm a realist, and that makes people think that I'm a pessimist. And I've always covered up any emotions I've felt, and I've never shown emotion to anyone."

Carter nodded his head in agreement.

Sloane continued. "But with you, well, you make me more real. I feel like I can let out emotions with you, emotions I wouldn't bother to show anyone else."

"Well I'm glad you've got that with me," Carter answered. He paused with his sentences before continuing. "So back to the subject... It seems you're on the right track by looking for alternative ways to attack the virus. Can you stretch your staff that thin, separating them into three smaller groups?"

"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem at all. Actually, people usually work better that way. And I'll let people decide by their own interests and abilities what they want to work on."

"And that's how you're going to keep their morale up."

"I guess it is. But I want them to have some control over their work; everyone needs to feel that their talents — as well as their interests — matter."

"I guess you didn't need a cheer for them after all."

Sloane smiled. "I also thought I'd do a little research on homeopathy and alternative forms of medicine. Nutrition, herbs, massage, hypnosis, something. Even if it has no merit, it might act as a placebo when people think they're on a drug and maybe it will help their system somehow. If patients feel they're taking positive steps toward recovery, they alleviate depression, and their immune system may respond positively. So it could be worth the effort after all."

"A lot of people say that kind of stuff really does have merit, though. Hell, we've published a number of books on the subject. Want me to send some to your office?"

"I'd love it, Carter. Thanks a lot. Anything you have on natural remedies or homeopathy for better health."

"No problem. Actually, we have a few books about AIDS, too. Mostly conspiracy stuff, though."

"Really?" Sloane asked, in a condescending tone. "Boy, you really do pander to the lowest common denominator, don't you?"

"Sloane, you know that sex sells, more than anything. But now, the people's hatred for the government is coming in a close second."

"What does that say for the people?"

"Really, if you think about it, those are two pretty worthwhile topics."

Sloane laughed, and glanced up at Carter.

Carter continued eating. Sloane got up and walked to the window.

"So, you're doing well at the publishing company. Why do you still run that small publishing branch in your spare time if it isn't a money-maker?"

Carter wiped his face with a paper napkin. "Because those books need to go out. Because I know they're right."

"Right? How so?"

"The drivel that gets on the best sellers lists, the garbage that makes us money, the language is at a grade school student's reading level. The content is poor at best. There are no heroes. There is nothing extraordinary about them, the characters or even the books. I want books that glorify man. People don't read that anymore."

"If people don't read it anymore, why do you print it?"

"Sloane, I have to hope that I'm not the only person in the world that thinks this way. I have to believe that there are other people out there—" he held his glass up to the skyline out his window — "other people out there like me."

"Do you think people don't read the kinds of books you're talking about because they don't want to, or because they haven't found them?"

"I hope it's the second. If it is, then I know I can't give it up."

Sloane walked back to Carter and sat next to him on the floor in front of the fireplace. "There are people like you, Carter." Sloane said. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

He liked her answer. "That's why you're here, isn't it?" Carter answered, and leaned his head on top of hers.

"Of course."

They watched the fire for a moment, then Carter made a motion to get up. Sloane moved out of the way. "Well, I hate to interrupt, but duty calls..." He walked toward the washroom.

Sloane watched him walk down the hall. She watched the long line of his slacks as he moved away from her. She watched his shoulders sway back and forth. He turned the corner.

He's not a scientist, like her, she thought, but she admired his sense of freedom, his love of succeeding and the fact that he knows that he's good at what he does. His pride, she thought, she loved his pride.

She looked back at the open cardboard box of left over mushroom and sausage pizza

and their glasses of empty champagne. She reached over, grabbed the bottle, and filled their glasses.

Carter walked out the washroom and down the hall. When he reached the entrance to the living room, he stopped for a moment and leaned against the wall. When sitting, Sloane's skirt slid up her legs a little, and Carter noticed her long thin legs trailing off to her delicate feet. Her black hair was shining in the light of the fireplace. Although Carter never visited her, he realized he missed her.

Sloane picked her head up and saw him looking at her. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm just not used to seeing someone in this place. I'm usually alone here."

"Oh, I'm sure you take people out all the time."

"Sure I do, but I don't bring them home with me." He walked over and sat down next to her.

"You know, Sloane," Carter started, "you're the only friend I've kept in contact with since college. And I've done a poor job at that."

"Carter, you're probably the only friend I had in college," Sloane answered.

"Well, you stuck your nose in the books too much."

"Well, science isn't going to let you guess."

They both leaned their backs against the couch and sipped their champagne. "Thanks for putting up with me," Sloane finally said.

Carter put his arm around her. "You know, I think we're cast from the same mold, you and I. It is nice to talk to you, because when I talk to you, it makes me feel better too... It's just nice knowing you exist."

Sloane whispered, resting her head again, "You know, you're cool."

"I'm what?" Carter answered.

"You heard me... I'm trying to not sound like I stick my head in the books too much." She paused to smile before she finished her thought. "You make me smile. It's nice knowing you exist, too." She closed her eyes as she kept her head on his shoulder. She almost fell asleep right there, until she relaxed her hand and the glass of champagne she was holding in her lap tipped over and spilled all over her skirt. Sloane let out a light scream at the cold liquid seeping through her skirt and pouring over her legs. She wiped the carpet off with an extra paper napkin until Carter brought in a towel for her.

He held it out to her, looking at the spill strategically located on her skirt. "I think I better let you do the honors." She smiled.

"Here, let me get you a robe." Carter walked into his bedroom and produced a white terry-cloth bathrobe. Sloane took it from his hand, smiled in embarrassment and walked into the washroom.

He heard her laughing from down the hall.

"What's so funny?"

"Carter, I know you're tall, I know you're a big guy, but I feel like this robe is consuming me."

She walked out. Her little feet stuck out the bottom of the robe. The shoulder seam was near her elbows. "I've rolled up the sleeves four times and I still can't see my hands. Are you sure this isn't a blanket or a sleeping bag instead?"

Carter stood up and started laughing out loud. "Why are you worried? You look per-

fectly comfortable — and perfectly dry.”

“Yes, thank you for the robe.”

“You want to go to sleep?”

“What time is it?”

“Two-thirty.”

“Oh my God, we talked that long?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me help you clean up.” She picked up the box of pizza before he could stop her. Carter got the champagne bottle and glasses; she got the napkins. They cleaned up in the kitchen and walked back out into the living room.

Carter put the fire out while Sloane looked out the window. “If I had this view every day, it sure would be easier to get up every morning.” She looked down.

Carter walked over to her, took her hand, and walked her to the bedroom. He placed her in front of his mirror, stood behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “When you have this view every day,” he said, pointing over her shoulder to her reflection in the mirror, “you have no reason not to face every day with your drive and enthusiasm.”

Sloane looked at herself smothered in Carter’s bathrobe in the full-length mirror.

“I look ridiculous,” she said, smiling.

“You, my dear, are Sloane Emerson,” Carter answered. “That’s all you need.”

They stood in front of the mirror together for a moment before Carter let go of her shoulders and walked toward the door. “I’ve got to do my press check tomorrow. Would you like to go with me?”

“I really should get back to work.”

“Oh, have you had your Carter fix already?”

Sloane smiled. “Well, you’re going to work, too. Have you had your fill of me?”

Carter understood and smiled. “I’ll wake you in the morning.”

“If I don’t wake you first.”

Carter closed the door and walked down the hall.

Sloane slumped down at the foot of the bed. She looked around the room. “So this is where he lives,” she thought. She reached over and crawled toward the pillows at the other side of the bed. She got on her knees and took off his robe and placed it at the foot of the bed. She lifted the covers and crawled into his bed.

“So this is where he sleeps,” she thought. She felt the sheets against her skin and could smell Carter in the pillow she was resting her head against. His scent comforted her as she tossed and turned in his bed, felt the sheets wrap around her legs, until she finally fell asleep.

Carter walked over to his couch. He stretched a blanket over the couch and placed an extra pillow on one end. The apartment was dark. He looked around, and walked over to the window. He saw what she saw as the lights of the skyscrapers flickered before him. It was a fireworks show he took for granted every night when he closed his shades and went to sleep.

He unbuttoned his shirt and placed it on a dining room chair. He walked back toward the couch and saw in the shadows her shoes lined up next to his near the fireplace. He laid down on the couch, stared for a moment, and tried to sleep.

###

At nine in the morning Carter gently knocked on his bedroom door. The light from the window woke him up.

Sloane rolled over, grabbed the sheets and pulled them up to her nose. Since she had that evening showing more to him about her than she was used to, she thought she shouldn't show off her bare skin in bed as well.

"Come in."

Carter slowly opened the door. "Hey, sorry to wake you. I have to leave for my flight to Ohio in about an hour. I figured you'd want some time to get yourself together. Do you want anything for breakfast?"

Sloane thought about the headache behind her right eyebrow. "No. Thanks."

"Doing that well?"

"Didn't fall asleep right away. I tossed and turned a lot."

"Really? How come?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just not used to sleeping in a different place."

He would never admit it consciously, but in the back of Carter's mind, a part of him was glad that she had trouble sleeping last night. "Well, if you need anything," Carter said, "let me know."

"Thanks."

Carter turned and started to close the door.

"Oh, Carter?" Sloane asked.

He stopped and turned back toward her. "Yes?"

"Do you have any orange juice?"

"Sure. I'll bring some in for you." He started to close the door again.

"Oh, wait, Carter?"

Carter looked back again. "Yes?"

"Is it from concentrate?"

"What?"

"Is your orange juice from concentrate?"

"No. That stuff tastes awful."

"Good. Thanks."

Carter then closed the door; she could hear his foot steps fading away.

She reached over and grabbed the bathrobe from the floor; it must have fallen off the bed while she was moving in her sleep, she thought. She threw it on and walked over to his bathroom and turned on his shower.

Carter knocked and came in with a glass of orange juice, a vitamin pill and two towels. "The vitamin is for the hangover. I heard the water running, so here are some clean towels." He put everything in her hands, then put his hand on her head and messed up her hair. She squinted her eyes and smiled. He turned around and walked out again.

She drank some orange juice and swallowed the multi-vitamin supplement. She walked into the bathroom, placed the towels on the counter, and let the bathrobe fall to her feet. She stepped in the bath tub.

The heat of the water shocked her when she got under the shower head; she liked the water piping hot in the morning. She grabbed the soap from the side of the tub and

started running the bar over her shoulders and up and down her arms. She turned toward the water and ran the bar over her stomach. She tilted her head back and felt the water beat down against her chest. Then she leaned against the wall of the shower stall; she liked how the cold of the ceramic tile felt against her back while the hot water was pounding on her.

She needed to focus. She had things to do back in Seattle. A part of her wanted to go on the press check with Carter, but eighteen hours was enough time to spend in one visit. She didn't want to seem overbearing. Besides, she had work to do too.

She walked out into the living room wearing her beige slacks and her grey tank top. She was shaking the wrinkles out of her white blouse while she was walking down the hall. Carter looked up at her; her shoulders had the same effect on him as they did on Toby.

Sloane looked over at him, sitting at the dining room table with the newspaper in his hands. "What are you looking at?"

"You."

"Why?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you when your hair is wet."

"Oh, I know, I look like a wet dog. But you didn't have a hair dryer, and I didn't pack one, so I —"

"I wasn't saying it was bad. I was just noticing."

She walked over to her shoes and picked them up.

"Are you done in the bathroom? I desperately need to shower and change."

"Oh, I'm sorry, yes, let me just get my bags and I can pack them out here."

Carter walked into the bathroom and closed the door. He noticed his bathrobe on the hook of his door. He took off his clothes and started the water. Then he walked over to the bathrobe. Just stared at it for a moment. He reached up to it with his left hand and felt the loops of the fabric under his fingers. He turned to the shower and stepped in. He stepped underneath the shower head and held his head under the running water for a few seconds. Then he shook his head, tried to regain himself, and grabbed the shampoo.





photograph by claire

Gears get caught in the mud

I've wanted to be so much for you
I've wanted to to cook your meals
and clean your clothes
And even wanted it to surprise you
I've wanted to do things
To catch you off guard
To beat your intelligence

And once I want to start
My gears gets caught in the mud
And they start spinning
And I try to get them out
But I usually never learn
And I spin them and some more
And I get further buried in the
ground
And it's like I'm digging my own
grave
By spinning my own wheels
And trying so hard
To be everything to everyone,
No, wait, to you

I'm trying to be so much
And do so much
I'm trying to accomplish so much
But I'm spinning my wheels
And I'm burying myself
And I want you to know
(At least)
That I'm trying

the Battle at Hand

I wanted you to know
that I was on a mission when I saw you
and that I was a warrior
and you were just a helpless victim
that couldn't fight my weaponry

that wouldn't fight my weaponry

I would come in to town
and pillage and rape
and rape and pillage
depending on how you put it

and rape is such a hard word, you know,
entirely inappropriate for this
because I made sure that you wanted me
before it was all over
because I have a knack for doing that
when I fight my battles

this is how I care to think of you.
I was on a conquest
and i came fully equipped with ammunition
I had bayonets
I had a rifle
with rounds of bullets in a chain
thrown over my shoulder
I had a .22 caliber magazine loaded hand-gun

I didn't even need to use the hand-grenade
or the tear gas

even before i started using my tongue as a weapon with a kiss
I used it as a weapon with words
and I knew I had won you won over from the start
you looked at me when I spoke
and I think you might have actually wanted to listen to me

and I would never have to resort to violence
to get what I wanted from you

we seldom had opportunities before
and there wasn't much of an opportunities here
but we made one
and we somehow made it work

I know I wasn't ready for a battle before
but I want you to know
that I came ready to fight
and I didn't care the circumstance
or whether or not we had to be quiet
because we wouldn't want anyone to find out
and no one did

and no, it was not a monumentous moment in my life
it was just a moment
a conquest, a battle,
and in my own mind,
I won the war

you still thought I was beautiful
and that I was horny
did I create a little monster in you?
now I'm going to have to re-arm myself
and use my stockade of defenses to push you away

but that is the cost of winning battles all the time, I guess

you thought I would always want you
and you know, I liked winning the battle,
but I'll have to work again
so that you don't come back to haunt me
because we weren't meant to be anything to each other
and you were just a conquest for me
a battle won

people thought we would never get along.
but I know better
I know there is no such thing as NOT getting along with me
and I know I can make anyone like me
as I did with you

you were easy prey, you know.

After the wreckage

I can't leave this funeral that never seems to end
I can't leave this funeral that, in a way, never started
And all I know is that I have been doing all of the mourning

And is that the way it goes?
Is someone mourning for you for too long
And you, the deceased, didn't know anyone would care
And you, the deceased, didn't know they were dead
So

So was it just me
Do I feel this alone

Does your spirit rise after the wreckage
And you watch from above
And see how everyone reacts
And see how I cry
And see how I suffer

Is this what you're doing to me?

And now, after the funeral,
And I have to clean up the room
And I have to put away the flowers
And I have to escort the people out
Because they don't deserve to be here
Because they don't even clean up the mess

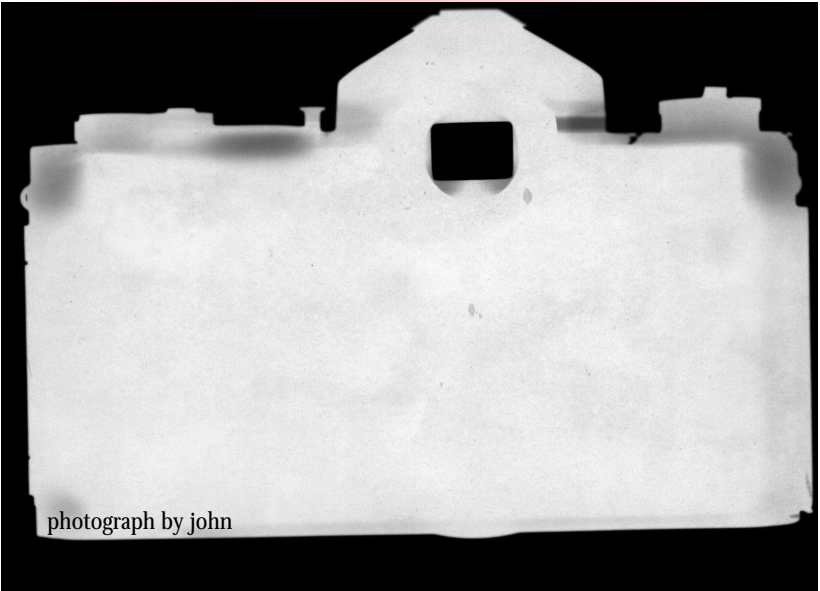
I should know by now
It's still me
It's only me
Isn't it?
Is that the way it goes?

Holding My Skin Together

is life pre-ordained?
i've been trying to remember
all the little details
that i'm supposed to take care of
and i know i'm not even getting
half of them done
and i wonder if you feel what i feel
is it just me
is the stuffing falling out
of my insides
through the stretched seams
holding my skin together
because i keep finding
bits of stuffing fallen out
and i try to put it back in
but damnit, i don't see the holes
and i just have to work faster
so that maybe
i'll have a better chance
of not losing my insides

is it just me?
probably
but i'll keep frantically trying
to hold myself together
so i can be a bit more normal,
no, wait,
so i can be a bit more like myself
and i won't have to be pre-ordained

down in the dirt



photograph by john

SPI DER' S SILK

Michael Estabrook

sometimes the sunlight catches
this long strand of nearly invisible
spider's silk stretching
like a delicate diaphanous golden hair
across my windshield
and it twirls and twists and flashes
distracting me but I'm leaving it there
because it's pretty

EVOLUTI ON

Michael H

Brownstein

Blue blood eases through creases
and the tigers come through bush and brush,
step into the clearing, protectors of the clearing.

And I guess I should have stayed
until all of the thievery had stopped.
I gathered everything up from myself, and others.

Everything slows to one frame of 35mm film.
So we no longer question your insanity;
your eveolution into insanity.

It's best I stay to myself and become nobody
and it's best for you
to create a clearing for yourself.

Puzzl e

Mel ani e Moore

I still remember the day we were able to
put the puzzle together inside out...
No corners, no ends,
Wrong and about
Renaissance arrived
After the money ran out

Our hopes relied on ancient forces
Living as the undead
Along our lives' courses
Somehow coping with our role models'
divorces

So the Dark Ages end
And different seasons arise
We keep on mourning
As we wait for the surprise

Nature' s Beauty

CJ Wi l son

Showers brighten
colors of spring
the senses are alive with the colors of
nature.

CORNER OF VOID & DIRTY

Cheryl A Townsend

It started out as Monday and it ended as Monday. How much more tedious can a life get? My fugitive soul is out chasing yet another sin. Remorse shadows me no matter what the time. There are too many distractions. The best are always by mistake. Boredom sets into my thighs and spreads. I can never find my reasons when it's time to go home. Lies flow like breath. I offered tomorrow, but that was yesterday. Changes. Where is my life when I need it the most?

GROCERY STORE HEADLINE (18)

L. B. Sedlacek

My friend Rick used to rent a studio apartment on the fifteenth floor where his kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom all were one room. (He had a top bunk for the bed, and curtains hiding the kitchen and the bathroom — though there was no privacy unless he was alone.)

He used to open the big picture window, and look down on the yard below while he drank gin and smoked pot right in front of the playing kids, or the neighbors looking out from the windows of their bordering row houses - thick with paint, devoid of trees.

One day he got so stoned he fell out of the window right onto some politician's kid; neither one got hurt, but Rick went to jail for a very long time and he lost the apartment which was too bad 'cause he was grandfathered in and the rent was cheap for an apartment one block from the Capitol. They wrote about it in a tabloid — I mailed him the article, and he put the headline up in his cell.

Return to Freedom

Jennifer Connelly

I placed my hands lightly on the icy railing. They appeared distorted and odd-colored in the diminishing afternoon sun. My breath came in puffs of white mist and my nose felt frozen. I shivered as a blast of the frigid Chicago winter air hit me across my back. My lungs ached for warm fresh air. I felt as if the intense cold were freezing me from the inside out.

I leaned forward trying to peer over the high railing. But I couldn't see. I looked down at the bottom of the railing. My feet seemed to move on their own. They stepped up onto the lower crossbar, slowly, one after the other.

I could now lean over the railing. I pushed farther onto my toes. People rushed all around me; busy holiday shoppers and frantic overworked men with briefcases, businesswomen in long fur coats and Nike running shoes, mothers trailed by children of all ages. They bumped me, brushed, shoved, and hollered at each other and traffic.

Snowflakes landed softly on my nose and sleeve. I ignored everything, all of the sounds and commotion. It all blended together in the background. I only heard the whirring of tires over the metal grating of the bridge and the gentle lapping of the water.

I looked at the cold dreary green waves of the Chicago River. I started as I saw a face staring back. It was a disfigured head, no body. The image frightened me, but at the same time intrigued me. I strained to see it better and then it was if all motion ceased. There were no pushing, rushing families, no men and women hurrying to catch the "L", no traffic, no noise, no freezing wind, no snow, no waves. I was alone. The city of Chicago stood all around me- silent, dark, empty. There was only me.

I peered through the on-coming dusk at the face in the water. It stared back up at me, solemn and sad. Her eyes sunk into her head, black circles around them. She had no color in her face, no "Happy Holiday smile," there was no youthful glow; only a pale shell of the woman she had once been. Her lips were chapped and colorless, turned down in a perpetual frown. Her once vibrant hair lay listless around her face.

The young woman grown old before her time depressed me so much. Every part of my being, as an essential to my character, wanted to help. I wanted to make her laugh, to forget about her worries, to smile, grin, anything to change her expression. I couldn't take looking at her anymore.

I closed my eyes. I could still see the woman, the vision even more vivid. She seemed to reach out to me, "Help."

I leaned farther over the railing, hand extended. I wanted to grab her and pull her to safety; it was a feeling so strong. I had to set her free from her wintry prison. I opened my eyes again and looked down at her and realized I was unable to reach her. She was so far below the bridge, it seemed like miles in-between.

She only pleaded with her eyes, "Help, please help."

I couldn't reach her. I tried to turn away, to run as far away as I could. I didn't want to see her face anymore, the horrible glassy brown eyes. I looked around for help, but I was still alone. The buildings all stood gaping at me, watching, waiting to see what I would do.

The urge to reach lower down, to stretch my arm to the green water below was growing stronger. I had to save her, but I couldn't reach. I turned and screamed. The sound echoed off the vacant buildings; there was no one to hear me. I was totally alone.

I started to panic, my heart raced, my breathing was shallow, and I couldn't think straight. All I

knew was to save my sanity I had to get that woman out of the dark water. How? How could I reach her? I searched up and down the bridge, but found no way down. How could I?

My concentration broke when I heard the clock in the old Union Station ring the hour. It was 6 o'clock. I turned to look at the train station. I was supposed to be catching a train back to school. I didn't want to go, but it was what I was supposed to do. I grew scared. I was split between the pull to save the woman in the water and my responsibility to get on that train and return. I had to make a choice.

Trembling I stood back on the railing and leaned over. That terrible pleading face still stared back. "Help me, please help."

"I don't know how," I answered weakly. I leaned farther and farther over the edge trying to extend my reach, groping the air with my frostbitten fingers. Still I tilted closer to the water. I locked eyes with the woman far below. I looked deep into her vacant eyes, wondering who she was and how she got into this mess. My eyes started to water over.

I felt as if I was moving in slow motion, my mind dissociated from my body. First my right leg slid over the stone cold rail, then the left. I squatted on the outer edge of the bridge, reaching out.

"Please help, please."

"I'm trying."

With my arm outstretched hanging off the bridge I looked once more at the woman and one single tear slid down my cheek. I watched it fall slowly to the surface of the water. The ripple effect disturbing the image, the distant reflection of myself.

"I'll save you," I whispered. And with that one tear I returned us to our freedom.



examine the files

by m. kyle silver



in five parts

One: The introductions

There were too many reasons for Sharon to be there, reviewing files, looking over profiles. She did not work for the U.S. government, however. And it was not as if they wanted her. "Wasn't there someone else in the Bureau they could have used?" she thought as she tried to process all of this information. Sharon worked as a researcher and analyst for software companies, and had the opportunity through work to travel. She was also an avid reader, which did not make her, well, a hot date. She avidly read and always questioned the government. So she took the chance to travel when she wanted to, and she got the chance to read stories at her leisure about what the government seemed to be covering up. She knew they were just stories. She thought that they had to be. There was a part of her that knew that there could be no evidence to support any of these stories.

Which made her current position in life confuse her. The Federal Bureau of Investigations wanted to take her from her job, pay her more, and give her only a brief amount of time to learn about who she was going to be the assistant of. She knew full well the name "Fox Mulder", she knew that most people thought of him as a man with nothing else on his mind other than bogey man from outer space. She had read of him at length before; she knew about his longing to find his sister, who disappeared in what looked like (in his opinion) an extra-terrestrial experience. She had learned of "spooky" from past readings, but she gathered that the people that wanted her had only wanted her intellectual mind and her reasoning ability.

The F.B.I. gave her one more piece to the puzzle. In reading about Fox Mulder, she never knew about his partner, Dana Scully, because his partner was only mentioned minimally. She learned from reading that Dana Scully was originally going to medical school, and that Dana had the intellect and the engineering ability to contradict the majority of Fox Mulder's arguments. The reason why the F.B.I. needed Sharon, however, was because Dana Scully quit the F.B.I.

It wasn't as if she wanted to leave working with agent Mulder, it was just that there was too much for her to be going through considering her sometimes perilous situations and her fear of what dan-

gers she put her own family through. Which, from the notes she received to read from the F.B.I., was all that she could gather.

So the F.B.I. needed someone else, someone to fill the shoes of Dana Scully, so to speak. Someone that was intelligent, someone that did not know the nickname "Spooky", and someone that had no opinions about extra-terrestrial existence. Well, Sharon knew of the nickname "Spooky". And her opinions about extra-terrestrial existence, were, well, difficult to make concrete and verbalize. Well, Sharon had her own set of opinions on life in outer space, but she thought that this was something that the government did not need to know about. In the mean time she would read more about Mulder.

He hated his first name. She inferred that in some of the articles she had read about him in the past, but she knew from reading now that Scully and Mulder referred to each other by last name only. When Sharon had access to some of their files in doing her research, she learned about Scully's bout with cancer and her potential inability to have children. And Sharon learned about Scully's sister dying in a shooting accident as well. Sharon was gathering that Scully had been through a lot, and that even for an F.B.I. agent, maybe Scully got to the point where she did not want to put herself through any more danger. Sharon also learned that Mulder and Scully never dated. This amazed her. Sharon saw photographs of Scully, even from her F.B.I. badge, and she was a pretty woman.

She looked at Scully's personal information listed for a moment. She was short, Sharon thought. Being tall was always a problem Sharon had, she could never wear heels, and she was often taller than her male dates.

She tried to keep her mind focused on her new job, and her new research. She thought for a moment about whether or not she would have to placate Mulder when she met him, or if she would have to prove herself to him. While she continued trying to learn, a few agents walked into the room.

"Special agent Damen, would you like to meet your new partner?" one announced. Sharon stood up, tried to act as professional as she could. She started a slight smile as she answered, "Yes, thank you." The agents told her as they took her through a maze of hallways that Mulder was usually late for appointments, and today was not an exception. They told him to show up in agent Skinner's office at ten in the morning, and it was approaching noon.

This was when she started feeling like the new kid on the block. She followed two other agents as they guided her to Skinner's office. There was a receptionist there, but no one else waiting to see agent Skinner. Sharon knew as she walked down the halls of this building that she should not be here, that it just seemed too easy for her to get a job here.

She looked up when she heard the door sliding open for Skinner's office. She was getting used to referring to people by their last names here, looking at the way Mulder and Scully referred to each other. She thought it was funny, that she didn't even really get the chance to talk to him in the past, and she is already referring to him in her own mind by his last name. Sharon looked at him and started to show a grin. She noted that the man working on a few papers at a desk in the office was an older man, and he looked somewhat disinterested in the fact that Sharon walked into the room.

Skinner looked up from what he was doing. "Sorry your new partner kept you waiting. I got off the phone with him just a minute ago, and he said he was walking right over."

"That's not a problem," Sharon answered. "And if there is anything you need from me, please let me know." Skinner looked up and started to smile. He wasn't used to people being so courteous to him in his office. A small intercom beeped from his desk. The receptionist in the front room said that Mulder was here. Skinner told her to let Mulder in. Sharon thought for a brief moment that this was her last opportunity to try to make sure that the first impression she left on him was not terrible. She straightened her jacket. She tucked her dark hair behind her left ear.

The door swung open. A man walked in that matched what she had seen in photographs. He seemed a bit tense to her, that he had something else on his mind. She also thought that he was good

looking. Scully must have had a hard time not dating him. Then again, Scully looked like a good-looking woman from the photographs Sharon saw; Mulder must have had a hard time not dating her. Well, this would be something she would have to learn more about through him in time.

Mulder walked in and looked at both Sharon and Skinner. Sharon thought for a moment that she would have to get used to being called "agent Damen". or just "Damen". Skinner broke the silence and started to speak first. "Special agent Mulder, I wanted to call you in to take this chance to introduce you to agent Sharon Damen." Skinner stepped back and looked at Sharon. "agent Damen, this is agent Mulder."



Sharon couldn't read Mulder's face. She stretched her hand out, in an effort to make the introduction more formal. He shook her hand back and started to smile faintly.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mulder," Sharon spoke, and Mulder replied, "Likewise. Want to see the office we'll be working from?"

Sharon smiled and answered yes before she turned to look to Skinner for approval. "You two get out of here. You have some work to start her on, Mulder?" Skinner asked. "There's something I've gotten a few calls on that I would like to look into. Maybe Damen can help me out," Mulder retorted as he took a step toward the door. Sharon spoke to Skinner before she left the office with Mulder. "Thank you for this opportunity to meet him, Skinner. I'm sure he will have me to work in no time." Sharon turned to the door and followed Mulder out the door.

He led her through a few hallways to an elevator when he said that the X files were usually shoved into the basement because no one in the F.B.I. wanted to take them seriously. They actually walked into the basement (she thought he was kidding when he made the basement reference) and he walked in first into their office space. There was a single desk, a lot of file cabinets, and a poster on the back wall that said "The Truth Is Out There". She tried to soak in all she could about the office, knowing that this would be where she would spend the majority of her time.

"It seems dark in here," Sharon said, knowing she would need to read a lot in there.

"It's Damen, right?"

"Yes."

"I usually use last names. I'm not a fan of first names. I hate my own first name, even."

Sharon was getting that there was at least some joviality in his voice and that he wasn't trying to close her off entirely to working with him. "Gotcha," she answered, trying to act a bit more friendly in how she talked.

She didn't know how to address him, or how comfortable he felt with her. She felt very awkward at times. He continued showing her parts of the office, and explained to her that they would probably be out of the office most of the time when they are actually "working".

Mulder spoke again about the first work they had to do. "There are some people I have to meet up with tonight, about something that was missing last week from the Arreltown murder scene. It might be something worth following. Do you want to work with me on that one?"

"Sure, I can update myself on what has been going on with the murders and the crime reports and anything you have on it as well."

"Great. But I think something else is in order before we can do a ton of work on this."

Sharon paused for a moment. "What?"

Mulder told her about a bar and restaurant that was about a mile from where their office was, and that if they needed lunch he could get the chance to learn more about her. She agreed. They left within fifteen minutes for food.

They grabbed a booth at Tony's diner to get food when they arrived for lunch. There were two pool tables at one side of the diner. It was approaching one in the afternoon when they sat down.

"So you weren't an agent before this, right?"

"No," Sharon answered. "I was doing research for a software company."

"Why did you choose to leave?"

"Better pay, actually. I know that sometimes working for the government doesn't pay well, but I was getting paid so poorly where I was before. And the subject matter fascinated me."

"Yeah, I think they picked you because of your research. They need someone to ground me."

"Well, I'm not trying to ground you, Mulder. I probably inherently agree with more of what you are striving for than the agents that took me on knew."

The chips and salsa came for them to start nibbling on. "But I want to hear more about you," Damen said. "How are you doing after all the changes that have been going on with your work?"

Damen started eating a chip while Mulder answered. "You'll have to be more specific than that, Damen. If you have a question, ask it."

Sharon paused to finish her chip before asking. "Why did Scully leave?"

She knew at that moment she caught him off guard. "You should have known I would ask that question eventually," Mulder answered, "I didn't think you'd ask it so fast."

"You mean, on the first day?"

Mulder smiled. He paused, the way Sharon did before, before he started talking about her. "Now, you've got to promise me, Damen, that we'll play a game of pool if I tell you."

"My dad used to have a pool table," Sharon told him.

"Well, usually I'm a better shot when I'm drinking. Don't ask me why on that one, but I'll have to prove I can beat your ass at pool after meeting up with Swanson tonight. We're supposed to be meeting him at a bar anyway."

She knew it wasn't a date, but she thought this would be a good chance to get to know Mulder better. She took him up on his offer and he started thinking of what to say about Scully.

"Scully wanted to contradict me with reason all the time," Mulder explained as they were served their food. "But I always replied that there are things that science cannot yet explain, and that with every decade that does by we learn more and can explain more. She had the background to test theories scientifically, so in a way she kept me grounded."

"Your alter-ego, in a way?"

"In a way. She did always wear a cross around her neck, though, that her mother gave her, and it always stated to me that people can go out on a limb for their own faith."

"That faith inherently means that there is no reason involved.," Damen answered.

"And your beliefs on religion?" Mulder asked.

"I'm an atheist, but I believe that religion can be a very useful tool to keep people from doing bad all the time," Damen answered. "But I thought I was asking the questions, and you were answering."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get to meet Scully sometime in the next few weeks, because I try to convince to her come back to the F.B.I. when I see her. You can see how we work together then. But in the meantime," Mulder said as he pushed his plate away from his seat the the booth, "You owe me a game of pool."

Sharon smiled. It had been a while since she had played, but she thought she could still hold her own. She started to get up as Mulder signalled to the waitress toward the pool table.

Sharon started thinking about it. In these circles, she would have to get used to thinking of herself as "Damen". Sounded like Damien, and it was only one letter off. Sharon. Damen. She walked over to the pool table to play a game with Mulder. She knew, just from her first day of work, that this was going to be a fun ride. There was a lot of work to do, and a lot to learn, and maybe Mulder would

trust her enough to let her work with him. Only time would tell, as she broke for their game Mulder set up. "That was a good break," Mulder noted. As she thought before, this was going to be a fun ride.

Mulder's cellular phone rang while they were playing. She listened while she was shooting pool. When he got off the phone, Damen said, "So we're supposed to be meeting him at 6:30, later than you had originally said, and he has more paperwork to verify what he was talking about." Mulder looked up. "You were listening?"

"I know I'm the new employee, but I've got a photographic memory," Damen answered. "You know that the photos he had could very well be doctored, even in a darkroom before they ever get to photographic paper. I used to do that kind of work myself in the darkroom."

"I know. Damn, there is a part of you that's like Scully."

"Well, don't let that get around," Damen answered. "It also helps that I was a photography minor in college." She paused before telling Mulder the table was his. "And yes, the table is yours, and you better get to work, because I'm about to win the game."

Mulder looked at the table while she picked up her net cellular phone and dialed one of her friends. "Yeah, hi, Steve, it's me, Sharon. I was wondering if you could do me a favor." She paused to let him talk before she continued on the phone. "Well, I need as much information pulled that you can muster up for me on the murders that have been going on at Arreltown, and I would also like you to rummage through any info you can Get on Eric Swanson."

She paused again with the phone. "No, it's just someone I have to meet up with, so I want to know in advance what I'm getting into."

Mulder finished his shots while she got off the phone. "How did you know Swanson's name was Eric?" he asked.

Damen answered, "You referred to him as Eric once in the conversation on the phone earlier." She looked at the pool table. "You left one ball of each of ours on the table. And by the way, My friend is e-mailing me info about the murders and Eric this afternoon. We'll see what he comes up with in the next two or three hours."

He made his final shot, hitting the four ball into the side pocket. She left the cue ball in a perfect line with the eight ball for the pocket. Damen called her pocket and made the shot. "Maybe you'll prove me wrong another time with pool," Damen said, "but we've got to get back to work now. I can start researching this all this afternoon and get ahead of things." They both reached into their wallets for bills for lunch and left to go back to the office.

Damen sat at the laptop computer that was handed to her, down from the computer that Scully used while she was working. She was able to get on line to her personal account as well as her governmental accounts and she had a stack of information waiting for her about both the murder problems and Eric Swanson. She read information for two hours. "Five people killed," Damen said. "And the police don't have an idea for a motive."

"Well, this Swanson said he managed to get pictures of-"

"Wait," Damen demanded to make sure that she could gather information without having it fed to her through Mulder's tinted glasses. Mulder stopped and looked at her for a moment, as if she seemed like she actually was Scully. She wasn't trying to be Scully. She was just trying to make sure she could keep her soul in tact through this introduction period with Mulder. She paused and waited until Mulder stopped before she would start talking about her theories and what she had learned. "I know people say they saw a light source from right behind the house. That night, a lot of things could have caused that light to appear. I know what you're going to think it was. It could even be something much more directed to the actual murder. So for the moment I am going to put the 'Mulder Theory' on hold." Damen paused. Mulder leaned forward in his chair and got a bag of sunflower seeds to eat while he listened. Damen saw him do this and knew that if he was not even going to stop her when she had paused, she must have earned some respect somehow

from him. "Now, there has also been a theory or two going on about an occasional noise near the main hole cover on the south-west side of the house. This could very possibly be something worth pursuing, whether or not it was a non-human doing the sludge-snooping on the night of the murder. It is definitely something to consider. But I have been reading over these reports from the police departments talking about who has to be the likely candidate for this act, and is it an act of serial killing. They have a couple of people up for it, and there is one thing I have noticed in their lists of men and their victims. Remembering how a map works, there are only a few people from the police reporter's and police lists that can come close, but we still don't have a motive. We do have a motive if someone drove them to do this, though. Only two out of the thirteen people on this list have religious ties... The one thing that I noticed was that one of the men, who knew these women, worked in a record store. He was a manager."

Mulder looked at her when she paused for a long enough period of time. "And?" he finally said. "Being a record store manager doesn't make you want to kill people."

Damen smiled. "It depends on what his musical tastes were. I e-mailed the friend I called earlier and asked him to send me anything he could about this Thompson guy from the list. Thompson used to be in a band, used to dabble in drugs in his younger years, nothing like an addictive person or personality or addiction here. The band work that he was doing died a couple of years ago and he lost contact with some of his friends and became more obsessed with generating electronic music and listening to artists that didn't even have the money to produce albums anymore.

Mulder waited for the pause long enough to speak. "So what are we talking here, "techno" music?"

"The material Thompson was generating was partially sampled, partially electronic, and partially classical. He owned a few instruments and could actually play very well. He liked being able to put in a bass line that could potentially damage your ear drum. My friend couldn't even find anything out about the bands that Thompson listened to since."

Mulder had to ask. "Who is this friend of yours anyway?"

"Oh, it's a friend of mine. Steve. Talented. A computer geek. He can find out what the cops aren't telling you most of the time. So I had a theory - and it's a long shot, but I could try it -"

"Oh, do tell," Mulder said in a bad voice, mocking her attempt to get more information.

"Steve was going to e-mail me back and tell me if this Dave Thompson shops, or if he goes to bars. If it was a bar, I could do this with no problem - just try to talk to him, tell him I hate this music, what does he listen to, you know, that kind of talking. See if he'll tell me anything. It's worth a try, if he even goes out in public."

Mulder leaned back in his chair again and stopped himself from shoving more sunflower seeds into his mouth. "So are you going to suggest to me that we may have a musical murderer on our hands?"

"Well, it is my first day, and you don't let me finish, and you don't have to be hard on me."

"So then, what is it about this music? He hits just the right chords to make him want to kill?"

"It could always be a biological reaction to certain combination of chords playing. He has even created a few in instruments on his own, according to what I have read. It could be something that only certain people have a certain reaction to when hearing this music by these other artists that nobody else even wants to listen to. It could be a chemical combination between something he ate or was given to him as he grew up, combined with the music." Damen paused. Mulder just stared at her.

"Well, it could be any of that," Damen said, to fill the void of silence. Damen's cellular phone rang. Sharon talked on the phone for a minute, then handed her phone over to Mulder. "It's Scully," Damen said. She turned back to her computer to see if she had any follow-up information in where this potential murderer hung out. Or if there was any additional information on the bands he liked, while Mulder talked. She tried not to think about the way that Mulder's voice didn't change at all

when he talked on the phone with Scully. She barely got any opinion of Scully in the amount of time she got on the phone with her.

Mulder got off the phone. "Scully and I were going to meet after I got off work Friday. If you want to come, you are more than welcome."

Damen paused. "If you want me there." She paused. "I can show up late, if you want to talk to Scully at all without me around."

Mulder looked up at her. "You know, in some ways you are like her, and in some ways you are different. You're analytical, you've got a tinge of red in your hair -"

"My hair is brown, it just turns red when it starts to get light in the sun. And I'm not as short as she is -" Damen tried to say as Muler cut in. "I know, I said you were different. You're coming up with an idea that I probably would have only thought about later in the game. We can have people here checking on whether or not those victims bought anything recently from that music store, giving them a closer link. And your willingness to go out to try to talk to this guy if he goes out -well, it is not what Scully would do."

"Well, if we need to get information, he may be our best source, and Steve e-mailed me that he goes to a corner bar from his house after his late shift on Thursdays."

"Well, Scully would never have stated she could go to a bar and do some detective work. That was my point about your differences."

Damen paused. "Well, today is Wednesday, so I can go to that bar after he gets off of work. Your call."

Neither spoke. Damen had to break the silence again. "And I don't know if you trust me yet, Mulder, and I don't know if you think I have motives in destroying you by working with you."

Mulder popped the last of his sunflower seeds into his mouth. "Well, you've got some damn good ideas, and you're willing to follow up on them. Maybe I could battle you at pool at the bar tomorrow."

"Or we do do that after you meet with Eric Swan tonight. They have a pool table where we're all meeting, right?"

Mulder started to smile again. Damen knew that she was developing trust with him, whether or not Mulder would vocally admit it. She also knew that she would get her chance to meet Scully.

And that she should buy some sunflower seeds to leave in the office for when Mulder runs out. And that she could beat him at pool whenever she wanted.

Tension mounted, the first case was solved, and Damen waited to meet Scully.



Two: F i n i s h i n g a C a s e and F e e l i n g t h e T e n s i o n

Tension mounted, the first case was solved, and Damen waited to meet Scully.

Damen told Mulder that instead of going with him to the bar, she would go home and try to get a little work done before meeting up with Eric Swanson.

Then, suddenly, without explanation, all she could think was that it was strange when it started to happen to her. She didn't know how this had come to be; all she knew was that everything was hap-

pening all at once. She was bending over to shoot a game at one of their rounds of pool and Mulder came up from behind and brushed his hip along hers. Damen stopped her shot and looked up at him.

"Oh," Mulder said while he was holding back a smile, "did I interrupt you?"

Damen looked at him for only a brief moment and went back to preparing for her shot. Mulder let her prepare for a little while longer before he spoke again. "Because I wouldn't want to do anything to spoil your shot," he finally said.

She realized that Mulder was trying to play a game with her, to screw up her ability to beat him at pool, so she thought she would play along. She stood up and slowly turned herself around to look at him. She kept her head on an angle and let her hair start to fall over her face.

She figured that if Mulder was going to try to use flirtation as a playing card, well, she knew how to play that game well . . . She rested her body weight on one leg, letting her hip show, standing like she was a girl wanting something from a guy, and she said, "Oh, you know I've been wanting something." She looked at him for just a moment longer, letting the tension form in their silence and their stares, before she reached for the chalk for the pool game. Mulder walked over to get and ran his hand along the chalk before she got the chance and then turned back until his eyes met hers. It was as if they were in a room alone, and not that there was a full bar of people there with them.

"There are so many things that feel so good to the touch that we forget about," Mulder said to her as he kept his voice low. Damen looked at him, knowing that her words would only break the moment. Mulder ran one of his hands along hers, guiding her hand to the chalk. At the same time he reached his other hand behind her neck and leaned toward hers so they could kiss.

The next thing Damen knew was that she and Mulder couldn't get their hands off each other. He kept one hand at the small of her back and the other hand at the back of her neck while he kissed her. He pulled back from her lips long enough to ask, "Where would you like to go next?"

Damen started think of all of this. Why are they doing this? Yes, he's cute, but is this going to affect how we work together? Two sides of her brain were having a battle; one wanted her to continue with him, the other knew she should stop. She didn't know how to answer that question. Her mind started to panic as she looked and saw two different sides of Mulder.

Then she woke up.

She got to her home on time from work that evening and went straight to bed. The chaos of her dream and the alarm clock were both making her instantly alert and awake.

And frightened.

She got dressed, noting that she still had time to get ready and stuff a cheese sandwich in her mouth before she met Mulder at the bar Wednesday night. When Mulder noticed that Eric Swanson wasn't in the bar yet, Damen noted that he didn't get a beer yet and asked, "What kind of beer do you drink?"

Mulder looked up at her. "Something hard, none of that sweet beer, and after this meeting, when I kick your ass at pool, I'll be buying the beer." Damen smiled as she got up to make her way to the bar. Hearing Mulder state that he was going to "kick her ass" at pool that night made her think about her dream before coming out to do work here, instead of doing research the way she said she would.

A stocky man with gray-white hair came up to their table and started talking to Mulder while she got the beers. Damen walked back and tried to understand what passed in the conversation as Swanson handed a manila envelope over to Mulder. "Hope I'm not interrupting," Damen said as she put the beers down on the table so she could make a formal introduction. Swanson got up to shake her hand as they met.

After introductions were made, Swanson talked to Mulder about what information he had. Damen started looking through the contents of the envelope, knowing that Mulder could fill her in on the conversation later. About half of the contents of the envelope were photographs, poor ones at

best, in black and white, of the post-murder scenes. There were a couple testimonies listed where witnesses mentioned when cars circled before the murder that was playing music. She thought that this may be a lead they were looking for, as long as the F.B.I. would be able to follow up on it, define the kind of car it was or what the license plate of the car was, or who was driving the car.

Damen managed to get from Swanson that he occasionally took pictures, and that he has his own darkroom in his house basement. Which made her think that the photos he was supplying were pointless for investigation.

It was nearly eight in the evening when Swanson left, so Damen asked Mulder to give her his opinion of the information. "Well, you had to catch him talking about a car going by before the murder that was playing unrecognizable music."

"The music could have been his own, if we're both talking about Dave Thompson," Damen added. "And a witness or two in the reports Swanson kept here noticed the music as well. Maybe the Bureau can find out anything about the car."

Mulder paused before speaking. "Well, let me call the Bureau now, to see if they can get any reports on the car or the witnesses. In the meantime " - he dropped all of his change to the table - "set up a table for a game of pool."

Damen smiled. They ended up playing pool at the bar for at least two hours, and the more Mulder drank, it was true, the better he actually got at playing pool. They were neck and neck in winning games as they talked about people to talk to in order to solve this case. In the back of Damen's mind was the fact that Mulder brushed up against her while she was trying to make a shot. It reminded her too much of the dream she had a few hours earlier.

And in the back of her mind she was also thinking about meeting with Thompson tomorrow. She got a scan of his face in the computer from the F.B.I. records of people so she would know who to look for tomorrow at the bar. "Are you thinking of going to the bar tomorrow to see Thompson as well?" Damen asked Mulder.

"I'll let you know," Mulder answered. They finished their last game of pool, left a meager tip at the table, and proceeded to their homes, where Sharon would try not to think about all the subjects going on in her mind. What to think about Swanson's information. How to act around Thompson. Whether to think anything of the possibility of Mulder.

The next day at work was filled with research for Damen to work though, and Mulder continued to work on getting information about the cars that circled the murder scene the day of the murder. He was away from his desk most of the day when his desk phone rang. Damen picked it up. "Agent Damen . . . Yes, hello, no, he has been at another lab most of the day today; is his cellular phone off?" Damen looked over as she said those words and saw that his phone was at the side of his desk and was switched off. She turned it back on. "Yes, he left it here, but if there is anything you would like me to do . . . Well, as far as I knew, Friday was still on for the two of you. Well, he doesn't have anything listed on his calendar here, but otherwise Saturday seems fine. I can have him get back to you on it . . . It is a pleasure talking to you, Ms. Scully, I would really like the chance to get to know you better . . . Well, thank you, I think I'm free then too, so I could make it with Mulder. I promise, I'll give him the message and have him call you. Would you want me to look for any additional schedules or calendars he has -" Damen said as she opened a lower file cabinet drawer and found what looked like far-too-personal video tapes, then quickly closed the drawer - "Oh, okay . . ."

Before Damen could say her goodbyes, Mulder walked into the room. She handed him his cellular phone which was turned off and said her good-byes to Scully as she took the stack of files from Mulder's other hand so he could talk to her.

The most that they could gather from the day was the following:

1. Damen would try to meet up with Dave Thompson that night at a bar near his work,
2. Mulder would not give her an answer as to whether or not he would be at the bar as well,

3. Mulder and Scully and Damen would meet together Saturday morning at around eleven,
 4. The police had no leads whatsoever on whom the murderer could be,
 5. The music could not be identified from the car that went by the murder scene beforehand,
 but one of the cars was Dave Thompson's, and

6. Mulder refused to believe that Damen could beat him at pool.

After she talked to her contacts about getting references to some of the bands that Thompson listened to, and after Mulder contacted some of his friends outside the Bureau about the case (all she could hear was a single name, as she tried to pronounce it phonetically to figure out who it was, "Fro-hic-kee . . . Fro-hic-kee . . . Fro-hic-kee . . . ") she prepared to leave for work and told him that she would be at the Thompson bar at about ten-thirty or even in the evening.

Mulder wished her luck.

She reminded him to call her if he got any information; he told her to do the same.

And so she left.

Hours later, after she got some information about what kinds of bands he had listened to, she walked to the bar herself, wondering if Mulder would show up there on chance, even though he earlier over the phone said he was going to work at his apartment for the night. She scanned the room, tried very successfully to look irritated, saw only one man in the corner that looked like Thompson, and she made her way to another nearby corner. She threw her purse on the chair, asked the bartender for a shot of bourbon and a pint of Old Style beer, brushed her bangs out of her face with her fingers, and then sat down. She glanced up only once in passing while the music played on the music box, continued to look irritated, then looked back down as the bartender brought Damen the drinks she ordered.

Damen pulled out a five to cover the drinks, then pulled out all of her quarters to make a choice on the music box. She took the shot of whiskey; she then thought for a moment about drinking the beer to chase it down. She knew that drinking the beer would only make her look like she was trying to cover up the taste, so she waited on drinking until after she made her music choices. Damen passed the pool table and looked at the music selections in the music box. She continued to look disgusted and turned around to make her way back to her seat. When she did, she noticed Thompson looking at her. She thought this was her moment to make her move.

She walked by his seat before she stopped to ask him a question. "Do you like any of the music here?" she asked.

Thompson looked up at her for a moment before he spoke. "I usually come here for a drink only after my last shift at work."

Damen smiled. She was hoping the "pissed-off" look she was giving was getting her anywhere. "It looks as if your day was worse than mine, so I'll leave you alone." Damen walked back to her seat.

She sat at her seat for a while and noticed that this Dave guy would occasionally look at her. There was next to nothing else he could be watching in the bar, so she spoke up at him while she remained seated. "Is this place normally this dead?"

She first talking started their conversation. "Are you normally so angry?" he asked back.

"Tough day at work, a gut interested in me too, and I have to pay rent for the next month." Damen paused. "And I just wanted to get away to hear some music I liked, and there's not even any good music here?"

"What are you looking for? I work at a record store."

Damen thought this was her chance. "Well, there's 'Post-Axing', 'Weeds and Flowers' . . . There are other ones that are more acoustic than electronic, but the record stores haven't carried them for a while."

Dave's eyes lit up and he got up to walk closer to her. She stood up when he started to come

closer. "Well, I have a few of those in my own collection, and yeah, they haven't produced an album in a while. You know, I even write music and -"

"Really? Is it anything like the other stuff that I was looking for?"

"Well, I've never tried to get a contract or anything, I just like doing it. I even created a few instruments to come up with the right sounds for certain songs, and -"

Damen and Thompson were standing and talking when she noticed Mulder walk into the bar. Thompson had his back to the bar. "Is something wrong - I didn't even get your name, so . . . " Damen made a point to not bring identification, in case Thompson found her story out. "I'm Alex."

Thompson looked at her quizzically. "Alexandria is the full name, and I get nicknames Alex, Allie, Andrea, Andy . . . I like Alex, so that's what everyone calls me."

Dave smiled. "Well, I'm Dave, but now you have to answer what the matter is?"

"Oh, I just saw a guy that was interested in me walk into the bar. I don't think he noticed me, so maybe I won't have to deal with it."

Dave turned around to look at Fox when Mulder looked up at them both. Dave turned back to her. "Sorry I turned around and messed it up for you . . . I suppose you'll have to go over there to talk to him. Sorry."

Damen paused to look at him before she spoke. "I'll live. I'll also be back in a minute, as long as you have a tape of your stuff for me to take with me. And thanks."

Damen walked toward Mulder and started to speak before he got the chance. "He thinks you're interested in me, and that is why I was having a bad day and used that as a stepping stone to meet and talk to him. He talked about music and I told him I wanted a tape of his music because he looked at you, making you look at us."

Mulder looked over at Thompson. "He's pulling a tape out of his jacket. If it is his music, what he is creating may be enough to get an analysis on it, which may be enough to ask him in for questioning."

"If that all happens . . ." Damen added.

"If that all happens he will be in our custody and we can sample his chemical responses to the music as well." Mulder looked at her.

"What are you looking at?"

"I don't know if this all has ever been this easy, solving a murder case. Now . . . Am I supposed to act like I'm interested in you?" Mulder smiled.

Damen thought about the adult tapes he had in the office and his lack of a social life. "Do you know how to even act interested?"

"Who says I would be acting?"

This made her blush before she tried to change the subject. "Any news on what the murdered people bought in the record store?"

"Very light pop. Crap like Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, Bette Midler."

"What, you don't like that stuff?"

They both smiled. "Well, I should get back to the table. I'll see how quickly I can get the tape. If you wait here, you may be a reason for me to leave when I get the tape." Damen stood up and walked back to Dave's chair, where he lay down after she left him to talk to Mulder.

Mulder could see that Damen got the tape from Thompson, and waited for Damen to leave. Ten minutes after Damen left, Thompson went to the bathroom and Mulder saw from going the bathroom earlier that there was no window to the street level the front door was near, so he left to meet up with her. Damen was waiting in the car, holding the tape in her hand.



"I couldn't play it, in case it is not a chemical reaction that only certain people can understand." Mulder looked at her. She looked down at the tape again. "Maybe it makes us all killers."

"Maybe we should go, so Thompson doesn't see us."

Damen drove him to another bar while he called some friends saying that he needed a copy of a tape that he was otherwise bringing to the Bureau. Two friends of Mulder's met them at the new bar, and they told him they would make two recorded copies without listening to it and return it to him in the bar within two hours.

"So the girl with the car gets stuck into carting you around, huh?" She smiled before he insisted that she go home and he would give her the third copy, the original, in case she was confronted by Dave again.

The rest of the next day was spent researching chemical reactions that occur in the brain when specific audible noises are detected. Damen spend most of the day at her computer, and Mulder was waiting for people from the lab to tell him what he already knew the answer was. By the end of the work day they called in Thompson to ask him about the music he was playing and listening to. Due to eyewitness accounts and chemical reactions that are caused with some people and that music, he was being questioned for his accountability during the times of those murders.

He had no alibi. Damen & Mulder talked about it over french fries & beers Friday night.

"I noticed Dave saw you when he was first brought in this afternoon."

"Well, I would have had an alibi, too. You work for the government, and I am a researcher for computer programs. I could tell him enough about the Unix systems alone that you would never think I was wrong."

"I'm assuming that you wouldn't be?"

"Exactly." Damen smiled, and Mulder looked at her as if to ask exactly what she was thinking.

"Yes, I have that much control over my emotions and I am that good of an actress. I think it's an art." Mulder smiled with her when she said this.

"Couple that with your good looks and a pretty good job of faking it at pool," Mulder said as he got up to claim the pool table, "it almost makes you a worthy adversary."

Damen smiled as he walked away. The rest of the evening was spent the way their other pool session was spent, with him drinking, with her drinking, with his game getting better, with her game getting worse. Occasionally she would see Mulder trying to make a shot that was almost impossible and she would try to talk him through it, through the training she received from a lifetime of having a pool table around. Occasionally he would see Damen attempting a nearly impossible shot; he would comment on it, she would tell him that she is trying harder shots to improve her game. He would watch her try and try to talk her through how a shot should be made.

A handful of times he even stood behind her to practice making a shot. All she could think of when he would do this to her was the tangled web they are weaving, that she has had odd glimpses into his personal life, that she is supposed to have a business relationship with him, and that she is feeling his hip against hers as she is trying to make a shot in pool.

At one point, when Mulder was trying to tell her to lower her body to the table so she would be closer to eye level when making her shot, at that one point all she could feel was his chest against her back and his arms around her arms to make the shot. She turned her head and his face was right next to hers; their lips were only inches apart. She had to consciously think: "don't let this happen to you, Sharon, don't make the first move, let him do it -"

When someone hit the table, they were playing on and said, "So are you gonna play pool or what?"

Mulder and Damen both turned and looked at the man at the other end of the table. They had

no idea how long they were looking at each other.

And they had no idea who was willing to make the first move.

three: The Meeting, the next case and the intrigue

When Saturday morning rolled around Sharon got dressed two or three times in her apartment, looking for something sensible to wear for her meeting with Mulder and Scully. She knew that Scully was going back into research in medicine and was starting to work at a private doctor's office; she also knew that Scully had not talked to Mulder about the X files. Sharon still couldn't figure out if Scully wanted to still be a part of the cases, or if Scully felt anything about Mulder.

Damen knew that she felt things about Mulder herself, even when she knew she shouldn't.

Damen said she would pick Mulder up at ten so that they could get to the cafe to meet Scully by ten thirty. Damen got a jacket as well as a sweater to throw on over her blouse so she could be prepared for whatever Mulder was wearing for the early lunch. As soon as she pulled up to his apartment she phoned him to let him know she was downstairs. He told her to come up to his apartment. She took the keys out of the ignition and started to make her way to his home to wait for him.

She noted that he lived in apartment 42, which was the answer to the meaning of life that she saw in a movie years ago. She wondered if this number had the same meaning for Mulder. She got to his apartment and knocked. She heard him yell to come in. When she walked in she saw an apartment with no substantial furniture. She saw a basketball on the floor near his desk. She even noted the edges from tape marked in an "x" on the window by his desk. She figured that in time she would ask him about this.

Mulder came stumbling out of his back room with some jeans and a t-shirt on. White. She noted this mentally and decided to wear the sweater instead of the jacket when she got the choice back at her car. Mulder started talking; Damen hardly heard a word, so Mulder finally asked her what she was thinking.

"You don't spend much time in this place, do you?" she asked as she looked around his apartment. Mulder smiled at her question, knowing she was getting to know him all too well, even when they had only worked together for less than a week, smiled at the thought and then grabbed his jacket and made for the door. Damen followed.

As they pulled up to the diner, Mulder said that Scully was there. "How do you know?" Damen asked, and Mulder said he recognized the car she was using.

Mulder and Damen walked into the restaurant, where a hostess waited to seat them. Mulder looked around the main room while Damen asked the hostess, "We're here to meet a Dana Scully. Do you know where she is?" The hostess guided them to her table. Damen noted, after looking at Scully as they walked towards her, that she was seated facing the front of the restaurant so that she could see if they were coming.

Damen let Mulder take the lead in seeing her before she would introduce herself to Scully. They spoke for a brief moment before Scully turned to notice Damen, so Damen spoke.

Dana Scully, it is a pleasure to formally meet you," Damen said as she extended her arm to greet her with a handshake. "I am Sharon Damen."

Dana smiled and shook her hand back and said as they all sat down at the table, "So this is what they replaced me with?"

Mulder answered. "Well, they weren't looking for a Scully clone, and I think there's a case we are going to have to check out about a bank robbery involving a woman who has the chip in her neck."

"So they handed it to you?"

"Well, they could have handed it over to some other guy to take care of it, but -"

"Well, what has been going on with you otherwise?"

"There was this murder case about a guy to had a chemical reaction to certain sounds is created instruments -"

Damen interrupted him. "If you'll indulge me, I would like to hear about what has been going on with Dana." Damen looked over at Mulder, then looked back. "Unless you wanted to tell her about the story."

Dana looked up at both of them. "Well," she started, "I got into the schools I wanted to in order to complete my medical education. Classes for them don't start until the fall though, so I have a few months to kill."

"What about work?" Mulder asked.

"Don't even think you'll convince me to go back to the Bureau, but I saved money from working there before that I have plenty to live on until I got to school. I should be interning there, working for professors and the like, while I am going to school, so I should financially be fine.

"Is that what you wanted to go into?" Damen asked.

Scully paused for a moment before answering her question. "Well, that is what I originally was going to school for."

Mulder cut the tension with another innocuous question. "How is the family?"

"When I visit them, everything seems good. I think my mom and my brother are happy that I'm not in the Bureau after what happened to my sister. I think they like to make sure that everything is safe, so they don't want anything to happen to me."

"Do you get to see your brother much, and your sister-in-law and their little one?"

"They're usually stationed somewhere that I can't even get to, so I don't get to see them too often. I think they're afraid, in part, of having me deal with their child after I found out I couldn't have any."

Damen looked over at Mulder after she said this. She tried to remember if there was any of this referred to in the information she read before she started working. She wondered if there was any connection between that and the chip that was found in her head after she was abducted. They had ordered food and the waitress made sure they all had coffee at the table before Damen asked, "Been dating now that you're not at the Bureau? I'm sure that working here full time put a cramp in your social life."

"I really haven't had much of a chance to think about meeting people. I never liked the idea of meeting men in bars anyway..." Scully turned towards Mulder to continue speaking. "So what is the new case you are working on?"

"I just heard that there was this woman named Stacy that held up a bank. The teller said she specifically remembered that Stacy seemed scared and she told the teller that some men just kidnapped her boyfriend and that she had to get this cash in order to let her boyfriend free."

"I head about that on on television," Scully answered.

"They checked out the healthy of both Stacy and her boyfriend after this all happened, those two don't have the money, because Stacy told the police that the kidnappers told her to put it in a certain bag in a certain dumpster and leave immediately following the robbery."

"Which she apparently did?"

"Apparently."

"So why is this an x file again?"

"She was a member of the MUFON group, a new member, so -"

"So they brought it to you," Scully finished. "When did you hear about this?"

Just now. Will have to look over files today." Mulder turned to Damen to finish his thought.

"Since you used to be a researcher, you might be able to help me and get information on this one. I

might be calling you today or tomorrow."

Damen looked at them and smiled. "No problem. I don't have plans this weekend."

The rest of the morning was spent with Mulder and Scully talking about past cases, and Damen tried to mentally absorb what she could from them talking about the past. By the end of the meal, Mulder tried to throw in a comment about how she should be back working with the F.B.I., and she would always catch his attempts and discount them. They came up with a plan to meet together next weekend, and Scully talked with Damen about meeting up in a bar some weeknight the following week.

They said good bye to each other, and Sharon spent the rest of Saturday catching up on the work that she didn't have time to do in her home during the week. She couldn't get everything done for the weekend on Saturday, but she figured she would have time to work on it Sunday.

Mulder called Damen on her cellular phone Sunday morning.

"Damen, hope I didn't wake you -"

"No, I was up. What's going on?"

"Well, they've forwarded a file to me about a woman who was forced to rob a bank as their cover because some people kidnapped her boyfriend and held him hostage for her to do it. They have interviewed her over and over again for a week, but everything seemed clear."

"This is the one you were talking about with Scully," Damen said. "Did she previously report that her boyfriend was kidnapped?"

He was kidnapped less than an hour before she had to go forward and rob the bank. She also said she was worried about what they would do to her boyfriend, so she went ahead and did it."

"Any leads on the burglars?"

"No. She had to drop the money she stole off in a certain dumpster outside the bank and someone else came by very shortly afterward and picked up the bag and drove off."

"So where is she now?"

"About to leave the country with her boyfriend."

"Oh, that doesn't sound suspicious," Damen said sarcastically.

"Well, they say this was traumatic, and they had money saved to go away anyway."

"Like Scully asked, so... why is this an X file?"

"Damen, I don't know. She had the chip in her neck like other tested women in the past from the MUFON group, a chip like Scully had, so they pushed this case on to us."

Damen thought for a moment about having the money to travel and getting the money for the bank robbery, which seems the obvious answer to this case. "So what are the names of this happy couple again, and when so we meet them?"

"Stacy and Ed. In New York. And we have a flight to meet them before they leave for their trip to some unknown destination. I've got my friends looking into what flight tickets they could have bought. Meet me at the airport in a half hour?"

Damen met Mulder at the airport, after she had already confirmed their flight plans. They were both leaving for an early flight. Mulder told Damen about everything he could while they were in the air, and Damen thought the entire time that she should act like she was just tagging along with Mulder, that she did not work for the F.B.I., so that she wouldn't be so well-guarded when they arrived at their apartment to talk to them. She posed this idea once to Mulder and he did not seem too inter-



ested in thinking about it. This is when she decided in her head to make the introductions and she would not give her title in working with him.

The rest of the time of the plane she talked on her phone with her friends who tried to tell her as much as they could about these two. Stacy seemed pretty mild-mannered; Ed is the one who had a less than perfect track record. She tried to tell this information to Mulder while they were in the air and while she was still on the phone. He looked back at her with a look on his face that said that this doesn't prove that they did anything wrong. She knew that this was possibly something to consider when they appeared at their doorstep, however.

On the ride from the airport to Ed and Stacy's, Mulder asked Damen to talk to Stacy about the chip in her neck, that Damen should use the excuse that she had a friend that had the same scar in her neck. Mulder said he would talk to Ed, figuring that the man could talk to the man, and the woman could talk to the woman.

That implied hint of sexism sat in the back of her mind, but she did not bring it up to Mulder.

They got to the door and Damen asked if she could knock. Mulder let her. The door started to open and the woman opening the door seemed very saddened, very stressed. Damen started by saying that she didn't mean to interrupt anyone, and when Stacy didn't show much of a reaction, Damen told her that they weren't trying to tell anything, that they just wanted to ask some questions. Stacy seemed apprehensive, but let them in and asked who they were. Mulder introduced himself, said that he worked for the F.B.I., and before he got the chance to introduce her, Damen crept in and said that she was Mulder's girlfriend, and that they were just out for a drive when Mulder said he wanted to stop by.

Damen noted almost instantly that Stacy didn't like the fact that Mulder worked for the F.B.I. and she hoped that maybe their lack of knowledge about Damen's association with the Bureau would be helpful to them later in the day.

It was.

Stacy called her boyfriend into the room, assuming that Mulder wanted to ask them questions. Ed was visibly angered by the visitors, and Damen did her best to say that they were just stopping in. She looked over at Mulder once, and she could read in his eyes that he was also still processing the fact that she said she was his girlfriend, and not that she was also an employee of the Bureau. Either way, Ed's anger at the interruption could not go unnoticed.

"Didn't we answer enough questions this weekend?" Ed asked.

Mulder started a conversation with him. "It seems that you have, sir, but there are still so many holes in the story that we thought that maybe there were some pieces of the puzzle you weren't telling us about that could make this clearer for us.

"We said everything we knew," Ed said as he paced back and forth, while Stacy wandered to the back of the room by herself. Damen was beginning to think that should could take the time to talk to Stacy about the cut in her neck before Ed's discussion with Mulder got more and more heated. Damen stood up to go over an talk to Stacy When Ed started walking toward her with his hand in his pocket. Both Mulder and Damen caught Ed's motion, but Damen did not want to pull her weapon yet because she did not want to reveal that she had a weapon.

Ed pulled his weapon first, and Mulder followed. Ed started talking immediately, first to Damen, then to Mulder.

"What do you think you're doing, young lady?" Then Ed turned his head toward Mulder as he kept the gun pointed at Damen. "And do you want me to do something to you little girlfriend?"

Mulder kept his eyes fixed on Ed and Damen kept her eyes on Stacy. She reached around to a drawer near where she was standing so she could point a gun at Damen while Ed could take care of Mulder. They all sat in silence for a brief moment. Damen finally spoke. "I was just going to talk to

Stacy," Damen said.

Ed looked at both Mulder and Damen and told Stacy to keep her gun on Damen while he took Mulder's weapons.

Ed did most of the asking once Stacy and Ed pulled their guns out on Mulder and Damen. Damen was able to continue to act as if she was just there with Mulder, that she was not an agent for the F.B.I., so she thought she cover was good for the moment. Damen held on to Mulder's arm for support while they stood in their living room. Damen looked at Mulder, hoping her look would be enough for him to be clear on her idea that she was willing to play this role if it would save them. It would also mean that they wouldn't check Damen for a weapon. They already pulled Mulder's gun and did not ask Damen for her weapon.

"Why do you hang around with this guy, Sharon?" Ed asked while Stacy sat in a chair in their living room with her gun on them.

Sharon looked at Mulder and said "Should I tell them?" And Mulder started quickly talking back quietly. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Well I might as well tell them the truth, they've got the guns, and I don't like guns, and -"

"This is why I didn't want you to come with me," Mulder answered. She knew at this moment that he understood the value of him being the Bureau agent and Damen being the girlfriend. "I thought this wouldn't take long and nothing was going to happen," Mulder continued.

"You don't like guns?" Stacy said to Sharon, stopping their conversation.

"I don't like having guns around," Damen answered. "I've never shot a gun." Damen looked back at Mulder in the silence before turning back to Ed to answer his original question. "I'm with him - because I'm his girlfriend." Damen looked back at Mulder, hoping her answer wouldn't change Mulder's reaction. It didn't, which was a good thing. Everyone sat in silence for a moment before Damen spoke, "We've only been dating for a few weeks, a month, and -"

"I don't believe you," Stacy said.

"Yeah," Ed continued, "you two have been close to each other but -"

"Kiss him," Stacy said.

Stacy saying those words stopped the conversations entirely. Damen didn't know how to react. Damen, Mulder and Ed looked at Stacy. Ed turned back to Mulder and Damen. Damen thought that this was not how she wanted things to be, but she knew she could do it and she slowly took one step closer to him. She turned back to Ed and Stacy, then turned back to Mulder after a moment and made one more step so she was right next to him. She put one hand on his chest and one hand on the back of his neck as she moved her head closer to his. Mulder knew that this had to be done, and he put his hands on her arms to hold her. Damen turned her head and opened her mouth and they started to kiss. For a moment it was like they were in a bar in D.C. playing pool and they took a break and no one else was watching them. Damen quietly moaned as they kissed; Stacy and Ed watched. Damen and Mulder finally pulled away from each other.

"That was a long kiss," Ed said.

Damen paused before she responded to that comment and said, "Well, if it is our last kiss, I wanted it to be worth something." She looked back at Mulder. Everything flashed through her head again, how much she liked him, that she loved how he looked, how she knew he had no social life, how she loved the intelligent analytical side of him, that he had pornographic video tapes in his office drawer.

And that kiss was all in the name of work.

Damen started to speak while she looked at Mulder. "But I was wondering if I could ask a favor," Damen said. Ed and Stacy looked at her. "I would like to use the washroom, if that is okay."

Ed looked at Stacy for a moment, then back to Damen. "Stacy will watch you," Ed said. With

that Damen thanked them both and she let go of Mulder's hand as they the two women went toward the back of the apartment so Damen could use the washroom.

"Well, we would be safe as soon as we left the country," Stacy answered. "Now your lover had to throw a monkey wrench into our plan."

Stacy let Damen into the locked room by herself. Stacy let her use the washroom by herself. Damen looked around, tried to adjust the gun at her hip and the gun at her ankle for back up, as well as make sure her stun gun was working. She slid the stun gun into the back of her jeans and flushed the toilet as she started the water running right before she opened the door so Stacy could come in while Damen washed her hands. Damen couldn't think of anything to say but knew she had to say something to her. "I don't know much about Mulder's work, but did you think this would be an easy job for you?" Damen asked as she finished washing her hands. Damen arched her back to see in the mirror whether or not you could notice the gun sticking out of her jeans.

Stacy looked simple as she walked into the bathroom. She didn't hold any emotion in her face, not rage, not happiness, not concern that she left Damen in the washroom by herself. Damen continued to wash her hands.

Stacy did not answer the question posed by Damen. "Why do you go out with that guy?" Stacy asked.

"I don't know," Damen answered, but she knew she had to come up with something pretty quick for a better answer. "He's very private about work, but he is also amazingly intelligent and I think it's adorable." Damen turned the faucet off and started to shake her hands dry instead of using a towel. "So... what are you going to do with the money? Go to another country?"

Stacy looked at her. Damen said. "I'm assuming you're going to kill us or something so you might as well tell me." They both sat silently. "And you don't seem too happy either," Damen added. Stacy stopped as Damen started to straighten herself up from leaning over at the sink. "Well, this is what we both wanted," Stacy answered, referring to Ed and herself.

"But it is what YOU wanted?" Damen asked.

Stacy looked at her. She didn't know how to respond.

"People want things for themselves," Damen continued, "but they can be roped into doing things for other people too. My question was: is this what YOU wanted, or is this what Ed told you would be a good thing?" When Damen said this she knew it was working because Stacy showed emotion, like this was not what she wanted, but at this point she had no choice.

Damen reached her one hand into the back of her jeans, prepared to use the excuse that she was drying her hands on her pants, but Stacy didn't say a word when Damen did it. Damen continued to act like a concerned friend but extremely quickly moved the stun gun to the back of Stacy's neck where the woman passed out on the floor.

Damen cleared the gun of pistols and placed them in the medicine cabinet in one of the water cups there. She then walked out and was prepared to make her speech. Ed and Fox both looked over at her when she was alone and Damen started to speak.

Damen made a point to look markedly confused as she began to speak. "Someone should go check on her, but... I don't know what happened... but Stacy passed out in the bathroom. I didn't know what to do..."

Ed realized in one instant that Damen could have taken Stacy's gun but didn't, and that Stacy was on the floor in the bathroom. Damen could have tried to make a run for it. Ed charged to the bathroom and Mulder followed. Damen stood behind him and gave him the gun from her hip while Ed wasn't looking. Ed looked up at them while he was crouched over Stacy on the floor. "Are either of you a doctor?"

Mulder and Damen looked at each other, and Mulder started speaking. "My partner is, but she isn't here, Ed. I'm sorry." Damen did not speak, knowing Mulder was talking about his ex-

Mulder and Damen looked at each other one more time before they decided to make their move. Mulder and Damen both had guns, because Ed never checked Damen for a gun, so they knew the outnumbered him, and Damen gave Mulder her spare gun when Ed was not looking. They were able to turn on him and get him to calm down. Ed tried to take stacy's gun, but Damen had previously removed the bullets and knew there was no competition.



Mulder and Damen had a flight planned for the next morning to get back to their homes, so they had rented a small hotel room for the right outside of the city. They barely spoke when they were alone together; when they were together before all they did was talk about the case and how much was left to be done on the case and how quickly and easily it otherwise wrapped up. The only personal (yet work related) note she could tell him was that she was sorry it was not an "X file" in the sense he was familiar with, but it was something to do and they did their job well.

They both got into their separate rooms and closed the doors. Sharon looked around and tried to decide whether or not to unpack her things. She sat down and was looking through the television guide left at her table when someone knocked at her door.

Damen walked up to the door and asked. "Who is it?"

"It's me," Mulder answered. "And I've got a gift for you."

Damen opened the door. Mulder was leaning against the door frame and had a bottle of Merlot in his hand. "I didn't bring glasses, but I thought you might like the wine," he said as he started to walk into her room. Damen was impressed that Mulder had a bottle of wine, and that it was Merlot, and not something as simple as white zinfandel, which men usually think women would like. She saw the piece tag from the bottle and noticed that it was from a shop less than a block away, so she knew he didn't put any real foresight into getting this bottle of wine for them. She was also thinking that Merlot wasn't half-bad. "Where did you get the wine from?" Damen asked as she closed the door behind him when he came in.

"It was a gift, but I normally don't drink wine, so I thought you might want some." He handed her the paper bag with the bottle in it; she noted that the bag was not creased and that there was a receipt in it. She was touched that he had enough foresight to buy it for her. She started pulling the cover of the wine off as Mulder got the glasses out.

They sat in there for two or three hours, talking and drinking a pretty sweet wine, and not once talking about work. Eventually Mulder talked about work, but it was about the kiss that she gave him for the case earlier that day.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Wanted to make it look like we were really dating."

"I'm not good at acting," Mulder answered as he stared at his glass.

"Well, I used to do it, I used to be an actress in high school, so I have no problem with it," Damen answered. She paused before she spoke again. "Why - were you acting when you kissed me back?"

Mulder looked up from his glass. "If you're such a good actress, I'm afraid to answer that question."

"Your response tells me the answer to my question... and I wouldn't lie to you," Damen said. "You're one of the few people I couldn't lie to. But I want to hear it from you - what was it - was it with how long the kiss lasted, or the way I turned my head, or -"

Mulder got on to his knees from sitting on the bed so he could move closer to her. "No," Mulder

started, "there was more passion in it, more intensity. It was like you meant it when you kissed me." Mulder paused as Damen looked up at him before Mulder put his hand on the back of her neck and continued speaking. "It was just the way it felt to be in someone's arms, I think." He moved closer as he spoke. "It was like this," he said as he turned his head and he guided her head with his hand on her neck and started to kiss her.

Damen did not know if Mulder was joking or not. She did not know what he was thinking. But she could not resist him. She had already set her drink down on the corner table so she wrapped her arms around him after she realized that he didn't stop kissing her.

Four: The Final Pages & the Fear

It was dark in the hotel room. Damen was awake enough to remember where she was, what had just happened with the case with Ed and Stacy, and what had happened afterwards. A sound woke her up; she knew with a motion of her arm that Mulder was not there in the bed with her. It was completely dark, but she got her bearings as quickly as she could, remembered exactly where she left her gun, and sprung up to get it. In the dark she heard all other motion stop in the room and she demanded, "Who are you?", but said it more as a command than a question.

She waited.

"... Damen, it is Mulder."

She recognized his voice. "Are you alone?" she asked.

"Did you want me to bring a few friends in here?"

"Did you have to be a smart-ass?"

Mulder instantly retorted in the dark, "Did you have to point your gun at me?"

She didn't know what to think when she realized that it was Mulder trying to leave.

When she fell asleep on his arm an hour before, Mulder could only stare at the ceiling. He knew he couldn't see anything up there; it was too dark in the room and all he could really identify through the drawn curtain was the faint glow of the neon glow of the motel sign.

Mulder didn't know what he was looking for.

Maybe he was looking for his sanity. Maybe he was looking for a quick, simple answer that would explain away everything he had ever wondered about.

His mind naturally wandered to Samantha. He wished he knew her. He could still imagine what she looked like, he could still hear her as a grown-up. He didn't know what he would be able to do if he saw her; he has been repeatedly fooled that he doesn't know if he has even ever seen her as an adult.

He tried to snap himself out of it and instinctively his thoughts went to Scully. No, he never slept with her, there were a few moments where he wanted to start a relationship with her, but it never worked out for them.

He then wondered if he and Scully were never meant to be together.

Mulder's thoughts were interrupted with Damen's voice. "Mulder?" she asked as she lowered her gun after he turned on the lights.

Mulder's mind then jumped to what had just happened between the two of them. Thoughts about Samantha or Scully instantly disappeared from his mind as he noticed that Damen was holding a sheet to cover her body as she stood next to the bed. "You know," Mulder said, "they had to teach you at the bureau to be careful with that weapon. You never know who you might point it at..."

"I could say the exact same thing to you," Damen responded.

They both smiled as she sat down on the bed. Damen still held the sheets around her. Mulder wanted ever and sat down on the bed next to Damen.

"I didn't know if you'd want me here."

"So you left?"

"Damen, I didn't know what to do."

"So you thought you'd sneak out in the middle of the night after having sex with your partner from work?"

"Well, if you didn't want me around, I --"

"Mulder, usually when you sleep with someone, I hate to have to fill you in on this one, but usually when you sleep with someone you actually stay the night. Then you can play ding-dong-ditch in the morning."

"Ding-dong-ditch?"

"Well, you know what I mean, Mulder."

Mulder sat for a moment before speaking. "I didn't know what to say."

Damen looked down at herself before she answered him. "Well, you could answer some of MY questions... this could be a sort of interrogation, if you'll allow me that."

Mulder pulled one of Damen's tricks and looked down before speaking. "Well, what do you want to know?"

Damen paused. "So I get to play interrogator now?"

Mulder sat in silence and started to smile. They were both aware that Damen was a researcher and had a good way of getting information out of people. So Damen started. "I know you just bought that wine. Why?"

"The wine was from --"

"I know better, mulder. No one donates a bottle of wine to us, we are not supposed to receive gifts from anyone related to work, and the bottle had a price tag from the store at the corner."

Damen waited for a reaction from Mulder. The reaction was slight, but there, and she spotted it. "I used to be a researcher, you know, and I've been trained to have an eye for details." Damen paused again before she repeated her question. "So why did you get the bottle?" He finally answered, "Wanted give you some element of relaxing at home, I guess."

"You don't know what I do at home, Mulder, and you don't look like the type that wines and dines women. So tell me, flat out, why?"

Damen looked at Mulder and waited as he sat in silence. He finally spoke. "Because I was going to sleep with you."

Damen almost did a double-take when he said that. "What?" she finally asked.

"It was a sort of test that I wanted to go through with for us."

"What, to see if I was good in bed?"

"Damen, that's not it, and you know it. I think I view women in two different ways, specifically. One is that a woman is someone I respect, someone I can talk to, and the other way is for more of a mindless screw."

"So which do I fall in to?"

"That's the thing... You're definitely someone I can respect. I value what conversations I have had with you, and I would like to be able to talk to you like that more. But I find myself attracted to you as well, and I wanted to know if you were just someone that would fall into category two instead."

"So... which is it?"

"You think I can come up with an answer to a question like that easily, Damen?"

"Hey, I'm the interrogator here, Mulder, and I'm the one asking the questions. You could just say you don't know."

"Well... This is my dilemma. I still like talking to you, and I've got to admit that, well, the other stuff was good too."



"The other stuff? The OTHER stuff?"

"You know what I mean, Damen."

"Well, have you been able to draw any conclusions about me since this morning? Is your conundrum remedied at all now?"

"Well, I first have to admit that I like your use of 'conundrum' instead of 'dilemma' there... But to answer the question, I like you, the person, and I still think that you're sexy. It's strange, but I actually feel like I still want to kiss you, the way a guy would kiss his girl..."

Damen smiled. "Am I your girl?"

"Damen, I don't even know what that term really means."

They both smiled at each other.

"I don't know what it means either." Damen paused before she made her next statement. "But if you wanted to, you could still kiss me."

Mulder looked up at her and she slightly shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I'd tolerate it..."

Mulder started to laugh and Damen smiled. Mulder slid closer to her on the bed, put his hand at the back of her neck and kissed her.

After he kissed her, Damen pointed her hand to the head of the bed out to suggest that he can stay. Mulder moved to the top of the bed, kicking off his shoes in the process. As Mulder got comfortable sitting at the head of the bed he gestured to Damen to come and sit with him, which she did. "So now what?" Mulder asked.

"Well, we could talk about something other than cases."

"Sometimes that's all I do, Damen. But if I can become the interrogator, seeing that you have read up on me, I can ask you for information about your life."

"So what do you want to know?"

"Anything. Spill the beans, Damen. Tell me the first thing that pops into your head."

Damen didn't know where to start. "No one ever wants to hear my stories."

"Well, maybe I'm asking."

Damen got up and walked over to a hand-written notebook and brought it back to the bed, throwing it in front of him. "You want to know about me? Here are some of my entries into a notebook."

"A diary?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"A journal?"

"If you're going to be that way, I'll take it back." Damen reached forward for the notebook and Mulder grabbed it before she had the chance to take it away. Without trying to look at it too much, he caught some pages from past entries.

passage one:

Sometimes people just don't want to hear about complaints. People would rather just process thoughts than actually think. When I meet people who are in charge of pro-life movements, they are actually against anti-religion, or anti-life, or anti-thought movements. These are the types of people who would like to defend racism, or other things that seem to represent some people but not all people.

I don't understand how some people can support a life-decision but not a life-philosophy. There is no consistency.

cy in that argument. Seldom do I see consistency in anyone's argument. This is my life

passage two:

one The man that I had dated for over a year had a heart attack and passed away. I do not think I have entirely recovered from it. I feel I still hold some anger about it. I even resent the family for taking the painting that he finished of me for me the day before he died either way, that alone is a stepping stone that I cannot get entirely over.

two I started dating another man one that seemed intelligent, caring, and in many ways very much like myself. It was strange because he was a friend of my long time friend and man that I used to date, so I could not even talk to people about dating this man.

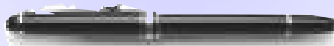
either way, he seemed to show less and less interest in me as time wore on, so I had pretty much given up on hopes for that relationship.

the plot thickens to where I was at the point where I was planning on going to Europe. I had places listed and a vague game plan when I was in a car accident. Visiting my parents on the road, another car hit me from behind because they did not watch the road. They were speeding. I saw them coming and turned my wheels away from the motorcyclist in front of me. I was stuck at the traffic light. This car hit me into oncoming traffic where another car hit me. The records state that there were skid marks from my tires for one hundred and eight feet.

I was sent to the trauma unit of a hospital immediately and was in a coma for about two weeks. No one knew if I was going to live. They even asked my mother when she came to the hospital if she could identify a body, which seems to me to be the most offensive thing a mother can hear about her youngest daughter.

I was in the hospital for two months. No broken bones, except for my skull, fractured in three places. They even watched to make sure that my one eye set back into my head where it was supposed to. They had a tube into me for the first half, which was four out of six weeks of my hospital stay. I had to learn how to eat and walk all over again. I did not even want to eat at first. The thought of food seemed strange when I had not needed it for so long.

by dinner time and the ensuing hunger pangs, I ate. I had to tell myself to eat, that I had done it before that I can do this.



for the first four months out of the coma I had to get used to walking. I have lost some balance from the accident. Going up or down spiral stairs are not as easy for me as they used to be. My vision has also been worse since the accident when I did not need to wear my glasses much before. I have to wear them more now.

in light of all this, my sister tells me that I was eating ravenously and that my vision is one hundred percent better. I did not realize that she could read my mind when I was bringing myself to eat in the hospital, or that she could see for me that she was just that clairvoyant.

I apologize for my sarcasm. But my problem with all this is that NO ONE around me knows what I have been going through and no one can read my mind. All

that is left is for me to pick up the pieces.

picking up the pieces is not easy when I have pushed people away for all my life I think people have been used to my needing no one so they are leaving me alone now I must be fine I did not even have any broken bones.

but as I am sure you are aware my spirit was almost broken which can be worse than putting a cast on to heal a broken bone after six weeks

It has been just over a year since I have been out of the hospital In that time I have been getting my life in order because there are a lot of things you start to think about when you almost lose your life get your will in order Organize your finances I am a writer and I have used pen names and if I had died no one would have known that these pen names were my own creation

Okay I know there is more but I am going to take a turn here and talk about something else Everything seemed to be going wrong for me Even the only friend that came to be there for me the man I referred to earlier he even wanted to have some time alone and I did not even have a car since my car was wrecked When I was NOT looking for someone to make everything better for me someone came along

Does this all make sense at all that is the question probably not but on some levels it was helpful for me to start to get it down I does not resolve anything but it is a start at least for myself

Just from skimming the beginnings of these sections, he knew he would have to read them in depth later.

Damen was laying back down on the bed, this time with her head on Mulder's leg. His cellular phone rang while he was sitting there and it almost made him jump while being a pillow for Damen.

Sharon picked her head up and looked at him. "Go ahead, answer it..."

Mulder looked at her and she could read that he did not know who could be calling him early in the morning on a Monday. Mulder answered the phone and talked to a gentleman from the bureau. All Damen could gather was that Mulder was talking to Skinner.

She listened to half of the conversation.

"Yes sir ... No, I've had no idea, sir ... Well, I've communicated with her, but ... No, she never gave me any indication ... Actually, I tried to convince her to ... Did she explain why she made the change? I know that her family did not like her with us ... And yes, I know what she has been through since she started ... Well, no, I don't know what Damen will do ... When I talk to her I will see what she thinks of this all ... Well, she hasn't been with the bureau long at all, sir ... Well, I'm sure there is ..."

Damen tried to gather all she could from listening to Mulder's disjointed conversation, and all she could guess was the Scully was coming back. She knew Mulder hadn't talked to her often in the past few weeks, and Damen had only met up with Scully once. Damen heard from other agents at the bureau that Scully seemed a bit, well, up-tight. But Mulder trusted her, and Mulder liked her.

"What work will she be doing at first, sir? I know there has to be some training ... Do you think she would be up for that, sir? ... I know, please forgive me for suggesting ... Of course I trust the opinions of the ones who assign her ... No, we should be back in to town this afternoon, the flight leaves here in about four hours, so I can talk to you about it this afternoon."

Mulder hung up the phone and did not look at Damen. Damen's eyes never left him and waited for him to break down and look at her.

He didn't.

Damen finally spoke up. "So Scully is back?"

She waited for Mulder to respond. He had already gotten up and was pacing during his entire conversation with Skinner. He finally stopped his pacing and turned to face Damen. She knew that when he looked at her he would have to tell her that she is no longer working for the Bureau, and that

if he cared about her he wouldn't want to tell her that. Damen was bracing herself for it before he even looked at her.

Mulder looked at her squarely, and all she could infer was that he didn't know how to react. He didn't know what he should tell her, or even what he should be thinking, which seemed almost surprising to Damen.

Finally Mulder started to smile. Damen followed him with the smile, knowing at that point she was correct. "Yes, she's coming back," Mulder said. "We'll get briefed on it when we get back into the office."



"Have you heard from Scully?" Damen asked.

"I'm beginning to thin that I should just wait to see her in the office before I talk to her..."

"Is she going to be your partner again?" Damen asked.

This was the question that Mulder was afraid of answering. She knew she struck a nerve. Mulder paused, giving Damen a chance to fill in the silence. "This is what you were interested in, isn't it, Mulder?"

Mulder responded immediately. "The trouble is, I've now got the Damen factor."

"The Damen factor?" she asked.

"Well, before it has been a concern of mine to see Scully back to work."

"And is it still?"

"Of course. Now I have an added worry, though -"

"And that would be?" Damen asked.

"Well, I have to make sure you can be at a nice place for working."

"And you're worried about what I am going to do?"

"I was saying that this was difficult before, and now I seemed to throw a monkey wrench in to all of this."

"Mulder, I can get a job... wait, is the Bureau going to keep me on in the first place?"

"I'm sure you would. Would you want that?"

"I don't know. I liked the research work I was doing before, and I could go back to where I was before with a bit of a raise... and I wouldn't have to worry about being shot at or anything."

"Or having a gun to worry about, for that matter..."

"my point is, Mulder that I like this kind of work, and I like doing the research that I was doing before I came to the Bureau. If I can be a reference for you and Scully in your future work that would be great for me."

"And you're not worried about a job for you?"

"I'm sure I can get one. It's not a problem. And aren't you supposed to think about Scully?"

Mulder smiled. "Yeah you're right."

"So... all that needs to be covered in all this is... are you going to see me again after I possibly leave the bureau?"

Mulder was pacing again but stopped when Damen asked that. Damen was repeatedly stunned by this stares and his looks when she asked such direct questions, but after all that had happened in the last day, she was even more surprised by his looks. She watched him as he walked over to where she was sitting on the bed. He bent his legs so he was crouched down in front of her and started asking her questions.

"Can you tolerate he?" he first asked.

"Yes."

"What if you don't see me constantly?"

"Fine."

"Would you be disappointed if we stopped working together?"

"No."

"Would you be angry if I needed some of your references for future work?"

"I would expect it."

"Do you want me to kiss you?"

"Of course."

"Do you have the plane tickets?"

"And the schedule. We have to leave in three and a half hours."

Mulder liked her answers as well as her punctuality and her directness.

"I'm going to kiss you now."

Damen didn't move, save the one eyebrow that started to rise and the smile that started to form on her face. Mulder saw it as a look that almost said she had expected that all along.

Five: The Good-Byes

"I feel like a heel for not spending enough time with you here," one of the lap reps told Damen.

She looked at him and smiled. "That's okay. I barely got any time to get to know anyone here anyway..."

Someone else chimed in that worked on defense cases that happened to be nearby when Damen was saying her good-byes to people. "Are they sending you to another building to do bureau work?"

"They offered, but I told them I would rather go back to doing research work."

Mulder walked by as people were talking to her. "Was it the safety issue?"

"No, I think it was the security issue. I liked being able to know where I was going to do the kind of work I like to do. It's not that I didn't like working here, it's just, well, a little more settled at my last job."

"You didn't have a problem getting back to your old company?"

"Oh, they offered me back, but that would require a move again, but I have been offered a better job here for an extra fifteen grand."

"Can't sneeze at that," one of her co-workers told her. Damen started to see Mulder walk away, so she added to these men, "And besides, working with 'Spooky' is a little much, even after only a week."



The men she was talking to started laughing, and Mulder turned back and started to smile before he turned back to the hallway to go back toward the office. As the men started to quiet their laughing and Mulder got further away from the group, Damen noted, "But really, working with Mulder was great, and if it's possible to break through that shell he seems to keep over himself, it would be nice to talk to him after I get out of here."

After she managed to break away from the people she was talking to, she stopped in Mulder's office before going to see Skinner. Mulder leaned back in his chair, keeping his elbows on the arms of his chair, and keeping his hands at his face, as he watched her walk through the doorway.

"What are you looking at?" Damen asked.

Mulder started to grin. "I just know I won't see you walk in like that again. I'm just... absorbing that." Damen smiled. "Well, you can see me again, if you actually want to call."

"The problem is, I will get the energy to call you," Mulder said. "Well, I've seen your apartment, but you haven't seen mine. You're always welcome over for actual food."

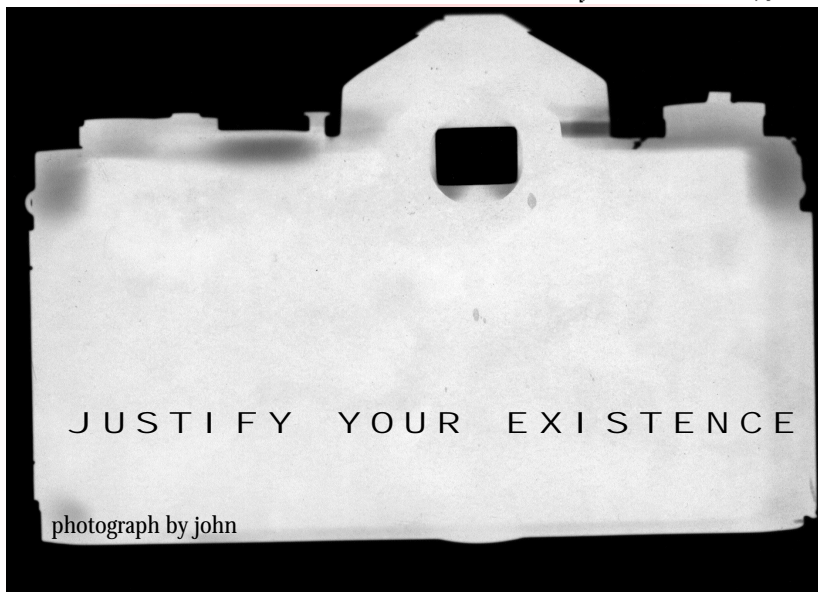
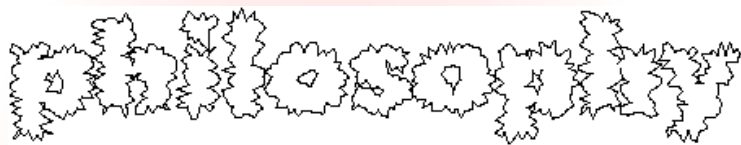
Mulder smiled. Damen walked up and pulled out the reserve bag of sunflower seeds she had saved for when he ran out. "In the meantime, you can keep your hands busy with this."

Mulder saw the other bag of seeds in her purse. "Is there another bag in there for me?"

"No, it's for me. Your habits are already growing on me." With that she turned away and did not look back from his office, knowing that she would drop her badge off with Skinner and leave this building as a visitor, someone that is not a government agent, like she had done for a month.

note: images here are an artistic representation and no one claims photography ownership of these images representing characters from this story.





JUSTIFY YOUR EXISTENCE

photograph by john

philosophy monthly. justify your existence with rants
from the editor & special guests.

Balancing the Budget

If we are going to try to balance the budget, the key isn't in doing it by taxing everyone until the debt is gone. The key is accepting more responsibilities as citizens, and not expecting the government to make things easier on us.

The reason why the government costs so much money is because we continually expect it to do more and more for us. The capitalist base that this country was founded on suggests that the government is there to protect our basic rights - "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This means that as individuals we reign supreme - the no one has the right to take our life, our property or our ability to achieve what we are willing and capable of achieving.

However, as the years have progressed, our political leaders have told us that we need to be taken care of, and to appease us they have offered, as a government, to do more and more for us. And we have agreed, these things would be better if the government took care of them for us. But that was where we went wrong.

The government is bogged down with a quagmire of laws protecting ourselves from ourselves. Seat belt laws. Motorcycle helmet laws. Speed limits. Laws to tell you when a rapist moves into your neighborhood, or laws to tell you when you're mature enough to drive a car, or drink. Although it seems to make sense that we shouldn't do these things, that we should make responsible choices, the government is going beyond it's basic role of protecting us from the force of others by telling us as individuals what is legally safe, which is infringing on our rights.

We haven't offended the rights of others, for instance, if we speed on a highway. By telling us we cannot speed, the government is infringing on our rights to do what we want with our property, as long as it doesn't infringe on the rights of others. If, because of our speeding, we hit another car and injure another person and/or their property, then we have infringed on another person's rights and we should be punished. But not until then. The government's job is to protect us from others, not from the possibility of accidents caused by others.

We haven't offended the rights of others, for instance, if we choose to not wear our seat belts while driving or riding in a car. The government's job is not to protect us from ourselves, but from others. Even if we get injured in our cars because we weren't wearing our seat belts, we cannot and should not blame the government for not intervening - their job is to protect our right to decide whether or not we want to use these safety measures.

I won't argue that wearing your seat belt is not a good idea, or that all 10-year-olds should be learning to fly airplanes, but I'm not going to tell anyone that they should relinquish the responsibility of making these decisions to their government. When you let the government make some choices for you, what's to stop them from making all your choices for you? Capitalism is a clearly-defined set of rules, all surrounded around the notion that the individual human being's rights are most important. When you start to slip into socialism, however, and let the government take control of some aspects of your life for you, they can take more and more - you've let them - until you're faced with a dictatorship, with communism, and no rights as an individual at all.

The government is also bogged down with providing for those who originally can't - and now won't - provide for themselves. The productivity generated by a free economy has produced a great many things, for all of the people in this country and others. It has raised the standard of living for all. Considering the standards people lived at two hundred years ago, considering the number of religious

Wars that killed so many over the thousands of years of human history, considering the hundreds and hundreds of years the world lived in moral and economic darkness with other political systems, it is evident what people owning their own work can do for productivity, creativity and progress.

The creation of the welfare state has given people a reason to be unproductive. The creation of the welfare state has made people believe they deserve something for nothing. The government never said that every individual in the country was granted "life, liberty and a block of government-subsidized cheese." But this attitude, the attitude that people deserve something for nothing from their government, can be seen in our homeless on the streets, with their cups in their hands, marking a post to beg from in front of people daily commuting to work. They ask for money, bless you when you pass (invoking the notion of a god and the altruistic notion to give to others, even if - especially if - they don't deserve it), and occasionally, when they don't get the money they want from you, they scream in protest, as if the money in your pocket isn't yours, but theirs, and they have every right to expect a hand-out from you. America created this mentality when they created the welfare state, and we're paying for it in many ways. The lack of a balanced budget is only one way we're paying.

When the government - and the people - thought it was a good idea to help others, they didn't realize that helping themselves by being productive raised the standard of living, created new products and services for everyone, and did end up helping others. They also didn't realize that the productive earnings given to those who didn't earn it had to come from somewhere - and where it came from was from the productive people's pockets. And our productivity, as well as our budget - suffered for it.

The government is even bogged down with controlling and subsidizing aspects of our lives.

National defense is a job for the national government, because part of its job is to protect us from outside threats (that's the "life" part of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"). But supporting the arts, education, medicine - the government is not responsible for any of these things. And most of the mediums the government has some level of control over have suffered in one way or another.

The arts have come under great scrutiny because people don't want their tax dollars funding certain kinds of art works. America's health care is more expensive and rated worse than eleven other countries in the world. And the education system? We need metal detectors at the gates of our city schools and kids graduate from high school without being able to read.

A business couldn't run without producing a good service or product - in fact, it would have to produce a better product, since it would be in competition with other companies. And a business couldn't run at a deficit - it has to be able to run efficiently in order to run well. In what has been the most capitalistic society to date, we have proven that companies can run efficiently, run well, and always produce a better product. This could also happen in the areas the government still has control over.

Privatizing education, for example, may bring the standards of schooling better, because suddenly there would be open competition. It would also allow for ideas that have merit but have been suppressed to be taught, because when goods and services are in demand, the demand will be met in a free economy (versus state schools, where boards of education have to impress the higher-ups in order to get more funding, and may alter their curriculum accordingly). It may cost more at first, but if Americans weren't paying taxes for schools, they'd have more money in their pockets to be able to meet these expenses. Parochial schools do this already. And in this example, we wouldn't have concerns about whether or not prayer is allowed in a school, because it is not state sponsored. And there would be no debate over whether uniforms are allowable - you may pick the school of your choice to send your children to, and base your decisions on prayer, uniforms, and even ability to teach.

DNA Versus Emotion

As technology moves forward, there always seems to be people who wish to contradict science and push it backward. Such is the case with the new trend in discounting the use of DNA testing in criminal trials.

In the past ten years scientists have used DNA tests to determine if someone who is accused of a crime actually committed it. Testing usually does not positively identify an accuser as guilty of the crime, but it can exclude an accuser from committing a crime. DNA evidence is hard, scientific evidence that can show that someone did not commit a crime.

And in trials, evidence - hard, scientific evidence - is what is needed to decide a verdict.

DNA testing has been very useful in shedding light on a trial. Especially in rape or rape/murder cases, DNA testing can clear someone's name.

It's comforting to know that as hard evidence comes in to a case, that more and more people look at it as irrefutable. That people accept science and trust evidence when coming to a conclusion about a crime.

However, the trend toward accepting this science is now being fought.

"DNA may be important, but it's not the ace that trumps all other cards," said Bob Benjamin, a spokesman for the Illinois Cook County State's Attorney's Office.

Why not? Why is it not important that conclusive evidence that the human traces left on a victim from their attacker could not be the defendant's? Why is the fact that hair, skin, semen or saliva left on the victim's body could not be the defendant's not important? No answer.

And cases are increasingly being tried even when DNA tests show that the person in custody did not commit the crime.

Virginia Governor George Allen turned down a plea for a request for DNA tests from a convicted murderer on death row. Allen stated that even if the DNA testing cleared the incarcerated Joseph O'Dell, there was enough evidence to still prove that O'Dell raped and murdered a Virginia Beach woman.

Virginia Governor George Allen turned down the plea, and O'Dell was executed via lethal injection on schedule.

Although prosecutors do not claim to discount the evidence from DNA testing, they do not discount other evidence that may lead to the opposite conclusion.

But two different pieces of evidence cannot contradict each other - one must be wrong. Which is more likely to be wrong - an eye witness account, for instance, or scientific evidence with fingerprint-style accuracy?

DNA testing is nearly infallible if done properly. Only human error, such as mishandling materials, would cause DNA testing to come into question.

But that's one of the strongest points DNA testing is argued on. Recall the O.J. Simpson trial, when hard evidence was refuted with claims that evidence was mishandled.

However, in the O.J. Simpson trial, hard evidence was also refuted with unfounded claims that there was a police conspiracy or the theory that this was a drug hit. And the sad thing is, it was these emotional pleas, and not DNA evidence, that won over the jury and decided the case.

And that's the only way you can argue against logic and science - by making a plea to emotions.

If a defense lawyer's job is to free his client, then fighting science would have to be done by any means possible - discounting the science: DNA testing is too young. Discounting the way the data was collected: the blood was tampered with. Emphasizing other contradictory evidence: O.J. Simpson was in his home during the murder. Listening to testimonials and opinions from friends and experts: O.J.

Simpson loved his wife, he couldn't do it. introducing additional theories with or without merit as to what may have happened, pleading to the jury based on the character of the defendant. Pleading to their emotions.

But remember that all of these pleas are just that - pleas - and evidence cannot contradict science.

People try to balance science and mysticism, or faith, every day. Scientists shed more and more light each day on the creation of man and this planet, but religion denies it, for instance. Once I had a conversation with a religious woman, and she stated that dinosaurs never existed and that "science was the tool of the devil." Another religious woman told me that she sinned once and got pregnant while out of wedlock, but God saved her by giving her a miscarriage.

Amen.

Obviously logic and reason won't win over a person who blatantly rejects logic and reason, but most people - especially in the United States, where science and technology have proven that people can live good lives - most people do believe in logic and reason, even if they have been taught otherwise. So their "philosophical lives" are spent trying to come up with a balance to these two opposing beliefs - of which there can be no compromise, but people still try. Okay, maybe the world wasn't created in six days, maybe that was just a metaphor for the order and time like things were created on the planet, one may decide. Okay, maybe there wasn't a man made out of sand and a woman made from his rib, but maybe God started the ball rolling in the creation of man, one may think.

It is this belief in logic, science and reason, coupled with this clinging to faith and tradition that tries to allow both sides to be right. And it is this philosophical mind set that allows people to be swayed by emotional pleas away from hard, scientific evidence.

That doesn't change the fact that the evidence is there, only how you look at it.

Diversity, Political Correctness, and Creativity

Are we looking for Diversity or Political Correctness?

Okay, let's get the basics down first. I'm white. Big strike against me, from a world-culture perspective, because I must be an oppressor. But I'm a writer, which probably isn't hurdling me into the upper class, and I'm a woman, which has its own set of relatively heavy baggage to carry around.

But I've always looked at myself as a writer, not a female writer. I've always judged myself, and hoped others would judge me, on the basis of my creative ability as a writer, not on the color of my skin or whether I had big breasts or which sex I was more attracted to.

But in working extensively in the north side poetry scene in the past six months, I've noticed the issue of diversity brought up in a few different forms. They can be pigeon-holed into three catchphrase categories: Working Too Hard to be Politically Correct, Crossing Over into Another Culture, and Using your Diversity to Your Creative Advantage.

Working Too Hard to be Politically Correct

I was working with a group of writers touring the nation this winter. In choosing who should be part of this tour, we had decided upon myself and four men - all white. And then some of the other

members of the group started asking - is this group not diverse enough? We're all straight - maybe we need gay and lesbian representation. There's only one woman so far - do we need more? Should we be looking for African Americans to fill out this group?

And you see, these were questions I had never thought of before. I mean, I never thought of watching someone because they were gay or straight, or white or black, or male or female. Okay, maybe female, a bit. But it never stopped me from looking for talent across different ethnic, cultural or sexual lines. And I never thought that a group of people going on tour needed to fill quotas in order to be politically correct. I mean, can you imagine a heavy metal band going on tour saying, "Maybe we should bring a rap group and a Christian folk band with us?"

The thing that might make this group work well together is the fact that we may have have somewhat similar cultural backgrounds. Our work can tie in better together. It may actually seem like a cohesive show; in setting up a show the first priority should be to make the show as a whole the best it can be, not to make sure every skin color is covered in the readers. Not that we shouldn't have other backgrounds in the tour. But maybe looking for the best talent is the better way to go, and if the first people that become part of the group have similar stories to tell, well then, maybe that would work to our advantage.

Crossing Over into Another Culture

Primarily, I attend opens on the north side, such as Joy Blue, Lilly's, Estelle's, Red Lion, even sometimes Weeds. Once I was invited to attend the afro-centric Lit X's Saturday night open mike. I noticed a few things:

1. It was in a darkened basement in the back half of a book store. I felt like I needed a secret password and handshake to get in.

2. There was a \$3 cover. I wasn't aware of this until I got to the door; I usually never patronize places that make you pay to entertain the crowd, or expect cheap poets to actually pay money just to sit in a room for a while. They can do that at home for free.

3. As I walked in, I almost tripped over light cords running all over the floor; the stage consisted of a well-lit corner of a small unfinished basement room. Oh, and the fold-out chairs were filled to capacity (which goes to show that atmosphere isn't everything). I had to stand in the back.

4. Everyone was holding either an incense stick or a clove cigarette. Versus a beer and a Marlboro Red, which is what I'm more used to seeing.

Beyond that, there were very good readings, it was a fascinating experience, and I'm glad I went. There's obviously a demand for poetry readings and open mikes that appeal to different cultures; it was nice to have a showcase of it in one night, at one open mike. I just wish that for their benefit, they had a nicer place to read.

It's not something I would go to regularly. I must admit, I felt a bit out of my element. Not because they made me feel that way; the people I talked to were glad everyone was there and everyone was very nice, as well as very talented. No, I felt out of my element solely because this experience was something I'm not used to. To submerge one person with one culture into another culture might be overkill. But to get just a taste of it is always a treat. That is great, to experience something different, even if only once in a while.

Using your Diversity to Your Creative Advantage

As I said, I'm a writer, and I'm female, but I never thought of myself as a "female writer." But I'm sure that men listen to my work and think of me as a "female writer," even if that decision is based solely on my own writing. I write about rape and domestic violence. I write about flirting with men. I write about being a woman.

In other words, I write about the things I know. That's natural; your best work is going to be on the things you've done the most research on. And a writer's life is research for poetry.

And yes, I've written both about the joys of being female and the oppression I feel in a patriar-

chal society. But is that what exploring diversity is all about?

A friend of mine, a talented writer that I had talked to a few times before I heard him read, read a poem in front of me on stage about growing up in a biracial family, about all the taunts and jeers and stares he gets, about how he didn't know how to behave when he walked down the street. About how people thought of him, about how they judged him before knowing him.

And I thought, I've written about that when it comes to women many times. And then I thought, but I never thought about the color of his skin before he brought it up on stage.

I noticed after that first reading that over half of the work he read on stage in my presence was about this experience, about living half-black in a white world.

I recently told him, I said, "You know, just so you know, I never thought about the color of your skin until you brought it up in your writing."

And he looked at me, a bit surprised, and then he finally said something to the effect of, "But that's my hook."

I think he was pleased that someone looked at him as a human being, but at the same time, we all assume we're all so different. And what if we're not?

Yes, you write about what you know. But you can learn more about what you think you know as well as what you don't know, just by listening to the stories other people in the Chicago poetry scene have to say. The voices are out there, voices on how they think they're perceived, and about how they perceive the world.

The important thing is not to worry too much about getting the right amount of cultural diversity, but just to open up your mind and listen.

A Letter to our Political Leaders

After watching a few of our elections, I noticed that politicians were trying to warm up to the twenty-something crowd. It's a wise decision: we're a strong group of intelligent, new voters. And, as a rule, we're dissatisfied with the United States' current political system. It's a chance for either party to take a hold of a growing and promising voter group and insure additional votes in future elections.

It would help to know what this group is looking for, though, if there's a dissatisfaction with our current parties, and to understand this, it may help to learn a little more about this group. Although I claim to be no spokesperson for all people aged 20-29, I can give you some insight into how I think,

as a member of this "age group."

I'm a twenty-something. But classifying us "twenty-somethings" or "generation x-ers" by our age is something I as an individual finds insulting. I know that we're Americans, but I also know that we as a group have differing opinions, and we have a right to those opinions. We can have different views on



our careers, or families, our music. And that's something I value - and I feel like is constantly being taken away from us.

Other pressure groups may want you to pass laws telling them when a rapist moves into their neighborhood, but I know that that just causes more red tape and costs us through tax revenue more dollars, when that information is public; besides, it's not the government's responsibility to inform, it the individual's. Other pressure groups may want you to pass laws telling them that they need to wear their seat belts, but I know that in a Capitalistic society it's not the government's role to protect people from themselves, but from the force of others, and that is all. Other pressure groups may want you to pass all sorts of laws, but they are by and large laws that go beyond the jurisdiction of the American government. Other groups may want the government telling them what to do all the time, but I don't.

Part of the twenty-something dissatisfaction (if I may speak for the group) with our current parties may be because neither party embodies a consistent set of values. Granted, our government-sponsored school systems teach students in general that philosophy is too difficult a subject for a single person to understand. And religion may not offer a practical solution for anyone that believes in individual rights, the rights this country was founded on (I mean, Christianity telling people that the meek shall inherit the earth and the self-sacrifice for the benefit of others as good directly clashes with the idea that the individual has a brain and the right to use it, the right to claim what they have earned and even become successful). But young people, especially ones who still have a glimmer of hope that there is something out there that makes sense, when all their lives their schools and leaders have kept from them that their mind is the answer, young people want their political parties to make sense. Currently, neither platform, whether Democratic or Republican - is consistent or cohesive.

If a person believes that government intervention beyond the necessities - police protection from the force of others, for example - is wrong, neither political party supports them. Republicans believe in less government when it comes to leaving businesses alone - economically the government should let businesses prosper - but when it comes to personal parts of people's lives - choosing to have an abortion, whether consenting adults want to engage in sexual activities that are not what they consider "the norm," the kinds of art work people make and see - then Republicans know what's best for us, and want to tell us what to do.

Democrats believe in less government intervention when it comes to these personal issues, but when it comes to businesses and the economy, Democrats want to be able to regulate industries because they'll hurt people, they want to be able to tax businesses because big business is bad (Why? No answer.), and they want to be able to take money away from people, via business regulations and taxation, in order to give it away to people who haven't earned it (there's no more realistic explanation of the welfare system - other than robbery from the people who produce in this country).

Republicans and Democrats both believe the government should stay out of their business, whatever their business may happen to be. Other people's business? Feel free to meddle.

Even on more specific subjects both parties split their decisions moralistically. The religious right, a Christian group of Republicans, as well as Republicans in general, will tell you that it's horrible to kill an unborn child, but it's okay to kill someone that's already alive and that has committed a crime (what happened to "turn the other cheek"?). If life is so sacred, why is capital punishment being pushed by Republicans? With our current appeals system, it is estimated that it takes six times as much money to kill someone as it does to keep them in jail for life. And who pays for it? We do, the individuals. The tax payers. The producers.

But the one thing both parties have in common is that they want to take away at least some of our rights. That's why we're disenchanted with the political parties we have today. Republicans want to take away our personal rights, Democrats want to take away our economic rights. Taxation, the Democrats' answer (so that people can still have goods and services while not working for them) tax-

ation for anything other than the essentials is forcibly taking away what individuals have earned. It's forcibly taking away people's money. That's the definition of robbery. And laws instilled by Republicans to protect our private lives, so that we are just like them, are not only forcibly telling us how to live, but enacting laws that also cause paperwork costs and costs in enforcing them. Who does the government pay for these things? Taxation, again, which means: we, the individuals, pay for the government telling us what to do.

Every election, I'm sure a good number of people, people with intelligence, people using reason and logic to the best of their ability in making a decision, go to the polls wondering, "Which rights am I willing to lose?"

Well, we shouldn't be losing any of those rights. We should have less government intervention in all respects of our lives.

I'm a twenty-something. I'm a woman, but I don't tell the government I need quotas to get a job, because I know that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" means just that - it means I can pursue whatever I want. But it doesn't mean the government should be handing it to me on a platter.

I'm a twenty-something. I'm intelligent, and I don't need the government protecting me from myself. That's not what I'm paying for it to do.

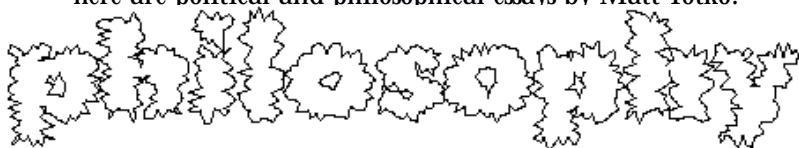
I'm a twenty-something. I'm looking for a political party that embodies not my beliefs, but the belief that people can have their own beliefs (whether or not people choose to live by logic and reason or not is not for the government to control). I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals can have their lives (that's the "life" part of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"), they can have the right to keep their lives (that no one has the right to take something that belongs to you, like taxation for the welfare state, or that no one has the right to try to take away your life, unlike what the government does to death-row prisoners, for instance). I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals have the right to pursue their own goals, without intervention from the government and without help from the government (that you can't expect hand outs, but you also can start a business to sustain your life without being burdened by overtaxation and regulation).

I'm a twenty-something. I'm looking for a political party that embodies not my beliefs, but the belief that people can have their own beliefs. I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals can have their lives, they can have the right to keep their lives. I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals have the right to pursue their own goals, without intervention from the government and without help from the government.

I'm a twenty-something, and I'm looking for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Can anyone give it to me?



here are political and philosophical essays by Matt Yotko:



13 Years, No Problem.

I had hope. I really did. I was starting to get excited about the fact that the American people were standing up for their rights and shouting a resounding “No!” to government control of the Internet. I was starting to see a glimmer of light in the tunnel as I read about some school boards allowing books such as *Catcher In The Rye* back into the libraries where they belong. But after reading this article, I begin to wonder if the glimmer I saw was nothing more than the front light of the engine of political correctness screaming toward me.

Recently in Cincinnati (Reuters): A suburban Ohio school superintendent who suggested that teachers be armed resigned under pressure late on Thursday.

John Varis, superintendent of Reading Community Schools for the past 13 years, had provoked a firestorm of criticism when he said at a public meeting Oct. 15 that arming teachers might improve school security.

Many parents in the working-class community were alarmed by the suggestion and circulated petitions calling for his removal. No action was taken by the Reading school board until after the Nov. 3 election, when two new members were elected.

Seeking to ease concerns, Varis said the suggestion had been one of many ideas tossed about at a brainstorming session and would never have been applied without community approval.

He envisioned keeping guns for possible use by teachers in a tightly secured central location.

Hmm, I have an idea. It's not necessarily a good idea, but an idea never the less. Of course, as I'm in a brainstorming session with a group of my peers, I throw the idea out for discussion. I'm fired because people think it's a bad idea. This sends the message to each and every person involved in the same scenario that potentially controversial ideas are bad, and they would do well to keep their mouths shut. After all, thirteen years is a big investment.

Good thing our educators are allowed to express themselves in a free and open environment, eh? Hey, isn't that what the learning process is supposed to be about?

This problem with guns in the hands of school children is a serious one, and it requires serious and frank discussion on the part of educators and administrators to determine an appropriate course of action. I'm absolutely certain that giving firearms to untrained teachers is a bad idea, but I can certainly see the thought process that could lead someone to make the statement in an open forum discussion of the topic.

The truly frightening part of this whole fiasco is that it was the community, the people whom this guy is trying to serve, which called for his dismissal. Thirteen years of what we can only assume to be at LEAST acceptable performance and guidance. Thirteen years of service to the community in an occupation which pays poorly and is thanked by only a very few. Thirteen years of passed opportunities, derogatory statements, bullshit from the kids, and demands from the parents that things improve or else. Now, get out.

I suppose that's what democracy is all about though in the land of the somewhat free and the home of the politically correct.

The Herding of the Public Sheep

First, let me say that I love this country and I love my freedoms. ALL of them. I hold a deep appreciation for the sacrifices that have been made by others in order to preserve those freedoms. Apparently, our leadership does not. After reading some of the unilaterally endorsed bills that are on the hill right now, I have come to a new understanding of what it means to possess freedom. The sacrifices of freedom which our government has been considering in 'quick fix' solutions to wide ranging problems such as teenage violence and domestic terrorism, in order to attain some artificial level of safety, is staggering.

Tyndall once wrote "It is as fatal as it is cowardly to blink facts because they are not to our taste." What he says here is that every one of us whom merely accepts the paradigms put forth by our institutions, and takes no action to analyze or comprehend their underlying basis for ourselves, behaves reprehensibly. When a society does this, it moves closer to self-extinction. Fortunately, the founding fathers realized this. They took action within our government to limit its power, and to pass the majority of the scope of decision making into the hands of the society, where it belongs. This most honorable and grave responsibility is now being taken away from us.

This brings me to my point. There has been a tremendous shift in the stance on government toward control in the politics of protection lately. I would really like to know why. Why are We, the people milling about as a herd of sheep waiting to be fed? What in the hell are we thinking? Are we so devoid of personal awareness that it has now become acceptable to sacrifice every bit of our humanity in order to avoid confrontation when we see somebody step out of line? I would swear that I've heard bleating a couple of times!

Recent proposals by our government have been put forth to create further restrictions on our constitutional freedoms in areas ranging from purchase of firearms to the ability to visit the local public library and check out classical reading material. Such sacrifices of personal and private freedoms could only come from a society programmed to accept whatever dogma is spewed forth by the media as gospel, and the truly frightening part is that these proposals are being met with significant public support!

Why not simply require thought? That's it. Require people to think before they act, and punish them appropriately when they don't. It isn't an enforceable law, and it shouldn't be. When we observe something that's obviously wrong, we should correct it and leave an impression. Place the responsibility for transgressions on the culprit and stop punishing society. It isn't society's fault if some idiot decides to start molesting children. Enough of the touchy-feely you can be rehabilitated and become a productive member of society garbage.

Make it hurt.

Because if we don't, it won't be long before it's time for our 'federally mandated' neural implants. It's for our own protection. Really.

Of course, that just my opinion, I could be wrong!

But I doubt it

Yotko is an arrogant know-it-all whose occasional unsyndicated opinion column, A Rant of My Own, fails to appear in more than 250 papers nationwide.





from scars publications & design:

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sulphur and sawdust,
slate and marrow,
blister and burn,
rinse and repeat,
infamous in our prime,
anais nin: an understanding of her art,
the electronic windmill,
changing woman,
the harvest of gems,
the little monk,
death in Málaga,
hope chest in the attic,
the window,
close cover before striking,
(woman.), autumn reason,
contents under pressure,
the average guy's guide (to feminism),
changing gears



compact discs

MFV the demo tapes
Kuypers the final, MFV Inclusive
Weeds and Flowers the beauty & the desolation
Pettus/Kuypers Live at Cafe Aloha
Pointless Orchestra Rough Mixes

upcoming projects

two stories (paperback book)
the decrepit remains (collection book)
the second axing (mp3s gratis)

THE
decrepit
REMAINS