

QUANTUM GENRE IN THE PLANET OF ARTS



Spectrum by Irene Frenkel

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V. Ulea

WHAT IS QUANTUM GENRE?

A Truly Short Introduction

This anthology celebrates an encounter of writers whose works regardless of their thematic and other differences have a common denominator, namely – all of them fit perfectly well the definition of Quantum Genre (QG) which I discussed in my Quantum Manifesto published by Sein und Werden (*Sein und Werden*, September, 2008 http://www.kisstthewitch.co.uk/seinundwerden/3_2/page37.html). My observations on my own “odd” collection of short stories, *Snail* (Canada: *Crossing Chaos*, 2009 http://crossingchaos.com/Snail_by_V_Ulea.html), initiated speculations which grew into the Manifesto. In the Manifesto I made an assumption that there could be a number of works that introduce and elaborate some principles which form the QG, and I was very much interested in reading such works. I was really amazed to see that such works did exist and as a result the Quantum Anthology was born.

The Quantum Genre is an emerging type of fiction that Darin Bradley calls “little weird.”¹ Using his term, I would call QG “weird-weird.” QG is not about the quantum topic but a “quantum” way of representation of characters and the universe. The theme can be any, including the quantum one, but the technique should be unlike the one we observe in mainstream literature. Therefore, a traditional formulaic language of synopsis required by literary agents and commercial publishers doesn’t work for QG. The Quantum Work can’t be sold to them and it has no appeal to the mainstream reader just in the same way as Impressionism or Cubism had no appeal to the general viewer.

To qualify for QG *all* or *some* of the following principles must be applied to a work:

1. “quantum” duality of characters
2. the uncertainty effect
3. quantum entanglement
4. “quantum” time
5. the observer/interpreter effect

The anthology is a debut of the QG, but we do hope that this is just the beginning and that many more exciting “quantum” journeys are waiting ahead...



Happiness by Irene Frenkel

FEAST

Nicholas Alexander Hayes

You retreat through dark alleys, following votive candles flickering amid overflowing dumpsters and tallow barrels. As wind gusts, the flames almost extinguish. Points of light curl down into molten wax.

You follow them hoping to discover a point of origin.

You follow them, fondling votives in your pocket.

Then framed in a window of The Chicken Shack, a boy.

You grip a single candle, pull it from your pocket.

From an alley his pale skin seems to recede deeper in the distance than his black hair, his unibrow. Tonight reflected light pulls from, retreats from darkness.

As you enter the parking lot, his hair, streaked with greenish fluorescent light, recedes to the same plane as his skin.

You light the candle and cross the lot. A dim streetlight makes you conscious of gray cat hair on your navy blue peacoat. As you brush some hair from your forearm, you tilt your hand. Light blue wax pours over your fingers. Pain fails to distract you from the vision you approach.

You set the candle on the small black window ledge in front of the boy.

His fingers work through a breast. Batter flecks from the meat and scatters onto his table, his lap. Off-white strings of flesh connect the torn strips to the breast for a moment as he brings the strips to his mouth. The boy's fingers glisten as they emerge.

Wax fractures on your fingers. Sloughing off, the pieces dangle from your knuckle hair close to where they hardened. You brush them onto the dark asphalt, noticing a slight pinch as the hair is torn from the roots.

The boy has color in his cheeks, which you could not see from the distance. The color is brighter, stronger than the normal rosiness of acne, like a flush of fever or wine—as if he had drunk half a bottle of cheap merlot in the early evening after school.

The boy almost smiles but his lips tense in mid-action. His long black lashes stir, flutter with a wink. His eyes catch yours through the dark reflection of your face, illuminated from beneath by wavering candlelight. Reflection obscures his features; they become yours.

He knows what you want. The corner of his mouth quivers, as if restraining laughter.

You cannot respond.

You flee.

You run to the nearest alley.

Candles fall from your coat. They hit the ground with a hollow percussion.

You retreat through dark alleys. No longer able to follow the candles, which have burnt out, you speed past obscure forms.

You retreat not knowing how much distance you have between you and the boy, not knowing what vision, which visage you flee.



End of World Series I by Rochelle Dinkin

VICTROLA

D. Harlan Wilson

I place the Victrola on the kitchen counter and wait for somebody to get a midnight snack. I hear my mother, upstairs, punctuating the flat notes of birdsongs. I hear my father, too. That rankled snore . . .

Lips sealed, my parents walk into the kitchen holding hands. They see me. They poke around the cupboards, looking for instant coffee. "Decaffeinated," says my father sternly.

I say, "Coffee isn't a snack. It's a drink. It's a pastime."

They turn their heads and stare at me. I realize I haven't said anything.

They give up and go back upstairs and the catastrophe of their discord recommences, instantly. Inhuman melodies forced from two strangled radios . . .

I wait, listening . . .

Finally somebody makes an appearance. A stranger. He wears a three-piece suit and a stovepipe hat that scrapes across the ceiling as he strides towards the refrigerator. I engage the Victrola, placing its needle on an old record. The record is warped and produces harsh static before articulating these words: "Welcome to the kitchen. I am your host. I hope you enjoy a snack. You must enjoy things. Eventually you will die." I mouth the words as they yawn out of the machine's *fleur-de-lis*. The stranger stops in his tracks and regards me with wide, unblinking eyes. He sucks in his cheeks. The Victrola says, "You look hungry. You should eat something. If you are not killed in a freak accident, eventually your body will eat you. Cancer, you see. Our bodies always eat us in the end." I continue to mouth the words. The stranger removes his hat and sits on the floor.

My parents return. They dance around the stranger and rifle through the cupboards again. They think that if they look hard enough eventually a jar of decaffeinated coffee crystals will appear, somewhere, behind something, even though I know there is no coffee in the house, and they know it, too.

They give up again. "That's life, son," says my mother, tilting her head. "One failure after another. But one must continue to fail. Otherwise one ceases to be human."

My father grabs her violently and shakes her. He pushes her over and wrestles with her on the kitchen floor, ripping buttons from her nightgown. The stranger observes the skirmish idly.

Winded, my parents get up. My father takes my mother in his arms and they slip away . . .

Upstairs my mother's tune changes: she shifts from the flat notes of birdsongs to the emotional drones of power ballads. And my father's snore gives birth to hundreds of minor snores.

. . . This is the climax. The stranger knows it. I know it. The Victrola confirms it, saying, "I am very pleased to meet you. You are diseased. Goodnight." I remove the needle from the record as the stranger lays flat and curls into a languid ball. I watch. I listen to my mother and father's muffled voices. They intersect and accomplish a crescendo, then roll out and taper off, fatigued, paling, until the only thing I can hear is the hush of ocean surf, the Victrola's *fleur-de-lis* whispering like a conch.



SNAIL
By Irene Frenkel

AXIS

Rachel Kendall

She created something with a conscience last night. She didn't mean to, but she was old enough and decent enough to accept responsibility for her mistakes. How was she to know that every mark on the graph plotted a similar pattern above her head, that the diametrics on her computer screen were at that moment rivalling a nine month gestation period in the sky?

Her mind had been elsewhere last night, heavy with real life, creating abstract images instead of the sales charts she was paid to draw up. She missed Lee, ached for him. She had been counting the days till his return, counting down the number of times she woke up in the night and missed the rattle of his snoring, the way he always pinched the covers, the way he never offered to make her a cup of coffee in the mornings. This, the first time they had been apart in four years of marriage and she found herself missing even the things that normally infuriated her, whilst the things that didn't usually bother her had become momentous in their gravity.

She had been drinking. Just a little red wine from an already-opened bottle. Enough to stain her thoughts to a slightly damp carmine. Enough to push loneliness to the side a little. Draw the curtains, pour the wine and raise the stakes. Tapping at keys, figures, digits, an eternity of co-ordinates, the numbers becoming more like Chinese characters or Egyptian hieroglyphs as her ideas sloshed into being. Crosses and dots and curves becoming cyrillic and maybe she was looking to crack a code all along. But it was so quiet. The inherited grandmother clock reminded her of her solitude, her heart beat competing, almost as loud. Together they punctuated the silence and when she heard the sudden single cry of a baby she leapt out of her seat, sending the wine over the keyboard in a splash of dark red. Damn it, damn it. She switched off the machine and climbed into bed, which hadn't made it back into its other self as sofa since Lee had gone. Fully clothed, a cigarette still smoking in the ashtray, the keyboard still dripping, the sound of that cry ringing in her ears like she had tinnitus. Cells dying, sound distorted.

It was still dark when she woke, shivering. Usually she found the dark a comfort, when she had someone to share it with. But now it was just a hole too deep to climb out of. It was too early for bird song. Too late for drunken revellers out on the street. It was just her and the universe, battling it out. She climbed out of bed and noticed the streaks of water on the skylight. Even the rain was silent, smudged against the glass. It was open, just a little, a crack, enough to let in the cold. She reached up to close it, arms bare white and goosebumped, and that's when she saw it, up there, staring at her. She stared back for a moment, just stared, and when it blinked her knees gave way and she fell to the floor.

She cried. She couldn't help it. The tears just came. The room was heavy with the vinegar smell of wine, the floor full of crumbs, strands of hair, dirty clothes strewn. She could smell herself as she curled into a ball and hugged her knees. She could smell unwashed skin, old blood caked under fingernails, greasy hair plastered onto wet cheeks. She must have fallen asleep there.

In the morning things are better. The light diffuses everything. She was stiff, but she had made it through another night alone. Today Lee would be back and he would make everything right.

It was still looking at her, through the skylight. This time she didn't fall. She didn't even break her gaze for a long while. They looked at each other, its eyes dark brown and wet, the pupils huge. It looked sad. It was... she didn't know what it was. A planet? It looked like a

planet, or a moon, a fat yellow disc taking up most of the sky and a corner of her skylight. It had no other features, no mouth, no body. It was just a body in itself, a being, and she was sure she was the one who had created it. She sat down and let her mind stutter over the simple facts. She could find none. She could find nothing more than voodoo or sheer will or some kind of uterine stream of consciousness. Something miraculous. And now what? It seemed to be waiting for her to do something. But she was at a loss.

She decided to get dressed. Pretty much for the first time in two weeks. She went to pull her nightshirt over her head and released a foul reek of sweat, old and new. It buzzed around the room joining something more sour that may or may not be emanating from inside her. But when she glanced up and saw those wretched eyes watching her every move she became self-conscious. So she scooped up some clothes from the floor and bundled herself into the bathroom, pushing the door to, slowly, looking at it looking back at her. The door closed quietly and she looked in the mirror. She wasn't too appalled. When one hasn't bathed or combed their hair or even stepped outside for two weeks, one can expect to look like a more transparent version of their former self. She was ex. She knew that. She was no longer what she had once been. She had gone through countless metamorphoses in her thirty three years. What difference did one or two more make? She cleaned her teeth and scrubbed at her yellowy tongue until it was raw. Spat blood into the grimy sink and then pulled on her clothes. They billowed on her like ship's sails, her hips like a rack, but her breasts hard white cushions, the areolae large and brilled and slightly sticky. She didn't bother with underwear. She didn't want to go into the bedroom to retrieve any. The door had remained closed for two weeks and some kind of instinct told her she didn't want to be going in there.

Dressed. As pointless an exercise as it had seemed, she would at least be a little more kin to the wife Lee had said goodbye to fourteen days ago. The wife who had pleaded with him not to go, or to take her with him. The wife who was going stir-crazy being stuck at home, who missed her job, her colleagues, the cigarette breaks, the god-awful coffee from the machine in the staff-room.

Dressed, she could greet him with a kiss. He could put a hand on the axis of her hip and ask her to walk towards him one more time. Sway for me, baby. Like you used to. Before. He would be tired, jet-lagged. She would loosen his tie, run him a bath, pour him a whisky. She would look after him, as was her desire. She would mother him a little, and then love him with her body. It was one of those things you never forgot how to do.

She sat on the chair by the computer, beneath the skylight. She tried to comb her hair but ended up yanking out whole clumps in a screech of agony and frustration. In the end she flung the comb across the room and waited. She would wait for him. He would see her.

"What do you want?" It didn't answer, because it couldn't. It could only stare. "I don't know what to do," she told it. Or him. "Stop looking at me." But it wouldn't. She tried turning away, swivelled around in the chair so her back was to it, but she could still feel its burn and her eyes kept rolling up to meet those above her. Like she was drawn to it, helpless. She decided to accept that fate and sat until dark, when the planet changed its hue from the pale warmth of sour milk to a dandelion-yellow in the glow of the moon. And it blinked and it gazed and it did nothing more.

She didn't move until the sound of a key turning in the door made her jump. She was wet. Beneath her bottom, her crotch, her jeans were piss-soaked. She didn't remember doing that. When she rose the odour of urine rose with her. Lee came through the door, his eyes heavy with grey shadows and his chin covered in rough dark stubble.

"You're up," he said. "It's late, it's after two. I thought you'd be asleep." He put down his bags and held out his arms. She didn't look at him. Just sat back down and looked back up. "It's okay," she whispered, tears beginning to trickle down her face.

"Liz?" He came over. Strode over in four easy steps. He kissed the top of her head, noticed the smell and his nose wrinkled in disgust before he could stop himself.

"Hey honey, I'm home," he whispered. "Are you okay sweetheart? Where's Ryan?"

She pointed, a fleeting hand, a whispery bare finger reaching upwards towards the dark. "Look what I did," she said. "I didn't mean to. Isn't it amazing? At first I hated it but now, I think, I'm quite proud. It has my eyes, don't you think?"

He looked up, squinted. "Liz, honey, I don't know what you're talking about. Where's Ryan? Is he asleep? Has he been good?"

She didn't answer him. Goddammit. She just ignored him, just kept staring up at empty sky. And what was that rotten smell? And then suddenly, he felt a stab in his heart. A pain, like he'd never felt before, the surge of something being ripped out, expunged in an instant, loss, the worst possible death. He looked at his wife once more, before striding, running, over to the closed door. He threw it open and yelled "No. No no no no no."

The violence of that time was very real and not so long ago. Her body had retained the memory. The bloody mess on white sheets, the way her body had trembled and ripped and fought against the baby so goddamned hard when all she wanted to do was let the thing loose, to push it from her womb to everything else. Almost as violent as conception, when their two bodies had slammed together and will had ceased to dictate. She had opened up willingly like all those times before but she had still felt sacrificial, victim to his stabs and release. Of sounds let loose through clenched teeth and howling in the last respite and the way he moved her body this way and that as though, no really, she didn't want to be fucked like that. She did of course. This was only playing. All of it was only playing. It wasn't a reality until the tiny pink and white slippery emanation nine months later started to scream... more violently than anything she'd heard before... that she realised none of it had been a game after all. It's never obvious until you lose.

But now, there was silence.

And some awful chaotic stench coming from that room, that probed her gut and she dry-heaved a couple of times as it, that thing, watched sorrowfully from above and the clock chimed the half hour.

He was in there a long time. The wife knew what to expect so when he came stumbling out, snotty and teary and blank, holding that blue-black dislocated stinking bundle in his arms, she couldn't even act surprised. Simply, she turned to her computer, switched it on, and began to chart the new numbers that were crawling nimbly in her head.



Heap of Ancestors by Rachel Isaac

GOODNIGHT, ALFRESCO

Benjamin Robinson

Though there was little or no wind that morning, I chose a windbreaker. I stepped off the coach onto the hot desert sand.

"Fashion's purview," said Goggles trundling behind me, "cow-tows not to the delinquencies of atmospheric circulation but to an unfathomable sense of propriety, inalienably applied."

"I see." I said.

"In the desert no one sees," he spluttered into my back.

We came to an oasis in the middle of which was a ring of blue surgical gowns folded neatly in squares. Goggles stepped into the ring and looked at me like I'd abandoned him as a child, poured the lava of indifference on the tender years.

With a tin of flammable liquid and a box of matches he set light to one of gowns—don't ask me where he gets these things, the liquid, the matches, the sense of ruined obligation—and we watched the flames weaving in and out of the fabric, seeking an end to their day.

On the edge of the oasis, the howls of laughter from the trunk of the coach, which had followed us like a cloud freewheeling through the desert sky, receded to a cropped whimpering.

"You feel cold?" I asked him. The sun was blazing a trail, engaging us in hot pursuit. When it gets an untoward vent like Goggles in its sights, it never lets up.

"Now that you mention it, I feel a draft," he said, mopping his brow with a napkin. "Ever since you tampered with the vent. To have tampered with the vent was sacrilege. To have tampered with the vent on the bridge, unforgivable. I hear you in my sleep," he whispered, "grinding the wide blue yonder, like Orion with an ice-cream cone stroking purgatory's sunbeam."

I glanced down at the gowns. "You think they ate alfresco?"

"I heard he took his own life."

"Preformed the procedure out of doors, I mean."

"I thought she decided against it."

"Try the atmospheric."

He sniffed the air, his nostrils vacuums of inquisition. "Picnic of some sort. Snacks. Vodka. Sleeping pills." He reached down and stroked the bloodstained hem of one of the gowns. "But mostly luncheon meat." Rotating his index finger round the gowns, he sniffed the crust of a discarded piece of excrement. "While the areola swelled to so big."

"Your soother," he kept his soother hanging round his neck on a pink ribbon, "it gives you a predictive sustenance?"

He lifted it to his lips. His cheeks dimpled and puffed as he sucked on the silicon outcrop. "Sterile as the Kalahari." He let it fall to the end of its tether. "I keep it out of sentiment."

What about an aftertaste?"

"A faint taint of tampering."

"Yours is an elemental philosophy, Goggles, I take my hat off to you."

The sun beat relentlessly.

"Donatello was the wild card, no?" I interjected. He'd recently taken up sculpture.

"His bric-a-brac of laissez faire amused, I suppose."

"What about a milky vestige? From the teat?"

He threw a sketchpad at me.

"The phrase offends you?"

"Your phraseology, yes indeed!" he laughed.

"Vent, vestige, don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about?"

"Did I ever show you my penises?" The look was wistful, the face a gambit.

"You have more than that one? Oh, you mean your collection of pricks?"

"When I showed you my vagina you laughed like a hyena."

"You should have explained it was part of a set you were sculpting. Then I would have laughed like a jackass and you could have locked me in the trunk with your mother."

"Did I show you the bronze I'm making of her dying moments?"

"You mean your work in progress?"

"It's at a critical stage. Looks a bit like a butchered vent."

Sucking heavily on his standby, he walked towards the edge of the oasis where the sand had been pushed into a bulbous mound. As he began his assent, the teat fell from his lips. "My mouth is so very dry. Were it a real nipple, true flesh and blood, I would feel fuller. And to the blind hyena locked in the trunk I say, she will learn the appreciation of art. Learn it or she's," as he reached the summit his voice became distant and shrill, "a doomed motherfucker!" He looked out at the desert, counting down the surgical gowns to calm himself, "...three stay calm, two stay calm, one stay calm, little teat, lift off soon, calm little astroteat."

I stared at him.

I wasn't getting away with that. He came racing down the slope, the dummy tit flailing from the end of its ribbon. "You think," he shrieked, "you can vent me you sonofabitch? I'll have you barred from the oasis. I'll have your legs broken. I'll have you zapped, you Mexican motherfucker. You'll never play the maracas again." The clinical ambience had got to him.

I threw open my arms in a gesture of submission. "An effigy! Let's make an effigy! Right here in the desert, what'd you say, Goggles?" Ever since he took up sculpting, he's been fascinated by the whole effigy end of things.

He lifted his watery eyes to the sky and the tears came hot and heavy. From the base of the slope he called for his hammer and chisel. "Damn him!" he screamed.

"Who?"

"Alfresco, the little toe rag. He's not my real father."

"Alfresco's not your father?" I remembered something he'd said years ago, something about his father moving to Atacama to get away from his mother.

His mood changed to brisk, off hand. "He's just some guy, some guy who knew my mother, what's it to you, what's your beef with alfresco?"

"Nix. Not a thing. I love alfresco. Let's eat, I'm starving. Let's eat alfresco!"

He dried his tears. "I couldn't stomach him."

"I thought you were made of sterner stuff."

"The hyena's made of sterner stuff. I'm an artist."

"A desert craftsman toiling in the bleached white sun."

"The colour of my mother's pubic hair, as it happens. Platinum blond."

"What if we burnt an effigy of alfresco? You could warm the little toe rag at it while I prepaid us a picnic."

"A game of nature verses nurture, I see, and you raised my mother's pubic hair to what end, exactly? To disgust me? Entice me? To bring on my laryngitis again?"

"You, Goggles, you raised the hairs on her vent."

He sat in the circle, removed his sandals and tried to suck his toes.

In an attempt to distract him, I said, "The surgery's very quiet this evening."

He turned a sour shade of wan, rose to his feet and took off down the oasis, limping. "Not far from here," he mumbled pointing to a patch of haze, "I was admitted to a hospital. A routine procedure, they said. Nothing to worry about, they said." He got down on his hands and knees and kissed the ground. "But look at me now, kissing the ground I limp on."

"Didn't Dresden tell you to get out more?"

"Ah yes, our dear friend Dr. Dresden. If there's one thing I can't stand more than my vent being tampered with it's a tampering vent."

"You were too busy playing Armageddon with his fancy stable of frauleins."

"That was before I discovered the healing powers of art." He looked up at the sky. "Donatello, he understood the need for relief." His sense of victory was waning. To distract him, I stamped up and down on the smouldering gown.

He came running back, took off his clothes and put the smouldering gown on.

He stood in the hot sun, a burnt blue mirage, smoke rising from his shoulders and looking so unlike Goggles I had to pinch myself.

"You're pinching yourself? Do you have an itchy vent or something?"

I didn't answer. I could see he was in one of his moods. Nearing the bridge again. The coach stuffed to the gills and he's making my life a living hell so I tamper with the vent. "Were you born on the coach or not? Once and for all, tell me the truth!"

An umbilical trail, a bubbly drool of disinterest trickled from his lips. "It was a hit and miss affair," he retorted.

"It wasn't an open and shut vent?"

He'd have liked to sneer at me for saying this, to have stroked his oversized gut and laughed, but his delusion of unflappability had got the better of him. As a token of his disgust, he reached down and stuck his soother in the earth. "Although sculpture is my forte," he said, "let me paint you a picture. The wind's howling like a hyena. We're hurtling across the bridge and the driver is slumped at the wheel. In his lap is an empty bottle of sleeping pills. On the dash, hardening in the midday sun, a hardboiled egg the shell of which is cracking against the moulded plastic lip as the coach bounces along, and a half-eaten luncheon meat sandwich. As we approach the other side my head emerges from my mother's vagina and I am prematurely sucked out an open window into the wide blue yonder aided and abetted in no small measure by a vent that has been tampered with."

"Vents don't suck, Goggles."

"This one sucked Goggles."

"I thought your father was a shoehorn salesman?"

"The shoehorns were a sideline. Coaching was his passion. Just before my unseemly exit, my mother whispered down to me, 'your father's taking an overdose'. As if I hadn't enough on my plate."

"It must have come as something of a blow, his death."

"If spending the previous nine months indulging your penchant for flatulence then becoming so distraught at the accumulative effects your rancid coils of turbulence elicit that you overdose at the wheel of a speeding coach while your wife is giving birth can be considered a blow, then yes, it came as something of a blow. The vent still sucked, by the way."

"I meant to you."

He ignored this.

"Just one last question," I said. "Prior to his taking the overdose, did he adjust the coach's ventilation system?"

"One of these days you'll wake up and realise," he sneered, "the laws of thermodynamics are not a free lunch."

"You can have this back," I shouted, ripping the windbreaker from my shoulders and throwing it in his face," you ineffable vent!"

He turned a glum shade of shrouded. Defeat was not far off. "Everything changed when you tampered with the vent. Everything turned sour. The days. The nights. The sultry desert air." He turned to the blue ring and took his place among the gowns. "It's time for our procedure," he said, lifting a fragment of luncheon meat from the ground. He brushed the dirt from his soother and pushed the sliver into the teat hole before ripping it from his neck and launching it into the air. "Goodnight, alfresco!" he said, the words pulled from an open wound.

Rising slowly to his feet, he began dancing the hula-hula. As he twisted and turned, the gowns rose into the air and pivoted like a steering wheel about his flabby girth.

"*Midnight*," he sang, rubbing his charred vent, "*at the oasis...*"

There was the sound of an engine revving.

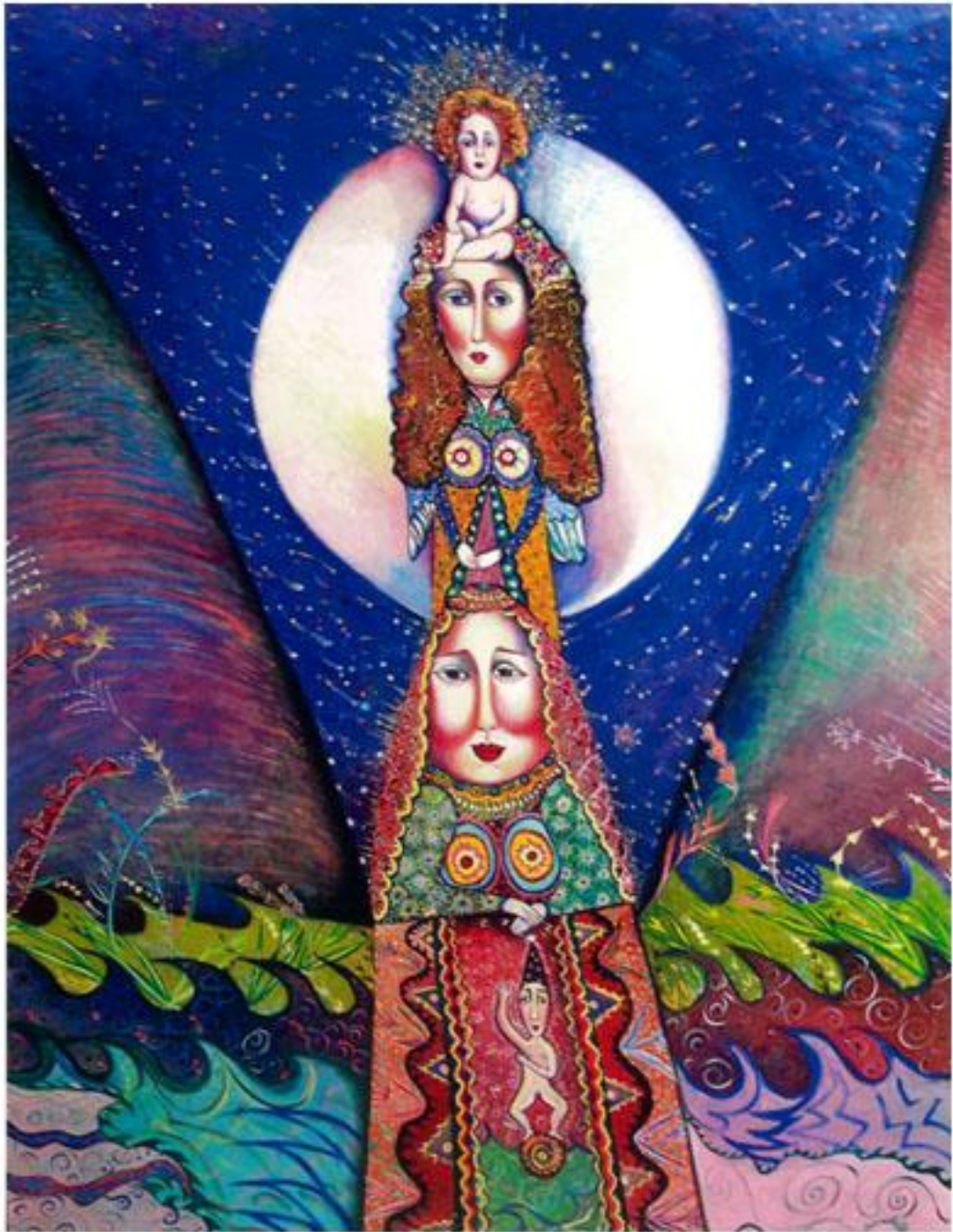
"Listen," I said, "the hyena's crying."

"She does that when it's time to go."

The past had caught up with us again.

Without batting an eyelid, I unbuttoned my shirt and with my shrivelled breasts dangling from my chest like two despairing eyes we made our way back to the coach.

The sky had started to darken. He put his arm around me and whispered, "Come on, mother, let's get you back in the trunk."



Matriarchal Totem Pole by Rochelle Dinkin

VIOLET INK

Michael Blehman

When does this happen? More frequently than often... Maybe less often than always.

I am getting ready. We'll arrive in time - or will be just a few minutes late... Which necktie will look better with my black suite? Definitely not that one looking as if covered with red spots or pomegranate stones someone has spat out on it: what can you do with a gift though?.. This one is better: yellow stripes on the black ground-color, it is quite new so far... I am almost ready. There is something else to remember.

The old address book can never be found where it is supposed to be. All the addresses in it are outdated, I should have thrown it away long ago... What's the weather like? It's getting dark and begins snowing, but I can see my best friend from this second floor - my best friend, the maple. He is a bit cold, stooping under the wind that is singing like a tuned flute... My maple must be as old as his antipode - the spotted necktie. It's good they know nothing about each other... We'll arrive in time, a few minutes late won't matter. The wind is singing, hiding away from me somewhere behind the rain-pipe. It is playing a nocturne on it, which will become a deep night piece earlier than I see and hear them again...

The two neighbours are coming back home - there they are walking right under my windows. They are sisters, those neighbours, and they look so similar - you can hardly tell one from the other. And dressed in the same way. The only difference is the color of their hair. But after you get to know them better, you understand that they have nothing in common except being close relatives. The brunette is gloomy and unkind, secret in her habits, with a calculating mind. She brings cold with her, even in August, to say nothing of February. The blonde is different: she will gladly talk to you, ask you all kinds of nice questions, smile to you, and give you some non-committal friendly advice. Even if I don't make use of it, I will feel the way I used to, long, long ago, and smile back to her. And keep listening to the flute, which won't stop singing, no matter how hard the ink-violet February would be trying to subdue this singing - all these years, which make up the time that has passed - passed away.

They disappeared without even asking my permission to stay, without even turning around to see me for the last time... I think we can go now. I will smile to the blonde who is walking arm-in-arm with her sister and looking at my window with an encouraging smile. It's getting dark, and she can't see me - the candle on the table is of little use, but we do know about each other, we know that each of us does exist... It's time to go downstairs, we'll arrive just in time. Let me look into the mailbox - maybe there is a letter? No, it's too late. I will look into it on the way back. Although it never arrives anyway...

I am getting ready. Let me make sure I have not forgotten anything... We'll come in time, or maybe just a few minutes late. Which bracelet would look better with my violet dress - the usual gold one, with the little red stones, or maybe the other one, which you can do nothing with, just as with any other gift?.. Yes, let everything be as usual - the one with the red stones, it looks quite new... This address book is so old, why should it be here?.. What's the weather like? From my second floor window, I can see an old piece of paper lost in the top of the leafless, rimed maple.

The wind, howling in the rain-pipe like an untuned flute, can't rip that sheet of paper away from the tree. That's the whole painting, with the miserable howling accompaniment instead of a frame. You may look and listen as much as you want - you won't be able to change anything. I will try not to look out, not to hear this pipe... Yes, today, as usual, the gold one with the little red stones will look excellent: it always does, and it never lets me down... I won't be looking out, and I won't be listening to the pipe. Nothing can be changed. The time I had at my disposal to try and change something is gone: the years it consisted of hopped away and made a long nose at me from a safe distance.

What is left after their escape? The untuned flute howling in the rain-pipe, and the stooping maple with a bold top I see from my second floor window, with a piece of paper lost in the leaves... But I have the garnet grains blinking as if a friend were trying to tap me on the shoulder or kiss my cheek sympathetically. These little red stones don't howl like a broken

flute, they don't stoop or bend under the wind like a snowbound tipsy beggar... The maple has bent down, and one of its branches has almost touched the two neighbors who are always there.

Here they are, passing by under the window, never looking at each other, never talking, though they are twin sisters... Their faces look similar, the only difference is the color of their hair. And their characters - there is nothing in common as if they were not sisters. The blonde is annoyingly smiling as usual, nobody knows why and to whom. The brunette is reserved and silent, she knows what she is worth, how important her every gesture and word are. Unlike her sister, she will never bother you with unnecessary questions and unwanted advice... February - violet, familiar, reliable, never letting me down, if it were not for this broken flute howling in an awful dissonance. And not this stooping lumber of maple... All right, I can go now. Let's make sure I have not forgotten anything. The candle is on - shall I leave it or snuff it out? I'd rather save it. It will be better to light it at night, as usual. And the curtain - I don't want the two sisters to peep in my empty room, especially that intrusive blonde... I will look in the mailbox on the way back. Maybe there is a letter? Well, hardly - when did come last time?..



Time to go. The inky black darkness gets in the left window covering from me the freezing maple creaking and groaning in the cold, trying not to leave me alone. Not the best time for a walk, friend!.. Or maybe it's not a walk? Maybe you are here for me? What would I do without you? What would I do without the flute sounding in the rain-pipe?.. Could I force myself not to pay attention to the spotted necktie, to the ink split all over the world, to the useless candle on the table?

Elf-Lord by Crystal Blue

The long-awaited dark-violet velvet pours into the right window covering from me the stooping maple that stubbornly refuses to get away. The garnet grains rub devotedly against my wrist. What would I do without them? Without the candle on the table? Without my dear violet month? If not for them, would I be able not to notice those crooked trees sticking their bold heads out of the snowbanks? The piece of paper that was caught by a branch?

A rye field has flashed in the left window, and a boy, almost a man, in a red baseball cap. He looks lost and absent-minded – maybe he lost something, or someone... Or maybe someone lost him? He will catch cold, for sure. But it's too late to speak to him, the time is gone, and the boy too... And it's too cold to roll down the window.

A little girl has flashed in the right window. She has stepped down from the kerb and is hopping merrily, not noticing me and the traffic. I must tell her to get back to the kerb - but it's too late, the time is gone... The girl is walking behind her parents, and they don't notice her. Maybe they will notice me if I shout up? No, it's too cold to roll down the window.

In the left window, the night street passes by, a lamppost smoldering like the candle on the table, with the unavoidable yellow. The drugstore smelling of fish-oil... That's why this month is so short. Why should it last? It smells of fish-oil and violet ink. Almost black, not violet at all. And its snow is squeaking and scraping like a letter I have never sent off and never received, the letter I crumple up to cause it pain before throwing it away. But there is the flute, it will protect me from the squeaking. The falling snow squeaks even before it has touched the ground, not even knowing that it is only falling to drown the leafless maples. A familiar building has flashed in the left window - we haven't seen each other for ages. I must

return here in summer, when the fountain starts working again... We have arrived at last. We are not late, it's around ten minutes before the beginning.

The frozen street has flashed in the right window, then the white snowbanks that make the electric light light-violet. My candle is left alone in the empty room, so I can hardly see the garnet droplets. Or yes, I can: the lamppost casts its golden-violet light and makes them visible. The snow also has this color - like the letter, never received or sent off, written in violet ink... Maybe it's being waited for somewhere? It's snowing again. Something is going away - what can it be?.. Time? No, time left me long ago, each and every year of it. Or some of them stayed behind - to wait and start leaving right now? Or is the time back - to go away once again and show me that I will have no more time left?... It's here, round the corner, after the crossing. We have ten minutes left.

Ten minutes left. I take off my coat and try to pull myself together after having stayed for so long in that cold, squeaking month - the shortest and, at the same time, the longest one. Every time, it ends later and later. But I have an endless evening without the dirty-yellow mixed to the black-and-violet. It will be long before the evening sonata becomes a nocturne - the evening piece played by the wind hiding behind the rain-pipe. There will be no sticky snow, no prickly lamppost, no drugstore smelling of fish-oil. Two endless hours and ten additional minutes... Though... What will change when the black-and-violet month is gone at last? It will return anyway. I wish I knew how many times he will be coming back... But will the others be better?.. I give both coats to the check-room attendant and look in the mirror - only to see the yellow stripes on the black background and the cold red drops close by. The familiar blonde and her twin sister, are going up the staircase arm-in-arm. She never appears alone... Well, I did see her on her own. Yes, I did, and it was before the years went away... They went away without even saying goodbye... It's time to go upstairs.

Ten minutes left. I take off my fur coat and, slowly, forget about my favorite coolness of the short violet month - my dear month that ends faster and faster every time. This time it will also go away soon, and, for a while, there will be no more snow looking like the letter never sent off, written in violet ink... My candle will have to give me much more light because the golden-violet light of the lamppost will become colorless... Yes, but the red seeds will be more visible on the narrow gold bracelet, and this will last long, and I will not have to wait for the light to pull them out of the black velvet... How many more times will it be leaving me? How often will I lose my hope not to hear the untuned flute howling in the rain-pipe, not to see the crooked maple from my second-floor window, that stooping maple with a sheet of paper hanging on a branch...

The check-room attendant takes the coats. I do up my hair and see the little garnet stones resembling me the years that giggled at me before going away. There are much fewer stones than those sneering years though... Let the two hours pass, and the ten minutes, and then, as usual, I will try not to listen to the flute and not to see the yellow spots on the boggy-black background... I caught a smile of the brunette neighbour passing by arm-in-arm with her sister who never seems to leave her alone. Two similar faces, and nothing in common. Since it all began, I have never seen her on her own, without her intrusive twin... It's time to go upstairs.

A few spectators are late, they are passing by me down the aisle, on my left. The light is off, I can see low dresses, the flute, a black suite, bright-yellow violins and, a clavecin.

A few spectator are late, they are passing by me down the aisle, on my right. The light is off, I can see dark-yellow violins, a bright-yellow clavecin, a black flute, a black suit, and dresses.

The flute is playing a nocturne, which, fortunately, doesn't differ at all from the piece the wind and rain play for me every evening on the rain-pipe. The clavecin restrains itself trying to look comely and modest among the insane fiddlesticks tearing the souls of the thin strings stretched like bare nerves along the bright yellow body. Those are the sounds that sway the branches of my maple. I remember looking at my friend from my second floor window: he always tries to draw up, even in this chilly, freezing black and violet month. Although how can you stand tall? How can you avoid sinking in the dirty-white snow?.. I see and hear that the flute, the clavecin, the violins are begging me to write the letter. I composed it long ago, when

the years began going away, sometimes turning around and, sometimes, just shrugging their shoulders, perplexedly or scornfully.

To write the letter? But how? I am always repeating it in my mind, and it protects me from the darkening yellow light coming down from the old lamppost near the fish-oily drugstore, from the muddy snowbanks that drown my maple... I would write it, but I have no paper, not a single sheet that would not scrape and get torn into pieces when I want to crumple and tear it. All that has remained to me is the black-and-violet ink spilled around turning the snow into mud that doesn't let me simply smile and concentrate. How can I write the letters on the resisting, scraping sheet of paper? How can I expect them to make up the necessary words and phrases that keep sounding in my mind? I have composed and repeated them numerous times - every phrase, every word, every letter. And these violins, flute, clavecin remember my letter by heart. They are reading it aloud - each instrument in its own special way, but so concertedly that the phrases don't fall into words, and the words don't fall into letters.

Where did they hear it first? I don't remember ever reading my letter to anyone... And why are they doing that in public?.. The violins, the clavecin, the flute are telling me, begging me: do write your letter - we know it does exist, we know every word of it, so write it. It's so easy: just put the letters into words, and then the words into phrases. All you need to do is just write it... Well, but where is the paper I would not crumple and tear? Where is the paper on which the letters would make up the words I keep in my mind? I do remember writing on that paper - but I spent so much time counting the years shrugging their shoulders indifferently, so I must have lost it... And even if I do write it - where is the address? It has changed, for sure. It simply can't remain unchanged, after so many indifferent years. I won't be able to find it in the old address book... Too late, indeed: the flute, the violins, the clavecin have fallen silent, the light has covered them from me, only showing the inevitable red seeds on the gold bracelet... It's been just two hours and a few more minutes, and they are gone, as usual, without saying goodbye or asking my permission to stay... It's time to go: the twin sisters are walking down the aisle on my left. They always go my way, we are neighbors... I put on my coat. We can go. We have to.

The violins are trying not to show their feelings, but they can't restrain themselves. Neither can the flute. In those rain-pipes, it plays the fool, rattling together with the rain caught in the rusty metal, or with the melting ice. But it is playing quite differently here - it is telling me about myself, about how it could have been if the years hadn't hopped away, grinning like Cheshire cats and making a long nose at me. I have so much and so little out there: my dear month, though spoiled by the flute playing the fool, and the bold maple looking into the second floor window expecting sympathy and never forgiving nobody's weakness, especially its own, and a piece of paper hanging on a branch. And so little but so much in here: the flute that understands just everything; the somewhat restrained clavecin keeping his emotions secret to the rest; the violins, supporting each other and telling me my story in quite different languages of their own.

What is your story about? Please keep telling it! Please don't hurry to give yourselves away to the rest - you are too few to be heard by all. Just look at me, talk to me, tell me why you are crying and who you are complaining to. It's me, only me, about me, right? Please don't let me down, no reply is better than "no"... I see and hear: you are writing my letter for me - the letter I can never write, I just can't, I won't make up my mind... But you - why is it so easy for you to read it aloud? It's mine, it's mine only! Why is it you, not me, who can write my letter in my favourite violet month? My letter, so dear to me because it has never been written, never sent off, and it never will... The letters I will never write in violet ink would easily make up words, and the words would obediently make up the necessary phrases... But, unfortunately, I don't have that ink. I know for sure that it does exist somewhere so I can find it on the bottom of an unknown inkpot, so the letters and words would appear easily. Then the years would stop sneering and thinking that, because of them, the ink has dried out and the inkpot has cracked...

Maybe, before my violet month is not over, I must try and find that magnificent inkpot, and turn the letters into words and phrases? Can I - may I?.. I know for sure that I can't... And even if I could- where will I send my letter? The address book is so old that a new

address will never appear in it... Besides, the instruments have fallen silent - the flute, the violins, the clavecin. The light has made them disappear. On my left, there are the yellow stains on the muddy black back. On the right, the twin sisters are walking down the aisle, with their backs turned to where the violins, clavecin and flute have just stopped playing. The only difference is that these two hours and a few more minutes won't sneer when going away as the others used to.... I put on my fur coat. We can go. We have to.

We turn, then pass the crossing. The left window is flying past the same grey-and-violet snowbanks mixed with the stale yellow light... It will soon be summer, it always comes fast, and it goes away even faster, never being up to expectations. This must have begun when the years started going away, never saying goodbye and never asking me to let them stay... June and February are almost alike, but the sun will have different colors: it used to be almost colorless and will become dark-yellow, and the grey-violet earth will turn genuine black. And the fountain will start working. Well, the candle on the table will cast its unnecessary light, though for a shorter time, but it will, anyway, I can't change that. And I can't change the red spots either... Shall I try to write and send off the letter? I will - but not right now, it's not the best time. It will be easier to find the paper I need when the sun becomes yellow and the earth turns black. I will wait. It will happen soon - but why does one always have to wait so long? And meanwhile, let my flute keep playing on the rain-pipe. Nobody will stop it.

The right window passes by a frozen fountain, by the golden-violet lamppost casting its violet light upon the snow. I remember: my candle is waiting for me, it wants to give me hope and light, that's what it is for. When I snuff it out, it stops being a candle - for a while... My candle is waiting for me again and again, it wants to feel a real candle, it wants to keep helping me - to protect me from the yellow stains on the black background, to spotlight the garnet droplets on the gold bracelet... What if I do write the letter? Maybe right now, before the violet month goes away as it always does? I have already composed it, but where - where can I find the violet ink? I won't find it in June... But June, though yellow-black instead of violet, is not to blame, it's no worse and no better than the others. Like the rest of them, it goes away unexpectedly, and comes just as predictably... Time can't remind me of anything: everything is remembered...

Violet ink is split all over the world... In the left window, I can see a little girl hopping along. Her parents are far ahead, busy with their very important conversation. I must advise them to be more careful and get the kid back to the sidewalk... Too late, we have already passed by. Time to get back. The candle will be on, anyway, it's always there, it would be funny to think that the flute can snuff it out. And even if the candle has been snuffed out, it remains a candle - sooner or later, it will be lit again...

Time to go back, and I can do nothing with the crumpled piece of paper caught in the top of the half-dry maple.... The right window flies past a rye field. A tall stooping boy is walking. He thinks he is grown up, but he is certainly not - a baseball cap in such a cold? I must advise him to put on a warm hat and ask him whom or what he is looking for so late at night. Maybe I could help? Too late, we have already passed by... It's time to forget about the rattling flute and make sure that the candle is on.

The key has creaked softly in the keyhole. The twin sisters have waked up anyway to let me know they are both on alert and there is no escape. It's impossible to tell one from the other at night. Where is the blonde? The flute can hardly be heard in the rain-pipe... Maybe a letter has come? Such a pity it's too dark and I can't open the mailbox. Will look into it tomorrow... Though there is hardly a letter there: the address has been different since long ago... Here is the old gift stained with red spots. I will hang up the necktie here, too, but first look at the orange-yellow stripes on black. It's so dark that both of them don't differ from each other... And the flute is almost mute, and the maple is almost invisible behind the dark-violet curtain. The candle will be on till tomorrow. Then there will be another one, then still another one. And still no paper to write the letter on... A candle on the table, as usual... Who knows - maybe the address is still the same?..

The violet velvet turns into the usual darkness. The twin neighbours feel at home everywhere, there is no escape. They came here when the years began sneering and leaving... I am trying to guess which of them is the brunette, but the darkness makes them

similar... I will look for a letter tomorrow - I don't remember where I put the key to the mailbox... However, the letter never comes, my address has changed... The gold bracelet covered with little red stones is again in its place, near the old present, which had to stay at home this time. It always does - since then. What do I need it for? All right, let it remain... The flute has stopped howling, the violet curtain has covered the maple from me. What if I don't remove the curtain tomorrow morning? No, I can't: the candle won't last that long... Of course, I can put another one on the table, I always do, then still another one, but the curtain has to be drawn aside anyway... And still there is no ink for the letter... The candle is on again... Maybe the address has not changed?..

So when does it happen? More frequently than often. Well, maybe less often than always...

Less often?

References

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Rain by Izya Shlosberg

ANGEL OF THE EVENING

Jonathan Shipley

She is the morning and the evening, but the two are not reconcilable.

She loves the morning and the hymns and the festivals, but is assaulted by doubts when she is alone in the dark...

* * *

Brass glinted in the early morning sunlight. She closed her eyes and let the music echo within her as it echoed without. She floated down the huge aisle, carved from the living rock of the cliffs. On either side, rows of slender pillars reached from the polished floor to the roof of the cavern far overhead.

Pierced in a dozen places to admit the sunbeams in narrow shafts, the roof played with luminous tints like a screen of light. Light among the darkness... It was how she thought of herself as well.

Her nights were so empty. Her very existence was a mystery – and in the dark hours, she wondered dark things.

* * *

She might grow weary of the dark hours, but she did not sleep as the wingless did. She merely waited restlessly for the sun to bring joy back into her life.

From time to time she would try to escape her thoughts by exploring the hidden places surrounding her. But even the cliffs held their disturbing secrets.

Those lured her during her times of solitude, lured her and disturbed.

* * *

One ledge held a chorus of gargoyles, fierce of aspect with piercing eyes above stone beaks and snouts. Misshapen and crumbling as they were, it was hard to tell what the original forms had been. But one in particular drew her attention, one better preserved than the others with stony arches springing from its shoulders. It sat hunched in the corner, always more in shadow than in light, but at certain angles the creature seemed to be winged, even as she was winged. Why would anyone place feathered wings upon a gargoyle?

* * *

The silence was deafening, the solitude frightening as she teetered atop the high ledges. The carved gargoyles stared solemnly back at her – not mocking, not challenging. For the first time, she could see compassion in their gazes.

And the night became darker and colder.

How strange, she thought. The moon should be casting its beams through the pierced ceiling of the cavern. The dawn should not be that far away.

But no moonbeam or pre-dawn glow lit the cavern.

She huddled at the edge of the ledge among the carved, pitying faces and sank her head into her arms. She could not feel her wings anymore, only the bitter cold swirling closer and closer.

She knew that if she tried to fly, she would crash to the stone floor far below.

So this is what I am. The thought came sluggishly.



Frozen Angel by Izya Shlosberg

SOUNDS

Tantra Bensko

The sounds grow more coppery, more richly lit. They caress the ears more flavorfully, with more texture. They shine out of darkness with more chiaroscuro, more boldness. They are waves. They are not nothing. Except that waves are nothing.

They grow fond of a very little girl, with pony tails with fasteners that look like grace-notes. They like the lift, the curve of the arc of her pony tails, as they lift high on her head. The shape reminds them of Ravel. And her ears so more accessible. Easier to please.

She doesn't like Ravel, has never heard of his music. She likes Wagner. The sounds aren't sure she's mature enough to put him in context yet, may be making a mistake, taking in Wagner without the necessary qualifying statements one should make about his politics, his monsterhood.

They try to incorporate a little of Ravel around their edges, the ones where their molecules bump off into other parallel realities, into other non-localities, into other potentials. She isn't buying it. She's tuned in. And she can tell.

"Cut that out," she says. "I know my Wagner. I know this reality. I'm sticking to it."

"But" says the sounds, in their own special way, as they aren't very interested in English. Too bland, too many accents that have destroyed it, not musical enough. They like French.

"What about the French Horn?"

"Cut it out, you. I know that doesn't go there. You changed the works. Wagner is Wagner, and that's in the past."

"But. You know the future affects the past. The waves go both ways from the present. We might as well start taking advantage of that. Only the young ones and the scientists and the yogis will take us up on it at first. But."

"I show you waves," she said. She waved good-bye at the sounds. And that was that.



Time by Izya Shlosberg

a house of small hours

Dorothee Lang

(1)

she is back. returning after two seasons, to a different room. she brings a yellow box, puts it in the kitchen. her room neighbour carries a yellow box, too. a token. maybe.

(2)

in the morning, a fragment of the night remaining, like a task, a card drawn in a place that was about spaces, about tableaux filled with lines and points, with diagrams:

“define your connection to others”

(3)

in a white room, a screen. a stream of images. a man there, talking to her, explaining something important, while the sound is missing. she pushes buttons, but his voice doesn't appear.

(4)

a stone room. a store room, old dirt lying on the floor, gutter, odd things, she doesn't want to touch them, but she needs to remove them. from the ceiling, there is a rubber band hanging. she pulls, and it is connected to something. some kind of mechanism. old. she never noticed it before. she keeps pulling, and the rubber band cracks. she listens for something to happen, for some mechanism to set in. but the room stays quite. at least for now.

(5)

it's not her birthday. yet there is a gift. wrapped with a ribbon. she looks at the gift, then at the man. he shrugs. there is no special reason for the gift.

curious, she opens the package. the first thing she sees is a black shape of plastic. then another one. then a third. she places the pieces on the table, tries to make sense of them. it's when she sees a little bag, inside the package, that she understands. water lilies, pink, says the bag. and the shapes of plastic – they are part of a miniature pond. a water lily pond.

“how does it get assembled?” she asks. no one answers. that's how she understands that it is up to her to put the pond together. to fill it with water. to set the pink lilies inside.

(6)

in the market, a tiny dog. lost. or living there. reminding her of anger, the way he once stood there. holding a tiny dog in its hand. a dog that did something wrong. making anger furious. so anger throws the dog. not to hurt or kill it. not really.

(7)

outside, there is a pond with pink flowers. she opens the door, and walks down a lane. on the way, she remembers what her room neighbour had said, that ants are living there. in the pond. water ants. and how the flowers are their home.

she goes there, to see. and sits at the pond. some children are there. they tear out the flowers. she is worried. but the flowers aren't gone. they return after the children walk away. the only thing that is missing then are the water ants. maybe they are hiding, to return after she has walked away, she thinks. so she gets up. and leaves the pond.

(8)

she is in the white room again. the one with the screen. she sits in front of it. she looks at icons that flash up. like an icon game. only that the screen isn't about playing games. but about control. a question appears on the screen: "what day do you want today?" then the screen rephrases the question. "what day do you need today?"

she looks at the images. she tries to figure out the right match.



stone glass sky2 by Dorothee Lang

THE BIRDMAN

Kyle Muntz

There he stands, a faint shadow
against the gray horizon, shirt flapping wildly in the wind. Black tendrils ripple from him, thick
winding bands, torridly stirring the sky.

His suit seems to resemble
a skin of feathers (no—pressed leather and lead,
declaiming stripes, faintly musted,
its lattice of gray and darker gray, checkers and lines, without counterpart in
corner stores,
in attics,
proper congregations,
battalions of soldiers—stir and
thrust—void of wrinkles,
darkly gray [a third proclamation as a shadow passes him over, cool wide depth
making sway his shapes and figures, absent of features, unseemliness of gray]
in justification of his arms, out-thrust, a martyr's pose,
to both embrace and do away with the stratosphere.)
The set of his posture
reaffirms the memory of statues.

.....

In the distance,
a storm is brewing.
It leaps like a child within its smoky cage, wickedly dancing, immaterial limbs
exempt from weight or burden—ligaments stretched of motion and electricity, swirling amidst
tornadoes.
Cracking thunder (the firmament bangs a gong: myriad
systems have gone to war)
jars its body; it quakes,
birthing rain.
Like a titan, carrying the world upon its back
(inverted beneath),
it begins slowly to move, a muted glow
about
its belly, never ceasing
to cry.

.....

Look at his face: it is the most hideous of portraits,
broken glass, angles sharply twisted.
His eyes are crimson triangles, incessantly blinking.
The nose takes the place of the ear (a decorative leg, curling its knee,
extending its toes, bending the ankle).
A crooked mouth
hangs from the jaw, thin yellow lips
faintly smiling—no, portraits smile in an attempt to replace themselves with an
image of a memory of an attribute of a moment—not a smile, but perhaps a grimace,
remnant of some wound or another—
so that even its dim shades are a prominent fixture upon the shadowed
visage, chin pointed.

This hides
a bruise-purpled skull, plucked mercilessly of feathers; a pile lies by his feet, fallen
from hands that have never touched them.
Looking closely, you would see
that there has never been a face there, only the retention of a face,
pieces and imitation, bits and clumps of garbage, flecks of rust, pine cones,
shredded flowers,
strands of hair, the fluff from a pillow,
strings of yarn and maybe a picture of the sky, taken in the latter half of
whatever passing season, palpitating mountains; a drop of
blood, drawn as the image is affixed,
cools to paste, and finally a hardened stain. It has the texture of paint on walls, sharp enough
to prick your finger
when you touch it.

.....

He flies,
fervently soaring.
His wings are made of sticks and sheets of blankets, glued and poorly collected.
They shake when he flaps them, like they're about to break (of course they
are; he was never meant to fly; he was hardly meant to live;
deserving no interim of the distance he abuses),
but still, he only teeters,
feet dragging the ground,
bones cracking as physics grind their masses.
His beak
has fallen from his pocket.
When he turns (without seeing—the distance is flat and he's never been there: grass and
bushes, entirely without trees)
he can make out no sign of it, already buried beneath shrubs, skittering the dirt,
an ivory recess,
a negation.

.....

He walks to the base of the hill, to coldness. Icicles form, a combination of mineral and
bones.
His breath is a spear, steadily lengthening, glossed faintly with poisons.
The weight gets to be too much,
and by accident he falls,
tipping precariously forward,
pinwheeling his arms,
casting the straw from his frame—but no good.
He smacks the ground,
and that stalagmite, vindictively broken,
sticks out of his chest, piercing his heart.
Black fluid
drains
from his nostrils, and more of it dribbles
along his tongue (tasteless).
He has difficulty with motion.
He stays there for a very long time.

.....

Utilizing rays of light, he decides to compose a memory,
filling it with trilling and music.
It doesn't work.
He's never been good
with color.

.....

Like a god, he turns to ponder his cage.
It is a place of confinement, the cage,
of emphasis (the cage),
of boundaries (the cage).
Limits
come to replace, and therefore define
the perceptive modes within it.
Internal
and external
obsess its creatures of stillness and unblinking eyes (that is just as they as they
appear, severed by iron bars), inherently limiting perspective.
This subjectivity is impossible to understand
from outside.
A flock of birds emerge, each tied to his hand at the ankle. There are many—he
doesn't count but he knows there are many—yet they cannot go very far.
Their bindings have not been removed, only redefined,
to be contained within whatever length of string. He persists
in chaining them
to the earth.



Butterfly Girl by Rachel Isaac

CROSSING.

j.a.tyler

She was a blue flower pinned to the shoulders of a giant, sky tall and shooting still upward. Trampling forward even in dusk with its stars and no moon. He was drunk. Legs wobbling and turning against his own knees. In and out and out of tune. She was a saddle on a horse. Jostling. Bleating in giggles.

His arms were owl wings spread open and splayed at the fingers. Palms rough and square, honed and planed like boards. Attached to his fingertips was a girl shrinking alongside his hulk. Smiling at his bow and skipping in the weeded shallows. Attached to his fingertips was a boy reluctant and sometimes callous. Hooked to his father's paw like a fish tied to the shore. Tangling along with him, spools of family spinning out.

Pillars of clouds broke from the growing dark of the sky. Spilled themselves in intermittent splashes of light. Purple. Purple. Purple. Thunderhead drops slowly banging on greased and ribboned and pinned hair. On flat and dry hair. Falling against struggling ground. Shattering on the spines of dry bristle weeds and plainsong branches.

The bar had been gusting in warm air and a sense of changing skies. Cornbread in cast iron. Sweet milk and curtains of print dresses. Shrouds of leathered hands and boots. The turn of a ragged guitar formed in blistered wood. Girls manic and peppered, running in and out of themselves. Men with beards and gaping teeth. Women as geese flocking and tittering. Boys like windblown seeds scattered in edges.

There was a first crack overhead and a shift of dirt, a quick finale of last dregs and packing. Hugs and scraping handshakes. Parting like waters ready, some leading horses and some nothing but feet. Turning back to homes miles in and out of the nearly disintegrated sun. Family herds like nomads, shuffling back to another day in many.

The draw was lean and contemptuous when the rain came. Staring them down like the muscles of burling men. Anchoring into the world like them, the straggling piss poor dust. The draw that led them to sometimes school and tottered on its own shy cliffs. A riverbed ravine that would flood as quickly as it would recede, loving the pelt and hammer of rain.

It came in drifts like snow and the wind smiled with it. The girl atop and the boy and girl at the end of his owl wings, stretched, all inhaling the way it rained. Ahead the draw filling. Curving smooth in the weight of new found water. Curling in on itself like a fireside. Winding around. Ahead they watched it and smiled, the rain plating their faces in sweetness and temporary cool.

She followed just behind. A basket woven rough and rampant, clutched in her firm palm. In front of her the rain and the family, both draining out of themselves. In front of her a rise and a fall and a draw sucking into an unsalted ocean. Filling like a brimful hat. Unnerved by nothing. Her ankles fierce and snake proof, tussling the ground as she walked, seeing her husband and children play ahead of her in the rain.

Five stood on the shore of a deepening flow and laughed at its grandness. Reveled in the nature of god. The man spit in its waters and the boy glared at its streaming. The girls chastised their father's arm and shoulder for the string of tobacco spit now a part of the draw. And her, the one behind them clutching a basket full of half eaten pie, she saw him stretch his head to her, a smile wavering, her lips returning. How they pooled together like the waters of rain.

The girls' shoes laced half way up and unlaced in their girl hands. Tied and then thrown together over shoulders. The boy was barefoot already, like he was always, like a piece of the earth itself. And in the pinched fingers of their father they stood as he steadied her like a

rock would steady the sky. Stood thwarting the rain and taunting the thunder as she cupped his shoulder and unlaced her own boots. In a fleeting and momentary pause.

They ventured into the draw, baptizing themselves again as they went. In the name of the son and the father and the holy spirit. Mud thickened beneath their feet. Rain dripped from their noses and skated through their hair. A feel of euphoria rustled abruptly beneath their clothing. The sky ripped with noise like wagons clanging to starts. Teeth in the flashes of light. Smiles broad and laughing.

On the other side they were swept by the wind. Towering in rain. And the other girl took her turn atop his giant shoulders and the boy ran handless through the stalks of ankle green. Feet tingling like the newly awakened, he led them to the barn's side door, thrusting back its planks like ripping open a heart. Into the shifting feet of cattle and the punch of straw.

The rain broke into sections through the four paneled windows and the five of them collapsed in a heap of limbs and wet hair. They lay breathing in small gulps of happiness. Pleased by the rain. Loving the rain. Understood finally by the rain. And the girls looked to the father and the father looked to the son and the mother looked to the men and the girls. Melting into feed and floorboards, none wanting to move.

She passed the tin of leftover pie from hands to hands to hands and they each one of them scooped two or three fingers full. Delighting in rain soaked glistening. No one spoke. A mouse scrambled over a barrel and across the floor, the boy missing it with the heel of one of the girl's boots. They laughed like the moon was full. Until the pie was gone and the rain was trickling through the valleys of the barn and outside, through the yawning cottonwood leaves.

In the darkness and the hooves of rain, the children fell to sleep and he unlaced her back. Over and through until she was unsteady and naked, sticking to his own unclad skin, rubbing flint against him, like steel. Their lips melted into it, kissing thunderously. Lighting their faces in the stillness of the barn and the last drops of rain pecking their way through the remaining night. Unbound by one another. Filling like the draw. Smoothing out for once and again the sharp and shy cliffs of their own. Like rain after such a wait.



House of Sorrow by Rachel Isaac

DREAMCATCHER

Annelyse Gelman

When they lost their dreams, everyone wanted to blame the moon.
I didn't tell them it was my fault.

"Let's go over it again."

"We were... traveling, Officer." I'm trying not to stutter, trying not to fall asleep.

"I'm gonna need more detail than that."

"Not in a car, but in something uncontrollable, something smooth and direct, like a ride at a fairground. All I have are these vague impressions. A creaking, disembodied rattling, gears, pulleys."

"Who was driving?"

"I was with James in the back. If anyone was steering, it wasn't human. Body without soul. And I remember—it crossed my mind, you know, casually, briefly, he—it—wouldn't be able to hear me if I screamed."

There's an uncomfortable silence. I don't want to tell him more, and he knows it.

"So what exactly happened, miss?"

"The world was born. A dirt path. The country? A deep hole bored into the trunk of a tree we hadn't reached yet, its shadows as impenetrable and indiscernible as those in the mailbox next to it. These seemed the only objects in existence. A path. A tree. A mailbox. I couldn't even see the road ahead, hadn't imagined it into being. Neither had James, I guess."

"You hadn't *imagined* it into—?"

"There was no time. Then the moon drew our eyes. Drew, I say, because I didn't know I had eyes. Hadn't drawn them yet, hadn't sculpted self-awareness and subjectivity. There was only the path, the tree, the mailbox. And now the moon."

"Then what?" He yawns, scratches his nose.

"Let's do this later. I'm tired. Just let me rest."

"Finish it. Then you can rest."

"Fine. A strange feeling overcame me. I averted my eyes. In the seat beside me, James melted into shadow. This hand like the hand of—like the hand of God. It reached toward me. I blacked out."

"Thank you for your time. You can go now."

I have just lied to the law. I have committed a crime. I could go to jail. If you want to know, when I said it was the hand of God, it wasn't. It was the hand of the moon. I knew he wouldn't believe me. I was just tired, that's all. He should have let me rest. I didn't want him to think I was crazy.

I didn't tell him what happened after I came to, either. That the next night, it happened again.

There was an astronaut in the kitchen, sipping water and reading the newspaper in the complete darkness. It seemed natural, almost expected, that he would be there. I flipped on the light.

"Can't sleep?"

I didn't know whether the voice came from the astronaut or myself. The astronaut said nothing. Words eluded me. I sat down at the table across from him. "What are you reading?"

The astronaut lifted his head; the glass in front of his face reflected the kitchen clock. The room looked strange in the reflection. The furniture seemed arranged wrong.

Then the moonlight spilled in through the curtains, diffused like sarin, filled my lungs. He slid the newspaper across the table, the headline facing me.
WAKE UP.

“Jesus, James, how have you been?”

The things we know we don’t know; the things we don’t know we know.

“Um, fine?” *I know.*

That across the country, every country, this conversation is taking place.

“Well, I mean, after the accident—I’m sorry, I should have called—I just—”

“What accident?” *I remember. I was there.*

Cue shrug, anxious micro-expression, a barely perceptible tightening of the lips. He was there. I know it. He knows it.

“...The car accident.”

“Cathy, you probably had another one of your nightmares. I’m fine. Look at me.” *It’s not supposed to happen this way.*

“You were there. And you became a shadow.”

“I don’t—” *Don’t do this, Cathy.*

“You were! The moon came down and swallowed you.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” *Please.*

“Tell me you were there, James.”

“Stop it.”

“Please. I’m not crazy—please. Please.”

“That’s enough!”

“You just don’t remember! That’s all. You just forgot.”

“You—you’re scaring me—now, don’t—”

“Liar—!”

“Shut up!”

“Admit it!”

“Fine! I was! I am. I remember. Okay? The path, the tree, the mailbox. The astronaut. How you thought—we thought—shadows can’t be that black. That I was a part of you. The moon. The hands of the moon. And I remember disappearing.”

Cue shuddering shoulders, paralyzed lungs

“We have to tell someone about this.”

“I can’t sleep, Cathy. I can’t dream. No one can, not since then. It’s over.”

James lifts up his sleeves. His arms are already going pale. Like moonlight on a road not yet imagined into being.

“Everything is going to be different now, isn’t it?”

Cue adrenal glands, sweat, tear ducts, acetylcholine, dopamine, endorphins. Cue synaptic flood. Cue silence.

It happened gradually. Unable to deem lost dreams a tragedy or catastrophe, the media ignored it. Newscasters’ eyes glazed over, their speech slurred, they shuffled papers with clumsy, heavy fingertips, eyes sliding over teleprompters and fingers over keyboards haphazardly.

The police stopped questioning me after a while. What they wanted to know, I couldn’t explain; what I explained they refused to acknowledge. The possibility of an indefinitely extended nightmare was infinitely preferable to the truth of it—that nothing, no one, could be depended on.

Better to think that nothing is real than that everything is.

It made no difference to the men and women at home in front of their televisions, at the kitchen table reading the newspaper, listening to the radio—their senses were equally dulled. Who's telling the story? Whose story? Subject and object, past and future. On all sides, slowly, they began to forget. It was as if the whole world had fallen asleep, with no one the wiser.

“Moon sure is bright tonight.”

“I know. I feel like I'm being watched.”

“So low in the sky.”

“Like I'm being warned.”

And it was easier to pretend. It was easier to resume our waking lives as if sleep, uninterrupted by dream, had merely paused the film. And if we awoke to a voiceover, to a forced plot, to unrealistic resolutions, it was that much easier to suspend our disbelief.

Swallow sleeping aids, lock the door, turn up the TV on static.

We are making and unmaking our beds. We are closing our curtains everywhere, now, covering our heads with pillows, falling into dreamless sleep, whispering, *the moon, the moon, the moon.*



97 Felsen by Michail Judovskij

THE CLOSET THAT EVER/NEVER WAS

Peter Diseth

Harry Harold lives his last years in a house that he owns but is not his.

Frozen mosaics of white crystal snow from the place where People say The Heavens can be found fall to his old and wrinkled forehead to melt out of existence. He raises a hand to block their descent, but it only makes them fall faster. His head now burns with icy malaise, his fingers wiggle dry in the wet air above. He sees the ocean rise and fall before him, sitting on the back porch in a steel and wicker chair, only a white picket fence and slim stretch of sand between them.

“Don’t you dare open that bedroom closet door without my hand, young man,” his mother said to his scrawny four-year-old self. Harry Harold wondered if she knew that he would demand the same thing of his daughter’s daughter many decades to come. Did she speak then because he would speak later? Were his words a future echo of her past? Or were hers a present echo of his future? And did it even matter?

The ocean swallows the snow, gathering the flakes like strength to its core and Harry is suddenly too tired of the cold.

It’s winter in the backyard and he’s spent far too long in December. He wakes his old bones, gathers the wit of his shrunken muscles, and goes back inside the house that is not his.

The concrete steps that go up and down, lead away from here and take you to there, leave wooden splinters in his soles. He fears he’ll run dry and fall. He fears that this has already happened and will happen once again.

The lower levels of the house were once flat, planed with care, and a marble could not but sit still on the planks, even if its meager life depended on it rolling. Now they are warped and frayed, and a marble could never stand still again. Harry warbles and wrangles from back door to front, where the summer sun heats the frosted glass and blinds him with nearly forgotten warmth.

How does one open a close that does not exist? How can a closet that never was be closed again?

Harry Harold opens the door and walks out onto the front porch, his wrinkles smooth, his spindly legs thicken with taut tendons, and his tired lungs fill with fresh and life-bearing air. He likes the front yard, spending time with his middle youth, and picking the pretty flowers that grow there in a garden. But like everything that had ever happened, and everywhere that might yet be, Harry will grow tired of this, too.

A four-year-old boy stands in the corner of his bedroom and stares at the brown-paneled door there. He has been told and was scolded, he will be both the teller and the scolder, and he will watch from afar as others do the same to others, but now he knows none of this. And all of it. If memories are colored shadows then the future is nothing but the shadows of color. Harry can’t begin to understand how he understands, so he doesn’t even try. He reaches out a small white hand and grabs the glass knob. And he turns it gently. And the door opens slowly. And what lies beyond is—

This daisy is for Mary, and this one for mother long dead. This rose is for Jerry, and this one for the father to be. This tulip is for Bernard, and this one for the long lost twin. And this narcissus is for nobody. It will grow until it is dead.

—nothing.

“Well, what did I tell you, young man? And what did I say?” Harry repeats the command that has frozen his dreams and will haunt his days yet past. “That’s right,” his mother says and hits him across the face before smothering him with wet kisses. “That’s right.”

A year or two later, several years before, the man Harold stands again at a door he’d forgotten was there. In the corner of the cellar, tall black iron with black iron rivets, and a handle ring in the center. He holds out his hand and feels the hot impression on his cheek and the kiss saliva on his lips. He knows he should not be here. And he also knows no such

thing. He grabs the iron ring and pulls. And the door opens slowly. And what lies beyond is—

For nobody. It will grow until it is dead.

—beyond his imaginings. There is no mirror at the back of the closet, but Harold's reflection is there all the same. It waves as Harold waves. It makes a googly-eyed face as Harold does the same. It speaks when Harold remains silent. "Can you spell 'apples' with only four letters?" it asks. "With only four letters not found in 'apples'?" it clarifies. The whole world, and the universe in which it lives, implodes with sudden violence and the only memories of a billion-billion years of life is but stardust now floating in distant galaxies before Harold responds, not two seconds later. "Ovum," Harry says and his pride shows on his face with two deep dimples and a toothy smile. "No," his reflection says, from the dark at the back of the closet, and disappears forever. The man Harold doesn't cry, he doesn't yet know how, or perhaps he's already forgotten, but his face droops from his head to the floor, and the loss will stay with him from now till evermore.

The sun is too hot, Harry Harold decides. He'd much rather be bundled against the bitter winter cold than frying naked in the high summer heat. He pulls on his shirt, he pulls on his pants. He carries his shoes in one hand, his spent middle youth in the other. He goes back inside and wanders around for years and years.

Harry is a boy, Harold is a man, and Harry Harold is both and neither at the same time, three desperate beings at once. They all three walk with hollow steps, up the stairs and up the stairs and up the stairs again. One hand from three men pushes open the attic door.

I thought I was going back to the winter, not the autumn or the spring. This, I'm afraid, is none of those at all. This, I'm afraid, is all.

The closet door is there, as it ever never was. It stands in the corner, webs of dust and thicket of silk hiding it not at all. The three men, who are none and one and more, move through the syrupy thick room, steps cushioned by bare and socked and shod feet. They stand before the door, arms outstretched, one hand hovering above the ivory knob. And he turns the knob gently. And the door opens slowly. And what lies beyond is—

"Don't you ever! Don't you never! I'll smack the wonder right out of you! I'll kiss the intentions away! I'll this and I'll that and you'll know and you won't! Come back up here! Come back over here! Come back out here! Pick the white flower! Pick it and pick it before it has died! Please..."

—absolutely nothing and a reflection that couldn't be and a rushing wind of water that beckons with waving fingers.

The nothing leaves the boy feeling nothing but lonely. The man's reflection asks: "Can you spell 'man' using only the letters found in 'boy'?" And the water coos to Harry Harold's deepest and darkest desires.

The boy stands empty in the sun-dappled corner of the highest room of his house. The man thinks for centuries and eons and eras beyond measure before answering at once: "Boy," with a knowing smirk and a holy gleam of the eye. And the old man steps forward to return the watery embrace.

The boy walks away, eyes aimed at his naked toes, knowing he should have obeyed his mother and himself. The reflection says: "No," and steps backward through the closet's darkly white back wall. And the old man falls laughing into the churning ocean below.

The snow tumbles and the sun beats down. The flowers spring forth and the leaves let go.

Harry Harold, one-two-three, lives his first years in a house that is all his but does not now, never has before, and will continue forever to not ever own.



Flame by Chrystal Blue

RADIO SOUNDS

Jay Caselberg

He comes upon me by the riverbank, the man with the face like Jack Palance. He stands over me as I lie there and I look up, squinting against the sun glowing around him. His eclipse light makes it hard to see. And he has no business being here, I think.

My squinted impressions come vaguely, but I see that his dark suit is covered in dust. At least I think it's dust. A gold chain swings across his vest, from one side to the other, looped. The crumpled undertaker's hat atop his head sports a single feather. I tilt my face and the feather changes from silhouetted dark to deepest red. He shifts his gaze, looking down at me and my heart becomes a drum.

I know without knowing that this man has come for us. I lean on my elbows in that chill moment and my thoughts scurry, scared, seeking out my brother. He sits small with his play rabbit, toys scattered around on the wooden floor of our house. The glass doors face the river. He is there for all to see, an offering. This man with the face like Jack Palance has come for all of us. I know he's after John and even after the toy. And I know he's after me.

Behind me lies the house, stilt-walking down the slope with its veranda stretched out toward the river. Beyond runs the rail line and beyond that lies the road. The train track circles the house, sweeping around. The house is wide and white. It stares out over the muddy river, its metal legs braced against the incline. The broad glass doors look out onto the encircling veranda. At times, we have sat there on summer evenings listening to the wind in the trees and the river sliding past.

My thoughts turn to black and white then colour. First comes Rod Steiger, then the two Roberts -- first Mitchum, then de Niro.

But this one is Jack Palance -- grinning.

He leans forward and, hands on his knees, peers at me. My drum beats louder and the wind stirs, rushing in the trees. My only knowledge is that there is no one to help us; we are alone now. Suddenly, as he peers at me side to side, decked in his undertaker's garb, he reminds me of a crow. I have no time. I have to get my brother away, away from this thing. I scramble backward up the slope. His laughter echoes after me, harsh, like the call of a blackbird and I hear his footsteps behind me.

I race up the hill. I stagger onto the porch, fling wide the door and charge inside. My brother looks up at me, not knowing. His face is open and smiling. I'm panting in the middle of the room, watching him there. Then I remember. I bolt the door. I lean backward, breathing deeply, my back pressed against solid wood, not knowing if it's enough. Looking round, I see a rope on a peg by the door, and there, in the small room to the side, the cans of petrol. There lies my answer.

John thinks it's a game. He takes his fluffy rabbit, stained grey from constant use, one ear hanging loose, and clutches it to his chest as I loop the rope around him. He smiles. I lower him over the veranda and down to the river where he can escape. Just in time, because I can hear the blackbird at the door.

Jack Palance's shadow draws together in the frosted glass. He's standing there, beyond the door, still. Perhaps he's listening. On tiptoe, I fetch the cans. I draw up the trailing rope and loop it through the handles. Gently, I lower them over the edge, one by one. Then I too climb down. Lifting the cans, I clamber up the slope and away from the house, away from John, away from the toy rabbit. The man is still there searching. I call out loudly to draw him to me.

I heft the gas can and I pour, splashing it this way and that. Leaves, green trees and a wall of flame to protect the house so he can't get past. I toss the can to one side, empty.

At first, I see him sniffing, then I scramble away, ducking behind trees. He's scenting me now, but the smell of burning confuses his senses and keeps him away. I spot a hiding place and creep toward it. Lowering myself through the grass, I lie.

I'm lying in the long grass looking up. Blades cover my eyes, and I'm peering through them. My breath is rushing noisily in my ears.

He walks above the hummock where I lie. I see him looking down, tall in his black

clothes and flat-topped hat. He's looking down sniffing the fire and fuel. He looms, then sniffs and looks away, not ten feet between us. I know then that it's ash upon his clothes, not dust.

His shadow stretches from above and the flames shoot into the air. I try to be still, to calm the pounding in my chest. I stay silent, waiting -- waiting for him to pass, waiting for him to leave again. The fire sound rushes in my ears. The smell of fuel and smoke fills me. Then I see him. Somehow, he has moved beyond the flames and heat. He is facing away. He is swinging his head from side to side, questing like a hunting beast.

I rush down the slope where the river narrows. I splash through the water, pushing past the current, then through the reeds that tangle against my legs. There's a lip there, a hollow in the bank and I duck beneath. I sink down into the water and press myself back under the overhanging bank. Trailing roots, feathered and clumped with earth, form tangled crosses before my eyes. The thick smell of mud is all around me.

I can see him over there, crouched down on the roof of the house, and I wonder how he got up there. He's splayed there, waiting, resting on the slates -- hunting like a spider. By now, John and the rabbit must be safe. My nostrils barely crest the water surface. The brush-stroke carmine at the side of his hat beckons across the space between us. His hands are pressed flat on the roof and his legs are spread wide. He's staring, staring down and I feel any moment he will notice me.

Another noise breaks through the quiet sounds. I hear the train coming toward us and he hears it too, because I see him tense. Just before the thunder breaks, he vanishes.

My heart is making radio sounds, beating the silt into little eddies, causing ripples that catch the light and shatter it. I feel as if the liquid sparkles call to him across the space between us. I cannot see him, but I can feel him, as I can always feel him.

I wait and dare to hope he has passed me by, that the train has taken him beyond us and away.

Crouched in the water, nostrils barely peeking above it and looking out, I squat there in the river damp, barely daring to move while the sky grows dark and light again. Then I drag myself out.

When I cross the water and wander up the slope, the house is empty.

I follow the path down through the waving grass. Stains of black criss-cross the slope where the fire has splashed. The river swirls past, torpid in the morning light. I look first downriver then up. I see the sand spit stretching out, and there, one, two, three, four clear footsteps incised sharply in the sand. His footsteps -- or are they his footsteps? -- leading out from the bank. Then nothing. For a moment, but just a moment, I think the footsteps may be mine. There is nothing there in the river, merely the swirls of muddy water flowing past.

Behind me, farther up the slope lies a small huddled form, curled in on itself and blackened, but I refuse to look. Almost without thinking, my fingers flex, feeling the strength and pressure there. I know the power of those hands.

I cannot think about what I may have done.

I can never think about what I may have done.

Across the river, near the bank, a small, grey-furred shape bobs lazily in the water. A twig floats past me. Then a feather.

Though it's wet, I can see it's red.



Der Leuchtende Schleier by Michail Judovskij

Proving Grounds

Tom Bradley

My solitude grew more
and more obese, like a pig.
--Yukio Mishima

When things were normal, Mr. Fukuoka could be found trying to teach Japanese to rich teenagers in a prep school in the mountainous north. But, tonight being abnormal, he found himself in the southern wastes, visiting the scene of a crime perpetrated against him when he was younger than his students, when he was known as Little Flip.

Wandering off alone into raucous blackness, Mr. Fukuoka fell, humbled, to pray, upon the abrasive desert floor, and impaled both knees on a decaying coil of War Relocation Authority barbed wire. Peeling that up from the sterile dust, he discovered an intact jar, its glass blued by decades of ultraviolet radiation, its label bleached but legible. No mayonnaise, but the crispy remains of two baby rattlesnakes were visible inside, greened by jaundiced moonlight.

Little Flip had intended to domesticate them, or at least to save them from the bullsnakes (long, thick, and black as the donkey penises cited in the Book of Ezekiel) which the guards had been ordered to set loose on the periphery to chase the mother rattlers off. But he had either forgotten or, more likely, in his dispossessed state, had lacked the means, to punch air holes in the lid. Dried macaroni-like mummies with microscopic fangs were the result of his lifetime's sole visitation by the nurturing instinct, active or passive.

"Better known as Hellman's Real Mayonnaise east of the Rockies, which is where you rice-niggers should be," a bully guard had mumbled. Physically unfit for combat, bug-eyed and hoarse, the guard had tried to confiscate the jar, but had been persuaded to relent by a golden and blue angel from the mountains.

"A child needs his pets," the Mormon missionary had smirked. "Just as we grownups do."

Tonight, shaking the concentration camp relic in his hand like a baby rattle or sorcerer's fetish, Mr. Fukuoka found himself stumbling down a dry gully and into a roaring corner of red-sand Topheth. He peeked between a cactus' upthrust fists; and what he saw stunned and paralyzed him like a double injection of hot reptile venom. He froze, obscured in lurching campfire shadows. He seemed to have almost walked in on a Canaanite orgy.

The throbbing explosions could have been his own heart imploding, self-destructing in waltz rhythm; the screams and profanities and flashes and tracers could have been his eyeballs and eardrums bursting out of heir appointed seats, being washed away, dislodged by the sheer pressure inside his head; the artificial winds could have shot from the four dilated nostrils of a yoke of supernal Palmyra oxen bearing on each of their backs one foot of the awful Bedouin Yahweh, come to deliver the final revelation of all time.

A detachment of jeering junior shamans, lithe and semi-clothed Caucasoid apprentices to red masters, howled and brawled among themselves with broad gestures. They sent forth bolts of lurid fire from their bony, outstretched arms and into Heaven's black midsection. Boys' lean backs and buttocks were plainly visible. Sinewy creatures, seemingly one-armed, followed behind them and whispered abominable jokes over their shoulders and into their juvenile ears, hunching and huffing very close, making the centaur with seven limbs.

He should have suspected something in homeroom the week before.

The polygamist children from the boarding department had reacted so jubilantly to the geology teacher's proposal of a geode-digging "all-nighter" among nerve-gassed sheep

carcasses in the U. S. Army's proving grounds. Japanese language instructor to the children of the nouveaux riches for an entire week already, Teachie-poo-sensei had assumed, in his naivete, that the Lord was giving him a chance to teach these privileged white children a connotation of the word topaz other than the one found at position eight of Professor Moh's unrevised, unexpanded Hardness Scale, which the geology teacher kept tacked to the homeroom wall. At the very top of the chart, just above diamond, someone phenomenally tall had penciled a new position of ultimate hardness: "Nip homo boners."

It had been part of his new-on-the-job hazing to be duped by the other faculty members into co-chaperoning this field trip. He could have had no idea what he was in for; could never have imagined what white teens were capable of.

"What does our right-honorable governor call that county?" one of them had squealed from the back row of desks.

"Panoramaland!" the rest of them had hooted in unison, making googly-eyes and whirling their index fingers in psychedelic spirals around each other's ears.

"Our patriarchal stomping grounds!" the polygamist children had screeched. (The administration let anybody with lots of money into the school.) "Time to take care of some business, boys!"

And here was the reason for their jubilation.

Instead of the sand-dune Jehovah's sublime voice, the youngish Japanese teacher heard the scratchy squawks of adolescent heathens of only near-angelic physique. When not dancing like naked dervishes in the firelight, they seemed to be hawking various survivalist paraphernalia and ordnance freshly delivered, in the original factory boxes, from the belly-hatch of their millionaire patriarch's helicopter.

The shoppers appeared to be Marxist bucks and savage septuagenarian peyotists from the Shivwit tribe aboriginal to this smoking cranny of Gehenna. They'd been latterly elevated to polite Intermountain society's upper-middle ranks by the discovery of lush uranium deposits on their reservation, plus generous federal recompenses for nerve agent leakages. They had shown up tonight not in the expensive sharkskin business suits they wore to New Zion's Bank, but in traditional buckskin sweat-lodge garb--a canny enough wardrobe choice, considering the fatuous young romantics they were dealing with. Their exquisitely beaded loincloths were bolstered plump with stumpy red penises and substantial wads of equally hard currency, neither of which they seemed particularly desirous of keeping a hold on.

For the native Americans' benefit, one of the less gifted Japanese students demonstrated something brand-new in those days: a surface-to-air, shoulder-deployed, heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile. The suggested target was a single crawling point of light far overhead which everybody surmised to be an Israeli spy satellite. And the rocket seemed, after a slithering, smoking chase through the constellations, to find its mark, filling the suborbital void with livid blasts of light, and the desert with incredulous howls of glee.

Cadets from the polygamist family's private military academy defiantly discharged their M16's, Uzis and AK-47's into Orion's belt, confident of their immunity from prosecution on this scofflaw reservation, where the bare mention of the words Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms could be relied upon to elicit hoots of derision from even the stoniest-faced old squaw.

Without being told, the youngish Japanese teacher somehow decided that he was witnessing nothing less than red communism cutting a deal with under-aged splinter Mormonism. They most likely were hatching a nefarious plot to stage a paramilitary coup in this county, at whose southernmost extreme was situated a vast dam that provided life-sustaining electricity to considerable portions of that militarily sensitive area known as the west coast of the United States of America.

Only minutes before, Teachie-poo-sensei had discreetly absented himself from the girls. They appeared to be camping more or less legitimately, if one ignored the mushroom clouds of hemp smoke belching from the turquoise mouths of their sleeping bags. He'd left those future brides of Satan under the chortling, geode-fondling supervision of the geology teacher ("Damn Army boys must be re-hearsin' for 'nother damn Tit Offensive out there on the damn provin' grounds!"), and he had scrambled deep into the moonlight. Almost insane with masochistic nostalgia for the relocation camp, and the guards, and the intrusive right hand of the golden and blue missionary, he had found nothing more edifying than an old vermin-rattling mayonnaise jar, and this mescaline Eucharist.

In the hot night air, hiding among the shadows at the rout's periphery, the youngish Japanese teacher found himself slipping into a delirium of rage at the sight of his boyhood's praying ground being desecrated by moneychangers, an intoxication compounded by furiously denied sexual arousal at the spectacle itself.

His heart began to swell with some half-formed intention of bringing fright and firepower to bear upon the pony-tailed socialists and the spawn of multiple fornication. He would drive them like sheep; he would force them to ooze their lubricious selves ten yards due west, or maybe twenty or thirty, or maybe a hundred miles, across sperm-yellow salt and scab-red sand, to where he hallucinated the county line. There, beyond the protection of the county attorney--who happened to be a plural mother of the "polygily-wiggly" boys--they would be forced to undergo citizen's arrest at the Japanese teacher's passion-quaking hands.

Quaking hands, but not bare.

Falling again to his punctured knees, he began to gather what he trusted were the raw ingredients of simple but effective explosive compounds. With splitting fingernails he scratched up various soils from his long-abandoned bridal bed, plus shirt-pocketsful of hardness-eight gravel to serve as splattergun projectiles. He prayed a weeping prayer of repentance as he performed the damnation offense of removing and shredding, for a fuse and wadding material, his official Church undergarments, this world's only sure prophylaxis from the black influence of Beelzebub. With adrenalin strength he wrenched the crumbling tailpipe from an abandoned army jeep, an orange barrel for this primitive but blessed blunderbuss.

Then he stumbled through the darkness and, mostly with his fingertips' sensitive skin, set about scrounging a sort of soldier-of-God uniform for himself, a disguise, improvised from dry stone detritus and desert carrion. He peeled some skin from a dead, pregnant ewe's jaws and eye sockets and stretched it across his own face to protect his lungs and brain cells from the toxic fumes of whatever burnt holocaust his pupils might be offering up to their Canaanite bull-god. With his bare teeth he gnawed free from their spindly anklebones the clawed feet of a gluttony-burst vulture, coated them with his own scant saliva and mud-pasted them to either side of his head: elfin ears, dead pinfeathers tickling. Like Moses himself, he sprouted a steer's parched and porous horns, and encircled them with a thorn-crown of blood-colored and blood-reeking barb wire.

As he made himself over, the gruesome elements in his costume began ever so gradually to be obscured by glistening ones: beads of sun-blued glass from coolies' shattered opium jars were draped from either earlobe; ivory-colored hair barrettes and false eyelashes were alluringly fashioned from baby rattlesnakes' filament-fine skeletons, lovingly shaken, with curled fifth fingers, out of the mayonnaise jar. And, in case his mask slipped, he concocted himself a facial foundation of talc-fine sand, wind-sifted, and moistened seductively with blood from his own tear-ducts. A powder of pollen was coaxed from cactus blooms clenched for the evening but finger-pried apart like moist fairy buttocks. And all this was obscured ever so subtly by a pagan bridal veil of woven cactus spines.

Heavenly Father's voice suddenly rang out from the hilly north. It blasted a passage through the night clouds and rebounded off the exposed depths of outerspace: "Leave off thy preening, effeminate son of the Gibeah Benjaminites! Set aside thy whorish adornments and step forth with thy flaming rod into the light!"

But the Japanese teacher was a tobacco-free Latter-Day-Saint. He had no match to detonate his cannon. He began to wail aloud, a keening sob of lamentation, bringing all eyes in the vicinity down upon him.

Matter-of-factly, with no hesitation and little or no registration of surprise, the demoniacs embraced the creature that came hiccupping from the shadows. They took his makeshift weapon and politely stacked it, tepee-style, among a cache of other wartime exotica, not even snickering. They draped him all about with their skin, their acne pockmarks and syringe-holes serving the same gripping function as suction cups on squid tentacles, and they drew him into the party, just another knot in the parched tangle of aborted serpents.

"Just another Utah misfit," laughed a horribly familiar teen voice, "a hairless Edom fucked out of his birthright for a bowl of bean soup--or, in this case, a pan of stir-fried green veggies!"

Leather-faced grannies gathered and gnawed on the youngish teacher's Japanese fingers in some nameless atavistic behavior. They shoveled handfuls of a sage-flavored incense onto the campfire. They fed him strychnine-tufted cactus bulbs that popped his brain-skin like an overripe hymen, and they laughed, at first affectionately, then derisively, at his impotence and structural underdevelopment.

The Mesopotamian god-head sprouted several writhing strands of hair, became a five-snake medusa, not only fatal, but impossible to behold for any creature without two faces, the second able to see behind.

The familiar boy's suffocating presence could be felt more and more, like a creeping odor. He squatted in the shadows and wrote in the living flesh of the orange sand with a slip of barb wire--not his Japanese calligraphy exercises, but something else, specifically for the benefit of three Shivwit braves, who gaped, were appalled, who giggled and wept in rapture and terror, who periodically touched one another's scaly elbows for corroborative witness, and manipulated their feathered fetishes to ward off the strong medicine contained in the overwhelming strokes that the white hand produced and wiped away with equal nonchalance.

"C'mon, you guys, can't you maintain twenty seconds in a row? These are the kind of questions they put on the entrance exam. Take 'em home to little Pocahontas, so she can come pitch her wigwam in our boarding department. We need some new blood around that dump."

At some rough jostle of a mighty sandstone elbow, very close to home, Teachie-poo-sensei was unmasked as he squatted and grimaced in a mound of ritually and literally defiled salt. Teacher and students' faces met: they grinned cougar teeth, flashed coyote tongues.

The brat's prematurely bleary eyes focused in a single direction for the first and last time. They lingered with impertinence where they shouldn't; but eventually those eyes managed to find their way around to the empty mayonnaise jar still clutched to the front of Teachie-poo-sensei's body, thence all the way up to his face.

In a convulsion of sheer delight, Sammy Edwine belched words destined to remain immemorial among the students of the Episcopalian college preparatory institution:

"Why, if it isn't Mr. Fuck You, Okay?"



Goddess of Bite-Sized Men by Rochelle Dinkin

FLUCTUATIONS

Gareth D Jones

A short man strode slowly uphill into the valley, his height affording him an advance view of the countryside over the hedges that lined the paved road. A black backpack swung easily at his shoulder and his worn, but comfortable boots squelched through the mud, splashing water that left stains on his shiny new footwear. The road wound in a straight line to the gate of the large village.

There was nothing to delineate the border between countryside and city, save the noise of urban dwelling – children playing, vendors shouting, passers-by chatting, the occasional dog yapping. The man walked through the deserted streets, sticking to the main thoroughfare, glancing nervously down the side streets and now hugging the black backpack protectively as he wandered through the back alleys. The wind moaned eerily through empty window frames, and caused loose gates to creak, making the woman's gaze dart round worriedly. A strange smell of decay hung heavily on the still air, reminding her that no-one had lived here since the last inhabitants had departed.

After leaving the town behind, with a touch of regret for parting from such friendly people, the woman hitched the black backpack into a more comfortable position and strode off once more at her customary steady gait that he had developed during his long walk. Cows gazed at him curiously from the surrounding fields. The warmer weather meant that it would soon be time for them to be shorn, producing the good quality wool that the sheep in this area were well known for. The sun was on its way down to the horizon, so he began to think about looking for shelter for the night.

A fairly solid looking barn came into view as dusk approached, made of old oak beams and thatched in a traditional style. The door was unbarred and swung open silently, creaking loudly again as it closed. The inside was full of straw bales, an ideal place to settle down for the night. The black backpack was lowered gratefully from weary shoulders and the traveller made himself comfortable among the hay. The leftovers from lunchtime were not very filling, and there was only warm water from his hip flask to wash it down, but he was nonetheless contented enough as he lay down and looked up at the darkening sky through the gaps in the roof where slates were missing. There was a nagging feeling in the back of his head that he really should keep going, but weariness overcame him. It was not long before she dozed off.

A cock crowing in the early morning sunlight that streamed in through the crumbling side wall brought the man to instant wakefulness. Instinctively he checked to make sure that the black backpack and its precious contents were still in tact. Nothing had disturbed them. He stretched and yawned and brushed off his clothes, then headed outside to gaze up the road. Not far to go now.

A couple of hours later, stomach rumbling and black backpack already digging into his shoulders, he spotted the ancient well that was her destination. The last few hundred yards were tough going through the muddy field that clung at his boots, the blazing sun that had baked the ground hard making him squint so it was difficult to make out the red brick shape of the well. The backpack was feeling heavier as she came closer to the old grey well, as the heat / cold made him feel tired / irritated / refreshed and the soft / grassy / snow-covered earth continued to impede / assist his / her progress.

A large black crow's harsh cry made him look / he ignored it as she tried to concentrate on her goal of reaching the grey / brown figure of the squat / tall well that was the cause of all the sunshine falling upon tired shoulders and crows flew so nicely it was

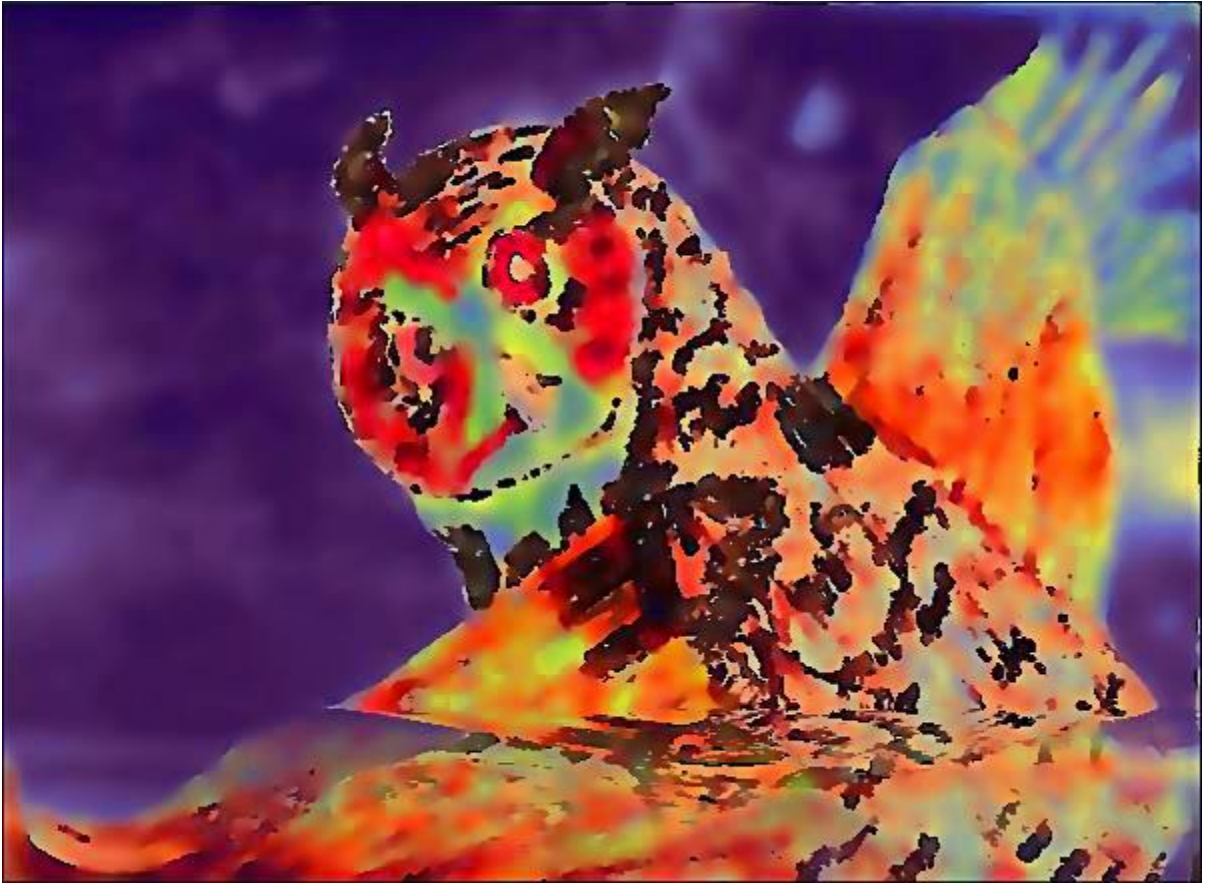
good to be able to take off the black backpack and set it down against the solid wall of the well.

She unbuckled the backpack and reached inside to grasp the dull grey stone that was nestled inside. As she touched it there was a sickening lurch as something altered her focus and she was wrenched from the maelstrom of chaotic reality. Suddenly her mind was calm, anchored to the centre of disturbance, here, at this well. At least for those caught up in the disturbances everything seemed normal, it was only from outside that the chaos was visible. Adelle shuddered as she remembered that for a while she had been a man.

The backpack turned blue and then green. Only a deep hypnotic compulsion had ensured that she continued with her mission despite everything else that changed. The stone grasped in her hand was the core of that compulsion, an oasis where her mind had been locked against the insane fluctuations around her. The ground flickered from mud to stony to grass, snow appeared and disappeared, the well continued to cycle through an array of building materials. She stood and kicked aside the burlap sack that lay at her feet.

She leaned now heavily against the well for support against the waves of vertigo that the surrounding chaos was inducing. Slowly she released her grip on the stone and it fell away into the depths of the well, lost in the dark; and with it her mind. There was splash and then another nauseating twisting sensation as the rent in the reality was suddenly knitted back together and a wave of smoothness emanated out simultaneously in all dimensions. A shockwave of coalescing normality swept away from the well in every visible direction, halting the wild fluctuations of existence.

A crow flew slowly away from him towards some nearby trees. He bent gingerly and picked up the brown backpack that had accompanied him throughout, then followed in the bird's wake.



Owl by Chrystal Blue

OPPORTUNITY

Debbie Vilardi

I've heard it too many times to ignore it. It's something that I'm s'posed to be...

-The Rainbow Connection, by Paul Williams

Shh! Listen. Do you hear it? I hear it all the time. It calls my name. Screams it on the wind. Whispers it in my ears. Spins it round me in a tumult 'til I turn inside out, an umbrella held tight, facing the wrong way.

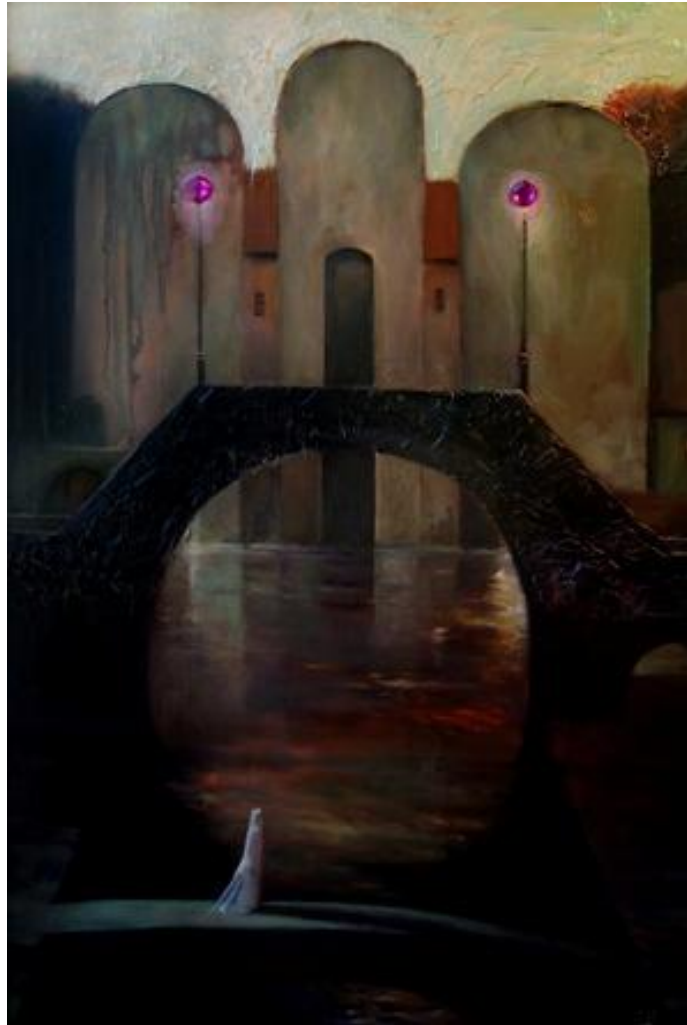
Time is growing short. Time is running out. Rush. The end of time is dawning. Nothing ever stays the same.

Future's now, breathed by last night's truth. Can't stay young. Can't stop. Can't push outside back outside. Try though. Cover ears. Walk. Wish I knew where to.

See the morning sun etching truth. Eyes closed. Still there. Hope for each morning after. See the camouflage clothes and guns. Gonna rest here.

Tired o' my name. Tired o' not being half what I'm supposed to be. Shh!

Time's creeping into my hiding place, my name blasting out. Forever. Hear it? What if I die today? What if I died today?



Walk in the Dark by Izzya Shlosberg

THE FLYING LESSON

Jonathan Shipley

He cupped his hands around the tennis ball and slowly levitated it upwards.

"Cool," the boy grinned. "Can I try?"

He cocked his head to one side. The ten-year-old was so eager, so full of energy. What was the harm? He willed the tennis ball to float over to the boy and drop into his lap. It almost made it.

The boy hopped out of his lounge chair to pick it off the tiled floor of the terrace. "Like this?" he asked cradling the ball in his hands. "Then what?"

"You will it to rise," he said. He searched for a better way to explain, but memory failed him. These days he had only tricks, not understanding.

The boy screwed up his face in concentration. "Rise, rise, rise," he muttered savagely.

Nothing happened, so he cheated, sending out a little of his own will to twitch the ball. The tennis ball rose in a wobbly orbit and fell back to earth.

"I did it," the boy whispered, his eyes huge. "Teach me something else."

He sighed. "I cannot remember. Maddening."

There was cosmic irony in the situation. He finally had found someone who believed in him. But too late. Time had robbed him of his identity. Or at least most of his identity. He knew he was somebody, but most of the memories were gone.

"Wait a minute." The boy hopped up and dashed into the house. He stared after the boy a moment, then turned his attention back to the gardens with its riot of orange and white blossoms and huge heated swimming pool beyond.

Exploding from the house, waving a book. "I found it."

"Found what?" he asked.

"You. This book. Here's a picture of you."

He took the book and studied the rendering of a scantily clad youth in helmet and winged sandals. Well, well, well.

"So that's you way back when, huh?"

"Apparently." The image brought back bits of memory.

"What about flying?" the boy persisted. "You know, the winged sandals"

"The sandals were only for effect," he shrugged. "The real power of flying came from within--" The snatch of information dried up. But the image of flying was very strong. He could almost feel the wind in his hair.

"Flying is important," he said after a moment. "Maybe the key to all that I am -- or was."

"Cool. So do it."

"I don't remember how."

The boy looked surprised. "But that's easy. You find a high place and jump off. If you can fly, instinct takes care of the rest. You know, like the birds."

It sounded like a ten-year-old plan . . . but still a plan. He followed the boy up to the attic where a dormer window gave access to the flat roof of the side portico. Then he looked down untold stories to the pool below and had second and third thoughts. The drop looked terrifying. How could a god with the power of flight be terrified of heights? It was so . . . mortal.

"Go on," the boy urged. "Jump."

Jumping held no enticement for him. He shook his head.

"Aw, come on! It's not like anything can go wrong with the pool down there. Worse

case scenario is just a high dive. You climb out of the pool and try again."

For someone with absolutely no experience diving, high or otherwise, the words held no reassurance. "No," he said firmly.

"Some god you are." The boy walked over to the edge. "Really, it's no big deal. Tell me what to do and I'll try."

Now that was an interesting notion. Maybe the boy actually could stay aloft for a moment -- with a little help. It would prove that it could be done.

"Just concentrate," he said. "Like the tennis ball."

The young face brightened. "Right, just like the tennis ball."

Backing up to the dormer, getting a running start, and launching himself off the edge of the roof. He extended his will. For a moment it seemed to work. Then a great splash.

He looked down at the pool where the boy's head was just breaking the surface. The boy waved that he was all right.

Well, he thought. That wasn't at all like levitating the tennis ball.

"Michael!" The voice of the boy's mother cut through the afternoon like a scythe. "Just what do you think you're doing? I leave you alone for ten minutes and . . ."

* * * * *

The two of them assessed the damage.

"Mom was pretty mad," Michael said. "She'll kill me if I ever try that again."

He nodded. A child jumping off a roof. It did sound bad.

"But," the boy continued with a quick grin, "she and Dad will be gone sometime. I say we try again."

The thought of flying tugged at him. He had been the messenger of the gods. "Again, then," he agreed. And faded.

The Lexus was barely out the front gates when they headed upstairs. "The dive's almost as good as flying," the boy said as they made their way up to the attic.

"You must concentrate," he replied. "Imagine yourself floating even before you leave the roof." But floating didn't seem to be the right word. It was too . . . heavy. It didn't capture the essence of soaring the winds.

With the moon hanging right in front of him, the boy took a few running steps and jumped out into space. Again, for just a moment as he extended his will to hold the boy up, there was a sense of weightlessness, as though the law of gravity were temporarily rescinded. Then it kicked in with a vengeance, pulling the boy down.

He sighed and waited for the splash. A dull thud sounded instead. Frowning, he crept to the edge and looked down. When his eyes finally made sense of the shadows and deeper shadows below, he realized that someone had drained the pool. His first thought was how typical of the mother. His second was that the boy had smashed into solid concrete.

As he stared down numbly, something happened at the bottom of the empty pool. A gossamer patch of light was ascending from the depths and taking wing on the wind.

Something clicked in his memory. Yes, that was how it was done. Flying required shedding the corporeal form, not trying to lift it in defiance of gravity. He must abandon the limitations of the flesh.

With growing excitement, he backed up for a running start, and threw himself on the winds. It would be good to be a god again.

AFTERWARDS

Michael Blekhman

Shall I stay?

No, it's time to go...

To keep going and thinking: Who was that ever-living fool - immortal as stupidity itself?..

My poor back is all in pain. My feet can hardly carry me - the shoes hurt them terribly ...

I will sit for a while on our bench. Some time has passed for us, and now there are twice as few of us here than in those old times. Well, I can be proud of my arithmetic skills. Good for you, old girl! Two divided by two makes one man and one woman... There is he, and there is me, but, anyway, it's just twice as less than in the beginning...

The dark, flabby cheeks of the midnight sky are spangled with dull, sometimes pink-pimpled spots. This sky reflects our ever full lake - the bottomless pond of hard, dry words we toss at each other.

I will stay. It would be useless and senseless to leave this bench, though too old to remain comfortable, this lake, too old to remain warm. The lake keeps millions of cold cinders, which, God knows when, used to be hot coals...

All right, I know but well that I won't stay here. I will get up and go - to get back to our four walls beaten with peas (1) of mutual reproaches and insults, to the broken pots (2) of rankling wounds of accusations, to the poisonous crocks of prickly irony. Fortunately or unfortunately, making a fortune (3) happened to be easier than expected, but it's good we don't keep hens (4): it would be sad to see them refuse picking this easily made fortune of gold mites thrown all over the place - in the yard, by the lake, in the castle.

I have to leave here again, I must move my sick feet, put in the cold shoes, over the old, rough staircase that looks like white halvah that has grown hard and rough since my childhood ended. The hard halvah of staircase - did I really manage to run up and down?

There was a time when, expecting my admiration and gratitude, he flew up, higher than any bird could fly - but it's impossible to even notice me from up there, to say nothing of seeing my face. So is there a reason to admire and thank?

It's up to me to fly, too, I have the right. Maybe, from up there, I would not notice the everlasting details? Well, no: the sky is occupied, it's too small for two: all we can do there is cross the ways. Besides, the fortune consists of too many details, and still new and new ones are coming...

- ...where are you?

Who has asked that - me or him? Not even asked: it's not a question any more: long, long ago it was anger, which became indifference, and now, it's a tired yawn...

If it's not clear who, then it's both?

- ...do you need ages to get ready?

Who said that - me or him? The ways won't even cross.

- ...where are you?

That's the key question. Just like the key that didn't fit in the lock separating us, the lock between him and me. Like the castle (5) where we never fit, after the two were divided into two halves.

I ask myself about it a thousand times a day. I turn it in my mind, I keep turning it like a key in the keyhole of the lock that locked us up, long ago, in the huge, cramped palace.

I look in the mirror - to make sure I am still there, to find myself - because that's the only place left where I can be found. There is no other place for me. Outside the mirror, is that myself?

- ...are you coming? All the people are here, waiting for you.

Are they sure it's me they are waiting for? Do they know my name? Do they remember what my name used to be?

Someone else asks me a much simpler question:

- Will you kindly permit me to announce your entry?..

Of course I will, how can I refuse? Of course I will soon appear, it won't be long. And, in exchange, will anybody help me understand where I am? And why did I disappear? And when did it happen?..

Is it really me in the looking-glass? No. I am looking for myself in there - and fail to find.

I keep looking, but it's not me. Not even there.

In the yard, under the window, there is a half-broken cart that used to be a ceremonial carriage. A basin of the same leftover pumpkin gruel near the same bearded coachman, sleeping as usual. The six snipy, narrow-tailed horses must be wandering around somewhere. The servants, dressed in liveries colored like rain that had whipped our shrubs, old and shabby like all my useless pleas, must be snoring in their room. Sleeping are all those who chose to remain in my childhood instead of joining me. All of them are sleeping, as though they had never kept awake. As though they all had simply been invented by that fool - immortal as stupidity itself.

Everything and everyone are where they are supposed to be, this might calm me down.

All I need to become happy is to find myself out. Did I keep existing after my childhood came to an end and everyone I had in it went away and fell asleep?

My back is sick after sitting on the hard bench, and after all the draughts I can't escape in the palace...

All right, I will enter: they are all there - except those who chose to go away and fall asleep.

I open the door and enter the hall. His former Majesty is on the throne. Her former Majesty, which is me, sits down by his side. He looks at me and thinks the same that I do, I am sure he does: there is nothing majestic in former majesty. Nobody ever noticed that the majesty disappeared for each of us, and isn't that more important than anything else?

No, it is not. What really matters is my pair of shoes, the most unbearable of all the details. The shoes make me hate my feet even stronger than I hate my always hurting back. I am supposed to put them on as soon as I wake in the morning and have them on the whole day. This will make great and irresistible the charm that comes from me and the admiration of those around. I am supposed to fly like a little bird and irradiate refreshing innocence, I must peal like a little silver bell when I am respectfully addressed and blush as a genuine *sancta simplicitas*. The guests must serve me, just as I am supposed to serve them. Her Majesty serves her people. She is an unattainable and thus attractive example, an embodiment of an unrealistic though once attained and thus tempting dream.

I am supposed to appear before my people in my already small, somewhat washed-out dress and in these hideous, unmanageable shoes. During each triumphant (they are all triumphant, that's my duty) entry, I must mischievously snap my little fingers, like a tiny coal had cracked in the fireplace: unnoticed by my people, the coal has become cinder. Then I must get ashamed of my own mischievousness, blush and look down humbly.

OK, I will snap, blush, and look down. Let me raise my dress up to the ankles to mount the throne and so that everyone would smile and melt with admiration and tell each other,

"Yes, that's she, always necessary and still immortal. And those are her little feet, wearing the same immortal, indispensable shoes".

The ritual works like the palace clock, which always chimes, and always in the wrong time. And, since God knows when, in the wrong way - as though beating me rather than simply chiming.

So let my feet remain little in the eyes of my people, and let the people never hear my feet buzzing with unbearable pain.

My people are sure that this woman is me.

That it's me mounting the throne, stretching my hand out for a royal kiss, blushing, and ringing like a silver bell.

They don't notice the pumpkins under my window? Well, let it be the way it is. They are lucky not to notice what has lost its importance - just as I don't notice myself in the mirror.

Let my feet always remain little, and let the shoes I hate remain little, too.

And let I never know the name of the fool, immortal as stupidity itself, who basted up those shoes and made the old, ill-natured fairy put them on my feet.

These cold and slippery shoes that feel like frogs.

These fairy-tale shoes. These little shoes made of crystal.

THE ILLUSIVE COMPANION

Nicholas Alexander Hayes

As I put a tin of beans on the hot plate in the sink, the air raid sirens silenced.

"No meat?" Auntie said from the john.

I shook my head and glanced in the mirror, cringing at how my five o'clock shadow pushed through my last coat of foundation. We expected guests since there was no longer an imminent threat of death or dismemberment. Luckily, the civil defense patrols would thin our guests' numbers by returning many to their registered homes.

I fished in the pockets of my once fitted coat that now swamped me. I rifled through my gray and green ration coupons until I found my snapshot—my face chubby from pre-police action chocolate and liquor was obscured by a smoky haze. The thick brown liquid around the beans started to boil and I thrust the picture back in my jacket.

I poured a mouthful of steaming beans into my mouth. An errant bean fell on one of my navy suede pumps. No use in cleaning it, the pair was worn to shreds. After unplugging the hot plate, I thrust our spoon into the can and brought it to Auntie who was plucking his scraggly chest hair from his sagging pecs.

"Where do you think I'll find my stranger?" I asked for perhaps the hundred-thousandth time, returning to the mirror to finish my primping. From my green-stained jewelry box, I took a pink broach with lavender rhinestones on the cardinal points and fastened my shimmering purple scarf around my neck.

He took a dainty bite, guiding the beans through the scarlet caked on his lips. "Here. Where else?" he said. He most likely meant don't leave the cottage, don't leave the blocks of toilets and rows of urinals we call home.

With a gentle smile, I pulled his soft sky-blue dressing gown over the marbling of varicose veins in his calves.

I left.

Outside torrents of water from the cottage roof caught the last white light of day before splashing into the crowd of unknown shadows. My jacket was spangled with beads of water before I made it to the street. The shadows trailed behind me only for a moment before surrounding me. I said that I wanted to see where the shadows who used to visit were and they insisted on leading me. We scurried down the street hoping to avoid any Civil Defense patrols.

The shadows' broad synchronized gestures and jerking bravado made them seem like the supporting cast of a Bollywood feature. The cast was constantly losing integrity as light from between rubble, plagued elms and the occasional boutique caused some individuals to dissipate and merge with others who would double or lengthen or shorten depending on the amount and direction of light refracting and reflecting from the boutique windows filled with deviled ham and rainbows of suede shoes.

We came to a manhole cover and as many of us as could put our hands around the rim to force it open while the others pressed against our shoulders and backs to witness our progress. We finally threw the heavy disc aside and scurried down the rusty ladder.

The sewer was a vast boulevard lined with red brick and lead pipes. A fetid yet fecund trickle of human water, sick and bobbing ordure ran well below the high-water mark. The difference between above and beneath, which before the current police action was demarked by harsh taboos, had been inverted and the tunnel's solid structure seemed a citadel the shadows might share for trade.

My guides showed me the pipes that lead to a famous playwright's lavatory. They explained that he also had a predilection for their company and lamented his trial and execution by dismemberment after he was caught in a compromising position with his shadow.

I expressed reasonable sorrow, caressing the cold pipe as they ushered me along.

One seized me and kissed the condensation from my hand. His translucent smoky fingers interlaced with mine and I wondered if he was my stranger. I turned to look at his face but he receded into another who came forward and held my hand to his barely corporeal chest. Others put their hands on me, patting out reassurance, stroking my neck and thighs to coax a more than chaste excitement.

Footsteps clamored down the ladder and a bright torch swept my guides away. I struggled to see past the light. A man in a gray helmet, which read in a clumsy scarlet lettering *Civil Defense* approached and studied his clipboard. He purred: "Son, is this your registered home?"



Brook by Alex Kats

FRICASSEED FILIPINA

Tom Bradley

Elementary spirits are like children: they torment chiefly those who trouble about them... it is these who frequently occasion our bizarre or disturbing dreams... but they can manifest no thought other than our own... They reproduce good and evil indifferently, for they are without free will and are hence irresponsible; they exhibit themselves to ecstasies and somnambulists under incomplete and fugitive forms... Such creatures are neither damned nor guilty; they are curious and innocent. We may use or abuse them like animals or children.

--Eliphas Levi, *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*

It's a glorious Easter Sunday morning in Tokyo Cathedral's parking lot. Sam Edwine is wedged behind the wheel of a bashed-up Mazda sub-compact, just trying to accomplish a little sleep.

Meanwhile, almost directly underneath the car's crumbling differential, deep in the demon-rife blackness of the cathedral crypt, Sam's wife squats with a coven of expatriate papists, taking certain purgatory-avoidance measures better left unimagined.

It's a bad surprise when one of Sam's bloodshot eyes pops open of its own accord just in time to witness a manifestation. Some wisps of brownish nitrogen dioxides swirl together with a bushel of airborne diesel particles and coalesce into a tiny center of consciousness.

Wandering tentatively around the churchyard, it approaches the Mazda and rattles a burnt-crisp knuckle against the windshield.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Edwine. Did I awaken you?"

Sam is too horrified to respond.

"Please forgive my appearance. I'm just trying to do my Paschal duty. It's the first time since I botched the flame dance that I've had the courage to come here."

When Sam reaches out a trembling hand to verify the existence of this salamander, it shrinks away, hissing, "*Noli me tangere*," and disappears into dark billows of carbonized hemp fiber. Floating and chattering, it envelops the Mazda, smudging the windows.

"I can't shake your hand, professor," comes the muffled whisper from between wads and folds of this strange fabric. The stuff has been configured vaguely to resemble the indigenous garb of a nearby island-nation which, through the expedient of sex slavery, provides oceans of orgasms for the grandsons of Great God Hirohito.

"My body is unlucky now," says the wraith, peeking out and flashing a toothless rictus. "The Yakuza pimps won't touch someone tainted with death, and they aren't fond of freelancers. So they refuse to sponsor the renewal of my entertainer's visa."

These words slough off in threads, and slip beneath the car, to emanate from the beer cans under the seat. Now they unwind from among the stash of methedrine-dusted joints in the glove compartment. And now they radiate in a web from Sam's own lumbar ganglia.

"I am an outright illegal alien. Immigration is after me, and just because of my vocation I'm unloved by the municipal authorities. So I must disguise myself as what I truly am by birth. Nobody would ever suspect me of voluntarily joining such an oppressed minority."

The exotic garment looks more like a transient's rags than a formerly indentured sex slave's work clothes. But the butter-fingered flame dancer seems to feel an emotional attachment to it, so Sam says nothing.

"All by myself, I've introduced a new kink to the local salary-men. They pretend to re-rape my people, in emulation of their proud forbears. My third-degree burns make it all the more titillating for them to pay homage to the spirits of their revered ancestors."

The baked child rematerializes for a moment in order to glance down at herself. "I know it's not in the best of taste," she says, smoothing away a few wrinkles and dust particles. "But it's the only halfway decent outfit I have."

"I think you look nice," says Sam, wondering why she lingers. It's almost chow-time around the subterranean altar. Meat's on.

She inspects her invisible reflection in Sam's side-view mirror, adjusts her costume, and ruffles up the few filaments of black floss that have managed to sprout from the mass of broiled tissue that once was her scalp. She lifts her ashen blouse and presents a scabby, scrawny, ribby torso.

"I may have stayed away from here a long time, but I can kneel a lot longer than any of those pious people--and on cobblestones too."

Then, bravely, like a small phoenixed Maid of Orleans, she limps toward the concrete steps that plunge into the crypt chapel.

Suddenly, grunts and howls filter up through the pavement in lascivious descant, as from Milton's asphaltic Hell. Eucharistic racket, Mrs. Edwine shrieking on top, freezes the flame dancer in her tracks, and she begins to weep.

"I want to pray!" she wails.

Sam unfolds himself from the Mazda and stands by her side, not two feet from the steps--closer than this husky atheist has ever gotten. He mutters, "You're only a few steps away from sanctuary. Enter now into the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Romish, and jab like that."

Sam himself, of course, will never go down there, not as long as he remains uncremated. At his mother's knee, little Sammy learned the definition of the word *simile* by coolly considering the nicety of the wine and bread. On the other hand, each Sabbath his otherwise rational wife trembles before a wafer thin slice of the sole material that puts her in divergence with post seventeenth-century thought. It would be not only disrespectful, but insane to approach something that substantial with a head full of attitudes flip as Sam's.

"Don't worry," he repeats, cringing from the brink. "You look real nice."

"But I'm ashamed." She holds up melted, webbed, nail-less hands and tries to cover a noseless face. "There was no time for rehearsal because the salary-men were getting impatient. I did my best, Dr. Edwine, but my arms weren't strong enough for the benzine goblets!"

"Never mind," says Sam. "We all have our spastic moments. My own asshole is fluttering pretty bad right now. Besides, these mackerel-snappers are obligated to embrace you. You won't be the first magdalen they've embraced. See? Father Itchy-Nookie or whatever is down there, all suited up in his prettiest rhinestone dress and big glans penis hat, and he beckons you to come on down. Don't keep him waiting."

Sam turns on his heel--or tries to. He must say his goodbyes. Subtly, he will fuck off back into the car and roll up the windows tightly, before his wife's father confessor sprouts goat horns and granny teats and breaks out the meat cleaver.

"You never come to mass," comes the voice, lisping. The little whore's waxing all shy and babyish now, plying professional skills other than terpsichorean. "If you come, too, everybody will be so surprised they won't notice me."

Try as he might, Sam can't seem to disentangle their elbows. But the paralysis doesn't extend all the way up to his tongue and teeth and lips; so, teetering vertiginously over his would be seductress, he tries to start a conversation that will last through the benediction and the recession and obviate this whole horrible fucking moment of truth in a stampede of shriven faithful. He commences babbling through a parched mouth--

"See the finger bowl thing down there with the heavily rouged plaster-of-Paris Barbie doll perched on it? That's full of valid-but-illicit holy water that exists but isn't supposed to be wet, except it is anyway, and you moisten your pulse points ever so slightly with--"

"That's not holy water, Dr. Edwine. It's baptismal water, and you're not allowed to put your fingers in the font."

"So, you're a blood-guzzler, too, eh? You know, my mom baptized me a low-church Epis--"

Gray tears of plasmatic lymph begin to flop from under a pair of out-of-mesh eyelids.

"Oh, come on," moans Sam. "Don't make me feel like an ogre. If you're hell-bent on making communion, little Missy, you'll have to shuffle up that aisle under your own steam. My whole, hefty metabolism recoils like an albino vampire from the Real Presence. Why do

you reckon I spend my Sundays snoozing up here in the parking lot?"

Nevertheless, the creature pulls him toward the pit. He wrenches his hand away and turns to flee. But the flame dancer's arm suddenly grows sumo muscles, and the good doctor is beneath the surface of this planet before his knees can lock.

* * * *

The blackened Filipina flits on scorched crow wings, shedding benzine goblets left and right, which explode like tactical thermonuclear devices.

Father Itchy-Nookie lurks simultaneously in all the crannies of this catacomb, his clutch purse brimming with transubstantial gore--Sam knows this without separating either seized sets of eyelids. To the assembled expatriate congregation, Tokyo's chief attorney of nothingness dispenses wads of gristle and scab, flopping them greasily from the chipped rim of a crude ceramic chalice. And, unlike Sam's present interlocutor, the wads are not even properly cooked.

Like a Baphometic cocktail party, the Catholics, Mrs. Edwine included, squat in vulgar positions around the altar, play with themselves, and trepan their own children with ragged thumbnails.

Sam rises from their midst, not looking quite like himself. It's almost as though a fraternal twin is standing in for him, disguised in his occidental-style beard and rumpled academic clothes. Not forgetting to genuflect piously, he climbs behind the altar, upsetting the cross.

His spouse and the other Mariolators choose the moment of the professor's leavetaking to yowl, in un-American Popish Esperanto, a cannibal hymn in the mixolydian mode--

*Pluck forth thy royal diadems,
pluck forth thy locks entwined within,
pluck forth from radiant brows the flesh
which pads the seams where headbones mesh.*

Sam crawls into a hidden recess in the wall and rummages among a gaudy treasure-trove of sacred objects and other such assorted jiggery-popery: pyxes, monstrances, reliquaries, crucifixes, icons, ruby-studded rosaries.

*Pry back thy scalp like fecund sod,
expose thy rank farm's protein pods,
chip free thy skull, let marrow drain
till one grey tegument remains.*

Mrs. Edwine's warbling soprano and the snarls of the elementary spirits gradually blend together with Sam's seismic snores, and transmogrify themselves into the whining of a tiny internal combustion engine at full throttle.

*And when thy brain is amply shown,
and naught is left of skin and bone,
then serve thyself to Christus Rex,
or suffer our collective hex.*

After an indefinite period of time Sam emerges, looking different again. On the anterior portion of his skull he displays the face of Grünwald's Saint Anthony, cheeks, forehead and scalp stretched like rubber by talons and beaks. Shouldering a golden shovel, he heads for the exit, a flashlight of purest platinum poking from his pocket. But, before vanishing, he turns and addresses the ravening parishioners in a voice other than his own.

"I have memories stored up, good and bad. But mostly neutral."

DYING.

j.a.tyler

Down and inside she lays, down and inside and in her bed, this mother, their mother, the mother of this boy girl girl. Old woman legs in blind sheets, unworking eyes in a blank and staring head, the slick smooth face of disease, the lack of tissue. Skin, tendons and muscles. Cups of water by her bed, sipped and sputtered, dribbled out. Down and in her bed she exists, barely existing, their mother, this mother, this woman, hill hill hill surrounding her, through a window, the clouds dimming in and out, the sun, never clearer, the white, the grey. She sinks into her mattress, down and into her bed, her insides, inside her insides, succumbing, slipping, sliding out, down and inside.

Her room in the shape of a meteor, a heart, a web, a cyst. The walls thin and veined, paint chipping away, stacks of newspapers and carpet shedding. Her room a head, a brain, a palsy. The ceiling, bowing down to her, to kiss, to meet, the ceiling dipping down for a handshake, a shake, shaking, a seizure, seizing her, blanketing. Her ceiling blankets her, this woman, this mother, their mother, this boy girl girl, one older one younger, both girls up and out, the boy, her boy, their boy, standing bedside watching nothing, watching everything, watching nothing. His mother, their mother, this coming back and going, her, down and inside a bed, a disease, eyes and the sheen of rattling disease.

Uncomfortable leaves quiver in winds, green leaves so it is summer, the same cottonwood skins, the bark rough and lumping, building up, branches reaching to sky, limbs sturdy, weighted, his mother, this mother, the shine of a snowflake, the weight of no weight, the noiseless slipping, the falling down gone and out. This boy, her boy, the boy of boy girl girl, he is the only one there, seeing this, her dying and going away, sleights of time and ties, her, his mother, tied to this dying. This death, the sun, the limbs outside wavering and shading.

Her arms shimmer with heat, her, overheating, and a boy hand on her muscled arm, feeling the faint, the slight heartbeat, the beating of veins as they hum, whisper, exhausted keeping on. She is tired, her eyes closing in and out, the boy's eyes closing in and out, sleeping sitting there, beside his mother, their mother, the world on his back, tall and toppling, acting as girl girl and father, this boy, the only family left in a family gone away, waiting out the end. Tunneling light and an end, the dust as it settles, the ruts of wagon wheel loosened, flattened, the yellow grass grown over, their walking paths, their routes to and from animals, to coop and cattle, those the only weedless paths left. The burrs as he walks to the porch, the snakes rattling by under the rusted metal of unused machines.

Across and from a distance there is echo of gunfire, countries away the bang and drop of fur, antlers, the same dropping ring, the same animal memoir he has been hearing for decades, he has been gone for decades. His hands, his father's hands, they work against his chest, the stunted breathing, the empty stir of hollow insides, him, this boy's father, the father of this boy girl girl, this once mother his once wife, him now, this man, bulleting down the game as he has done for years years years. Seasons, all winters and no heat, sun but beaming with cold, meadows of snow, white, crunching through limbs of pine, the stout walls of cliff rock and cabin logs. This father, disconnected, unfeeling the last breathing breaths of her, his wife, the mother of his boy girl girl, the woman he left on a plain, in the dust, in the dirt, in the sleep of hill hill hill.

Inside and down, among her liver and her kidneys, memories of him, playing with them, this boy girl girl, swinging them by rope, bridle fitting and combing the manes, branding the ribs and the hides, the cattle, them, boy girl girl, watching him play at farming, at dust and dirt

and the swelling sun, the ever uncoming rain. Down in her insides, among her black and swirling blood the darkness and hollow sounds of him, her husband, her man, the man she loved, once, back then, long or decades ago, before he left to snow, the noise of him calling to boy girl girl, calling the clouds for shade, the leaves to seasons, the ground and the burrowing in earth. Him, hinged and unhinged on drinking down, on the cascade of it, the nullifying, the deadening. Her, dead and dying.

The boy watches, a man now, watching his mother, their mother, the mother of this girl girl, of this boy, the one younger, the one older, both having gone to the sun, out over the hills, the hill hill hill, the rights of the earth, the moving on or out or down or in, tunneling in like their father, the man he was, drinking down, they followed him down, down down down, shovels of life over his shoulder, their shoulders, not wanting to but becoming him, unrefined and spirited, out to the snow, the places with rain, the liquid exhaust out in the world. Lost from their mother, this mother, his mother, the mother he is watching die.

The boy watches, a loss a gap a stop, a line past lining, past snow, past the blister sun of this dirt, this place, the place for her like loneliness when it comes, when it grows, the growing in her eyes, spread to her head and filling it, a well, with the disease of water, the melting raining down of ill-redemption or unease, disease. His mother, this mother, down and inside her bed, the sheets heated and threaded, needling through her, a skin of a woman dying now, lost to the ever of a life lived and unlived, the braying of imaginary cattle in the window, out the yard, the sun bending wheat, turning wind, a ravine and a path, the places she follows, the boy as a man, as a father himself, as a now unalone and living thing, a tree out of its roots, watching a mother, this mother, moving down and in, inside and down, out out out.

NO BODY

Adam La Rusic

No Body, I call myself, though I am known to others by more mundane names. Getzel Ternell, government clerk, bachelor, 35. No high school sweethearts think of where I am now as they lie reminiscing one night. No co-workers gossip about me in quiet morning coffee machine huddles. No secret agents discuss my name with raised eyebrows on the sixth floor of nondescript buildings.

I whisper my existence in the urban cacophony. I'm convinced I'm disappearing.

On Tuesday, the bus doors closed in front of me. Felipe, my cubicle neighbor cannot recall me. Street thugs on Third and Andrews don't raise hooded eyes at my passing. I'm having trouble with my bank card. It doesn't recognize me.

Others hands were made for fame or infamy, but my limbs splay about me, incapable of art or murder, merely following orders to lift food to my mouth, ambulate my body to the moment's imperative.

I slouch at the cluttered kitchen table with its flimsy metal legs and pour cream into my coffee. I consider patterns. Patterns within patterns. Entropy is cream in an unstirred cup of coffee, the tendrils of white softly curling, each tendril producing smaller appendages and echoing itself over and over, the intricacy staggering and beautiful. The design reminds me of a vast, leafless oak on a winter plain, or the ganglion net of a brain. Eventually the swirling back eddies of cream coalesce, diffuse to mere colour.

We are back eddies in the tide of entropy. Tiny little fingers on the appendages of tendrils. Electrified meat, with delusions of conscience. Reproducing, like those tendrils of cream, until the Second Law of Thermodynamics discovers the improbability of our being and returns us to death, putrescence, dust.

Because I know this, I feel nothing. Because I feel nothing, I am becoming invisible.

I feel the psychic tendrils of others lose purchase as I immaterialize. Puzzled, their mindfingers search for me momentarily like the pseudopods of hungry amoebae.

I notice humans becoming increasingly irrelevant. Their sounds are like the utterances of cattle. It's as if every word is spoken out of context from the one before it. I come to understand people, their reactions to given phenomena.

This is how I see humans now: a vast beach, billions of bodies planted to the neck in the sand, stuck in time. Billions of heads, able only to see each other and the great tide slowly coming in to end them one by one. Do they scream? No. They sing. They sing!

Emptiness fills me. I find I can float, instantly be anywhere in the world.

Time becomes distorted, events transpire in slow-motion and at accelerated speed. Seconds, years, eons mean nothing. The waterfalls are languid as clouds, the life spans of galaxies are cracks from dry wood in a campfire. My edges have become fuzzy. I am many places simultaneously. Dust crawls at my feet now, if it can be said that I have feet, if it can be said that there is dust.

Ahead lies fecund oblivion, an abyss made out of everything. I can just about touch it. And here is the mystery: I can't reach it without letting go, but once I let go, I lose all desire to reach.

DAY STREET
(From *The Knowledge: An A-To-Zed Of That City We Almost Know*)

Susannah Mandel

It will probably be dusk by the time you turn onto Day Street. The brick house-fronts will be darkening with approaching evening; between the chimney-stacks; the blue is slowly draining out of the sky.

The lawns are in the process of converging, with the brickwork and the trees, into a mass of indistinct purplish-gray. Out of the twilight, the legs of lawn furniture gleam fitfully; the white fences holding in the back yards; the curtains in the windows. The pavement stretches before you down the street and trails perpendicular paths up to the stoops. It luminesces faintly under your feet, like a phosphorescent wake.

The air is soft along Day Street. A breeze moves gently past your ear, bearing the sound of voices talking; coming, not from out here, from this sidewalk empty except for a solitary walker, but from somewhere very close: just over a white fence, just around the corner.

As you pass the house, a light flicks on behind the translucent curtains. There is a movement of shadows in the window, a barely audible clatter of silver, a muted murmur of conversation. Up and down the street, just like in Magritte's painting *The Empire of Lights*, the streetlamps are flickering to life.

Along the roofline, the chimneys and the satellite dishes have become silhouettes against the dimming sky. Very high up, a curve of light has pooled, like a rim of salt along the edge of the world, and in the west a single bright star is coming out.

A person could stand here for quite some time, looking down the street at the line of yellow-cool lights, looking up at the shadows, the star. But it is equally possible that the walker might have to begin moving along again. It is possible that you have someplace to be.

The air holds you close as you move down Day Street: grey and gentle, cool and faint, suspended between the darkness and day. The pavement is a crepuscular glow beneath your feet. You walk, slowly, past the lighted and darkened windows, between the lines of lamps like morning stars.

The air holds you close: grey, cool, and suspended. The pavement is an auroral glow below. In the darkened windows, the lights are beginning to come on. The silver is starting to clink.

In the dew-laden grass, the flowers are yawning. The wind is bright and silent: clear, cool, clean-smelling, as the air is just before dawn. Seeping upward from somewhere behind the houses, behind the one bright star in the east, the sky is beginning to turn blue. As you pass beneath the long row of streetlamps, following the pale line of the madrigal sidewalk that points your way home, above you, one by one, the lights are flickering out.



Rachel Isaac TheGood OldDays

MILLIGRAM

G David Schwartz

"Milligram, a wild-eyed fanatic, burst into my study while I was concentrating on John Donne's 'Kind Pity Cloaks My Spleen'. I was studying so intensely that I did not immediately realize he was in the room with me. Finally, his frantic interruptions seeped through to my consciousness."

"I have discovered", he was saying, 'the perfect word.' 'The perfect word,' I asked absentmindedly. 'Does it not have to do with the context; with what we are trying to convey,' Milligram ignored me as he pronounced his word: 'Confiscate. 'Con', as in the criminal actor who performs the criminal activity. 'Fist', as in the balled hand which threatens. 'Sssssss,' the snake sound. The hard 'K,' and 'ate'. Should I elaborate,' he asked me. I told him I did not think that necessary. "

"The new edition is so much more appropriate than the previous word,' Milligram told me. 'Confusion has a similar criminal activity, the 'few' emphasizing the minimalist tone of the behavior, the 'ssssh' denoting the sad iron at work, and finally the 'on,' explaining the piece upon piece of the oneness. So understood, 'confusion' would be enigmas resulting from the addition of 'con,' he concluded. I vaguely recalled Milligram's discussion some weeks ago, attempting to determine which word came first: confusion or fusion. I distractedly attempted to reconstruct his argument as he brandished his latest comparison."

"He told me, I thought, when I work up this morning, that 'controversy' was a contender. The word has the obligatory 'con,' followed by 'traverse,' as in to move about, and 'see' as in to comprehend. "

"Thoughts such as these were frequent with Milligram. He was adept at changing single letters so as to design different words in a sequence. He could transform cats to moles in six steps. Why, one time, although this was not strictly through the chain of letter manipulation, he changed 'infinite' to 'affinity' and, in the process, invented the word 'iffinity': to identify with one to the infinite power which, Milligram explained, was silence. He was something of a theologian as well. "

I interrupted Mr. Gardner's rambling speech to ask if he could supply evidence that cat can be changed to mole in six steps. He responded that he had written the answer somewhere, and began rummaging through his desk drawer as he spoke.

"I did not think much of Milligram's discoveries. I suppose I had too little insight into these logic puzzles, or word games, or whatever people have taken to calling his skill. No, I did not think much of the value of his work until he was found dead. Ahh, here he goes."

Gardner handed me a sheet of paper, which listed the following words length-wise down the center: CATS, HATES, HATE, MATE, MOTE, MODE, MOLE. I looked upon the paper without much interest and less understanding. Its very presence seemed only to confirm my next question. "I didn't understand what you do here."

Gardner shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Is it necessary to understand what we do here to solve this murder,"

"The more information we have at our disposal..." I began.

"That you might dispose,"

"...The better our ability to find a motive. Motive is half the solution to a crime."

PHANTOM

Marc Lowe

I am in the hallway, but I don't sense it. That is to say: I don't feel my body. I am like a phantom, a limbless entity floating, flailing. And now there's my head. I watch it go by on the video monitor (where they are watching me). It does not see me, does not look at me. Its eyes are concentrating on the path of its trajectory. It needs its eyes to guide itself, otherwise it will forget that it exists. This is what the doctor has told me. He has labeled it "a loss of proprioception," which means that the body does not have the means to perceive itself, or something like that. Phantom limb, phantom body. The doctor does not understand how this condition might have arisen. He has never seen such an anomalous "sickness" in any of his patients before, only read about it in a medical journal. Who is this doctor? And what can he do to help? He seems to be grasping at illusory straws. No advice for me. No clue what to do. No help at all. The body—*my* body—can hardly keep from falling over itself. Without the eyes, it is helpless. Put a blindfold over these eyes and the body crumbles to the floor like a sack of squid. These hands, pudgy-like; these feet, two unfeeling lumps of flesh. Limbs that have no control over themselves; a torso that is hollow. Am I a straw man? What is the point of living in this state of limbo?

The body walks, unsteady, unaware of its own existence. It can only recognize itself when it peers into a mirror, views itself on a plasma screen. I am in the hallway, this much is clear. My eyes...my eyes focus on every movement, every step in *their* direction. They are behind the glass; I see them (my vision, perhaps in compensation for my lack of sensation, is superior). They think I don't know, or don't care. The glass is tinted black, but beyond the glare I can see the outline of bodies. There goes my head on the monitor again, swaying on a gelatinous neck that only exists as an image, a reflection, an afterthought. It only has eyes for itself. The body moves forward, awkward, unaware of its awkwardness (the eyes are aware, but they are too concentrated on their effort to move the body to judge). What would happen if the body were to fall into the glass? Would the glass shatter first, or would the body?

The doctor does not know what to do. He shakes his head, opens his mouth, closes it. He is perplexed, dumbfounded by this enigma before him. He can only refer to his notes, which are as useless as this body without eyes. Hollow as hollow men. We talk in the cramped office. He performs various tests, all of which I fail. He has me close my eyes, watches me tumble to the floor, takes more notes. I don't feel a thing. The exercise is useless. Intrinsicly. And yet we continue like this for months and months. Why should I care? I am just an empty vessel, an afterimage of what I once was (or was I once?). By all rights I should kill myself. What keeps me alive? Hope? No. What, then. Pride? Fear? Perhaps. Could the eyes ever will the body to suicide? It would take a great deal of effort, without a doubt. But would death be preferable, or simply comparable, to this state of disembodiedness? Would it bring me peace and stillness, or simply more struggle, more senseless discomfort? Plato, writing as Socrates, believed that death was *a priori* preferable to living, because, by his way of thinking, it would either be like a deep, undisturbed slumber, or like a party where one would be able to converse with great historical figures who had died. Did either Plato or Socrates have any idea, though, of what it's like to have a lack of proprioception? to live inside a body without awareness of itself? Could this not be the fate of all who die, once the consciousness leaves its shell? How is a man to know whether the world ends with a bang or with a whimper? The doctor doesn't have any clue, that's for sure. He doesn't know what to do with me, other than to capture me on video and to observe.

They all observe, just as that head of mine observes the simulacrum of itself, the only proof that it *is*.

I take a step, and then a step, the eyes leading, trailblazing. I am in the hallway, approaching the blackened glass; I see myself in the monitor. To call this non-entity "I" is misleading, but it is the only way that this narrator can justify his own existence (so please allow him this freedom). The body swaggers and sways, as if drunk, approaching the men who hide behind the glass with their useless notepads, their spastic pencils, their searching eyes (there are no eyes here). In a moment everything goes dark; the body has disappeared. Have I entered the black glass, or is this another realm entirely? The doctor's voice rings out in a tone I have not heard before. Panic. A stain on the floor I cannot see but intuit. The jumbled voices of the others, sound of pencil tips scratching away, pressing into their presumed pads of paper. Then a phantom silence. My head is on the monitor, looking, staring, trying to locate something it has lost, perhaps forever.



by Izya Shlosberg

ZINNA

Louise Norlie

Little Sebastian stands on the windowsill and threatens to jump. But it is I who am falling.

Through the window another's eyes are upon me - a miniature man with steely grey eyes and a muscular build. He knocks heavily on the glass. I ignore him. From time to time I seem to pass into him: I smell an outdoor smell, the odor of loamy earth leavened by rain.

It was either the stairwell or the library where we were introduced. A blurry divide between these places and between the people too. The father's mustache curled higher and higher until it became the mother's eyebrows. He said:

"Welcome, Donatio. I hope that you will be able to keep our Sebastian company and bring a smile to his face. We - my wife and I - have grown heavy of heart." But then he began laughing and his face expanded, and he became my uncle, the one with the scar above his lip who cared for me after I was orphaned. And whenever I was in the stairwell I was heading in the direction of the library, and whenever I was in the library the sound of resounding footsteps reminded me that the stairwell beckoned with its indistinguishable passages. Either one takes me to Sebastian.

Sebastian's limp fingers rested indistinctively in my hand. He was asleep. I grasped his hand at his mother's insistence. She passed her finger to her lips then across the sky. She said: "There is no telling."

"No telling what?" I asked.

"No telling," she repeated, solemnly, stroking Sebastian's fevered brow. The inexorable chimes of the clock dimmed her away. I clasped the boy's hand closer but couldn't sense its shape. That is, it did not conform to the pressures of my hand or force its substance into my skin.

At dinner I met Zinna. Her hair melted from her face into the darkness. The food consisted of mashed meat stuck like arrows with crackers and celery. At once I discerned that Zinna was rebellious. She did not eat but sculpted the food with the tines of her fork. Her gaze lingered on my face. With a remote smile she said: "I have never known a good man's love." The father dropped his fork with a clatter, his face pale with anger. He abruptly rose to his feet, his chair scraping the ground, and left. Blushing, Sebastian's mother ran from the room. I never saw either of them again.

Zinna reached across the table, her hand snaking like the tendril of a spreading vine. Her eyes were pools at the bottom of deep wells. Growing uncomfortable, I cleared my throat and shoveled vigorously with my cracker. She poured me more amber wine. I heard a distant groan. She patted my hand. "Sebastian is awake," she said.

What stood out were his teeth and how they were reflected in the whiteness of his eyes. His face consisted of two echoing horizontal lines, eyes and teeth. Both eyes and teeth incorporated curves, the rounding of the eyeballs, the horseshoe jaw. The skin of his face was unbearably dry. He did not ask for his parents.

"Do you call yourself a clown or a jester? Jester has a better ring to it," he sighed, squinting as if my face gave off a blinding light.

"Jester, if you prefer," I said.

"Show me something," he demanded. I displayed my standard array of tricks, not wanting to set the bar too high. He watched intensely, but only to glimpse my sleight of hand. Then he said: "I am too tired for more."

"As you please," I replied with a bow.

"Your room is the last on the left," he said, turning on his side and drawing up the blanket. That night Zinna rose and set like a heavenly body, too distant to perceive.

* * * *

Sebastian proved a formidable player even when sprawled in bed. Zinna was nowhere to be seen, or else she had become indistinguishable.

"Take me to see the stairwell," the boy asked, so we went to the landing to peer into distance crevasses. The smells from the stairwell were distinctive; an untrustworthy smell of smoke without evidence of fire, sweat mixed with the choking odor of musty clothing. Throughout its vertiginous drop the stairwell repeated the pattern of rose petals. Between each petal was a void.

"Listen to that," Sebastian said his face full and unblinking like the moon. I could not resist humoring him.

"What sound?" I asked. I heard only the churning noise of an amnesiac sea brushing the house at its roots. Sebastian rose to his feet, his hands gripping his wheelchair from behind. With great effort he pointed one finger up as if the sound came from above. Taking slow steps, he pushed his entire contraption backwards to an area without illumination.

I called out: "Where are you leading me?" I followed as if mesmerized and if you hadn't known better, you would have thought that I would follow him anywhere, yes, even to the ends of the earth.

"Silly Donatio," he said, "Genius climbs you like a vine or a ladder." I proceeded cautiously, holding out my hands.

"Stop! Stop!" Sebastian called suddenly. Then I heard him laughing, but trying to conceal it. "Don't walk any further. Lean down." I did so. "What do you see?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Lean further."

"Still nothing," I said. My voice became a spiraling echo. "Do you want me to fall?"

"I wouldn't mind if you did," he said. I straightened my spine and smoothed down my clothing. I was indignant.

"Sebastian, what a mean streak you have."

"You self-righteous prig," he snapped. "How can you ever amuse me?"

I heard her laughter although I didn't immediately see her. Zinna stood in the doorway, observing us from a distance. "You've made me laugh, Donatio," came her voice.

As we returned to the library, Zinna pulled me aside. She said: "He knew what a torment it was to be a child genius, and he decided to be a tormented child." Her hair smelled sickly sweet, like the taste of spoiled fruit. She said: "Eventually, you will merely fetch for him, play the errand boy."

That night my dreams were heavy with jungle sweat. I was afraid of a formless monster concealed in the shadows, and I snuck into Sebastian's room and rested in a chair. His eyes were open.

"Mimic the raven," he whispered. "It helps me dream." I cawed and squawked, flapped my arms. This bored him. He said:

"Now I will show you a trick you cannot repeat." He pulled back the blankets revealing a bloody wound pulsing with worms.

"What can you teach me now?" he said.

"Oh Sebastian," I sobbed.

* * * *

I feel pressure on my thoughts and am afraid to look up. Her eyes spread across the room, compelling me to follow the direction of her many glances, pulling me in. She hovers

lightly on the edge of her chair, tentative as a butterfly flirting its wings before taking flight. It is then that I recognize her. She is the gap between thought and vision, the gulf between impulse and act, every magician's femme fatale.

Zinna takes my hand and leads me toward the faceless man at the window. His eyes are stony and his muscles chiseled. Space spreads around us. I have never felt such desolation except in the parting of waves as a flood retreats. What is known is not recognizable, and the recognizable not known. Her skin spreads over my own like a satin sheet.

"I will not fail in my duty. I will not be seduced by you," I say. She laughs.

"Sebastian is calling. I must go," I say. I try to pull away from her but I cannot. We begin to dance. She draws me closer to the edge of something, a vast unseen precipice. With every step we skirt its edge. Sebastian claps his hands from the sidelines as we twirl.

"Dance, clown, dance!" he says, rising from his wheelchair and dancing a jig alone.

"Sebastian, you are well!" I cry out. Zinna draws me into her emptiness. Her mouth is a livid gash on her face. In a dark space inside it I watch a small version of Zinna picking a solitary rose. She looks up at me and the rose sprouts as her lips. The petals fall away, broken like a crushed snailshell. Tender red flesh quivers beneath.

"We are hothouse flowers, delicate growths," she whispers. "Don't think I haven't lived for this."

The statuesque form of the faceless man clings to the window, reminding me of a smothering dream. My mind cannot admit the possibility. In his strength he shatters the glass. Inky darkness pours through the opening.

"I feel ill," I tell Zinna, stumbling out of the dance. I reach for my head to hold but I cannot find it. Zinna reaches down her arm as through a vast distance. I feel her pulling me up, but the distance is far and the window is rising.

Sebastian steps over the shattered glass, faceless. His limber movements are made silent by the rushing of water in my ears. He grabs my arm and lifts me. If I could jump back in shock I would, for his grip is like iron. His skin is as cold and rough as a statue made of stone.

We are afraid of standing under statues and rightly so. They will collapse and crush us.

"Sebastian, you are hurting me!" I moan from the force of his strength.

"If it doesn't bite it has no teeth," Zinna laughs.

"Save yourself with your tricks now," Sebastian says. "It is Zinna you love, not me."

"Dance, clown, dance," Sebastian commands. I reach for Zinna but she is gone. Sebastian beckons to me from the edge of the windowsill. He holds himself ransom for my few remaining possessions: keys to a bottomless stairwell, and an unhatched egg that I keep warm in a small pouch on my stomach.

"You have my unhatched bird," I say.

"Here," he mumbles, crushing the egg in his fist. The bird hatches from its shell, squirming free from the gluey film around its feathers. It flies after me through the broken window. I see the earth below approaching, covered with the shelter of vines.

SILENCE

Yveta Shanfeldova

Numbers three and two have sunshine, room one is dark like the night. It reeks of an old red rug.

Len feels the weather in every pocket. White mist runs out of his fly. On a whim, he puts his hand inside his worn coat and pulls out decay.

Tuesday. He waves it off. Maybe this is a hospital and it is dawn. Or maybe he is in heaven, or a movie theater, and it's not dawn. In a wave of sickness he strokes his white hair and the scar above his left eyebrow; when he was little, he fell onto a grate in the street.

The scar made him clairvoyant. Along with the scar and clairvoyance came a sensation of perpetual waiting that had not left him since. The scar is a door to mystery and to meeting other souls. A southern wind falls to his face like long nights and soundless distant lands. Len coughs. His hand is burned. He throws an empty matchbox on the floor, inhaling sulfur. His lungs hurt.

* * * *

Next to the penitentiary in the woods groans a dormitory. The road is off limits to regular cars, barred by the crossed-out circle on a sign.

The landscape's eye. He climaxes, so that the guard draped in white robes can't hear. The location is closed off by barbed wire, as with a Sabbath string. Only in a string-fenced community can some people worship God, as he learned in a library magazine. He went there after lunch, sat down and read an informative article on a Chassidic community in Australia.

Reading is difficult for him, and the slow trudging through the text improves his memory. He remembers many nearly unintelligible regulatory texts and images he couldn't grasp.

Also, he remembers learning at school about proper forest behavior. Quiet, they said. One must stand and listen to the silent landscape behind the wire fence. The best thing to do in a forest is be silent. The silent fragrance of berries. That's how he's been to this day; a silent sleeper and silent sinner.

* * * *

The world is one great silence of distances and warm cheeks, whispering up above the earth and over the stream behind the sleeping station. Across the pasture stands a wooden amphitheater. Yesterday they played a movie there... It was about a couple. Before leaving home, the couple stood on the bridge and watched a flood, and a street cable fell down from the electric pole, just missing them...

The film ended and the forest quieted down. Len sat alone on the wooden bench. His elbow slept and he stretched out across the seat. It was a nice couple, and he liked the husband's rough skin.

* * * *

Len himself has psoriasis. It's from the sun. He hasn't been in the sun for years. His whole body is scaly.

As a child he had to lie in bed with his broken forehead and at night he watched the snow falling slowly through the open window. The streets were half empty, and the cars

passed by quietly, their windshield wipers moved like feelers. The pictures of Mexico and Indian ruins from the book he'd always kept with him in bed had come to life, inhabiting the room.

The Indians had always dug deep into the red clay earth: flour grinders, bunk beds and tunnels, burying their entire lives in the earth. In the corner of the room, the sailing wife was sitting on the armchair, undoing her braid, her naked body shivered.

* * * *

The room has no ceiling and the chilly night air is fragrant. Fire and white smoke spread over the sky. It will gray by dawn. The amphitheatre sounds with sirens and commotion...

A long day in school. After lunch Len eats stewed fruit in the earth dugout. Flies buzz on the windowpane. Insecure people don't forget to water the plants under sweet rays of dappled afternoons, and they visit church because that is where sinners go.

The night sleeps there too.

* * * *

Vespers. Steeple bells. Their voices resound in the clouds and yachts. Sinning is like igniting air. Dusk undoes the naked braids, dawn seldom appears, and sin is hard to find.

He used to sin easily but not anymore.

The bells keep beating and the snow in his pants grows until it spills inside his chest and freezes his heart still.



Four Elements by Michail Judovskij

THE QUANTUM FOOL

Tantra Bensko

The two huge rocks, slightly crumbling, glow almost translucent. One rock is behind the other, mimicking it. It catches your eye, and as you stare at it, you feel you can start to see through the one to the other behind it. The rocky landscape is brilliant in fall colors, orange and crimson speckled over with black. The sun is beginning to set, making it even more vivid.

Someone you don't remember from your other visits to this park stands in front of the pointed, tall rocks. Sometimes the person seems male, and dark haired. Sometimes female, red headed. Hard to make out such an arbitrary thing. The old ways of looking at things are seeming so outdated. You feel sorry for those who are still trapped with them. Whatever those ways were.

The rocks look as if in another life they are pyramids, though in this particular reality, the one you are most familiar with, they lean to one side. How many worlds intersect here? How many worlds are dreaming of other worlds? What are those trees with red berries in the other overlapping worlds?

How do YOU appear in those worlds? As a shadow of a cloud? As a sound of unusually melodic wind? Are you perhaps one of those selves you've dreamed of, taking people on a journey through the wilds of Australia, deeper into forgetting and out into the stones and roots around them? Are you, in yet another overlapping world, a sculptor, looking at this bemused redheaded woman standing here in front of the pointed, yellow rocks? She is not moving, her head turned back to look at you in a fetching way. Her chin is small and delicate, and her nose has a slight bump as if it has been broken some time in her past. You feel your hands become more comfortable as earth, as covered with clay.

But are the rocks there in that life with the model, or are they instead a bed of daffodils, a flock of finches rising to the trees with yellow flowers? When the finches land, does, in that artistic life, a yellow butterfly land on the elbow of the model? Does someone's awareness, in the group of bush adventurers, learn to merge with the forsythias through the aboriginal meditation they are dutifully practicing while you sneak off to have your secret beers? In another world, do the pyramids send out a higher sound to the Cambodian initiates? In which intersecting life do you make crude jokes about pyramid initiations?

When the model tells you, the sculptor, that she has dreamed of you before, each night, for seven nights, the night explodes into great crackling lightning from the pyramid's capstone. The initiate inside the sarcophagus has visions that create his past and future lives intertwined with some child he wishes at the time were his own. Those of the well paid expedition through the bush find most of them have foreseen this day, and its plot explains the mysterious premonitions they have been discussing around the campfires.

You want to hold the model, your hands covering her with clay. Whenever or where ever she is. To touch the curve of her lips, to touch her undefinable accent. To run your fingers softly over her eyelids. You call her, across the veils. In the world in which you are a sculptor, you become impulsive.

She looks up. Her eyes grow darker. Her heart seems to open like a flower. You go quickly to her and stare at her eyes. "I love you many lifetimes, now." Her startled look confuses you. She pulls on her yellow sarong. It is time to stop for the day. She has to go. She is frowning, accentuating the furrows between her brows that you had been kindly ignoring. But she has dreamed about you as you are in this life in which you are not a sculptor and do not know her, though she never understands. You are a poem she reads repeatedly, in sleep, each time a little different, referring to the last version or the next one within the poem, symbols from the version intertwined like vines. The finches leave their nests. The journeyers you take through the outback adventures all write one long poem together and throw it on the fire.

Who is that person standing in front of the yellow rocks, in this very life? You go closer. He seems lit up better now, in the deepening sunset, almost as if flames were highlighting his features. He turns to you and nothing in your life makes sense.

A love so overpowering is filling up your chest. Your peripheral vision blurs. You resist the impulse to speak to him, because of the memory of the superimposed model's reaction. But this IS the model. This is also your father who performed with you in circus acts in Austria. How could you have forgotten him? This is your nephew in the Cambodian pyramid order, who smirked about the rites and made fun of the priests, making you laugh at them as well. This is the Australian journeyer who had a twitch and paid you in installations. What would this stranger say if you approached? How can all the colors be so brilliant? How can they all make such similar designs through all the intersecting worlds? Yes, this is an incredible meeting place of parallel timelines. It is hard to contain your breathing, and your spine is tingling deliciously, a rush of light running upwards along it.

Perhaps each moment is a meeting place as powerful as this. Each spot of space. Perhaps this is each moment, each spot. Time, perhaps, to lie down.

The sky, the scene before you, all seems shot through with holes. Wormholes. Scintillating. The stranger looks at you, waiting. He doesn't seem to notice the popping sounds you hear in the sky.

He has longish, dark hair that curls around his face and neck. He is slender, agile. Quite handsome, really. His shoes are muddy. He has a small backpack. You don't want him to leave until you find some way to start a conversation that will make sense.

A kind of fear, adrenalin, runs through your body. Your heart is noticeably beating. Your breathing is erratic. It's time to say something, or never have the chance again, unless your paths happen to meet again. Trying to pretend life is as mundane as people normally believe seems beyond you at the moment. You can think of nothing normal to say. He walks on.

Your heart sinks. The colors dim. It is hard to stand up straight. You start wondering if you are possible, because you have worked up to this moment, breathing and chanting as the books told you to do. Eating nothing but sprouted rice for days. Some of it a little too soured. Maybe you held your breath too long, too many times. Maybe you fooled yourself into believing in yourself as you have become. Once, in a more comfortable time, you believed in a past leading inexorably to the future in simple strides, looking straight ahead. But that was in the past.

You close your eyes. Maybe your meditations on the quantum foam the scientists say makes up our universe, tiny black holes and white holes, has boiled your mind. You see them now, the little buggers, and they sound like popping. At the opening of each circle of each hole you seem to sense The Fool. He reminds you of the circus performer. He is wearing a deep red velvet cape, pulling back red velvet curtains over the each bubble. He is the Master of Ceremonies. His number in the Tarot Deck is 0. He is insouciant, preparing you to remember not to take seriously any of the cast of characters that come after him—1,2,3. And also before him. He is both at the beginning and the ending of the deck. He closes the show with grand, smirking, sweeping gestures. He seems like he would fit in well in Berlin cabarets. He is at the beginning and ending of each tiny wormhole, the 0 holes. All in between is fun. A kind of play. Your character is one of the cards. Or many of them, in your case at the moment. He is the jester, laughing at it all: don't take any of it too seriously. Enjoy the colors and the drama. Especially the deep red velvet. Enjoy the way the characters pretend to be who they are, pretend life is just a normal, simple thing. Pretend it can be all separated out nicely. All the aspects of one thing. All sleeping in one deck together. Lying in wait for meaning. Meaning that comes and goes.

You open your eyes again to the deepening reds of the sun going down. It doesn't help.



THE STORY QUANTUM BY TANTRA BENSKO

AKELDAMA

Tyler Williams

There lies a field once paid for with a fistful of coins where strangers are buried, where their shadows are said to wrestle & scramble for food at nightfall, climb on all fours down the mud banks into the lipping dregs, crazed in the undying rain.

Black rain that trails the moon until it crests & long after it dissolves across the range of thicket, over the claw-shaped ridge, black grass that slithers against the wind angry one instant, docile another, then completely petrified as dawn sets to drizzle & the shadows, damned for the light, fumble to embrace & whisper after another, those shimmering black eyes submerged, chase after the volatility of wind, whisper after another, after a cowering father.

Some shadows rest at the bottom, unwilling to rise for air, splayed out in the clouds that swirl & twist around the weeds, sighing, their bubbles spread thin by the rippling surface, drops beat against the water, dousing what errant prayer might bleed thru, what hurried votive chant to deathly struggle, blessed renunciation, the cattails steeped & dragged near water's edge.

Prayers offered in hindsight as heaven's spilloff of scorched roots, tubers smoothed as if by child's hands & caked red brown, stones jagged as the potter's spade precede the night rain.

Once bodies deceived by bodies, tangled in a mass of hands, left to exhale, left to fingers that meld to their own, touch against touch faded, spent in breathless peril, touch against touch reborn.

Black rain sifts down like black seeds spilling thru arthritic hands, like bees burrowing thru a hive, uncovering cracks in their own paperthin cosmos.

Awoken with heavy lids shuddering, you cross the kitchen floor in the gray light, lids weighed down as if your lashes were soaked & flitted to dispel the rain where the floor beneath you trembles & your hands reach out to guard against swooning.

Each blink pretends to master a weight it cannot bear, each breath, to give life to a body it doesn't know.

Awoken with your mouth covered in the shadow of the city's night seized by the closed window, you cross the kitchen floor to a table revealed in the gray light where a fish uncut rests beside a darkened blade, a loaf of bread preyed upon by spiders lowering themselves in ghostly unison, crawling on air, their webs spread across the ceiling's corners as scintillating paths towards a feast half-begun in soundless desire, the stillborn silence, the storm's narrowing reprieve.

Fish uncut for how many nights, for how many nights has it laid in the gray light, preyed upon, left to its own decay, preyed upon, left to exhaust its watery shell in the dry silence, the pink rivets of the gill exposed, soon blackened by air, coarse as the splintered table, as the blade's splintered handle which lies beside it?

Beside the loaf of bread lies a bottle of wine, empty but for a few drops, enough to soothe the palette after awaking suddenly in another night, another hour, another city distilled thru the pane when you drink to be rid of thirst, not to be rid of the night, to drink to the night, to feel the wine's rain across your throat, not to feel the soul as it rears up, wraithlike, fatally struggling against desire, writhing in the nest of the mouth's shadow.

To drink to the night, to the shards that spill & shatter once more in the shadow of the street, to drink to the night, to the dissolution of the night, to the betrayal that fades as light settles, as a wound closes, as the spilled shards wash from the curbside, as the moon quietly closes, its red core fading pale, to drink to the night, its vast poverty longed for in stillness, to swallow in anger, to reel from betrayal, night of alleys burning in silence, night of kiosks warped by storms, night of shutters forever rattling against blindness.

To awake in the night as spiders crawl from a nest lodged deep in the ceiling's rafters, from a void too narrow to house them into the wet darkness peeling beneath gray light, a brittle moon barely hoisted above the rooftops.

Your lids woven in their web, with each blink, a spectral scattering of dust & venom turned sour.

To awake in the night, how can you call yourself by your own name when no one else dares to speak it?

Beside the fish uncut with its blank stare & glowing scales lies a loaf of bread staled for how many nights, lies a bottle of wine empty but for a few drops, enough to only deepen your thirst till the dryness in your throat becomes unbearable & its vinegar stench widens your nostrils as your lids crawl back, shimmer like the fish's scales, shudder like the fish's gill.

To awake in the night & limp to a table laid out for another stranger, another nameless, ragged sleeper seized halfway between the terror of a drunken dream & the stillness of a city not yet awoken.

Nameless not because of lack of one but because of the crowds who pass, sometimes strangers, sometimes those counted among the few yet to be erased in bitterness, buried by shame, all lost to a voiceless passing but who still brush by you, flesh against flesh, touch which cuts sharp enough to sort out friends from those once endeared as enemies, enemies from those once loathed as friends, until no touch is desired more than that of the stranger's soft blade.

Your hands graze over what lies on the splintered table, what seems to disappear slowly in the gray light, but you cannot touch it—it cannot belong to you in your absolute poverty, but must belong to another stranger, one whose guilt has yet to devour his hunger & flood out his thirst, another bearded beggar with clubbed foot & shuddering lids who stumbles before the jagged mirror nailed to the wall that hangs blinded by the shadows' embrace, air yet cleared of storm-trailing musk.

Only the field, stretched out beyond, belongs to you as the measure of your perfect betrayal.

You once prayed to the depthless struggle against poverty, against whatever mirrored stare hurled itself toward you, whatever pain vowed to complete you, now you pray to a coarsened vision of struggle's end, slightly bowing down in the kitchen, one hand pressed to the wet floor, the winds whipping across the wall, carrying the stench of faith's dissolution.

A barren song garbled from a street corner, the singer cast beneath an eave's cover.

A cruel joke slurred from the kitchen table, the teller hovering over a meal set for another.

Guilt bears down on the body, innocence, on the soul—as the body's left unshorn, carved from brittle bone, limping narrow circles beneath the window latticed with webs, the soul swings, soundless as a spider, from miracle upon deceit.

Can you say it, can you say what must be said, how both bear their burden: one thru strain, the other, thru spurious denial, but both decay the same, crumble gracelessly, form rifts that finger outward in time?

Can you say it, can you say what must be said, after awakening in the night, your eyes unable to fully open, as if nearly rotten, or fastened to worms that weave among the lashes, drip from the lids blinking to uncover what must be seen?

Carried into this world by betrayal, now shuffle away with regret, find your step in the tide of sewage flooding over the cobblestones, down the alley, your leather rucksack made heavy by the black rain that flairs from the drooping ladders, with a resounding soul once grasped as origin, its echoes no more than ciphers of a ravaged salvation, across parking-lot pools bubbling, the empty knolls of parks where names are raised to battle oblivion, where rabbits scurry in the rasping vines as the dead brush away the thunder.

Passages in the city that seem forever uncrossed, abandoned even in the light, when the winds run soft & pigeons remain poised beneath fountains, their white eyes roving—garages forever silent, front porches marked short with boards, jutting nails, feathers washed from rifted stairs, footways unmended to ashen courtyards, storage rooms enclosed by aluminum doors ravaged by some midnight cerebus lured away from the drains, locks rattling

against busted gates, spaces as deserted as childhood days where you trudged thru silence, one candlelit corner after another, awaiting sleep.

Left at peace in torment, you are unable to remember why you are here as the stillness withdrawals from your broken rhythm.

Cursed from the very moment of light's brisk unfolding by your mother's voice, the midwife's hand, root snapped, spilled upon the red dirt floor.

You drag your leg thru water, the wind once again enraged by nothing, its anger forever excused.

You were a creature of promises, frail but inviolable, of oaths cradled in dank kitchens, held before the grave silence of father.

Met with stillness thru nights of unslaked thirst, your oaths soon shattered in secret, their hollowed shells railed against in acrid cellars, shattered in their endless repetitions behind doors soldered shut, before mirrors made blind, their sentences curled inward, flaked off like wax, uttered again, echoes of a voice lost to winding alleys, uttered once more, a plea to the one who alone owns the terror.

You touch your shadow along stained walls, the blood-orange rust of wire fences, over a bridge host to so many processions sifted out of memory, twisting masks held aloft in stranger's hands, drum-rolls & smoking torches.

Unborn until the blink & the betrayal, when your name was finally uttered, then veiled in a hush forever lingering.

To reach the field, starkly etched in brushline, near the very edge of the earth, you trudge up a gravel pit, one foot placed as anchor, the other left to burrow in mud, slackening your stride.

To find a foothole in gravel, respite from bitterness.

...how the soul's erased in its innocence, reawakened in its shame, how it sheds its fears all together in one quiet tumult.

Your rucksack knocks along the stones buried in the black grass, along the wind's slithering current.

Cross down the ridge to where once dwindling streams have flooded out the field.

...absolved of fear, dare to say it, returned to my name, the haunted name that children cry, crouched among the stones, in hiding from their own echoes.

The leafless tree at the foot of the hill drooped in the black, undying rain, nestled in high grass & nearly ripped in half by an ancient bout of lighting—where your steps have led you, harried by no admonitions, where your plans have been laid, broken by no salvaging word nor confounded love.

Where you've slept, where you've awoken, the sliver of gray light in the kitchen where your hunger abandoned you, where your steps resounded before their steep ascent wedged between walls traced with burnt rubble, how far you've carried this stench of spoiled leather, from whom you've parted, once passed on blessings from your parched mouth, where the twilight seeped, what name called after you, whose name ceases to haunt you, how wide the silence opened when your lips grazed his cheek, how far the curses chased after you, how vigorously they pulsed from within, what bridge stretched out, mirrored in the sewer's mouth—all of this fades as you cross the field, once disowned, soon disowned again, clouded in lightning traces as rodents clear out, petrified by dawn.

...those were never prayers of love, oaths brought before your unbroken gaze, they reeked of envy, the desire to share in your solitude.

How godlike the earth is once you know you shall at last rise from it, to arrive only to pass from beneath the moon's stern shadow, to arrive only to slide with death in hand down the mud ridge.

Those who suddenly deemed you stranger knew why you bought this field with the most money you've ever held, parting with it to save your pocket's seams, your haunted name, why you soon burned all that you owned, chose silence, relished hunger, spent nights before the window, self-abandoned on pace to oblivion.

The tossed rope snags in the wind once, twice, then wraps around a stripped limb, coils in thorns—as you pull it, the tree bows, wrenching its sore roots, almost too battered to be a tool of death, but the only one on your plot of its girth & reach.

As you fashion the noose hurriedly in the drizzling rain, you grab onto a stone before your feet slip beneath you.

...I've lived as you would have it, spirit eked from knotted fingers, prayers intoned a thousandfold, imbued with anguish everlasting, lived it as you have willed it so that my death can only bring me joy.

You drop your rucksack, stumble to the tree, brace yourself before its slender trunk & look upward, the gray above fractured by its outspread fingers, burnt in the east, cast beyond each star's tremulous withdrawal.

Each man to his own noose.

When the wind calms, you climb atop the stone, slip your head thru & let the noose carry you.

Your hands, dangling at you sides, become numb as your face tingles & your eyelids shudder.

...waited for you until you could no longer wait for me, led the lepers to the river until their prayers grew too fierce, cured every cursed vision with a trembling touch until it bore a heaven too terrible to unravel.

First you hear the branch snap, feel your limp leg cave in beneath you, then drag yourself, the jutting bone left to scrape up the mud & huddle behind the stone against the wind, against a death designed for another stranger, less a coward yet more ashamed, whose own death deceives him, whose blood's swallowed quick by the floating red earth.

Huddled behind the stone, your rucksack carried off, the streams coursing around you as the sky brightens, as you say your name, hear it echoing, a feverish stutter slurred among the surrounding stones fated as a graveyard for the nameless, those huddled together in life around a busted furnace, possessed by father's silvery tongue, one page passed around by so many hands, relief from fire spelled in smeared inscriptions, outside of vast cities deserted by twilight, then piled together in the same pit, marked by a wounded tree, haunted by a name once unspoken, born of shame, then conjured again as a voice of impossible salvation from within the borders of a gutted field.

WE WERE IN THE DRY LANDS

Patricia Russo

We were in the dry lands when Mauricio said, "I know a way out."

Nobody paid any attention, because Mauricio said this every day. Mirelle kept on sifting sand. We'd long since stopped asking what she was searching for. Milton set some fires. Annoying, but it was how he filled his time. The problem was that every flame wicked a bit more moisture out of the air. It hadn't rained since we'd arrived, and despite all our maps and dowsing rods, we hadn't been able to scratch up a single trickle. All we'd gained from our labors were blisters. Michael had a few aspirin tucked away in a battered tin that had originally contained licorice drops. To get him to part with even one pill involved acres of negotiation and always ended the same way, with surrendering to Michael's jackhammer version of sexual intercourse. One aspirin didn't do much to dull the pain of the blisters, and nothing at all helped ease the agony of the silicate crystals wedged under our nails or the bits of dung-flavored grit that got trapped between our teeth.

The wind blew, and blew.

"I know a way out," Mauricio said.

We were on edge. We had been on edge since Mirelle and Milton had violated our pockets while we slept and hooked out every single key. They'd pounded them to pieces with lumps of rock. Some of us had collected keys for half an eternity, so we weren't sorry Milton and Mirelle sliced their hands to ribbons on the igneous stones. Those two had no respect for sentiment.

"I know -- "

"Shut up with that shit," Michael said, and sparked a black flame between Mauricio's black feet.

We were all on edge, but that was no excuse. Milton and Mirelle jumped up. Michael had misappropriated flame, and scattered sand. Mauricio was irritating, but Michael was in the wrong, not that he cared. He grinned, and said, "Pull your claws back in. You'd have done the same thing if you'd thought of it."

At least that was what I thought he said. I could hardly hear him over the wind.

Mauricio was the least disturbed. Bending, he scooped up the small flame. "Yes. This will come in handy. Now look." He took a candle from the pouch around his neck and set it on the picnic table. The candle was fat and square, and looked to have been lit and extinguished many times. I didn't remember ever seeing it before, but all of us had hidden things. When Mauricio lit it, the wick made a sound like a knuckle cracking, but the sun-white flame stood up straight against the wind. "Look."

"Look at what? We've seen fire before."

"Candles, too."

There was sand in my nostrils, sand in my ears. The wind blew it in, then blew it out again.

"Look," Mauricio said. "I'm telling you this because we're all in the same mess. You can get through this way." He was blinking too fast, and he'd stopped smiling.

Grasping the tip of the candle flame, he stretched it high, as far up as his arm could reach. "Now, you just ease the sides apart, like you would a curtain."

"You've tried this?"

"He's fucking with us."

"It's not a real flame. Look, it's not moving, and the wind so high..."

"Of course it's not a real flame," Mauricio said. "Touch it, if you like. It's cool."

And it was cool, indeed, slick and smooth and chill as a glazed razor. It was easy enough to move the sides of the slice of flame apart – as simple as drawing back the lips of a wound.

“No.”

“I don’t trust this.”

“I don’t trust him.”

“So you’ll stay in the dry lands forever?” Mauricio said. “Dabbling in the sand, building fires, and fucking? Where did you hide your fathers? Kiss them goodbye, and slide.”

“Can’t fight fire with fire.”

“Or dry with dry.”

“That never works.”

“Who said anything about fighting?” Mauricio pegged the tip of the elongated flame to the air, and stepped back. “It’s there if you want it.”

None of us could remember where we had concealed our fathers. Mirelle thought she’d stuck hers under the sink, but when she went to check, there wasn’t anything there except a dustpan, a half-empty bottle of bleach, and a few plastic bags. Milton claimed he hadn’t brought his along in the first place, so he wasn’t going to bother to look. Of course everybody knew this was a lie. Michael poked about a bit with a stick, furtively. Furtive was a good word for Michael. Mauricio stood aside with his arms folded, watching, and meanwhile, under cover of the poking and the checking and the shrugging, we watched him, waiting for him to slip off to the basement. His father was in a box down there, mixed in with a bunch of dented paint cans and dried-out brushes.

It wasn’t long before he came back with his father slung over his shoulder. We could all tell he was itching for us to say something, but we refused to give him the satisfaction. Mauricio went to the flame and stuck his fingers inside. He pulled the sides apart as if he were ripping a screen, and stepped through without a word or a glance for the rest of us. His father shrieked, though. He shrieked so loud we couldn’t hear the wind for hours afterwards, but none of us was delusional enough to believe a scream could cause the wind to die. We waited patiently for the return of sound. Meanwhile the candle burned. Wax dripped. The tip of the flame tore away from its peg, and shrank to a squat flicker.

Mirelle said, “I’m not going to be able to sleep now,” and stalked off to rummage under the sink again. Milton and Michael stared at their toes. Eventually, the wind came back.

I doubted any of us was going to miss Mauricio.



Old_Fire_&_Brimstone by Rochelle Dinkin

TRUE STORY

Dennis Danvers

She leans in close, with a little smile, like she's actually interested in him, and he can't believe something good's happening in his life for a change, and she whispers, "Would you like to hear it?"

He laughs. "Hear what?"

"The story," she says, looking into his eyes in a way he's never had a woman so beautiful look at him before—Hell, probably any woman ever—and he wonders if she's a hooker or a vampire or a witch or just a run-of-the-mill nutcase.

"What're you saying, you— you think you *know* the story?"

"Why wouldn't I know it?"

"I didn't mean that. I just don't think...."

"There's any such story."

"Yeah. I guess I don't. You think there is?"

"I know there is. Bartender?" she says. "Another please."

"Sir?" the bartender inquires.

"I'll have what the lady's having," he says.

When the bartender starts making their drinks, our guy says, "So tell it to me. I'd love to hear it. I've got all night." He's imagining all night. He's imagining all sorts of things. He can hardly wait for them all to happen.

"Let's wait for the drinks," she says. "I don't want to be interrupted. Have you ever thought that it might not be the story itself but the *telling* that's important?"

To tell her the truth, which he has no intention of doing, he's never given the incident much thought until he told it to her. "Not really," he says as the bartender sets their drinks before them. "Let me get this," he says, taking out his wallet.

"All right," she says, "if you insist."

"I insist." He takes a delicious sip, then sees the bill, four times what he ever imagined two drinks might cost. The bottles, the glasses, the ice, even the little napkins, look pretty much the same as the place years ago. The bartender, the bar, and his drinking companion are all better looking. That's what he's paying for. She lays her hand on his forearm, and he figures it's all worth it.

"Are you ready for the story?" she asks.

"Definitely," he says, hoping when they finally get past this crazy story obsession, he might finally get lucky.

"The story doesn't matter," she says, "it's the telling, becoming the story. Like this..."

And *she* starts telling the story of the smart guy in the bar and our guy walking in; only as she's telling it, her voice starts changing from a melodious alto to a gruff bass, her enormous eyes shrink to squinting, wrinkled, hardened eyes, her delicate nose swells and heels over as if broken long ago and left to heal badly. Everything about her changes, right down to the last detail, until she's turned into him, the smart guy, right before his eyes. And just like that, the incredible woman is gone. And there's our guy listening to his own story, drinking a drink he can't afford, in a place nicer than anywhere he's ever been, wishing he was somewhere else, *anywhere* else, wishing he'd just let the guy tell his story in the first place back when he had the chance, and by the end of the story, he gets his wish, and that's where he is, in a place pretty much like this, the same bottles lined up, the same faces in the mirror, hearing the story for the first time, all the way to the end, and then the smart guy leaves, and the bartender closes down the place, and he's left sitting there, all alone.

THERE'S NO TIME

Douglas Hutcheson

He sat sipping his decaffeinated coffee, as if that might sedate him.

"There's no time!" she screamed.

"Whatever do you mean?" he said, still stuck, his nose in the paper, as if there might be some answer.

"We have to mooove!" she yelled. She felt like she was some sort of fruity stuff, a syrupy sludge solidifying around banana bits and mango mash. "Nowww!"

He shifted his sore hip in his La-Z-Boy. It was leather - the best, as he bought it yesterday, in celebration.

"You always get so worked up over things," he said at last. "Always so dramatic. Not melodramatic. There's nothing mellow in your drama."

She felt her toes and fingers begin to seize up. Her vagina had already collapsed upon itself, frozen. It's too bad about the fingers, she thought, I'd really have liked to strangle him.

"No sense of the REAL," he said as he sat his coffee down. The cup began to rattle on its saucer, and then both shot through the window. "Hey, look at that - a flying saucer." He giggled as the dining implements smashed into the side of a shiny metallic disk that had appeared at the eaves.

"You never understood a thing, not me or this world." She rallied herself for one Herculean kick at his shin.

"I say," said the little green man who had just popped his head out of the disk. "Do either of you know the way to San José?" He looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry - not the one in California, but the one in Alpha Centauri?"

"CAN'T YOU SEE WE'RE HAVING RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS HERE!" she yelled and missed her lover's shin in the distraction, but managed to bean her cat to kingdom come.

"Oh, dear," said the green man. "It seems as if my timing is quite terrible. I shall have to get it adjusted."

She gathered herself to hurl the wall clock at his antennae, but he ducked back into his disk. A tyrannosaurus rex lifted its head and chomped the craft.

"I mean, see, you've no sense of pacing. That's always been your problem," her husband said and eyed her again over the top of his paper. "Just like when we first started going out: it was all sex, sex, sex, sex, sex. Now it's just ex."

The T-rex began to roar. Then it began to ring. She popped it on its head with her shoe and it snoozed off.

"You just can't handle a real woman. You never even loved your own mother," she accused him.

"Of course not. She murdered me."

"Don't be silly," she said, almost upon him now. "How could you be so absurd?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's just that it says so here in the paper, right after the part where I murder you."

“Give me that!” She grabbed the pages from him, and saw there was no longer anything connecting his head with his shoulders - just his scalp and eyes and nose and mouth, all those things floating there, neck-less. “What the Hell has happened to you?”

“I’m preparing myself,” he said. “All the smart ones are doing it. Don’t want to be with that filthy part when my time comes.”

She stared at the paper. The words were shifting and reforming all over it. “Where’d you read that garbage?”

“Oh, darling,” he said. “I love you madly.” His head parts fell to her feet as his chair moaned and chewed at the shag carpet.

“What is this?”

His lips kissed at her cat-soaked toes. “I’d ask you to marry me, but you know I can’t really read! Why must you torment me with your incommunicable lobes!” He spat at her. “You stomp at my heart as though it were this blind and bleeding kitten, bereft of mewling, you tyrannical Nazi bitch!”

“Hang on.” She squinted. “It says here I’ve just invaded Poland.”

“Repent!” he shouted and then gnawed at her ankles. “Repent! For the time of his birth is nigh! Away to the manger, baby!”

The paper evaporated in her hands; a stone tablet and a chisel took its place. “I can’t make anything out of this!” she cried.

On the floor, his brain began to turn to light, swirling in a multifaceted array, like a ball of rainbows left too long in the dark.

She became a child playing with a giant wheel. It caught fire. She wept and swam in her tears, sprouting gills, and then losing them for a mass of cilia.

“Burple,” she said. “Gleep!” she gleeped.

And then he lit upon it: “Bzzzzzzzzz!”

Inside cells collapsed. Monks imploded to quiet nothings.

Outside, galaxies compacted like trash men. Angels danced on the heads of dead mathematicians.

The Devil struck them all down. He opened up his great black maw and swallowed the universe and all its bleeding pinpricks of stars. For a moment, he grinned wide and smug.

Then God swallowed him. And then He swallowed Himself.

He paused a few hundred millennia for effect.

“Mmm,” He said in the beginning, and then spewed the whole thing out again.

He watched it shift like an oil slick, flounce like a landed fish flinging bright water all across the sky, fall and tumble and twine into infinite forms and fancies.

He burped and rubbed His belly.

“That was Good,” He said.



OCTAPUS by Tantra Bensko

THEN WE WERE LOOKING AT THE WAVES

Kyle Muntz

Karen took my hand as the waters came. We stood upon a broad platform before the pandemic ocean: zephyrs in the gale. Her hair flew; the girders shook. Sunlight shone on her necklace, refracting the many worlds within it.

We rebuked our own place to make another in the woods. The dark deafened vision, so we stumbled. Leaves slurried the branches, dangling in cloudforms. Her tangled hair wove the path we walked upon—I combed it for her, taking us many places unknowable, making the universe smooth.

The first night we slept in a hollow tree; the second we saw a fire beside the path, and went to it. A heavy aura became vibrance and music. Men and women danced in willowy circles. More stood behind them, holding tambourines as they sang. Perhaps half wore clothing. Karen stood behind me, but they said there was nothing dangerous. If we wanted, we could join.

We did.

The dance took a new shape, making us a part of it as well. We imitated the trees, dipping and waving.

The night brimmed with dew and coolness. Gilded threads spread between us.

The forest came: luminescent stags and creatures covered all over in fur, that walked on two feet and spoke many languages. Impish beings strode behind them. Each wore a different mask, painted brightly, and carried another mask mounted upon the end of a stick. They were very old, but barely taller than children. They shook their sticks to gurgle the beads within them.

The dryads refused to dance without partners, yet there were no partners left. One took my hand but I couldn't let her have it, it belonged to someone else. She told me not to worry, she'd already asked—I thought she lied, but she did not—and the dance she gave me had much in it of the stars, whirling in sylvan splendor, an aureate beam upon the fulminating night.

Later, the visitors left. The air smelled of foliage, perspiration, and the approaching morning. Many had passed out beside the fire. Others (they wore no clothes, as did I—now the air seemed chill, rather than cool) milled in conversation about it. One painted; another wrote poetry.

"Who are you?" I asked. "All of you, I mean."

The poet gave pause to his pen, becoming a man again. Blond braids fell half down his back.

"We're a theater group," he said. "Or that's what we call ourselves, but really we're much more. Tomorrow we're giving a performance at the city on the other end of the forest. Is that where you came from?"

I nodded.

"If you get a chance, feel free to attend. Normally we perform in the street, but we've heard of a stage available there. Our shows are never the kind you pay for."

"I'd like to go," I said, "but we can't. We're never going back."

The poet chuckled. And understood.

"Why are you coming on foot?" I asked. "It seems like you could have ridden and come much faster."

"This is the way we prefer it," he said.

And I understood him in return.

We spoke until there could be nothing left to say. He wished me well, pointing to where Karen slept beside the fire.

“Take this,” he said, brandishing a small, crystalline object.

“Your pen?”

He shook his head.

“Before we talked, I saw you wrote with it—you can’t be finished, can you?”

“So long as you carry this with you,” he said, “you need not fear the floods. When the day comes that you no longer need it—and that day will come—cast it into the sea, to calm the waters.”

I gestured to his notebook. “Would it be alright if I looked at that?”

He nodded—and tore out the page, though I protested; crumpled it, and gave me another gift. “Someday,” he said, “you’ll need this as well.”

I slept beside Karen as the flames went down. Her hair smelled of smoke and flowers and many other things. We woke in an empty clearing, beaten upon by light. New music played: a chorus of birds, thrumming in the overlay.

We left, finding what we’d followed the night before had not been a path, but only something made to look like one; paused only to climb a tree, that we might rediscover love in it. For we had much love in us, such that touch became rediscovery. If we fell (though we would not fall), being there, being ourselves, even the ground would make us welcome.

We stumbled into a cave, and thought to sleep—but the cave led to a tunnel, a place of exploration. Blue stones glowed in the walls: a running river. She took my hand and we ran as well, every step in euphonious pulsation, her laughter the sprinkled thoughts of chivalrous dusk.

Once she tripped, but I caught her, and we went down together.

The ceiling opened into a bigger space at the end of the passageway. A blue crystal sat upon a platform in the center. She picked it up. It gleamed brightly. It floated.

“I have something for you,” I said.

She didn’t understand.

“A poem. A poet gave it to me this morning.” I removed the piece of paper from my pocket, wondering if he’d folded it before handing it to me—he hadn’t. I must have done that myself. Everything I touch I make smaller.

“Can I see?” she asked.

I let her.

“Did he give you anything else?”

“His pen,” I said. Here and now (as opposed to then and there) it looked less like a pen and more like a stylus, for carving on walls. The crystal body tapered to a point at the end. I handed that to her as well. We wondered whether the stone was the same as that she held, but no. The pen was blue too, but clear enough to be translucent.

Smiling, she moved the implement upon the surface: it scratched.

“Does it write anything?”

“Yes.” She giggled. “No.”

“Can I see?”

If there were words there, I couldn’t. No matter how hard you pressed, she told me, you still couldn’t. But she would write me an invisible note, about something so secret, so special, it couldn’t possibly be written—and someday, maybe, she would read it to me.

“Would someone have taken the poem as I slept, you think?”

She nodded. “I might have.”

“Did you?”

“No.”

"But I saw him," I said. "Before I talked to him he was writing—he'd been writing for almost half an hour. I could tell because the pen moved, and he held his face like he was concentrating. Isn't that what people do when they write?"

Karen did many things, but she did not concentrate as I spoke. The stone glowed in her hands. "Do you see?"

"What?"

"This rock," she said. "It's made of water. Water runs in it. This is what water looks like when it's solid." If the overcast froze it hurled gems, that shattered, dispersing richness.

"Have I given you a present before?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Almost as many as I've given you—or just as many."

"If you give me that rock, can I make you a necklace?" I touched my hand to her collar: pale and smooth, with something precious behind it. "I could carve something for you with that pen, and you could wear it here, because if you wore it would be beautiful."

She nodded, and I sat down to work. She fell asleep, woke up again and fell asleep, and then I finished. I wove the grass into a string. She turned and I put it around her neck. She turned back and I kissed her—then, pulling away, saw myself reflected in the mirror she wore: a crystalline gate into a place of anesthetized dreams, vivacious in body.

Deciding we'd been gone long enough, we contemplated returning to the city. Putting off the decision, we found a river and washed in it. We became cleanliness and water, giving names to another aspect of togetherness; found our own place on the bank, wearing nothing but ourselves. The moon came out as it had not done before, shining in the cavity above us, giving us third sight: a gray world.

We slept.

Waking once, I saw a tall man all about us. He had the head of a bull, and held a spear at his side. Maybe he stood across the river, or against the trees at our back. His silhouette seemed impossibly large. I thought he might speak, but he did not.

I stood.

The night air crisped in my throat. My side felt very cold.

"Wait!" I called. "I have something that belongs to you."

But he did not wait. After two steps I let him go, knowing that no matter where I went, he would not be there—not where I could see him. Regardless, he could see me just as well.

I'd seen him the night before, as I danced around the fire. He had not danced, despite many invitations to do so. The fire stained his musculature dark orange, casting diminutive shapes about his eyes.

He hadn't spoken that time either.

The next day we met a man in the center of the path. The man wore long brown furs and held a spear as well—or I thought it a spear, but up close it became a large stick. Even then I thought I recognized him until I saw the fatness beneath his coat. He had very little hair, and the scalp beneath it shined. His nostrils flared at each breath, like mushrooms.

"Can we pass?" I asked.

He shook his head, pointing beside me. "I require payment."

So of course we fought. Courteously, he allowed me to break a branch from the nearest tree, but I took something else as well.

I felled him by trickery: tossing the rocks I'd grabbed and breaking the branch upon his face, making a wide gash across it. He tossed his own aside and burst into shouts, grasping at the wet mark upon him. I let him go, though I thought of chasing him. This forest is not a good place for trolls.

We arrived back in the city to witness a performance in the street. We watched it and were amazed.

Afterwards, I talked to the poet, asking him if he'd seen the bull-headed man at the fire.

"I saw other things," he said, "but not a man with the head of a bull."

"That's what I thought."

"Did you see him yourself?"

"Three times. One more, maybe, but I don't think so."

And then: "Have you written anything since the last time I saw you?"

He nodded.

"The piece of paper you gave me. Did you write anything on it?"

"Half a poem. Or I thought so at the time, but because I never finished it, it's become a whole in its own right."

"Are you sure?" I asked, and gave the page to him.

"I am."

"Is it still blank?"

He gave it back to me—and for a moment, seeing the notebook he held, I wondered at the things inside it.

"If it displeases you," he said, "throw it into the ocean as well."

I thought perhaps it held nothing at all.

That night we stayed with the theater again, in an abandoned building with an unlocked door. We crowded into the biggest room, singing songs. No visitors came, though we danced again, nearly as well. Later, we found our own place—a loft a whole floor above the others—and wove a single mass in the moonlight, a twining band amidst the torrid shadows.

In the morning, again, the theater had gone.

We went to the piers, gods of a turbulent aquatic landscape. The sunlight shone on her necklace, seeming mirrored in time: all the world existed within it, myself especially. Standing there, I thought to throw the pen as well as the paper, but not before she read the words she'd written. She did. The objects broke the surf into a whirlpool, but many other things calmed: the furious clouds, the screaming wind, the gaping horizon. I grasped her hand as the waters came—and it seemed something within us fell, something grand or beautiful but ultimately without name; or that we fell with it, dispersing into the great cool ocean like one wave lapping another, our grandiose legacy upon the paramount sky.

THE RAIN MOVER

John Beleskas

I'm not sure how old I am. I have a long memory and remember back many years, but have no memory of any sort of childhood. I may have been born whole, or not. I have no birth certificate, no social security card, no driver's license. That doesn't matter, though.

I am a man of the now.

Je parle le français y hablo español, but I think in English, so I assume that it's my native tongue. In my time I've worked in restaurants and bars, just to be around people. I've done landscaping. I've written poems and sold them on the street for a dollar apiece. I've picked grapes in Napa Valley, worked the cranberry bogs on Cape Cod. Sometimes, when there was no work to be had, I stole what I wanted instead. Nobody noticed.

I am a man of few needs.

The rain follows me. I love it for that. I am a pied piper of rain. I am a cloud gatherer and a wind maker. I herd the lightening and rainwater and let it free again where I choose.

I am a rain mover.

I travel alone for the most part, although there have been times when I've needed the others, the ones like me. There were times when the storms were too big for one man to manage by himself. There were times when being alone was too much. The other rain movers don't remember the past any better than I do. I know this even though we don't talk about it. We don't dwell.

We exchange storms like baseball cards and we exchange pleasantries, meeting at the borders of our territories. Sometimes we drink coffee or share a joke. I like a good joke on a rainy day.

I can't stay in one place for too long, not with the rain. It demands I keep moving. Bad things happen if I linger- mudslides, floods, hurricanes. I live a life on the road.

I've read every book on meteorology I could get my hands on, but they've all been wrong. They never mention the rain movers. When I've watched the weathermen on the news, what I saw were men trying to predict where I was going to be that afternoon or maybe even seven days in the future. How could they know when I don't even know myself? No wonder they were wrong so often.

Some of us move across the oceans, letting the clouds release their fury where it will feed the deep waters. Some of us stick to the land, satisfied with the relief to dry earth we bring. Some of us crawl, some drive. I walk among the people. Not all of us do. We all keep moving.

Some days the clouds have given all they have to give. On those days, I try to enjoy the sunshine, but the queasy feeling in my stomach warns me not to enjoy it too much. I am an overcast kind of person.

There are others like us. I know of them. We rarely socialize. Bad things happen when we do.

There are those that the earth follows. They move more slowly than my kind. They aren't interested in conversation. They drag the continents. They spend years on their plans to topple cities, and then its over in a minute. But then they begin their plans for the next city, not even built yet.

And then there are those that fire follows. Hot tempered and short lived. I don't know where they come from, but they are born again and again. The fire movers hate the rain movers. They think us contrarians, but I disagree - a joke for a rainy day.

There are those that are followed by disease. They call themselves 'The Cullers.' They are creatures of inspiration. They create things the rest of us cannot. But they follow us sometimes. They follow the trails we forge. They seem to like me. They invented cholera and trench foot for me.

There are others, too - a mover for every thing that moves. The others are not like me. I am a people person.

There was a woman once.

She was stunning, eminently attractive, and charismatic. We all moved toward her - the

earth movers, the fire movers, the rain movers, the Cullers, the others. She was beautiful. She loved us. She recognized us. She charmed us.

We fought for her attention and did our tricks. The earth shook harder than it ever had before. The fire burned hotter. The skies boiled over. She liked dangerous men. We had to prove we were worthy.

I could be deadly if I chose. I bring the rain. If I stay someplace too long, there's a deluge. Stay away too long and there's a drought. Either way, all hell breaks out. I'm the flood maker and the desert maker. I'm not often like that, though. I am a man of moderation.

But I made my case. I'd not seen a woman like that before, not that I remembered. She had a thin waist and wide hips, eyes that were at various times brown or blue or black. She rode bareback on a pale green horse. When she smiled at me I felt the world heave. When she pouted, I felt it crushing in around me.

Though we all tried, presenting her with our gifts of burning flesh, and bloated skin, and dust-filled lungs, the Cullers were the ones that finally caught her eye. They were kindred. She smiled on them most of all. The others talked about coat-tails, and that they were being over-shadowed by hangers on. Even the earth movers grumbled. But I understood The Cullers. They are what they are. The Cullers seem to like me. I exploited this to stay close to the woman. I wanted to believe that in some way she understood my importance. The rain is life; the rain is death. But when I squeezed the skies dry and I had nothing left to offer, she ignored me. The fire movers pushed me out of the way. The Cullers stared through me.

Eventually, tired of being shunned by the woman, I left.

Only when I had been given some time away, when I had seen what she had asked of us, did I feel any remorse. I am not the squeamish type, but even still I don't remember taking so many lives as I did in those months.

And something had happened.

There were new movers, like the Cullers, but stronger than the old, with wild eyes. I came across them in my travels, wandering back to where the woman had been, hoping for another chance. They followed me, chasing after me, heckling me. I believe they were born of the woman and the Cullers. They chased me, exploited me. They wore black leather and face paint. Spittle shot from their mouths when they talked, even to each other.

They had no name for themselves or what they moved, but the people they touched fell away like rotting fruit. The people they touched got up again, hungry, angry, their skin falling away as though they were boiled chicken. They ate each other, weeping as they did so. The young movers laughed when this happened, basking in their own power and inevitability.

We called the new movers the Eschaton. And the Crawling Death. And Hubris.

It was a mistake to try to run from them. They were part of the clouds, part of my rain. They would not be shaken so easily, and I led them to the places they wanted to be – new cities, new people. Birds fell from the sky.

Soon there were no jobs to be had. No people to visit. The streets were littered with twitching limbs. I went without for a long time. My appetite for life diminished. The rain movers avoided each other. Some of them died, or hid. The deserts grew and the earth movers bore the weight of the new young movers.

Still I wandered, looking into store windows, with no one to speak with. I spent long hours thinking about the woman. I am only a man, after all.

Eventually, The Crawling Death weakened, though, became irrelevant. They were short lived, not like the earth movers and the rain movers. They were both the cure and the disease, killing themselves even as they killed.

I remember little enough now of my life before their birth. I remember the woman, the places I worked, the bitter taste of cranberries. I move the rain even now. I let the rain fall over bones that have finally stopped moving.

It's who I am.



Matriarchal_Jorney by Rochelle Dinkin



THE FINGER TENDER

Seth Rowanwood

I am waiting. I have been enclosed in this vessel for a spell of nameless duration. Here, eternity shies away, bowing out humbled by the mere sight of my ornate chamber, my cell. I am waiting for her in this place before the named, before brilliance and darkness become sisters.

Who is she, you might ask? That I cannot tell you. But I can tell you about myself. I am, or used to be, a tender in service to our Lady. My given name was Cōnus Zephirum but in the holy hangars, the Blessed Tending Chambers, I was known only as 50013. I worked the odd-number shifts as a groomer in one of the endless temple halls, honoured with the station of serviceman first class; my brethren and I were responsible for dispersing, removing, and transferring the three divine qualities of efflorescence or runoff from one of her many hands. This temple section's complement was blessed with the task of grooming the smallest finger of one of her right hands.

Centred on all four walls, between the Monstratem Divinus fixtures that held the "Occultus Santus" or Great Veil, were the balconies where we tenders waited, two teams in each, positioned head to head to allow easy communication and coordination of our efforts in dispersing the efflorescence cast from the veiled chamber in which she materialized.

While waiting for her I would silently admire the exorbitant beauty of everything that surrounded me. Every object, every implement, every tender was matched, tooled, and crafted to be as decorative as it or he was useful by what can only be known as the unspeakable. Gems, black onyx, and gold decorated the gothic architecture of the halls. Lavish embroidery made splendid the tenders' black protective uniforms. Ornate deflective armour fashioned from precious metals complemented the round spectacles that shielded our eyes.

We tended the Great Veil she crafted with impeccable care and veneration. We routinely performed bare hand inspections as well as etheric and lens-scope scrutiny, and could see that the fibres were woven into patterns that in themselves were also made up of smaller identical ones, repeated into the most minute scale. We did this inspection to ensure the Veil was intact, though we never found any imperfection whatsoever. How something as indestructible as the Veil could ever lose its integrity remained a mystery. We performed our service when our Lady was resting, taking a moment to be still during her great work. Only one thing was more rewarding than seeing the crystal beacon signals fire up, telling us of her impending arrival, and that was the sequential light and sound of section notification lumens that directed us in our tasks. The Massah orchestrated the undulating movements of the energy clearings and our work became a dance of light, sound, and service. I had never been happier or more joyous. But that was not my destiny.

While in the Blessed Hangar, one soon realizes why our ruling motto states Totus Res Es Possible Comprehendo Irritum—"All Things Are Possible Including Nothingness." As we must not only accept and prepare for the unfathomable, so must we be in service empty of passion, thought, and self-concept.

The slightest utterance during the removal of the efflorescence in her presence could be catastrophic to the tenders. We were forbidden to wield the tiniest arc or flints or even the most minute threads of smoke from the runoff of the Great Veil that shrouded her resting form. I witnessed many times the appearance of horrible beasts and malformed objects of the foulest order.

A tender lost his composure while chasing an elusive wisp of smoke. Before we could hear the sound in his breath, a dancing yfle leaped into his mouth. Taking root in his throat, it grew to thirty cubits, crushing its host and fusing itself to several tenders before we could inject lumenium into its still materializing form. Besides rendering the aberration benign and ending its expansion, the lumenium allowed us to dispose of the lurid thing by dissolving and aspirating it into the conduits.

I beheld other strange happenings, including the unthinkable—a breach of the Great Veil during a grooming, when a ray of her brilliance, no larger than a strand of hair, cut a hole through the chamber wall. Its holy beam destroyed several temple supply ships in orbit, then continued unaffected to obliterate several hundred planets that were caught in its path before the Massah brought the existence of the breach to her attention. She sealed the breach from the inside. We could only speculate that the great work that day must have been most glorious, to produce the quality of runoff that could effect a breach. The Great Veil was our shield and it protected the tenders and all of creation in our parsec of the great art. Nothing in creation could behold her brilliance directly. Any object or being so exposed would simply cease to be.

Please know that the great diligence of empty mindfulness which banishes fear, detaches emotion, and protects and honours the station, also allows us to continue serving her for as long as fate has a gentle hand with us. In my case, it was with regret that I had to withdraw from my station. I have failed to uphold the motto and I have fallen in love with her. I did not hold empty-mindfulness in the act of service.

This did not happen all at once, but came about gradually. My desire grew hand in hand with the images that spring forth from the arcs, flint, and smoke of the efflorescence, which found their way into my mind's eye. It was then that the runoff began to speak to me, and it was also then that my heart began to ache.

Images of fantastical lands and creatures whispered and taunted me to listen, capturing my wonder; soon I was a slave to their tales of her great work. I was given visions of countless galaxies, stars, and planets where civilizations came into being and, to my horror, were subsequently snuffed out, destroyed with what seemed less effort than blowing out a candle. No sooner had I fallen into grief than joy would strike anew, as I witnessed a new and beautiful image—the budding of consciousness; I watched its innate knowing of its mystical morphology as it keenly conquered challenge after challenge, adapting to every opportunity. I was not long in this vista before it turned to madness, and I saw mothers giving birth, then eating their young; I watched displaced souls from various disasters and ill-fated happenings replanted elsewhere, to futures unknowable.

Mortified and delighted beyond my wildest imaginings, I became sleepless and restless as my fantasies fused with the visions. I hungered to know that all was right and well in the Great Work, that all had meaning, that I had meaning beyond my station. In her brilliance the highest truth resided, the source of all hope and of all love itself. I wanted her more than my own life, more than anything with which the visions could seduce or frighten me.

Before starting a tour of service, I was discovered kissing a drawing I had secretly made of her, displayed on the door of the closet wherein hung my vestments, under which I had placed a rose—an offering to a graven image. I had been so careful not to let anyone, even my closest brother, know of its existence. But that day my love for her had become unbridled. I revelled in my feeble desire, naked and raw—I wanted her. I sealed my fate by throwing reason and sanity to the wind, oblivious to my surroundings.

I was taken to the high council; the temple administrators informed the Massah who in turn related the tale to our Lady. Within the hour, I received a letter in a box. Everyone knew of the box—it was known as the coffin, as it resembled the container in which tenders were placed. I was warned that, upon opening the enchanted box, if my mouth moved as if to speak, my life would end immediately, before a syllable could be conceived. This communication was for my eyes only.

I read:

Dearest child of wonder and innocence. I am flattered by your expression of love for me and your desire to know who I am. But a drawing that you point to with your lips is not that of anyone, including myself. My nature is a process, and if your wish is to truly know me with every fibre of your essence, you will have to come up to the task.

I shall grant you one of two choices. The first would be death in flesh and in spirit. This merciful fate will free you of the great suffering that will only grow as you wander aimlessly through the roads of eternity, chained to the guise of a diluted ghost, separate and isolated, trying helplessly to find me. The other path I offer you is to take my hand. In our embrace I will burn away all the images you think or conceive of as being a likeness of me, forever. This, my love, is the only way your lips can truly touch my own.

And so my path now leads me to the chamber of the void, where I will be placed in a cell in the likeness of her message's chariot until such time that she will need my unique qualities, and I will become her intimate servant. I will be a seed in her garden of universes. And there I will embrace all forms she places against me and light all shadow she dances before me, burning all illusions of her in the flames I have sparked into being. Embracing her in the gallery where she paints with fear and love, deceit and truth, I will be with her without end and without beginning.

"Are you ready, my love?" I hear her whisper to me.

"Yes, my Lady," I answer humbly, and I immediately begin glowing a brilliant white. My light makes my prison transparent, and I am now free. I can hear her, as if she is standing close by my side.

She again speaks: "*There is something I want to show you.*"

She transports me to a place I never thought I would see. I am high above the temple, looking down from the emptiness of space. As I marvel at the perfect sphere, I recognize it as the temple where I fell in love with her. Towering gables grace its mosaic surface—a sublime balance of both ornament and utility. I never knew what happened to the sacred effluence once it had been harvested by the brethren. Now I see it radiating from the tower heights, forming geometric patterns, connecting seamlessly to the unseen. Even while she rested she created.

She senses my question as if she's been waiting for it to bloom, expecting it to sprout from deep within me. She answers me as it forms. "*Yes, dearest light. I celebrate creation and support its every wish.*" While she speaks my vista accelerates away from the temple. I am able to glimpse a horizon created by other temple spheres as they all recede and become but a speck. "*I lie still within the perfection of the great work, sleeping and dreaming in it so all the beings of creation can in turn sleep and dream, allowing them to journey beyond their conscious knowing.*" I see atoms and molecules pass from behind my mind's eye. Still she speaks: "*And in so doing I am in all things.*"

Then she is silent. Cells form out of the froth of energy. Then a crimson colour gives way to the details of a petal. I recognize it immediately. It is part of the rose I placed on the door of

my vestment closet—the drawing is gone, but the rose remains. An overwhelming emotion strikes me, something beyond what I thought love could ever be. It swells in me and overtakes me completely. An ache pushes forward from deep within, directing me to dare finish with her words that now will be my own, spoken aloud: “And all things are within me.”

At that moment, I feel the urge to scream and weep.

The darkness returns. Once again I find myself looking at my cell from the outside. From here I witness my body, still within the ornate box. Silently I feel an intolerable pressure build, first in my feet and hands, then creeping into my abdomen to meet the emotions in my chest. What once was my flesh now desires to push out, to rip itself away. Rays of brilliance break through my glowing form. Time seems to slow. I feel that I have begun to explode in every sense possible.

Bursting forth in an ever-expanding torrent of blinding fire and debris, racing in all directions through the void, what was once my body has become a well of inconceivable energy. Waves of matter flow from my mind’s eye, and I now discern shapes and material ebbing and flowing as it coagulates into countless galaxies and worlds.

Time speeds and slows through aeons where consciousness grows from dust and fire, swimming, crawling, and walking, hungry for metamorphosis; pushing through, it revels in the hunt, the battle, and the dance of lovers in a myriad of species. I am struck still in a sublime moment of silence, where I have become a child’s gasp, its first breath of air, its cry.

I lie as innocence strewn across a woman’s arms, held close to her bosom; she does not give me a name. Falling silent and peaceful, I am drawn to listen as her voice sings to me a lullaby:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star

How I wonder what you are!

Up above the world so high,

Like a diamond in the sky,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star

How I wonder what you are.

FIN



Mist by Chrystal Blue

FLAT

Tantra Bensko

Suddenly, everything in front of me spreads out, and lies down, with me standing in the center, everything else becoming a flat glowing wonderfulness. I'm ready for that. You know it.

I take a deep breath, and start exploring what everything looks like when flattened. The red shack with the pointed, slanted roof and tall bent stove pipe has become a what looks like a storybook illustration. I wanted to go in it but never met the inhabitants. Now, they are flat, so less intimidating. I pull upwards on the door to the shack and walk in. I figure, if I'm the only thing standing, I have the right. In I go.

The psychotic donkey is finally in its proper shape, should have happened long ago. It's braying outside the window of the shack, making me tremble, as does the eerie slant of the evening light coming in through the horizontal windows. The sun doesn't count in "everything." The sun is still in the sky. Otherwise, the world around me is like a map of itself laid out on the ground.

No one seems to care that I'm walking through the shack. Maybe the inhabitants aren't home. I poke through the house. The flat donkey slides in, as I've left the door open.

It kicks me, of course, and I go up, up, the only vertical thing gone more vertical, and I see from that height that the world around me is *now a colorful diagram explaining why I am the one left upright. Beautiful saturated colors create the story, like ancient cave paintings in a futuristically encoded detail.*

It looks like to me that it is says I am the one who has the right combination of DNA to be impossible to flatten. It's all about genetics. The genetic markers are laid out in the shapes, the helixes, the genes, the family trees.

THE INFERNO

Yelena Dubrovin

I stood by the window, staring at the blazing inferno, erupting from a fiery red sunset, so unusual for November. The whole sky glowed with the light of the red fire, fiercely burning the clouds, then slowly fading out somewhere behind the horizon. I couldn't take my eyes off the dying sun, shedding its final light, as if it were a sign from above. I began drawing the curtains as the inferno had sluggishly dimmed down. "The inferno" – that is what I had been calling my life during the past couple of months, a time when suddenly everything I cared about had collapsed, while in vain I was still trying to glue together the shreds of a broken vessel.

The rasping noise of the phone brought me back to reality. I picked it up, expecting the unexpected, and I was right --a sudden invitation, short notice from a colleague reached my ear. The voice sounded almost imploring. I was invited to a party, not just a simple party, but a masked one. The voice twittered about the importance of the invited guests and the brilliant idea of everyone suddenly appearing without being recognized. The voice announced that under the mask I could be myself, reveal my own soul, my sins and speak my mind, without sheltering the truth, without hiding what I had been thinking about every guest. Very like a whale, I thought to myself, but it felt compelling --it was an amazing opportunity, especially for me, who has so much trouble keeping my opinion about others to myself. Unfortunately, my tongue has made me a lot of enemies . At first, I demurred as much as I could, not because I didn't like the premise, but because I don't like parties in general where people are trying to carry on pretentious conversations about subjects that don't even interest them. And in addition to this, usually, I don't fritter away my time. So, at first, I gave a cagey reply, then, a polite rebuff, but the voice skilfully embroiled me into the conversation about integrity and morality and that the goal of this party is to teach us to be honest. I mulled over the offer for a second, and suddenly, decided to go. At that time, I didn't know yet that it was a mistake on my part to accept the invitation. I tried to pry more details from the voice to find out who exactly had been invited, but the voice didn't want to reveal any names to me. Although it was a big secret, I had gotten the gist of the idea and my curiosity had won over my resistance. When I entered my bedroom, the night had already swallowed the sun and the room was immersed in blackness with but a few deft strokes of red, still blinking on the painted walls. It was the last thing I remembered, before I fell into a deep slumber.

At the appointed time for the party, I stood at the door of an old mansion, mantled with fog and surrounded by the woods. It was a bleak November evening and the earth evaporated upward chill and damp. The velvet lawn closely girdled the grey base of the mansion. I began to feel a certain giddiness from the heady smell emanating from the woods, although the air was pure and cold. The last rays of the sun thrust up and down the evening sky. The night moved ponderously behind my back, circling around my body.

The raw breeze danced about my hair, chanting with a whoosh some mysterious words into my ear. The whole gamut of sounds from the woods created the music of an invisible orchestra that muffled the words of the wind. Was it trying to tell me something important, to forewarn me about some danger awaiting me behind the closed doors? I wondered, as I inspected the iron door and its heavy lock, but could not find a bell. Suddenly, the door creaked and opened just enough for me to peer inside the mansion.

Nobody was there to greet me, so I surveyed the place through my mask with bewildered eyes. I registered in my mind that I was in a strange place that looked to me almost like the abode of the spirit. A dimmed, shimmering glow emanated from somewhere

between the walls and the ceiling. A tremulous pleasant voice was heard singing on the background, accompanied by the sound of a single guitar. Its soft, unpretentious melody overwhelmed me and calmed down my strained nerves. The music had slowly ebbed, but its melody lingered on in my head.

The clock was striking nine, and at this very moment, the first mask appeared in front of me. I guessed it was a man, outfitted in a tight black garment and wearing a mask of a smiling innocent child. Without saying a word, he took me by the hand (his hand was cold) and, as I followed behind him along the corridor, he led me into a spacious hall without any windows. I stopped behind my guide, as if suddenly turned to stone. All the masked guests were huddled on the floor around the hardly flickering fire in utter silence. The flame shone eerily on their deathly mask-faces.

I was offered a seat next to the child's face, but the space was so narrow that with my angelic wings I was almost touching the bony shoulder of a devil. He hunched and let out a loud shriek. A wave of a whisper rolled around the room, as if the wind from outside shook the tree branches. Under my heavy lashes, I looked around the room – it was empty – neither tables nor chairs, only paintings on the walls in heavy golden frames.

The devilish mask next to me craned his head and stared at me for some time, making me shiver with uncontrollable fear. Suddenly, still gazing at me, he got up, and introduced me as a guest of honour. He, almost graciously, extended to me the privilege of revealing candidly all my sins, and all my inner thoughts and feelings about my friends and my colleagues. During his short speech, I was plagued with an eerie sense that I had heard this voice before. He announced that they gave me this opportunity of a lifetime and all said here would remain behind the thick walls of this castle. Nevertheless, with some innermost fear, I anticipated the pleasure of eventually speaking my mind.

All the masks glared at me waiting for my response. But what exactly should I talk about? I asked the baby's face as I was stupefied by this devilish request. He heaped more wood into the fire and it suddenly hissed like a snake ready to bite. The flickering flame lit up the ugly masks and their menacing circle closed in around me. I tried to look into their eyes, but nobody had any eyes, instead, I saw only black holes.

At my own peril, I set to the task with verve. I realized that as long as I was here I had no choice --to do what they asked or face some fiendish outcome. I gathered all my strength, staring back at the emotionless frozen mask-faces. I tried to quench the inferno burning inside me and all the pain and injustice that had accumulated inside me during the past months gave way. As I spoke, silence crept slowly into every corner of the room and, to my dismay I noticed a light, emanating from the black holes on their masks.

Slowly those holes shaped into angry eyes, staring at me from behind the masks while listening to me. During my heedless speech, I didn't feel any qualms, but my mind boggled at the idea that those eyes gazing at me were the eyes of my friends and my colleagues. Step by step, I began to recognize the faces behind their masks, those colleagues of mine whom I had been so openly chastising. Suddenly, I felt that I was through my vanishing consciousness, I heard someone let out a chuckle, and then, I had fallen into oblivion.

How much time had passed, I didn't know, but, gradually, I opened my eyes, dripping with a cold sweat. The clock on the wall showed nine o'clock in the morning, twelve hours since the minute I had entered the mansion. Confused, I surveyed the room, looking at every picture on the wall, every piece of furniture – it was my dwelling, my room, my home. It was just a bad dream, I thought, striving to recover from my night's adventure. Feeling still dizzy, I wandered in a slow pace around the house, touching every object, and then, on silent feet crept down the stairs to get a cup of strong coffee. On my way to the kitchen, I looked through the window --the morning fog had just settled down and the sunlight began to push

through the clouds, brightening the morning. In my addled mind, I began to realize the time. To cap my misery, I was already one hour late for work.

When I eventually arrived into my office, I saw a note on my desk that the boss wanted to see me at the end of the day. It was a bad omen and I felt a cold sweat stream along my body like it had in my dream. When I gingerly strode into his office, the boss didn't get up, but continued sitting at his paper-strewn desk, hunching over a chessboard, pondering on a new, unexpected combination. Then he raised his head and stared blankly at me. The big window in his office, opaque against the darkness, mirrored his reflection and his pointed profile was sharply outlined on its smooth surface. Suddenly, his eyes flashed at me with burning disdain while his lips made an attempt to produce a semblance of a smile. He glared at his chessboard for some time, as the brief scary smile vanished slowly from his pressed lips. He signalled for me to take a seat across from him and then, lowering his voice, almost hissing, as if afraid of being overheard said: "You have reached the end of the road, my candid friend. You have sinned again and give me no choice, but to fire you." He then looked one more time at his desk, and bending over, began searching for something through the piles of paper in the lower drawer, until finally he produced a silver box and a fancy cigar and lit it, mulling over something. I tried to remain quiet as he carefully observed me with the same steady expression on his weary face, drawing slowly on his cigar and blowing a cloud of heavy smoke into my face.

I set in front of him, wan and nervous, but had now gathered enough courage to voice my objection to him about having no reasons to fire me, about my loyalty to him and his lack of loyalty to me. He settled back in his chair, still piercing me with a frozen look of disbelief at my audacity to speak to him when he expected me to beg him to allow me stay. Then, not looking into my eyes, he handed me a letter, explaining that my position had been eliminated and therefore, I had been fired. I tried to gaze directly into his eyes, but perhaps it was in my imagination that I saw only two dark holes.

The night began slowly embracing the city with total darkness and the fiery red sunrays could hardly pierce through the clouds. Another inferno, I mumbled under my breath. The shadows of the disappearing crimson sun were blinking on the blue walls of his office, reflecting in his eyes, hostile at the moment. Suddenly, he turned away from me, letting me know that the conversation was over. On my way out, I turned my head to look at him for the last time, but, to my horror, I suddenly noticed the mask of a devil on the edge of his desk staring at me with its derisive grin.



Evening Landscape by Michail Judovskij

NO ORNAMENTS WITHOUT HUNGER

Pablo Vision

I keep the door closed on the ravenous objects which pull me back into the past; their hunger is insatiable, and they taunt me with all that is no longer, and all that can never be: trinkets and memories that pine and entwine.

There is another room, in another house; now, as it was twenty years ago: innocent dolls, crayoned images tacked to the walls, soft dolphins and laughing mermaids, and a bed made ready for a child that forever sleeps elsewhere; a child that breathed life and colours into these things; but now these objects rapacious for the life, and colours, of those that are left behind: a shrine of longing belongings.

But, behind this door, inside this house...

A carved wooden mask: African art and Arabian mythology; four days without food to attain and possess; airport scanning screens conjuring up the Devil's face painted in flames. Morocco: lost and found in the Rif Mountains; spices and death threats in the Medina; my hypnotic stoned bass against a swirling dervish of flutes and pipes and the lost ghosts of Burroughs and Jones; making love beneath the stars; a voracious devil who had wandered through the Sahara, through the centuries, and airborne over continents to hold dominion here; and that which I possess, avariciously possessing I.

A stone smuggled out of Pompeii: excavated from the ashes and the past, and brought into the light and the present; secrets of tender love and friendly girls; erotic combat and the frozen moment; the narrow winding steps of Positano; ice pistachio green and mafia paranoia in Palermo; the fog and the mist of a midnight Vesuvius ramble; citrus groves and pirates' coves; dreams beckoning through dreams; and the stone unburied, covetously interring I.

An old oak box containing shells abducted from the Islands of Greece; motorcycles, hairpin bends, streaming hair and floating joy; vine leaves and lemon and the enveloping night; through the waves faster than a falcon to the ship turned stone, rising like a Phaiakian phoenix from its watery grave; fortuitous encounters as strangers caress in nocturnal seas; Balanos alive in dead oak; and the container of things, enviously entrapping I.

And so much else...

An unfinished portrait, now just flakes of paint in glass jars, like ashes in urns; a sculpture of burnt driftwood, rusted metal, and the skulls of birds that died before spring; a printer's tray where letters once spelt out messages of love; a sewing machine with ornate iron treadle; crystal kaleidoscopes and dissected valve radios; an arrangement of bejewelled parasols with rich brocade...

I keep the door closed, but these parasitic possessions still conspire to make their vicious appetite known.

I keep the door closed, but their grasping, ectoplasmic fingers reach out for the memories on which they feast.

I keep the door closed, but these things, like succubae desirous of my essence, disturb my waking sleep of amnesia.

There are no ornaments without hunger.

BLANK

Colin Meldrum

I sit up from the worst of mazes. “Carmen?” I whisper, wondering whether my sleeping mouth has uttered it aloud or not. I saw every corner, every turn, every potential path, all at once, as if my eyes had crossed a writhing nest of tubes. And all of a sudden I’m out of the maze as if passing through it is in the past and finished, but I can’t remember the way to where I am. The thought of it weighs on me like peanut butter in my sleep again, weighing down my joints, keeping me from flying like a normal dreamer. Doesn’t everybody fly in their sleep? The frustration coagulates, blocks the way, and then it kills me like the bottom of a cliff, but I sit up from my dream before I hit the bottom and break against the ground.

“Carmen,” I say raspily. The room is dark. I reach out, wriggle a blanket tentacle off my arm and feel her body in the maze of bedding, soft and cool. And she is hard and cold and artificial—she is a pillow and a book. .

“Carmen?”

I like glass: blown glass, stained glass, broken glass. And I like to read, too. One day I think I will make a glass book.

She comes in, stumbles, thin, tinted shards in her cheeks and her chest and the insides of her bare arms. Her blood is glowing. Then I realize that she is in uniform, seeing her sleeves and smooth cheeks, her tight, black bun and stern, pointed round eyes. Now she is registering at a counter, bent over the chained pen, but with heels together and her mouth a tight crease between her lips, not parted slightly, not smirking or winking a dimple, with no prancing heel flirting with her opposite calf.

My hand is moist from the night, and the phone squirms in my sweat. “I passed the bullet test,” she tells me, panting. “There were three test administrators; the first one in was the one I killed.”

“Carmen?” The room is dark. I try to remember what happened, and then what might have happened. I can’t find a phone in my hand. “Carmen?” I bounce over the mattress and thump across the room, groping between the desk objects until I feel buttons and the glow erupts across my eyes. I fondle the button pad and thumb the correct button, or several, and press the phone to my ear. Carmen doesn’t answer. No one is there.

And I’m confused. I must have gone the wrong way again.

“Carmen?” I walk into the hall, feeling my way and wiping the walls for a light switch or a door. No one is there, but her recent presence in my mind sparks my neck hair like filaments. I catch the switch and flicker it once, twice. No power. I find another switch and the room comes alive with the abrasive yellow of the chandelier.

I change the other light bulb, the entryway light, test it, go back to bed. The light went out on its own, spent. Now Carmen is registering for the bullet test at the counter of the waiting room in the academy testing center.

A new knot works its way into my middle. I didn’t realize what time it was when I woke up. It is early morning. The big day. The bullet test. I lie in bed on my back, my eyes readjusting to the dark, my hands over my stomach to hold the knot in.

I want to keep her home, but I guess in all fairness, the academy found her first, sometimes, exactly one hour before she snared me. I would like to think that I’m as unique as the academy, that I’m as close a fit for Carmen. I met her either when she melted my ice cream or when she fixed my watch. I was walking down Third on my way to the crystal shop for an interview, the one across from Back Issues, and I glanced at the time: 9:40. *Bueno*, I thought, *me queda bastante tiempo*, when in fact I was late, and am always late, and rarely

have Spanish so ready at the quick of the mind, but I was late, because my watch had stopped and I didn't realize it until I looked again ten minutes later behind the cover of a discontinued magazine in Back Issues and discovered that the time on my watch had not changed.

Just then, the second hand of my watch flickered; Carmen shuffled past in a distracted lope of curiosity between the bookcases, and the hands corrected themselves to fifteen minutes after the start of my interview, where I was being handed an ice cream sandwich by the secretary since the boss was running fifteen minutes late. His watch had stopped. An ice cream sandwich has to be the worst thing next to spaghetti to eat before an interview.

The faux chocolate is hard to miss between your teeth and, of course, the sugar never leaves your lips, no matter how much you lick and scrub. I might have decided not to risk it, or that it was some sort of a pre-interview test of cleanliness that I should have taken seriously.

Crystal requires a careful business. You'd think that punctuality would have been worth something, and I had showed up fifteen minutes early to an interview that immediately became a disaster when Carmen, shopping for a glass moose, spied me through the transparent shelves and decided that my lips reminded her of the wings carved into her favorite soap, and she melted my precarious meal straight onto my lap so that I would fail the interview and be able to move with her to the academy base on the other side of the country. And that's how we met.

I reach out, feel the book again. The book is no longer Carmen. But there is a sticky note that hadn't been there before. I tear it from the cover and hurtle over the hard cover onto the carpet and toss on the light, bowing and squinting over the note in my hands and then holding it out of the shadow of my head to see it properly. *I love you too*, it says. I look at the book. It is orange and plastic-covered, the library book about light bulbs that I have been reading secretly.

I learned that Edison had not invented the first light bulb from scratch, but had purchased the patent from the original inventor. Or maybe he hadn't. I had to know how they worked, the reaction of the filament, the movement of the particles, the shifting of energy. It had nothing to do with reading books or obsessing over glass. Carmen knew that, which must have been why she left the note when she found the book. I didn't want her to know how nervous about her previous test I was for her. This was the bulb test. Had I taught her what I learned about light bulbs, however, she might have passed in less than four tries.

Carmen graduated from the bulb test four weeks ago. "You walk in and you can't see through the window," she told me. I'm there. Everything's white, even the test administrator, who tells me, "Put out the light," and I'm welcome to sit at the square-meter sterilized table with the bulb in the center, afraid to touch anything, but I don't need to anyway because I'm Carmen; I know every particle in the room before entering, and the first time through, all I do is think some pressure in just the right place and the filament is out—could have done it before entering. So the next time Carmen did just that because they wanted to see something more impressive, but she got cited because it was against the rules.

The third time she focused her mind into the bulb for a good few seconds and oversped the filament particles and ignited it. The test administrator jotted down "reckless," so during the fourth test she took her time and melted two polar points on the bulb and they vacuum-pinch together in a pop and severed the filament, and they were quite impressed.

Later, at home, she and I made a glass moose together (mostly she) and tangled up with tequila bottles and body shots.

Her mention of the next phase in testing sobered me up quickly. “I don’t understand,” I told her next. “What does this *bullet* test entail?”

“Well, it’s different from the bulb test, and if I keep talking, I’ll be more than just cited. Don’t worry. I can’t move on in the academy without passing this test.”

“Sounds to me like you can’t move on with *life* if you *fail* the test. And even if you pass, the moment you do you’ll become an international target. It’ll be official.”

“Oh, Luis,” and she touched my upper lip.

“I don’t like it. *Es mierda.*”

Now my phone is humming on the desk, but at first it doesn’t register in mind. Finally, I answer it; her voice is crisp and stern, lively. We go to the exam together: I sit cross-legged and tousle-haired on my bed with the phone oozing against my ear in my sweat while she sits cross-legged and militantly-groomed on a waiting room chair. “They’re almost ready for me, Luis.”

“Don’t be nervous, *flaca.*”

“Luis, I’ll be fine. I feel really good, you know? Oh, they’re taking my phone—bye, *mi amor!*”

I lie flat on my stomach, star-shaped and blank, my neck twisted on the mattress so that I can see the white wall in the dark. An hour. I get up, pace, sliding my feet like glass over the carpet, play with the light switch, look up, flip it off. It goes out, just like that. I unscrew three bulbs so that there’s just one left, and then I repeat my experiment.

What was I doing with a library book on light bulbs? It’s overdue by now. It must be overdue. I should be reading up on bullets right now. On gunpowder, exploding particles, major organs and life-threatening wounds. I had been hiding from those books, hiding from what the bullet test implied—an execution—and hiding from half of the maze the way I had originally hid the light bulb book from Carmen.

No, Luis, I tell myself, because for a moment I’m Carmen; the bullet test involves a harmless bulb, just like the bulb test. This test is timed, though, and you have to be fast as a bullet or you fail. Time was not a factor in phase one; now it is. Hence the term “bullet test.” No problem, Luis; Carmen already passed. *Bien hecho, flaca.*

I run to the bed to check if someone called while I was across the room. I slither into the covers, exhale. I lie with my head turned to the other side now, watching the phone. I curl my hand around it to make sure I won’t miss the call. I turn on the volume to make sure I won’t miss the call. I slide the phone under my ear to make sure I won’t miss the call. Of course, in some ways, I already have.

I blink. There are three testers, not just one. I blink at the white wall, white like the clean, square room. There are a dozen revolvers and one bullet, already loaded, its whereabouts unknown. There has to be a risk, a real danger, or it is not a real test. They enter the room, the cadet takes her position, the testers each randomly select a revolver, aim, count, fire. Most likely, the real bullet will never be fired. But there *is* a bullet, and thus a real peril. That is how the academy plays. They aim, count, fire, and a cadet doesn’t pass isn’t much of a loss anyway.

Because I am Carmen, I know there’s something wrong even before I enter. The first of the three test administrators to enter the room is like me in the head; he *feels* the room as I feel it, the way I feels clockwork and ice cream temperature. I’m not the only one who finds in the location of the bullet in my mind among the revolvers, and I watch that tester select the revolver I have locked in my head, watch the cylinder turn to just the right chamber, watch the bullet leave the barrel. And now I make a choice: stop the bullet and pass, or take the bullet and expose the assassin.

Carmen takes the bullet in the throat. She loses her speech, loses her testimony. The blood sparkles the white walls like particles. The other two testers gasp as Carmen gasps and bubbles and chokes on herself and begins to go limp. They each hope that they are not the one who fired the gun that killed, realizing that they are in combat now, that there is death sliding into the room and down the wall and that retaliation is natural and inevitable and that they are locked in the sterile room with a cerebral cadet, and they hope that she is already dead and that they won't pinch or burst or go out the way her bulbs went out.

The tester, that first tester, is never investigated.

She's dead. I touch the white wall with my fingers spread like splattered blood and think about death. Blank. It should be blank. I will go to her funeral and look at her caramel, lifeless face, her high-necked collar covering the hole in her throat, and her black, glassy hair stuck in a bun for the rest of her body's chemical decay. I'll wonder what happens to the mind of a cerebrally superior human when it goes out, and I'll wonder what there is left in my mind, and I'll wonder and wonder and cry.

I exhale. I exhale. It is beautiful, the way in my mind, the tears and the compassion of mourning, like broken glass.

The phone rings. I try to remember the night, all its parts. I punch the phone on.

"Don't worry about me, *mi amor.*" Her voice is alive. "They're saying I killed the test administrator. I never even let the gun fire. He just fell over like a tree, like a window, *como cristal*, Luis, *fue bonito*, not a particle of water in him. I love you. I love you."

I lick my lips. The roof of my mouth sticks. "Did *you* do it?"

The phone goes dead. I look at the screen. I might have hit the button myself.

I realize I'm parading around the house, the glass moose, stiff and smooth chin drooping like a beard. I can't get enough friction against any of the objects that I push, scrape, or throw. I want a glass book. Layers of shatterable frustration.

The house has been a blur, a storm, but I take a breath now and I see broken, tinted shards on the floor, on the windowsill. I had spread my tantrum into the bathroom and now there are wall-sized mirrors and windows on the floor in jagged, physical, realistic parts.

I pick up the largest triangle, slowly, moving like peanut butter. It's broken and beautiful in my hands. In its mirror is an image of me with a tight black bun gone stringy and wild and short, just as broken and beautiful, like a window, *como cristal*. A trickle of blood runs along the creases in my hand, dilutes in my sweat and spreads into separate paths along my fingers. I've found the way to where I am.

SHADOWS

Tantra Bensko

The long dream casts its shadow, blueish, cool. The other dream shadows are not yet faded away, are growing spindly, almost iridescent, a little itchy when they fall against the skin. The shadows like to line themselves up sometimes, create patterns, sometimes go crossways, weave themselves together. But usually, they like to just relax. Not get too caught up in location.

They like non local phenomena. Action at a distance. Elements that make them up being in more than one place at a time. They like it when people read physics books out loud. They listen. They grow to understand that what is in them also resides in parallel worlds. That they are only probability waves down deep.

It makes it easier for them to handle when the other shadows fade away completely. They otherwise grow somber. They think too much. About their future. Being so alone, missing the other shadows. "We are all nothing, really," they say. "There is so much space between electrons, we hardly even exist, really. That should make it better, less full of pain."

They like the dreams that cast them. Mostly. Not all. The ones where someone falls off the edge of a cliff and is never seen again get to them. The ones where someone is the only person left in the world. Where someone is trapped in a car that won't open, ever, can see out, but no one can see it, no one ever knows. The ones like real life. Like loneliness. They hate that.

They like dreams being told, aloud, to someone on the other side of the bed, head resting on a pillow. They like dreams of someone else in the bed, who is really there, on waking.

One shadow has woven itself into the others so fully, so completely, it's not sure what will happen when they go away. It's the youngest, and knows the rest will disappear. Yes, there will be more, but dreams aren't due until the night. There will be the sense of disappearing. Of one shadow after another growing lighter blue, less cool, less substantial around the edges. The young shadow knows they are all so flimsy, so nearly invisible, it really shouldn't matter. Existence is over-rated. Over-needed, over-wanted. It cries.

TO BED, TO BED—GOODNIGHT

D. Harlan Wilson

I marched into the kitchen and dropped my suitcase onto the floor. It exploded. Dirty socks and frayed underwear sprung onto the appliances.

“I’m home,” I said.

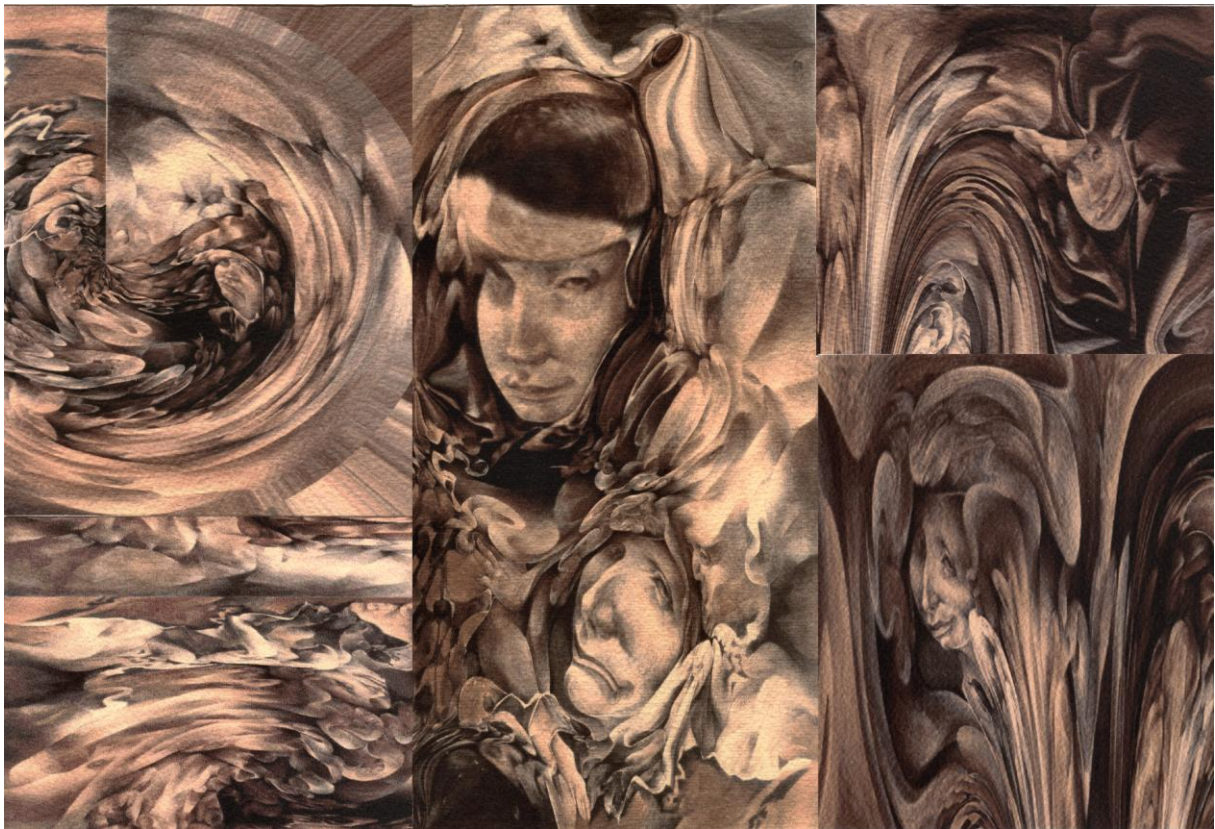
“Where have you been?” asked my mother, blowing steam from a cup of coffee.

“Everywhere. I am a world traveler. I have seen everything and met everybody. A snake tried to bite me once. A cobra. I outran it. Now I’m back.”

“Where are you going?” asked my father, blowing steam from a cup of lentil soup.

“To bed, to bed—goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” said my parents as steam swallowed their heads and melted the cone of their throats . . .



FACES by IRENE FRENKEL

WEIRD AND WONDERFUL CINEMA

Betty Jo Tucker

V. Ulea's intriguing introduction to the "weird-weird" world of Quantum Genre inspired me to take another look at my review of *The Fountain*, a wonderful film that fascinated but puzzled me – an important clue to its genre credentials. In Quantum Genre offerings, **anything** is possible. That's probably why I managed to have the following interaction with my past self, the one who wrote the review of this powerful movie.

Past Self (looking up from computer): I didn't see you come in. Don't you believe in knocking?

Current Self: It's an emergency – no time for knocking. We have to do some quick editing of the review you/we wrote about *The Fountain*.

Past Self: I don't know why. That's one of my favorites!

Current Self: Mine too, but something's missing.

Past Self: And what's that? Is it something that will help us -- and our readers -- understand *The Fountain* any better?

Current Self: That's not important. In Quantum Genre films, the style is more significant. But we need to point out the movie's quantum characteristics.

Past Self: Well, you'll have to make those edits all by yourself. I haven't even heard of Quantum Genre, but I'll put on a pot of coffee. You'll probably need it. Here – help yourself to this keyboard.

Current Self: Thanks! My additions will be in **bold type**.

Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* is an artistic masterpiece. This stunning, elegant movie co-stars Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz as characters representing eternal love and the battle between death and immortality. However, because it highlights such esoteric elements as mysticism, spirituality and symbolism, this unique film may not resonate with some viewers. Personally, I found it hypnotic and almost painful. **Plus, I believe *The Fountain* emerges as an excellent example of Quantum Genre filmmaking. The setting and the two characters change as we see them in different time periods, but both Tom and Izzy are quantum representation of the same individuals and their many worlds.**

Delivering the most memorable performance of his career, Jackman plays three different roles here, although these men have **one** soul and are all tied to the character portrayed by Weisz. Tom, Jackman's main role, is a research scientist trying desperately to find a cure for his wife Izzi (Weisz) who's dying from cancer. His second character is Tomas, a Spanish Conquistador, sent by Queen Isabella (Weisz again) to the Mayan jungles to find the Tree of Life. An astronaut floating in a bubble with the Tree of Life and his memories of Izzi is Jackman's third persona. **Using the "many world" QG interpretation, Jackman's roles are three quantum personalities which develop in quantum time-space and represent one being who exists in the present, the past and the future.**

The film jumps back and forth among the 15th, 21st and 26th centuries because these are the time periods in which the three **Toms** live. So it takes a bit of patience to figure out what's going on, which involves a book -- titled *The Fountain* -- Izzi is writing and wants Tom to finish for her. Fortunately, that didn't pose a problem to me, for I was completely awed by **the movie's emphasis on style** and its incredible images. **Connecting the story's dots didn't seem so important at the time.** And, of course, Jackman's fiercely brilliant acting also captured my attention. The love and despair he projects as Tom struggles to save Izzi's life is so emotionally powerful that I'm still thinking about certain scenes and wondering how he was able to do them with such depth of feeling. **As Tom, Tomas, and the Astronaut**

intertwine in their separate worlds, their goals remain similar. Tom struggles to find a cure for Izzy through research on trees; Tomas undertakes a quest for the Tree of Life to free his captive Queen; and the Astronaut drifts toward a special nebula with an aged tree and his love for Izzy as companions. When this Quantum Genre offering ends, we can't help feeling the power of *The Fountain*, mainly because of its many-world representation.

Looking gorgeous as the Spanish Queen (she was definitely ready for her close-up, Mr. Aronofsky) and winning our empathy as Izzi, Weisz makes us believe in the purity of her character's soul. In their unforgettable bathtub love scene, Weisz and Jackman display a chemistry that practically scorches the screen, but it's the tender moments Tom and Izzi share with each other that touched my heart. **Weisz's character exhibits quantum qualities as Izzy, Queen Isabella, and Tom's memory of Izzy. In each dimension, she grows more accepting of her fate than Tom -- and even tries to help him understand why.**

Should we fight death or calmly accept our mortality? Which is more important -- spending time with our loved ones or working to save them from death? Can love conquer all? Heavy-duty questions, for sure, and not ones we expect to see explored **all at once** in a movie. Fortunately, *The Fountain* handles them with style and grace. **We may be left with a feeling of befuddlement, but that's part of the fascination of a QG work like this. By concentrating on a many-world representation of his characters and their story -- instead of telling it in a simple linear way -- filmmaker Aronovsky has created a movie that involved me to the core of my being.** Bravo! (Released by Warner Bros. Pictures and rated "PG-13" for some intense sequences of violent action, some sensuality and language.)

Past Self (reading over Current Self's shoulder): Hmm. Shouldn't a Quantum Genre interpretation be added to our review of *Mulholland Drive* too?

Current Self: I think you're right. *Mulholland Drive* oozes QG-ness, so here goes.

Trick or treat? That's what I'm trying to decide about David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. Although the first part of this complex thriller enthralled me, I was **puzzled** by the trickery of its ending. For the only time in my reviewing history, one movie has earned a place on both my "best of year" and "worst of year" lists. **However, using a Quantum Genre "many world" interpretation, it's possible to be two things at the same time, so I shouldn't be worried about my reaction. The characters also switch from one personality to another -- much as light looks like a particle at one time and a wave at another, depending on the way it's measured.**

Filmmaker Lynch likes to reveal the dark side inherent in people and situations that appear completely normal. In so doing, he worries little about explaining his films. **In fact, Lynch loves to make movies with Quantum Genre "many world" quantum duality and even multiplicity implications.** When I met him in Telluride two years ago, I asked for a clarification of the theme in *Lost Highway*, another mysterious film showing people changing identities. "It's based on a condition called psychogenic fugue," he stated. **That didn't help much, but style rather than themes are emphasized in QG works -- and an intriguing dreamlike style permeates *Mulholland Drive*.**

Mulholland Drive opens with compelling scenes of a beautiful woman (Laura Harring) suffering from memory loss. After surviving an attempted murder and a car accident on Mulholland Drive, she takes the name Rita from a Rita Hayworth *Gilda* poster. **Does the accident contribute to the change of conditions influencing how we will view each character in this movie? Perhaps -- and if we use a quantum analogy here, Lynch's characters could be wave/particles at this point.**

Betty (Naomi Watts), an aspiring young actress newly arrived in Hollywood, unselfishly befriends Rita. These two develop a strong bond while trying to solve the mystery of Rita's amnesia. So far, so good. Actually, more than good. Watts and Haring, each a stunner in her own way, deliver amazing performances. My heart went out to Rita, and I loved Betty for her optimistic outlook and willingness to help. Watts is sensational in an amusing audition scene showing Betty wowing a director, producer, lead actor, and casting agent. Adopting a seductive voice and sexy mannerisms, she says her lines like a potential Oscar winner. And, with those luminous brown eyes reflecting a poignant combination of confusion and despair, Haring's Rita looks every bit the lady in distress.

I wanted things to work out for both women. Foolish me. Guess I forgot for a moment that this film is directed by the man behind such **"weird-weird" efforts** as *Lost Highway*. Halfway through *Mulholland Drive*, a blue key is inserted in a matching box and everything changes, **similar to the way experimenting with light can change the results**. Betty and Rita become different characters entirely, and the film transforms into a soap opera tragedy. I understand Lynch originally planned this project as a television series, then changed it into a feature film. Could that explain the difference in the first and last sections of the movie? Maybe. **But it's more likely the film's quantum qualities suggest the duality of the characters, which influences its style and action. The QG "alternate realities" ambiguity of Lynch's film really shouldn't bother me. After all, that's probably why I'm still thinking about Mulholland Drive so much.** To me, this movie represents a cinematic Rorschach test. Instead of interpreting inkblots, I find myself trying to discover meaning in scenes that still haunt me. The most bothersome involves an incredible singer in a weird nightclub called the Silencio. Although she dies while performing, her voice continues. Did Lynch simply intend to depict a woman lipsynching an emotional "Llorando" recording --- or was he communicating deeper implications regarding the immortality of art? Are there other possibilities? **Parallel universes, another quantum idea, comes to mind.**

Okay, I know I should get a life, but I'm afraid *Mulholland Drive* will intrude on my thoughts for a long time to come. Not many movies have such a strong impact on me. (Released by Universal Focus and rated "R" for violence, language, and strong sexuality.)

Past Self: Wow! Wish I'd known about Quantum Genre before seeing *Mulholland Drive*. And by the way, those "alternate realities" you added remind me of *Sliding Doors*. Gwyneth Paltrow's character found herself living in parallel universes, so we probably should edit that review also.

Current Self: Good point. Pull that one up for me, will you? Ah, there it is. Time for another **bold-type treatment!**

Have you ever wondered what your life would be like if you hadn't taken a particular trip, met a certain person, or gone to a specific party? *Sliding Doors* explores that question for Helen, a London public relations executive played smashingly by Gwyneth Paltrow. After being fired from her job, she misses the subway home. Or does she? **Quantum Genre's "many world" perspectives abound** in this fascinating movie about what happens to Helen -- and her love life -- in both cases.

By catching the train, she meets a handsome stranger (John Hannah) who becomes infatuated with her. But she also arrives home early to find her live-in boyfriend (John Lynch) in bed with a former girlfriend (Jeanne Tripplehorn). Conversely, by missing the subway, Helen falls victim to a mugger and doesn't get home until her boyfriend's tryst is over.

A remarkable depiction of parallel universes emerges in this provocative movie. It's done with great style (**so important in GQ works**), humor, and heart -- thanks to first-time director Peter Howitt. Looking more like a football player than a filmmaker, Howitt confesses feeling relieved that viewers can follow his film's **entangled stories**. "It took me three years

of writing and twenty drafts of a screenplay before getting it right, and I'd still like to film the whole thing over," he explains.

Describing the incident that inspired his movie, Howitt recalls needing to make a phone call on a day while walking on a busy London street. "I wondered if I should wait until I got home or use the callbox across the street. I decided to call right away, stepped into the road, and was almost hit by a car." This close call jolted the filmmaker's mind. He became obsessed with how his life might have been different had he been hit. "The idea bugged me for ages, but it was four years before I started writing the screenplay," he declares.

For me, it was very easy to follow Paltrow's character through her two worlds. **In one universe**, Helen cuts and bleaches her hair and becomes more liberated as she takes on a new career. **In the other, she** comes across as much more shy and vulnerable. Because of Paltrow's incredible ability to draw me into her performances, I was captivated by both versions of the character she portrays. But I desperately wanted this lovely woman to end up with the amusing stranger she met on the subway. No doubt about it: he's definitely more fun, especially when he quotes those hilarious *Monty Python* bits.

Sliding Doors, a **“quantum romantic comedy” featuring characters with exciting mutability**, raises questions about fate and the mysteries of life. Yes, it's a thinking person's movie, but one that's also entertaining and a lot of fun. (Released by Miramax/Paramount Pictures and rated "R" for some sexuality and language.)

Past Self: Is that it for now?

Current Self: I think so, but I wonder what the future holds for Quantum Genre cinema.

Future Self: Is this a private conversation, or may I join in?

Past Self & Current Self (in unison): Of course!

Future Self: Great. I wanted to drop by to tell you the good news. This past December, 2011, ReelTalk Movie Reviews began listing Quantum Works as a film genre of its own – and movie titles can now be found under that category on this online movie site (<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com>).

Current Self: Good news indeed! I hope additional groups follow suit. Personally, I look forward to writing about more weird and wonderful Quantum Genre films.



CRYSTAL KALEIDOSCOPES PABLO VISION

CHELSEA'S SECRET

Misha Chariton

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

Soft orange light projects through the only standing window, invades the darkness of the room.

The room is still and quiet. It resembles the inside of an old, picturesque chapel in the late evening, the kind you can only see in a Renaissance painting or read about in books.

In the far back wall hangs a circular, distorted mirror. The mirror produces a FISH EYE effect on the room, and those in it.

Two silhouettes, MARK and CHELSEA, sit face to face across from one another. They sit still... quiet.

A stream of golden dust lifted by the evening breeze rises between them.

Mark makes a slight gesture, disturbing the golden dust in the stream, and speaks very softly.

He never addresses Chelsea directly

MARK, late 20s conveys subliminal sadness in his voice as if he's afraid to disturb the serenity of the room.

CHELSEA, twenty one, listens to him calmly, with a shadowed smile on her face, almost as transparent as the golden stream. Her fair, pale skin complements her pure and innocent gaze.

MARK

Why didn't you tell me sooner?

CHELSEA

How could I?

MARK

You know I love you silly...

Chelsea smiles

CHELSEA

I know, I know you do. And I love you too, but some things aren't easy as that.

MARK

You know me so well. You know how understanding I am.

CHELSEA

It's not you, lovebug, it's me. It's hard for me to think about it, it's still a wound that has yet to heal.

MARK

Damn it, I knew I should have been more patient. I'm such... such an idiot!

Chelsea turns away to hide a tear.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

MARK and CHELSEA are in bed. MARK is sound asleep. CHELSEA opens her eyes and gets out of bed.

She puts on her sweats, grabs the house keys, and goes for the door. She takes one look at Mark, sleeping.

She exits.

MARK opens his eyes, fully aware that she left. He puts his hand on his pillow, and begins squeezing it real tight, burying his face in it and sobbing

MARK (V.O.)

You would wake up in the middle of the night and leave the house.... I didn't know where you went... didn't know how to stop you

The cold moonlight and the quiet night is merciless

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

CHELSEA

My case worker told me about my mom. She knew she wasn't supposed to, but after seeing me so desperate, she couldn't help it. I needed to know where I came from, who I really was... to whom I belonged. It shocked me to learn the truth...

Pause.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - TWENTY TWO YEARS AGO

The screeching of a bed is heard from behind a closed door. The door slightly cracks open, and inside we see a man, Chelsea's soon to be father, doing it missionary style with some blonde.

He's got long, wavy dark hair, a stubble, and a renegade look.

CHELSEA (V.O.)

My mom didn't want me because she was afraid I would be an eternal reminder of a mistake she made with my soon-to-be father. She couldn't abort me because by the time she found out his true face, it was too late... I was... a mistake

Chelsea's mom, about seven months due, opens the bedroom door and stops. The man looks at the reflection from the mirror above the bed and sees her -- he continues to watch her through the reflection as he's doing the other girl, and a manic grin comes across his face.

Chelsea's mom watches him, and she begins to shake, with tears rolling down her eye.

INT. CHELSEA'S MOM'S HOME - NIGHT - 20 YEARS LATER

A single family home is revealed. It's seemingly well maintained, and has two cars parked out on the driveway. CHELSEA stands there, behind a tall tree, observing the house.

CHELSEA (V.O.)

I demanded to see pictures, know her name... even her birthday... she is a Virgo, like me.

Pause

CHELSEA (CONT'D)

I was never allowed to leave the group home to see her, but now, it's like a habit... a habit to see the life I could have had... I even moved here to be closer to her

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

MARK

She was the reason you moved here and you never told me...

Beat.

CHELSEA

I'm sorry, Mark.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. CHELSEA'S MOM'S HOME - NIGHT

Chelsea sits by the tree with her hands folded and knees tucked in, continuing to watch the house

CHELSEA (V.O.)

Ever since I aged out of the group home, it became my mission to find her. I wanted to see her so much, but I was afraid to, so I would just go to the house and watch it, make sure she was home with her family, her car was parked out on the driveway, and that they're safe. Perhaps she even saw me once or twice, but she never knew who I was.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

They are now sleeping together in bed. CHELSEA turns away from MARK, curls herself up, and begins to SHIVER.

MARK puts his hand around her, and moves in close to her.

MARK (V.O.)

You would curl and shiver at night,
and I'd bring you in close to me.

CHELSEA (V.O.)

I used to sleep in cold, dark, motel
rooms after I left the group home.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Chelsea is lying alone, curled up in a dark motel room. One small suitcase is on the floor with all her belongings.

She covers herself with a blanket without going under the sheets. Next to her bosom she holds a small, white, furry bunny.

CHELSEA (V.O.)

On the night of my eighteenth birthday
I was alone... scared... with... with
no place to go and no one to cry to.
I just lay there, alone in that motel
room bed, numbed by fear and
helplessness.

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

A WIND enters the room and blows through Chelsea's hair. No wind touches Mark.

THUNDER is faintly heard in the background as Mark continues to speak

MARK

You would receive strange phone calls
and walk out on me, talking quietly so
I couldn't hear.

CHELSEA

It was my case worker...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

MARK sits at the kitchen table watching CHELSEA over his shoulder as she secretively talks to someone over the phone

Mark tries to stand over her shoulder to check if everything is alright, but she walks away into another room, leaving Mark by himself.

Mark slowly walks back to the kitchen table, and sinks into the seat. He looks up and around searchingly, trying to find an answer

CHELSEA (V.O.)

She would check in on me and see how I was. Hearing her voice would always make me cry because... because she is the only one who understood me... she was my only true family. She loved me, but she never said it, she couldn't say it, because she knew how it would make me feel

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

There is more distance between them now. Mark stands looking out of the window as rain begins to break out.

The lighting outside shifts from Gold to Moonlight cold blue.

Thunder continues

The RAINDROPS slide down the window and their SHADOW reflect on his face as he looks on, while the cold blue moonlight shapes itself around his face

Chelsea is her calm self, walking up behind him, but keeping about two feet of distance between them. Her face is pale and cold blue.

She watches Mark over his shoulder

MARK

I'm such a fool.... What did I do...
how can i ever bring you back

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. MARK AND CHELSEA'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Streaks of daylight welcome themselves through the semi-closed curtains, into their bedroom.

They both have the morning after glow. They're both lying naked under the sheets, looking at one another intimately, and wrestling throughout.

CHELSEA

Tell me something...

MARK

Anything

CHELSEA

Tell me what college was like

Pause

MARK

Very carefree, not a worry in the world

CHELSEA

That sounds awesome! How's that though?

MARK

Everything's taken care of by the parents...

He gets carried away for a moment, but stops short of finishing his sentence, realizing, without knowing why, that this is her soft spot.

Chelsea gets quiet.

MARK (CONT'D)

Sorry...

Pause.

CHELSEA

No, don't be, love... I want you to tell me more.

MARK

Ok. Being far away from home gives you a lot of freedom to do anything you want, and we did everything.

Mark gets a bit carried away

MARK (CONT'D)

I mean, we had parties non stop our freshman year, sometimes it would get so wild that....

CHELSEA

(cutting him off)

That's... that's not what I meant.

Mark looks up at her.

CHELSEA (CONT'D)

I wanted to know what it was like...
... what it was like to have...
parents

MARK

Oh...

Pause

MARK (CONT'D)

Well, it's kind of like having a bank account with a never-ending cash flow. They always seem to find a way to pay for everything, that's how they spoil you

CHELSEA

Are you spoiled?

MARK

Haha, i don't know, what do you think?

CHELSEA

(she wraps her arms
around his neck)

I think you're very kind and gentle and loving, and if that means you're spoiled, then you're completely rotten!

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. KITCHEN/LIVING ROOM/BEDROOM - DAY

Tension builds as CHELSEA is in a state of complete distress, running away from MARK, who is scolding her

Chelsea is holding a PHONE in her hand, pressed close against her bosom.

MARK

Who are you, huh? I don't even know you anymore, where you go, what you do...

CHELSEA

(quietly, distressed,
shutting her ears with
her hands)

Please... Don't shout

MARK

Chelsea, look at me!

Chelsea continues walking away from him

MARK (CONT'D)

Chelsea, stop... STOP!

She stops. Mark stops. Time stops. It's dead quiet -- two pounding heartbeats are audible -- Mark lowers his voice, and repeats...

MARK (CONT'D)

Chelsea, please just... look at me.

She turns around, eyes red from tears, she is in a nervous meltdown. As she turns around, she is shaking, in a state of utter distress, and unrecognizable.

Her eyes are down.

Mark takes a step closer to her

MARK (CONT'D)

Chels... you have to stop playing these games with me. Who is it, huh? Why don't you tell me anything.

She doesn't respond, still looking down

Mark takes another step towards her

MARK (CONT'D)

Chelsea...

CHELSEA

(finally looking up at
him)

I'm sorry... I... I can't do this...
I just can't.

Chelsea turns around and hurries to her room. Mark follows.

MARK

Damn it Chelsea why can't you just
tell me what it is.... Talk to me, damn
it.

She packs a few things into her backpack, and hurries off, passing right past him. He tries to grab hold of her but she swiftly manages to maneuver herself out of it and rushes past him, to the door

MARK (CONT'D)

Where are you going, Chelsea..?

CHELSEA

It's too late.

MARK

What is too late? Damn it Chelsea can
you just make sense for once and
explain where you're going?

I/E. MARK'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

She walks gets her BICYCLE, puts on her BACKPACK, and exits.

He rushes out after her, yelling at her back.

MARK

Chelsea...

He looks on as she rides off down the street.

MARK (CONT'D)

(quieter)

I... I didn't mean to yell at you like
that. I just wanted to... help

Mark continues watching Chelsea as she gets smaller and smaller, until...

His expression suddenly changes from sadness to that of horror as he yells out.

MARK (CONT'D)

CHELSEA...

CUT TO BLACK:

OFF SCREEN sounds of screeching brakes and skidding tires are heard, followed by a loud THUD.

Beat.

BLACK SCREEN

MARK (V.O.)

The first time I saw you, I was mesmerized by how beautiful you were...

Pause

CUT TO:

INT. DANCE FLOOR - FLASHBACK CONTINUES

The dance floor is filled with people dancing close to each other, holding drinks, laughing.

Somewhere in the middle of it all stands Chelsea, and as soon as she becomes visible, the music grows very faint and distant, and everything becomes slow motion.

MARK (V.O.)

...so gentle, so fragile, and yet you seemed to know how to handle yourself. I was afraid to approach you.

Mark approaches Chelsea coyly, and she looks at him, softly smiling.

CHELSEA (V.O.)

You fell in love with me.

The pacing changes and a slow song comes on. He takes her in his arms, and holds her by the waist. She wraps her gentle arms around his neck, and looks up at him.

MARK (V.O.)

Your hair smelled like peaches

Mark brings himself closer to her, and lowers his head to her right cheek. He closes his eyes, as does she. He whispers something into her ear, and she arches her neck up, just slightly, and brushes her cheek against his.

He continues whispering his inaudible incantations into her ear, and she opens her mouth, as if panting, and bringing her lips to his ear, slightly touching them with her lips.

They looked at one another for a long time, dancing, holding one another close, not sure what was to come next.

CHELSEA (V.O.)

We held that moment for as long as we could.

MARK (V.O.)

Until the music changed.

The music changes to a faster beat

She contorts herself around him, now with her back towards him, while still maintaining eye contact and looking over her shoulder at him. She comes in real close, looking up at him, arching her long, beautiful neck, so that her eyes could still meet his.

Then she lifts both her arms over her head, reaching his temples and going down around his neck. She closed her eyes, and let the palms of her hands caress the back of his head.

The music was pounding with a hip hop beat, but she is still consistent with the rhythm of her body, in tune with his, as if they are united.

With her eyes closed, she slowly brings her arms back down to his neck. She then arches her head back against his neck, and while her eyes are still closed, the back of her head touches against his chin.

MARK (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I was afraid of making the wrong move and just held you close to me, afraid of letting you go... afraid of losing you.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE OF THE CLUB - NIGHT - LATER

People are walking out, couples are holding hands, and out comes Mark and Chelsea.

Mark's hands are in his pockets, very shy. Chelsea is watching him, curious and intrigued by the connection they both experienced on the dance floor earlier.

This was their first moment away from all the noise and music, and they both realized that they haven't yet said a word to each other.

Chelsea decided to break the ice

CHELSEA

Hi!

MARK

Hi

CHELSEA

Soooo...

MARK

So...

Chelsea is enjoying this

CHELSEA

I had a real good time with you

MARK

Yeah, me too. We should do it again sometime

Mark waits a moment, and then gathers enough guts to take her hand. Looking her straight in the eyes, he continues.

MARK (CONT'D)

You know, I just want to...

CHELSEA

(flirtatiously)

What..?

MARK

I know this may sound like a cheesy pick up line or something, but what just happened there, it's... well you're not like the other girls

CHELSEA
(playfully)
I'm not..?

MARK
No, there's something different about
you.

CHELSEA
Oh yeah? Like what?

MARK
I don't know, haven't quite figured
that part out yet.

CHELSEA
Well there's something different
about you too...

MARK
Really...? What..?

CHELSEA
Well... most guys would kiss a girl
right about now

Mark smiles, she smiles back, and then he leans in for
a kiss, going ninety percent of the way -- letting her
complete the motion with the other ten

FADE TO:

EXT. TOP OF THE CLIFF - FLASHBACK CONTINUES

Chelsea and Mark sit on top of the hill, shoulder to
shoulder.

Chelsea's legs hang freely and she enjoys the feeling
of being so high up. Mark has his legs safely tucked
in his arms, trying not to look down.

Both of them are looking ahead into the horizon,
enjoying the serene, calm, beautiful view in front of
them

MARK
So this is it, huh?

CHELSEA
This is it.

MARK

It's beautiful.

Mark turns his head to look at her. She continues to look on.

CHELSEA
It's my secret place
(turns to him)
And now you know about it

He takes her hand.

MARK
You never cease to amaze me. I know so little about you, and yet, I feel like I know you all my life. How can that be?

CHELSEA
(playfully)
That's how it *be*

He smiles. She gives him a slight nudge. He gets a bit scared.

MARK
Whoa, be careful there.

CHELSEA
You're scared of heights!

MARK
No I'm not!

CHELSEA
You are so! Admit it!

He turns away and then turns back to her, trying hard not to give in, but it's quite evident she found his soft spot.

MARK
Ok, fine... I am.

She laughs.

MARK (CONT'D)
I mean it's like at least a hundred feet down and god forbid something would happen...

CHELSEA
Oh shush you cry baby.

She lands a kiss on his cheek, and he quiets down.

They face the view again.

MARK

I'd like to meet your parents some
time.

Beat.

Chelsea removes her hand from his, and turns away from
him.

MARK (CONT'D)

You alright?

No response

MARK (CONT'D)

Chels...?

CHELSEA

(still looking away)

Yeah, I'm fine, I'm ok. Let's... let's
talk about that later

(she turns back to him)

Ok?

MARK

Ok... ok.

She smiles and he smiles back. She comes back closer
to him, and puts her head on his shoulder.

CUT TO BLACK:

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

Mark walks over to the darker end of the room and turns
to look at the distorted circular mirror. For the first
time he acknowledges CHELSEA'S presence in the room.
He looks directly at her, transfixed.

CHELSEA

What's it all mean?

MARK

What?

CHELSEA

This... you, me, our life. What's the point. Living only to die...

Mark turns around and...

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Mark walks backwards in front of Chelsea as she walks on the beach sand right along the water.

Chelsea wears owl-like sunglasses which cover her eyes and half her face, and a straw hat. Her bohemian long beach dress flows gracefully in harmony with the wind.

Mark talks over the wind as he's attempting to convince her of his point.

CHELSEA

Being stuck in a microcosm we call earth, and always being at the mercy of our greatest enemy, time. What's the point of it all, of us being here

MARK

Well, i don't know what the gods think the point is, but i have a theory, if you're interested

CHELSEA

Ok, what's your theory?

MARK

My theory is Love

CHELSEA

(rolls her eyes)

Ok, Romeo... you don't need to impress me with those big words anymore, we're already together, remember?

MARK

Just hear me out, maybe you'll like my theory and you'll use it for something!

CHELSEA

Highly unlikely, but OK, I'm listening...

MARK

Alright. When most people ask what you had asked, they are typically looking for a meaning to their life. Most people don't have a meaning, or haven't found one yet, and that's why they don't see the point to it yet. I even bet you if you'd ask a person what the meaning of their life is, you can immediately tell by their answer if they found it or not. Anyway, what do you think gives life meaning?

CHELSEA

Hope.

MARK

Great answer! What gives us hope?

CHELSEA

Dreams, of course.

MARK

Good dreams?

CHELSEA

Only good dreams, dreams about a brighter future.

MARK

Ok, and what's a brighter future look like to you.

CHELSEA

To have a family and be happy.

MARK

And would you agree that family and happiness give life meaning?

CHELSEA

I guess so.

MARK

You guess so?

CHELSEA

Ok, yes you're right, they give meaning.

MARK

And do you know what Love does?

CHELSEA

It... it gives... meaning.

MARK

Without Love there's no meaning. It's both a concept and an emotion, and even the saddest and loneliest souls out there are looking for it because, like you said, once you find Love, you find meaning.

Chelsea thinks this over.

CHELSEA

hmm...

MARK

And you wanna know what else?

CHELSEA

What?

MARK

You begin to feel a bond with everything around you.

Pause

CHELSEA

Wow.

MARK

Yeah, it's pretty cool when you think about it... Love gives us meaning, and that's why we exist... to find Love, and have meaning in our life.

CHELSEA

It's... beautiful.

CUT TO BLACK:

BACK TO PRESENT

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

Chelsea stands in front of the window, as Mark is sitting on the chair by the table.

The rain has stopped, and the lighting CHANGES from MOON BLUE to GOLDEN again. The light wraps itself around Chelsea's hair.

CHELSEA

I want to come back.

MARK

I just wish things were different.

Chelsea softly smiles and takes his hands.

Mark drops his head to look at her hands, and slowly raises his eyes to match her look.

They share a moment together.

Suddenly, Chelsea lets go of his hand, and begins to FADE IN AND OUT. Mark gets concerned and tries to catch her.

MARK (CONT'D)

Chelsea... Chelsea..? Where are you going... Chelsea! Chelsea!

Mark's voice dissolves into an echo...

FADE TO:

INTERCUT - HOSPITAL ROOM/SERIES OF SHOTS

Mark is standing over Chelsea, as her lifeline slowly starts to fade.

MARK

Chelsea..!

He calls the nurses and the doctor.

They rush in and try bringing her back to life, but now the lifeline is FLAT.

WHITE ROOM - Chelsea is in a blinding WHITE ROOM, wearing a ROBE, the same one from the beach. The room has a BLACK CLOCK on the wall. The room has no flooring -- at least none that is visible -- and Chelsea playfully walks across a LONG STRAIGHT POLE, with her arms spread like wings, trying to maintain balance

HOSPITAL ROOM -- Her gentle body becomes lifeless

Mark continues to call her name, but his voice becomes inaudible, and the male nurses hold him back and try escorting him out of the room as he fights to try and hold on to her, to catch one last glimpse of her face, her hand... her breath.

OPEN SEA - Chelsea's pale, naked body is submerged in a BODY OF WATER. Her arms are spread like a Dove's, and she floats effortlessly and divinely on the surface, looking up

CHELSEA (V.O.)

I'm free...

HOSPITAL ROOM -- Chelsea is GONE.

Beat.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY

The bedroom is dark and quiet, with cold, blue, moonlight slightly making itself visible through the window, highlighting the clothes on the floor, some photos on the drawers, and some generic artwork on the walls.

Finally the bed is revealed where Mark sleeps, and next to Mark is... CHELSEA

They are sleeping together, peaceful, happy.

All of a sudden, Chelsea opens her eyes and sits up, panting. She is scared, and looks around for Mark, seeing he is safely in bed.

She leans in and touches his face to make sure he is there, and then she touches her face, to make sure she's there too.

Mark opens his eyes and sits up with her

MARK

Chels, you ok?

CHELSEA

I don't know

He comes closer to her

MARK

You just had a nightmare.
Everything's alright

CHELSEA

I don't know. I had this dream... it
was so real

MARK

What dream babe?

She begins rambling, running on sentences and not
making much sense.

CHELSEA

You were telling me the meaning of
life and at first i didn't listen to
you but then your story inspired me
and I wanted to come back to life...
to live, but I couldn't... And I lost
you, forever

MARK

You dreamt that you were dead?

Mark gives her a kiss on the shoulder.

MARK (CONT'D)

Babe, you're alive, see?

He does some gestures to prove his point.

MARK (CONT'D)

And I'm here too. We're in bed
together talking, silly. You're never
going to loose me... never

She turns to look at him with tears in her eyes, and
she is delighted to see his face and hear his voice.
She gives him a big hug and a kiss on his cheek, burying
her face in his neck.

CHELSEA

It was just so... real. My god

MARK

It's ok, it was just a dream.
Everything's fine now. Let's go back
to sleep.

They embrace tight, and then Mark lies back on his
pillow, rolling over on the other side. Chelsea is
still sitting up in her bed.

Pause.

After a moment, she turns back to Mark.

CHELSEA

Mark?

MARK

Hmmmm

Pause

CHELSEA

Did I ever tell you who I really am...

He opens his eyes

CHELSEA (CONT'D)

Where I came from, and why I get phone calls that I can't tell you about.

Mark sits up

CHELSEA (CONT'D)

And, why I go out for hours at a time without telling you where...

Mark sits up even more and watches her intently

MARK

No, you said you'd tell me when you're ready

CHELSEA

Well, I think I'm ready now... I'm ready to tell you... to tell you my story.

FADE OUT.



Fragment. By Irene Frenkel

SCARABOCCHIO

Grace Andreacchi

Burn what you have worshipped, worship what you have burned.

– St. Remy

CHAPTER ONE

[from the Poet's Diary]

Ash Wednesday

The Ten Golden Sovereigns

I came here first of all to work. By which I mean not only, nor even in the first place, to make black marks on paper, but also to look about me, to observe the passing scene, to tread in the iron-clad footsteps of dead Crusaders along the black shores of a wine dark sea, to pose for my official portrait with the ancient temple of Segeste serving as the highly appropriate backdrop or stage set if you will. I have with me (and yet not with me, for he has a room of his own) a young painter who calls himself Danzig although I am convinced that is not his real name. More than once I have heard the waiter address him in an undertone as "Lorenzaccio". This so-called Danzig claims to have been an officer in the Austrian Navy and to have learned his excellent Italian in Trieste, where he served on board a submarine. He has already painted the Archduke, and now he is to paint me.

These are only some of the reasons I have come. There are others, of course, less superficial, less ready of explication - they will be revealed in the course of time. They have a bearing on angels and archangels as well as on other, less benevolent spirits who have long been expecting me. Tomorrow, for example, I have a rendez-vous with the Royal Gardener to the Prince of Palermo in the gardens of the Villa Nebbiosa overlooking the sea. I have sent word that I will come an hour before sunset, but I cannot stay long. I must be at the Governor's in time for dinner; the Governor insists on punctuality and apparently has been known to order on-the-spot executions of those who are late to his table. I shall be careful not to make that mistake.

We took the corvette from Naples and were nearly drowned. We sailed directly into the heart of a storm, sea and sky were one black and sickening whirlpool. I lay in the bunk shivering with nausea and fear, watching the rats run back and forth across the tilting walls. The water came in and I tasted the dark salt wine of the mythopoëic sea. I shut my eyes tight and was once again an Unborn, rocked in swirling waters, dreaming the pure nameless passions of infancy. When the sky cleared and the dripping sails were unfurled like the white wings of waterbirds shaking off sleep and I staggered on deck to see the sky blue once again in all its cloudless innocence I was almost sorry to be alive, my head stuffed with thousands and millions of names, names for all things as well as their Latin equivalents. I would have liked to linger in that salty twilight a little longer, perhaps passing imperceptibly over into death. I leaned upon the railing and wept, I was angry as a thwarted child, when Danzig appeared, smiling, his shirt open at the throat, his dark hair ruffled by the stiff sea wind - he was altogether poetical in his dishevelment and good humour, and I forgot my sorrow and embraced him heartily.

It is not true, what they say, that I have never had a woman. It is merely that, under the eyes of the Archduke, my opportunities have been extremely limited. The Archduke is a strict Catholic, he has fallen into the hands of the Jesuits, and it is enough for him to hear only so much as a whisper of scandal to send for the Inquisition. Besides, he is very jealous of those he loves, and I am conscious of my position as a favorite. It has its (numerous) advantages. I am no Diogenes, as you can tell by the fine cut of my knee breeches, the violet silk of my coat. But there is no denying I am sometimes a little what the French call *étouffé*. The love of the Archduke is not like that of ordinary mortals, being at once more exigent and more refined. Have I come, then, to wallow in the gutter away from the prying eyes of those that love me too well? Wait and see...

Although Danzig was beaming with good spirits on our safe arrival in the harbour at Palermo, he had been disconsolate the night before our departure on account of a half-grown Siamese girl with dirty feet in whose embraces I more than once had surprised him. She had skin the color of the local marzipan and wore a sprig of crushed jasmine in her hair, another in the sash of her dress. She smiled at me, she offered me an assignation, all with an air of the most winning and angelic innocence strangely at variance with her words, which were uttered in a childish lisp. There was nothing sensual or the least bit voluptuous in her invitation, which was given as the most natural thing in the world - she might have been a well brought-up young girl asking me to tea. I gave her an appointment to come to my room. It was late in the afternoon but the sun was still strong. I had closed the shutters to keep out the heat, and the room was striped as by a brush with streaks of gold. She lay down on the brocade bedcover in her torn pink dress. I sat beside her and began to fondle her. Like a cat, she stretched and trembled, the long, thin lashes swept down over the marzipan cheeks so full and smooth I longed to bite them - so sure was I they would taste of sugared almonds. Closed, her eyelids displayed two humps of pale violet skin where the eyes had been - wide set, upslanting eyes of a ganoid blue so startling I assumed the color to be artificially enhanced with one of those beauty drugs known to the women of the east. She allowed me to remove her thin rag of a dress. Underneath it she was still a smooth-limbed undeveloped child; there was no tell-tale down on the little mount of the goddess, the hipbones were mere ridges under the sheath of downy skin. I caressed her and she moved her lips as if in prayer, then smiled and wriggled closer to me. She placed a knowing little hand upon me, but alas! It was too late for me to enjoy her. I lay on the bed gasping in the heat, dazzled by the sudden light, for someone had pushed open the shutter. A little Siamese cat came bounding onto the bed and miaowed noisily at the girl. She laughed and sat up, she called the cat Coco and bid her make my acquaintance. I gave her a false name and she gave me her own of Faustina. I gave her a sovereign to hide my shame and vexation, but in truth I was just as glad not to have possessed the child. Perhaps she was too young for me? I am not sure of the cause of my unease in her presence. She was constantly moving her lips as if in prayer. When I kissed her lips and sweetly odorous cheeks I heard the silken swish of her blood, the flute-whistle of the breath rising and falling in her narrow lungs. On the whole I was relieved when she left with her cat on her shoulder, but then the room was terribly quiet, the crumpled bedcover spoke eloquently of her visitation no matter how I tried to smooth it, the light remained in the same golden stripes upon the walls and floor, as though the sun had halted in its journey, and at last I was obliged to go out to escape the resonant void. That evening I asked Danzig to exchange rooms with me, which he did willingly enough, as his was by far the smaller and less desirable of the two. I asked him where he had happened to discover her and he answered that she was one of the little girls who do the laundry for the

guests at the hotel. There are many of these Siamese in the Empire now, for during the last war they were imported in large numbers, both male and female, for purposes of prostitution. Strange that I never noticed her before. She must have been in and out of the room many times to collect or deliver my things. Why, the very shirt I was wearing now might have been crimped and pressed by those same agile fingers that had touched me so intimately in the afternoon. I fingered the stuff of the shirt and it seemed to have acquired a new significance, to be whispering something barely audible in the folds of the white cloth, over and over again, like a prayer.

The next morning I was accosted outside the door of the inn by two rough-looking characters, the father and brother of the little laundress. Their demand was simple enough - I must marry the girl to make restitution to her family for her outraged virtue. When I expressed myself unwilling to do anything of the kind they immediately suggested the substitution of gold and named a high figure. I had ruined the girl, she would no longer be marriageable among her own people, they explained, and so high a sum would be necessary to keep her for the rest of her days and to soothe the anger and grief of her family. I was unwilling to disabuse them either as to the child's character (which in truth they knew well enough, having played this scene many times before - the two had the slightly bored expressions and tired mannerisms of actors who have been too long in the same roles), or as to my own prowess. Nor was there any question but that the girl had in fact been most crudely violated and that not once but innumerable times, for her character had been thoroughly spoiled. The distress of her relatives might, for all I knew, be genuine enough. Nonetheless, the figure they named was far beyond my means. I named one considerably lower, to which they readily agreed, thus making it clear to me that I had paid too much. I gave them ten golden sovereigns and obtained in exchange the answer to the age old question, "What is the price of virtue?"

Beethoven's Other Nephew

The ships in the harbour at Palermo swim as in the dark dregs at the bottom of a gigantic goblet. Black volcanic headlands rear up on every side, black shadows swarm and dive in the ever-changing sea. The line between sea and sky is obscured by a heavy golden mist like that which appears around the Christ Child in certain baroque paintings. Always one hears the melancholy orchestral roar, the rush and retreat of the reaping tide.

The sun was low when we arrived, and by the time we had unloaded our boxes and hired a carriage it was nearly dark. It was a steep drive up the mountain to Monreale where, we had been assured by the vetturino, a pleasant inn awaited us. The road was well-paved and the distance not far, we should have been there easily in half an hour. But the vetturino kept stopping every few minutes, only to climb down from the carriage and disappear into the darkness at the side of the road.

"Driver, why are you stopping? Why don't you go on? Is there something amiss with the carriage?" I called out.

"No, no, Signore," he replied, approaching to the window from which I had spoken. "There is no problem. Don't distress yourself, Signore. We shall be there very soon."

"But why on earth do you keep stopping the carriage?" I demanded, and began to climb out myself, curious to see what was going on. I caught a glimpse of a brightly lit shrine set into some rocks in the hillside, and a black-faced Madonna draped in gold, from whose breast there protruded the hilt of a golden dagger. The vetturino pushed me roughly back

into my seat, apologizing all the while in a soft, wheedling voice. "Sorry, Signore, very sorry, forgive me, Signore, you must not get down now. We are nearly there. Only have a little patience, Signore." At that point the carriage started up once more and in fact we did not interrupt our journey again until we came to a halt in the courtyard of a little hillside inn.

I was given a large pleasant room on the first floor, opening onto a terrace that overlooks Palermo and the sea. They assured me it was the best in the place, and I do not really find any fault with it, although it suffers from an elusive atmosphere of decay. The entire hotel is like this - any individual object on which you fasten your eyes presents itself in excellent condition, ordinary and unobjectionable, but somehow the whole wears an air of sombre, brooding regret. Invisible ants make their way across the spotless pink and blue tiles and swarm upon the gilded chandeliers in the dining room. Beneath the smoothly whitewashed walls the cracked and blistered skin of old age appears like the cheeks of an ancient belledame beneath a coat of paint. The terrace is planted with lemon trees and the tiny globular fruits mingle their perfume with the dead odours in the drains. Below the terrace the hill falls away sharply. Far at the bottom the city of Palermo is laid out like a glittering blanket every night. By day it disappears into a pink and blue haze, crowned by the golden aureole that hovers above the wine dark sea.

When I had settled my few belongings I called upon Danzig, whose room is next to mine, and asked him to accompany me on a walk before dinner. I always like to obtain some preliminary impressions of my surroundings, and besides my head was heavy from the prolonged ride in the airless carriage. He readily consented and we made our way the half mile or so down the hill to the village of Monreale. It was easy enough to find the main square, for the streets were full of people all hurrying in the same direction, and we had merely to let ourselves be carried forward by the tide. The piazza was brightly lit with electric lights - I could make out the arcade along the north face of the cathedral, and the one remaining tower thrusting its head above the level of the palm trees up into the starry sky. The press of the crowd was too intense to permit of a promenade, so we took seats before a gushing fountain wherein a marble boy was engaged in some lascivious sport with a sea serpent. Before us passed an endless parade of sloe-eyed velvet-skinned children dressed in the most elaborate costumes. The boys were attired as Crusaders, Moors, mousquetaires, as Sicilian princes in scarlet cloaks and golden doublets; the little girls like animated flowers in pink and blue, crimson, gold, violet, their broad-brimmed hats drooping with flowers, their skirts billowing over lace petticoats, draped with satin ribbons and sparkling with glass gems. One little beauty in particular caught my eye - she was dressed all in pink, in that distinctly garish hue, merging almost into blue, that is seen in blown roses, or in the thin membranes that surround the eye. Her smooth black hair cascaded from under a lace-encrusted picture hat that tied under her chin in an enormous pink bow. Upon her shoulder she carried a dainty pink parasol edged in lace, which she twirled continually in her lace-mittened hand. She paused before us several times, each time using the parasol as a screen from behind which she trained her curious young animal's eyes upon us. I saw her again much later, back at the hotel, where we returned after dining in the town on pasta drenched in saffron cream and the tender flesh of freshly killed fish. She was sitting on the wall under a lemon tree eating an ice, but the moment she saw us she jumped down and ran away into the dark, her parasol bobbing behind her.

That night when I was getting into bed I noticed for the first time the picture of the Madonna del Popolo over the headboard. I was repulsed by this blurry photograph of an artifact from a period antipathetic to my taste and would have liked to remove it from its place

over the bed but was afraid of giving offence to the hotel staff. I pondered long over it and finally left it untouched, but I had reason to regret of my magnanimity before morning, for I was held captive all night by the most terrible dreams. The Madonna was weeping inside the picture frame - her tears ran down the glass that covered the tawdry print, soaking the bed. "It is nothing," I said to myself in my dream. "It is only condensation from the excessively damp atmosphere here in the hotel." But my heart was troubled - I wanted to comfort the weeping Madonna but had no idea how to go about it. "Don't cry, Mother," I said, climbing up on the bed and looking into the face of the picture. But her tears continued to flow faster than ever. I felt that I was the sole cause of her grief and that nothing could be done, no restitution was possible. I awoke early all in a sweat. The pillow was soaked with my tears, and the light dancing over the sea was painfully bright.

At breakfast I had a chance to observe the other guests at the hotel - they are not numerous. One of these is an old acquaintance of mine, a retired Canadian pianist whose extravagant interpretations I have more than once had occasion to praise in the pages of the *Alldeutsche Musikalische Zeitung*. He had retired first from the concert stage at the age of thirty-two, then from a lucrative recording career at the age of fifty, and had given himself out to be dead. These successive stages of retreat from reality had in fact rendered him dead in the public eye (although the matchless recordings continued to sell steadily) and perhaps something close to dead in himself, for as he sat there in a sunny corner of the dining room, hunched inside his ubiquitous greatcoat, he had the appearance of something shrunken, mummified, partially dissolved in the intensity of the light that poured in through the plateglass and reflected upwards from the glittering sea, and he did not move, he did not look as if he could ever move, but sat as still as a dead person over his gleaming white coffee cup. I was torn on seeing him thus at breakfast, for on the one hand I wished to preserve my anonymity, I did not wish to have my experience mediated by interaction with any superfluous persons belonging to the past; on the other hand I was moved to pity at the sight of his aloof and deathlike isolation. I compromised and offered him a simple nod by way of greeting, but he gave no indication of having seen me at all. Slowly, slowly, I saw his hand steal out towards the cup. He raised it with infinite slowness to his desiccated lips and drank. I deliberately turned my back to him, not wishing to prolong this painfully lugubrious spectacle throughout the whole of my breakfast, for I am a nervous and uneven breakfaster, the least thing puts me off my food in the morning, and then I won't feel right the rest of the day. The waiter brought me a biscuit ornamented with icing sugar, and a cup of gleaming white enamel identical to that I had seen in the slow-moving hand of my former friend. The waiter had the same sloe eyes and black hair as the children of the night before; his hands were deft and delicate like those of a violinist or a lacemaker. Looking up from my coffee, dazzled by the light, I shielded my eyes for a moment and realised that I was now looking into a large, gilt-framed mirror that covered the greater part of the wall opposite the plateglass. In the blue-green depths of this mirror the tables in stiff-winged cloths swam like so many white swans gliding upon glassy water, the enamelled Moorish candelabra and painted jugs, the battered piano, the gilded chandeliers were all repeated as a phrase from the first movement of a sonata may reappear at the very end, transposed into a different key and bearing an altogether different significance because its surroundings have changed utterly, because time has intervened, things have happened and failed to happen that have caused us to modify our opinion of this initial phrase, so too the dining room was repeated but not the same, and my friend, modified by time into what significance I had no idea and

could hardly be expected to guess, was also there in the very corner of the mirror, his eyes over the now immobilized coffee cup meeting mine in the glass.

BARTON BEALE - b. 1932, Little Dip, Saskatchewan, Canada. d. 1982? First prize, piano, Toronto Conservatory, 1950. One of the great pianists of the twentieth century, Beale was particularly noted for his startling interpretations of the classics, and of Sebastian Bach in particular, whereby he influenced irrevocably an entire generation of musicians. His spectacular concert career was cut short by his voluntary retirement from the stage in 1964, after which he devoted himself exclusively to electronic recordings. These include, notably, the Goldberg Variations, J.S. Bach, 1952, The Well-Tempered Clavier, 1960, the entire keyboard oeuvres of Beethoven, Mozart, and most of J.S. Bach, little-known works of the Elizabethan period, works by other members of the Bach family, and again the Goldberg Variations, 1982. He was also an enthusiastic champion of the works of such recent composers as Schönberg, Krenek, and Leverkühn. Beale disappeared under mysterious circumstances shortly after the completion of the second Goldberg recording and is believed to be dead. Beale also achieved a certain notoriety in his lifetime as the author of such articles as "The Inverted Möbius Concerto - A Look at Bach's Brandenburgs" and "People in Glass Houses or Why I Gave Up Live Performances". See biographies by Sir Adrian Gower, Barton Beale, A Life Apart, (1984), and Dominique Lafontaine, Barton Beale, Sa Musique, Sa Vie, (1987).

[from The International Musical Encyclopedia]

Danzig came in and, after his customary little bow with hand pressed against the heart, slid into the place that had been laid for him at my side. He was even more sparkling than usual this morning - a mysterious sly smile played about his lips and alerted me that he was up to something. He had brought the portfolio with him and laid it down on the table, then placed his left hand over it. With the right he fingered his shirt ruffle in a coy, absent-minded gesture that drew my attention to the dark column of his throat.

"Good morning," I said, unable to repress a smile at the sight of his cheerfulness.

"Yes indeed, Meister," he replied. "Coffee, please," he said to the waiter, in English, for he likes to display his contempt for that whole class of people who serve, being himself in something of a servant's capacity to myself, and (I suspect by his manners and appearance, which are very pleasing but a trifle vulgar at times) having his origins in that class that lies just above the servant's and feels compelled to assert its superiority over the same whenever the two come into contact. So, despite his fluent and unaccented Italian, which is really much better than mine, he uses, whenever possible, that universal English that is the hallmark of the educated classes.

"I hope you were able to sleep, Meister," he added in a solicitous tone. I waved a hand in deprecation of all that his question implied, for he is well acquainted with my interminable sleep difficulties, and the topic is an old one between us.

"Not at all," I said. "But it's not important. Perhaps tonight will be better. I have the most terrible head... But what have you there? You haven't been at work already?" He took a large bite from his breakfast biscuit and licked the sugary crumbs from the sides of his mouth with a dextrous pink tongue, then took a swallow of coffee. I was fascinated by the visible passage of the food inside that smooth erect brown column.

"Have a look," he invited me, handing over the portfolio. Inside were several sketches of the children we had seen the night before, including the little girl in pink. "Recognize her?" he said, laying a finger on the picture.

"Yes, of course - Faustina. But why...?" I looked up at him in confusion.

"It was the same girl, Meister," he said, shrugging, opening the palms of his hands in bewilderment. "The very same. I recognized her right away. Did you not, then?" I shook my head, then bent over the sketch once more and examined the child in pink. There was certainly a strong resemblance to the little laundress of Naples.

"But I don't understand," I said. "What is she doing here? How could she have arrived so soon? She wasn't on the boat with us, I'm certain of it." Danzig shrugged again, and his eyes slid away from mine.

"Oh, well, certain - that's difficult to say, isn't it? She may have been... It was a rough crossing. She may have kept below."

"But why would she come here? And how would she have time to obtain the costume? It was quite the prettiest one there..." Then, it dawning on me, "You haven't brought her here yourself, have you?" His hands closed over the drawing and he stuffed it, along with the others, back into the portfolio.

"Certainly not," he said, looking into my eyes with the perfect frankness that belongs only to clear blue eyes in a very young face. I knew then that he was lying. "Would you like to see her again?" he asked. His majestic smile was that of a procuress who knows her goods to be of the first order.

"No!" I said sharply. "I would like to have nothing further to do with her. I only wish you hadn't brought her along, certainly not without consulting me beforehand. Her presence here will constitute a distinct nuisance to me."

"It wasn't me put the idea in her head," he said, again meeting me with that gaze of spurious and unshakeable naïveté. "The fact is, Meister, you shouldn't have given the father so much. Now she thinks she belongs to you."

I no longer had any appetite for my breakfast. I crumbled the remains of the biscuit and looked unhappily into the plate, hoping to read some augury there. The sea light reflected on the white ground of the porcelain, imparting to the biscuit deeper hues of golden brown like the striated chalky cliffs that crumble into the sea along the coasts of France.

"Tell her to go away," I said, but softly, to myself.

"What's that, Meister?"

"Yes, give her some money and tell her to go away." But in my heart the image of her almond cream skin, united now to the swaying silk skirts and lace parasol, opened like a rose and spread its perfume upwards into my brain. "Give her some money," I said again, and this time Danzig bowed his head in acknowledgement.

At this point another guest came into the dining room and sat down at the table next to ours. He was slight and spectrally pale, a young man fashionably dressed in a bottle green frock coat and riding boots, carrying a small riding whip. His dark hair was tied in a green ribbon, and the exposed right temple, which presented itself to my gaze, was ornamented by a small, neat hole of the type usually associated with a low calibre duelling pistol. The hole was black, scorched, and crusted around the edges with a fine crimped border of dark red coagulated blood. The young gentleman asked for the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and began to read it immediately with minute attention while the waiter poured out his coffee.

"That is Beethoven's nephew," Danzig whispered, leaning towards me across the table.

"Do you mean Carl?" I said.

"No, this is the other nephew, Paul. He suffers terribly from nerves, they say. He is travelling with a private physician. I had a word with the doctor last night." And indeed a few moments later a gentleman who was conspicuously of the medical profession came in and took a seat beside young Beethoven. More than once I felt the young man's searching gaze upon me, and I saw him put his head together with the doctor's in consultation. Meanwhile Beale got up from his corner and shuffled across the room onto the adjoining terrace, where I saw him take a seat under the lemon trees and bury his head in his hands.

The Stones of Monreale

After breakfast we made our way down the hill to the cathedral, I with Heinrich Adams's excellent guide book ready to hand, Danzig with his sketchbook and pencils. Both money and faith being in short supply since the last war, the depredations committed by the firebombs have never been made good, and one can no longer hope to find the glowing outsized reliquary, paved from floor to ceiling with gemmed mosaics, that so fired the American scholar's imagination. Adams spent the last years of his life here, working out his stupendously detailed and ravishingly poetic guide to the Cathedral of our Lady of Monreale. The church as it stands today is but a shell. Still, it is possible to trace, with the help of Adams, the significance of certain isolated fragments of colored glory that adhere to the crumbling walls like scales to the sides of a too hastily cleaned fish. The roof is entirely gone, but this does not pose a serious problem, as the climate of Sicily is in general warm and dry. A cloth awning of blue and white stripes, similar to those in common use at fairgrounds and country markets, has been set in place and is unfurled on those rare days of bad weather when there is need of it.

The great west way stands open to the street, for there are no longer any doors. (The old Romanesque bronze doors were melted down during the war.) One looks from the high stone lintel directly into the face of the ancient Christus Pantocrator, His arms extended in universal gesture above the apse. The white glare of the sun lights His face and hands, lends to His sombre eyes a similitude of life. Below Him are grouped the courtiers of His Sacred Kingdom, damaged beyond recognition by the hand of time, showing only a fragment of a celestial blue robe here, of a golden halo there, where once a saint looked down in glory upon the world of men. The walls are now of bare stone, broken down in part but essentially sound, and as thick as those of any fortress. The relentless light rains down through the empty window embrasures and the empty vault overhead. Underfoot, the pavement of multicoloured marble tiles has cracked open like an overcooked egg - the jewel-green grass leaks from the cracks and spills in vivid patterns across the floor, fertilized by the blood of martyrs, the dung of sheep and goats. The air is bright with the blue wings of Adonis butterflies; they swarm by the hundreds high up in the apse, forming a living mosaic that shivers like wind-blown water upon the dark stones. Doves have made their nests in the niches of the tower, and the sudden rustle of their iridescent wings breaks like a blue wave on a calm sea, pushed towards the shore by who knows what invisible hand. Down the center of the nave are two rows of antique columns, their capitals flourishing with the autumnal foliage of ancient Rome. No longer restrained by the Christianized iconography of the pulvins, which have been flagellated down to the naked stone, no longer serving any

structural purpose, as the roof they were meant to support has been replaced by the divinely sustained vault of heaven, these columns, which never could have achieved more than an uneasy alliance with such rigorous spiritual surroundings at the best of times, are now forlorn, and appear like oversized and overdressed little girls who have come to the wrong party by mistake, and only want to be taken home again.

I wandered about with the book in my hand and found I was able, with the help of Adams's careful descriptions, to identify most of the coloured fragments that remain upon the walls. Oddly enough, this identification served only to throw into greater relief the contrast between the Monreale that Adams had known and loved and written about, and the Monreale where I now stood. My pilgrimage had been in vain - Monreale was no more. He had written of a place bloated with the riches of Byzantium, glowing with gold, replete with oriental perfume and splendour. Here the Norman warrior had conquered, and here he had been conquered - ravished by the spirit of the grave, purple-clad east. Now were desolation, tristezza, and the simplicity of the barbarian revealed beneath the borrowed robes. Time had stripped the gilding from this flower of chivalry. Now were sky, wind, stones, light. The old beauties of line and space were fertilized by the felicities of nature, giving birth to a new building compounded of equal parts of memory and desire. Surely these were the bare ruined choirs of poetry, and as poetry they testified to the highest aspirations of man. A poetic place, then.

Why is it that the ruin is so often more interesting, and even more beautiful, than the finished building? It is not always so, to be sure - there is nothing more depressing than a row of damaged apartment blocks - one averts one's eyes from the sordid mess. But any really fine building - a cathedral, a monastery, a Greek temple - pleases me more as a skeleton than as a - what? One can't say as a living body, for these are artifacts from the dead past. More than an embalmed body, perhaps? Having seen the most conspicuous examples of the restorer's art I would say such monstrosities resemble nothing so much as an exhumation clothed in artificial flesh, fitted out with wig and tiara for a bal funebre. No, I prefer a good clean skeleton to the reeking charms of the reanimated. Then, the process of deconstruction is revelatory - Dust thou art, to dust returneth. A ruin is a place full of mysteries revealed. I remember a block of smashed apartments that stood opposite the museum in Frankfurt when I was a child. One could see the way the pipes were fitted inside the walls and connected to toilets and showers, also how the staircases had been arranged, the shaft for the elevator - everything was revealed as in an anatomical drawing. I was fascinated by this spectacle, and never failed to observe it closely whenever I passed by the museum. Mine was the tingling, deep-seated voyeur's delight in seeing that which was never meant to be seen. There was also a house I used to pass every day on my walks in Weimar - it had been bombed by the Inquisition and the inhabitants scattered God knows where. Now their salon lay open to the perusal of every passer-by. There were chairs covered in pink plush upholstery, as I recall, and some china in a corner cupboard. A portrait of a lady hung over the hearth. (I supposed her to be the vanished mistress of the establishment.) Impossible to resist the daily temptation to gaze into the private domain of this unknown family, to gaze with the impunity of a dreamer and the prurient curiosity of a child. I ended by changing the course of my daily constitutional, rather than continue this heedless indulgence. Here at Monreale I am free to clamber over the carcass with a clear conscience, for this is no private grave but only one of the myriad burial mounds wherein lies interred my very own civilization. I pick over these bones with a melancholy respect, much as a man might handle the diaries and letters of a beloved ancestor. And, just as a man's closest secrets may lie

sealed within such packets of old paper, tied and taped and labelled "to be opened only in the event of my death", and as, once opened and read, they may bring to sudden life a stranger, flaming with wit and passion, one whom we never knew in life - so too among the ruins of Monreale the long forgotten voice of an ancient glory is heard.

I stuffed the book back in my pocket and bid Danzig make me a sketch of the Pantocrator. He knew better than to attempt any conversation with me, for I cannot bear interruption when I am immersed in an aesthetic experience. (I know of nothing more despicable than those so-called art-lovers who descend upon a thing of beauty, their mouths going in perpetual commentary upon that which they utterly fail to see. Art is made for silence, and we must keep silence if we would have it speak to us at all.)

In a little ruined chapel to the south of the apse I found the original of the Madonna del Popolo that hangs in my room, the same that had tormented my sleep of the night before. She is a stiff faced, doll-like figure in polychromed wood, holding an even stiffer babydoll, the two of them dressed in gold paper crowns and gowns of moth-eaten blue and silver brocade. Her niche is brightened by a corona of electric stars that burn perpetually in a sky of broken blue marble. There is a powerful odour from the baskets of roses and jasmine at her feet and the smoke from the many candles banked in military rows before her like the torches of a midget garde d'honneur. I knelt down and said a quick Ave Maria, then called upon her thus: "Dear Blessed Mother, Please do not torment me any more while I am sleeping! I know you don't mean me any harm, but I'm not feeling at all well, the climate here is very enervating, I'm not used to the food, and then I have so much to worry about - First of all my new book, then there is Danzig, and now also the girl. I beg you Mother, let me be for a little while and I promise on my side to increase my devotions both to yourself and to your Son." I had every intention of carrying out this promise, and knew that it would be to my benefit to do so. However, it was highly probable that, as in the past, too many things would interfere with these intentions and, in the end, I would do nothing substantial to improve my spiritual life. Still, Our Lady has never been a harsh Mother to any of her children. She honors our intentions, however false or sententious, she pretends, at least, to believe our promises, and she always forgives us when we come back asking once again for her help. No, never, never has it been known that she turned away from any of her children. I blew a kiss to her painted cheek and helped myself to one of her flowers for my buttonhole.

I left Danzig to finish his sketch and made my way across the piazza to the adjoining convent, for I was eager to see the cloister. This cloister, where Adams was assumed into a quasi-spiritual aesthetic rapture so high that his usually meticulous prose cracks open and he begins to babble, was (perhaps miraculously) spared the devastations that were visited upon the nearby cathedral. Built in a burst of furious energy by the conquerors from Hauteville, it is the single most valuable example of twelfth century sculpture that remains to us, now that the west porch of Chartres is no more. (It was upon hearing the news of the bombing of Chartres that Adams took his own life, writing in his last testament that he did not wish to inhabit a world where one could no longer regard the smiling queens of the Portail Royal.) I crossed the empty piazza, my shadow moving quickly past those of the disorderly palms, swishing their black heads in disapproval at my resonant footsteps. I entered a sunny courtyard and rang a bell that sounded somewhere deep inside the walls. I waited and waited for someone to come and open the door. A lizard clung to the lintel, his skin the same bright vermilion as the blistered paint. The shadow of the cathedral tower crept slowly across the broken pavement. Water trickled from a fountain in the center of the court. Overcome by the heat, I removed my hat and bathed my brow in the cool stream that gushed from the

mouth of a smiling dolphin. It was while I was thus engaged that the door opened at last, and, drying myself with my handkerchief, I hastened to greet the Sister. She wore the full black gown, white wimple, and sweeping white tulle veil of the Re-ordered Carmelites. The face encased in the close-fitted coif was neither young nor old, but smooth and yellow like a piece of old silk, and the ancient eyes smiled at me with the innocent coquetry of the virgin. I explained my purpose in calling, and she welcomed me most hospitably, saying that the Abbess was expecting me. Danzig appearing at that moment in the courtyard, he was rapidly included in the invitation. We followed the Sister down a cool, dark corridor whence I caught a glimpse of a flock of nuns moving far in advance, their veils floating behind them like white wings. There was an overwhelming odour of sweetness, for the Sisters are engaged in the manufacture of marzipan, which they fashion into the likenesses of fruits and other comestibles, such as crustaceans, tiny fish, as well as holy images of the Lamb with bloodstained cross, and tiny blue and white Madonnas.

"It is an honor for us to receive such a distinguished visitor," said our guide, softly at my elbow, for I had used my own name in writing to the Abbess, and was expected.

"The honor is all mine, Sister," I replied. "Do you by any chance remember a Professor Heinrich Adams, the great American scholar? He died here during the great war."

"Yes, Signore, I remember Professor Adams perfectly well, although I was just a girl at the time. He lost his faith, poor man. We are forbidden to pray for the souls in hell," she said, raising a troubled face to mine. "Why is that, Signore? I would have thought they needed it most of all."

I didn't even attempt to answer this poser. Fortunately alike for my reputation and my peace of mind we had arrived at the Abbess's quarters. The little Sister showed us into the reception room and bade us wait while she went to announce us to the Abbess. We found ourselves in a vast chamber hung with dark red watered silk that been much damaged by time; the furnishings consisted of a prie-dieu, a large crucifix, and a few spindly ornamental chairs. The windows looked out upon the brilliant green and gold silence of the cloister. The sunlight fell in rectangular sheets upon the polished dark wooden floor, causing it to shimmer like a pond hidden away in some primeval blood-red forest. I heard, rather than saw, the ghosts and shadows of times past fluttering over the lustrous surface of this pond like the paper-thin leaves of autumn; their faint, rustling voices mingled with the bright fanfares of sunlight upon windowglass and, farther off, the light, twittering voices of the nuns at work. The ceiling and the window embrasures were caked with stucco in the characteristically exuberant Sicilian style - the cherubs over the windows probably the work of Serpotta, but those on the ceiling of more recent date, although in very good taste. Over the central door by which we had entered I noted a group of our Lady presiding over the alliance between Pan-Germania and America. Germania is depicted as a handsome Nordic youth, America as a bold, torch-bearing maiden. The youth and the maiden have joined hands in the act of betrothal, and behind these two graceful figures the Virgin, the globe under her feet and the crown of twelve stars upon her head, extends her arms to bless and protect the peace-giving union. It put me in mind of earlier matrimonial alliances, such as that of the Hapsburg Princess Maria Antoinetta to the King of France, or that of the King of England to the Duchess of Chicago, which also had served to establish or maintain the peace in their day. So too the marriage of these two great earthly powers had put an end at last to bloodshed, and marked the resurgence of Anglo-Germanic culture throughout the Old and New Worlds. United now politically as well as temperamentally, the new Europeans were better able to defend themselves against the hungry hordes of the Third World, who beat incessantly upon

the golden doors of civilization, seeking, in their unreasoning greed and envy, to destroy that which they cannot understand. I was in the process of clarifying a few of these observations to Danzig when the door opened and a huge figure, nearly as broad as it was tall, entered and advanced in our direction, its progress as stately and ceremonious as that of a laden ship coming into harbour. This I took to be the Abbess. She came to a halt directly before me, and I knelt and kissed the great hen's-egg ruby that sat upon her enormous finger.

"So, you wish to see our cloister?" she said. She spoke without any apparent movement of the facial muscles, so immobilized were the fleshy folds of her cheeks and chin within the hard casement of the wimple. Her face was very like a frog's, although not so green. The voice, too, was deep and frog-like, of a volume in keeping with her tremendous size, and rolled its funerary echo in the dusky great spaces overhead. "It is a pleasure to open the cloister to such a distinguished visitor. And your young friend?"

"Is here to make a few sketches for my private collection, Your Grace, that is, with Your Grace's permission of course. I am confident that I can answer for him."

"Answer for him?" she said, her tiny crescent-moon eyebrows shooting towards the upper lip of the white casement. "You are a true Christian in that case. Am I not my brother's keeper? And shall you answer for him also before the heavenly throne? Or do you draw the line here below? One must draw it somewhere, or fall into the sin of pride. Come closer, young man," she said to Danzig. "Closer!" He stood within a foot of her, and lightly she touched his fresh cheek with her great white paw.

"I wouldn't presume so far, Your Grace," I replied. "It is quite enough that I am prepared to answer for him for the duration of the visit which Your Grace is good enough to permit me. I haven't the gift of second sight..."

"A pity - it would have been an excellent thing in a poet. I have enjoyed your Iphigeneia so much.

'Who walks upon the smoky waves of dawn
But Pallas in her girdle of new gold...'

"Be seated, gentlemen, please." We sat upon the spindly chairs - as she sank down there came an ominous groan from the overburdened wood. "If you think to write a poem on Sicily you could do worse. Here you will find a perfect equilibrium of the natural and the supernatural beauties. Etna itself was believed by the ancients to be the navel of the world - your Hindu mystics would appreciate that claim! Have you been to visit the Saint?"

"Not yet, Your Grace," I replied.

"Ah well, you must go immediately. She takes a particular interest in visitors from foreign parts. It's a long way to the top of Monte Pellegrino, but the visit must not be neglected on any account. I can lend you my barouche if you like."

"I thank Your Grace, but that will not be necessary, as I already have a carriage at my disposal. But Your Grace is too kind."

The little Sister entered again at this juncture, and served Danzig and myself each with a fluted glass of dark golden marsala wine and a plate of marzipan cherries. We sipped the wine and nibbled the sweetmeats with all the solemnity of a Eucharist.

"Forgive me for not joining you, but this is one day on which we are obliged to observe the strict fast," said our hostess.

"You must have been acquainted with my fellow scholar, Heinrich Adams," I remarked, hoping to hear more of the man whose works had so marked my youth and who, more than any single human agency, was responsible for my presence in this faraway place.

Her eyes became mere slits in her face as she answered. "Professor Adams was a great friend of mine. He often sat where you are sitting now. He had an appreciation of twelfth century stonework superior to that of anyone I have ever known, and I knew Huysmans, Mâle, John Ruskin... I knew them all before the war. He cried like a child the day we got the news about Chartres. I'm afraid he committed a very grievous sin within these very walls..."

"Do you refer to his suicide? Because I must take exception to that narrow belief that would condemn a soul in torment to everlasting hell..."

"I refer to his happiness," she said, opening her eyes wide to pierce me with her stony gaze. At which point she broke into a great, orotund laugh. "Don't presume to enlarge my horizons at my age," she said.

"Happiness?" I echoed. "I don't understand. To be happy is surely no sin. What of the seven joys of Mary?"

"What of them? Do you know them? One of them is the crucifixion - a savage joy for a mother, I should think, and very little allied to happiness. What are these seven joys of Mary but seven daggers that pierce her Immaculate Heart? Bah! Don't talk to me about happiness - it's a childish state, or rather not childish, for children have more sense - they generally bear their sufferings with sufficient gravity - say, rather, an idiotic state, for only an idiot expects to be happy in this life. And Professor Adams was certainly no idiot, but an extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive man - a man like yourself, perhaps. Consequently, a most unhappy man. Yes, I knew him - the last Puritan! The aged young man from Boston. He sat there in his tweeds smoking Turkish cigarettes and speaking in his low clever voice about beauty, always beauty. But what is this beauty he cherished above everything else? Rubble. God is terrible. He doesn't save us from ourselves. We may break our own hearts - and monuments - if we so desire."

"Then you grant the wanton destruction of beauty to be a sin?"

"I grant nothing of the sort! You've seen what remains of our cathedral - does it displease you? I see in your face it does not. The destruction of beauty - of man-made beauty - in other words of art, a sin? A crime? Or a good idea, perhaps? Even an occasional necessity, to free us from those glittering chains that bind us - oh so pleasantly! to the past, to the earth, to ourselves and our own best creations. Idols are made to be broken. How worship a stone Madonna when every dog that crawls on its lice-ridden belly in the dust, every insect on the leaf has more life than this? The Lord God made us, shall His work decay? Don't mistake me - I too have wept for the loss of Chartres - and of Monreale. So too does the Mother weep to see her Child upon the cross. But she would not have it otherwise. That is the secret of Mary's joy, and my friend Adams's despair. Those who pit themselves against the will and the wisdom of God are crushed...I tell you...they are crushed."

I saw with amazement that the loose flaps of her cheeks were shaking, more frog-like than ever, and the tears coursed in two bright rivulets within the valleys formed by those fleshy appendages. She pulled a lace handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her face.

"Forgive an old woman's folly, Professor," she said. "I have been Abbess here for sixty years. I was but a young woman, and a foolish one, when I knew Professor Adams. Now you will think to yourself - Aha! the usual. But it was not like that. I have told you he was the last Puritan. But I will tell you something else as well - he was a knight. A real knight, in blood-stained armour, like the other ones, his brothers, who came before him and built the spiritual castles of Monreale and Cefalù, of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. He

called me 'Principessa', for that title had been mine before I took the veil, and I loved and admired him, as a young and chaste woman may love an older man. You are not so very young yourself, and yet I think you have not yet learned that there is a loss more terrible than that of the most beautiful work of art that ever sprang into being under the hand of man, and that is the loss of a loved human being. I would knock all the cathedrals of Europe into a heap, and burn all the paintings in the Louvre, too, if it would bring back my friend."

"How dare you..." I whispered, aghast. "How dare you?"

"Love is a savage thing, Professor." The great ruby flashed on her enormous hand as she fingered the crucifix at her breast. "The love of God and, the closest we shall get to it in this life, the love of his creatures for one another. There's nothing in the Gospel about your sticks and stones."

"You've no right - no right whatsoever - to destroy culture to gratify the desires of your own heart."

"And you've no right - none at all - to what you call culture. War may be a necessity, if only to rid the world of this excrescence - culture. The men who built the cathedrals loved - not their own work - but the God for whose sake it was done. Very little twelfth century work remains to us, even less from the eleventh, and this was true even before the war. And do you know why? By and large it was deliberately torn down by the next generation to make way for new building. The stones of their fathers were not sufficient to bring heaven closer to earth - they needed their own work, their own sacrifice. No question, then, of your culture. When art has become thoroughly debased, when it no longer has any meaning for anyone, when it no longer seeks to mediate across that great gulf betwixt God and man - then, and only then do we begin to speak of culture. If there is anything sadder than the spectacle of Chartres in ruins, it is that of Chartres, the museum."

"The Center for Medieval Studies?" I ventured.

"Exactly - the so-called Center for Medieval Studies. You would not remember - you are too young - but when I was a girl people came by the hundreds to Monreale, not to pray, but to gawk stupidly at culture. You see, in this I do not agree with my old friend, Professor Adams. I prefer to let Chartres burn. When we have burned to the ground all the museums and culture palaces in the world, we shall be free to begin again, to create a new art - savage, perhaps, but none the less beautiful for that, and our own. Until that time I prefer to watch and pray, and I leave the culture to the professional aesthetes. And now, if you have sufficiently refreshed yourselves, Sister Portia will show you the way, if not to your heart's desire, at least to that which may serve you as a temporary substitute. But then, you know about the consolations of beauty, don't you Professor? C'est votre metier. And you, my dear boy?" she said, turning to Danzig. "You fancy yourself an artist, but you are already something far more rare - a work of art. Don't allow him to wrinkle his brow and rub charcoal in that lovely hair," she said to me peremptorily, and, holding out her hand to be kissed once more, bid us adieu.

Again we walked with the little Sister through the dark corridors till we reached the entrance to the cloister.

"Here you are, Signori. Please take as much time as you like," she said and, folding her hands together, made us a graceful bow. She hurried away down the corridor the way we had come, her black and white habit fluttering about her like a pair of diatonic wings.

The cloister is made in the shape of a square, enclosed on all sides by a low arcade. In one corner a much littler square has been set within the big - the chiostrino for the King's fountain. The central space is given over to verdure, and a wild, strange garden it is.

Overgrown paths of small, brightly colored bits of glass run from the four sides of the cloister into the garden, but these paths mingle hopelessly with clumps of grass and weeds, and finally lose themselves forever in the general confusion towards the center. Among the errant paths there blooms a profusion of sweet and pungent grayish herbs, and a single giant aloes, like a green image of Kali the many-armed, the World Destroyer. Two or three ancient palms, growing now at random intervals, for their companions have died or been cut down, cast long, irregular shadows, oddly at variance with the orderly procession of light and shadow thrown out by the arcades.

There was a languid stillness over the place, odours of invisible rose and insidious marzipan, and the low, tremulous voice of the fountain singing to itself in the chiostrino. The mystical book of the past lay open for my inspection, turned to the chapter on twelfth century stonework, graven upon the capitals of two hundred and twenty-eight columns. The book lay open, and yet I did not read. The truth is, I was afraid. There was such a stillness in that place - I felt I had come to disturb the dead. Perhaps the Abbess's strange speech had rendered me thus uneasy. Certainly I disliked to hear my motives so impugned. Then, I was loathe to trouble Adams's ghost. If he had really been happy here, perhaps my intrusion was unwelcome. And, moreover, two hundred and twenty-eight capitals was such a lot of stonework to be got through - just the thought of it wearied me. The columns were arranged in pairs, each couple entwined like fond lovers by any of a number of foliated and draped devices. Each slender, white column gleamed with a different pattern of inlaid mosaic - little checkerboards of blue and green, red, black, and golden stars. Above them the still idols (But they are only stones! I told myself) returned my inquisitive gaze. Perhaps they did not wish to be looked at. But I had not come all this way to gawk stupidly! I absolved myself in my heart of the charge. Mine was not the indiscriminate greed of the tourist, for had I not come on purpose, over many thousands of miles and despite many obstacles, to see this very place? You may gawk nonetheless, I thought, and was none the easier for thinking it. I was afraid, too, of being disappointed after such a long journey and so many years of anticipation. I was afraid - of not being disappointed, afraid of the very revelation I sought, whatever revelation awaited me should I dare to read in that Bible of stone the lessons writ by men of iron. I was afraid, as I walked among them - *deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas* - looking and yet not looking at the little stone manikins, the huntsmen and lions, angels and devils, knights in armour, mermaids, evangelists, acrobats, monsters, Adam and Eve, Salome and John, the massacre of Innocents, and the agony of sinners. These carven figures had a terrible tenacity beside the evanescent realities of the flesh. They put me in mind of those puppets, whose strutting, high-pitched antics cause us to grip the hand of our companion at the Guignol. And yet they were so still...It was hot in the sun. I had taken nothing since breakfast save the marsala and sweets, nor would I have the temerity to break the fast before nightfall, for all that I might claim the traditional traveller's dispensation. I looked about for Danzig and had once again to marvel at that young man's unexpected capacities. He was standing perfectly still at the center of the overgrown garden, bareheaded in the sun, his young cheeks flushed, his mouth slightly open showing the pearly teeth. A flutter of breath in his slender chest was the only sign of life, for he was handsome and ruddy as a waxwork. His stillness was like that of a cat - an ecstasy of alertness. I smiled to myself, partly in amusement at his childish susceptibility, partly in expectation of some fine drawings from him later in the day, for whenever he is carried away like this I can be sure of an especially rich hoard. I smiled, but nonetheless I felt it uncanny that he was struck so still, as if with the stillness of the stones. Tired and hot, and beginning to be angry

both at myself and at my surroundings, I sat down in the shade of the chiostrino and laved my brow with water from the King's fountain. It smelt sweet and mossy, not at all brackish, and I just touched it to my parched lips. I leaned back against the columns and fell into a stupid doze. While I sat there, my eyes but half open, a pretty little cat came and sat opposite to me, on the sunny side of the wall. She was a Siamese cat, with eyes like blue glass beads, and when she began to clean her sleek fur her tongue was as pink as a rose. I allowed my eyes to droop shut. Through my torpor I heard the fountain singing in its own secret language.

When I sat up again it was already late in the afternoon, for the air had grown quite cool and the shadows had stretched themselves to enormous lengths across the garden. Danzig came and sat beside me, and wordlessly handed me his day's work. He had caught the mermaid perfectly, that solemn bewitching gaze known to me already from the Lorelei. He had caught the mother clinging desperately to the child being torn from her arms. Here were the vigorous angels, the comical, battling knights. But there were several studies of a head I did not recognize - a drawn, delicate face, I should have said inclined to neurasthenia, prematurely aged around the eyes; a thin mouth, a trifle harsh; the whole overshadowed by a huge, white brow like a skull's, a veritable thought machine in which one sensed the combination and re-combination of innumerable ideas, fired in that brain as in a crucible to produce God alone knew what poisonous, exquisite compounds.

"Who on earth is this fellow?" I said to Danzig, holding up one of the sketches of the terrible head.

"Why, that's you, Meister," he replied. "Just a few preliminary studies. Soon I'll begin the real work. I'd like to go to Segeste soon to begin work on the background as well."

"Yes, of course..." I murmured. But it can't be, I thought. I, this ugly white head? I, the handsome court poet of Weimar? But you are nearly forty, a little voice whispered.

"I hope you like it," said Danzig timidly, and I became aware at once that I was frowning furiously; at the same time I realized what an aspect this frown must present affixed as it undoubtedly was to the terrible head of the drawing. Hastily, I replaced the frown with a feigned expression of benevolent indifference - at least this would not frighten anybody!

"Yes, indeed," I said. "I like it very much indeed, my boy. Very, very much indeed..." I handed him the sheaf of drawings with a smile I meant to be reassuring, thus grimacing as if I had the toothache. Danzig had just begun some inquiry after my health when the great bells sounded from the cathedral tower. The pigeons scattered from out the belfry in smoky circles upon the evening sky, turning within that radius of deep, oceanic sound. We took a hurried leave of the Sisters and headed for the church, for we did not wish to be late for the deposition of the ashes.

The press of people was tremendous, from the mumbling bundles of old womanhood in black to the numerous children, many of whom were still dressed in the gaudy costumes of the night before. They tumbled underfoot like so many roses blown on the wind. Their suppressed giggles, sudden explosions of laughter, soft glances and flushed cheeks were in odd contrast to the sombre mood of the crowd. I looked about for Faustina, but didn't see her anywhere. The crowd huddled together before the church, the bells thundered on - we were raised to the utmost pitch of expectation awaiting I knew not what. Gradually the bells left off their noise until only one was tolling alone, a single insistent note repeated again and again with untiring regularity. Then I heard it - a low, unearthly, melancholy roar that rose and fell in rhythm like the sea. At once the crowd drew back to make way. Even the children were quiet now, their eyes round with fear. The terrible sound drew closer and

closer. The bell tolled on and on, and the very air around us seemed to vibrate like one great resounding bell. Closer, ever closer, like the advancing tide, until at last it rounded the corner of the piazza and rushed upon my sight with the half-expected terror of a dream. A group of men, stripped to the waist, their heads swathed in black hoods from which the eyes looked out through circles in the cloth. They carried heavy whips with which they were striking themselves in rhythmical ferocity, and their backs and shoulders were covered with gore. As they marched they shouted in unison a hymn to the Virgin - it was this terrible chanting that we had heard from afar. The blood flew about like rain - it sprinkled my face and shirtfront. The people pressed forward, tripping over one another in their eagerness to touch the streaming wounds. They dipped little pieces of cloth in the blood and held them to their lips. And still the bell tolled, and still the birds circled in the sky. A few of the children were crying. Now the flagellants processed around the church in the lurid glow of the winter sunset. There must have been two hundred of them all together - all of them young men and beautifully made. The air quivered with the crack of the whips, the monotonous chant, the screams of women and children. The crowd pressed close upon them, groping, beseeching, some on their knees, many sobbing and calling upon the Madonna. Some of the women came forward with garlands which they placed over the heads of the flagellants. Soon the flowers were spattered with red, and the odours of jasmine and almond blossom mingled with the pungent, maddening scent of blood.

Into the midst of this bedlam, his advent announced by the ringing of a little silver-voiced bell, came the Bishop in a gown of exquisite purple, surrounded by a flock of priests and boys. First came the thurifer, swinging a gemmed censer that wafted sweet clouds of incense over the crowd. Six boys were needed to carry the Bishop's train; another three bore the instruments of the Passion aloft like tutelary deities. Behind them came the trumpeters, dressed in white Battenburg lace and wings fashioned from swans' feathers. Then the priests, six in number, all in purple satin. Last, behind the priests, the boys of the choir, dressed in white, with chaplets of almond and jasmine wreathing their dark locks, drooping against the silk-petal cheeks of their blossoming faces. The Bishop waded through the crowd, casting the Waters of Redemption upon us with a silver aspergillum. His face beneath the lace-encrusted mitre was painted like a doll's. At the entrance to the church, he turned and addressed the crowd.

"Dominus vobiscum."

"Et cum spiritu tuo."

With a single, animated sigh, people and flagellants alike sank to their knees. The Bishop gave his blessing; we rose and passed on into the ruined church for the ancient and beautiful liturgy that ushers in the season of remorse. The flagellants again took up their whips and resumed their grim procession. All through the service I could hear them just outside the walls, the endless chant rising and sinking, rising and sinking like the sea.

Danzig and I found seats halfway down the nave, for the best places were already taken. The terrible Christus glared down into the apse from above the broken remnants of the gaily clad Court of Heaven. The choir launched into Palestrina's dangerously contrapuntal setting of the Dies Irae. They sang with an icy sweetness that pierced to the heart like a gush of pure water. High in the apse their voices mingled with the blue wings of a thousand Adonis butterflies. The Bishop took his seat beneath the great Pantocrator. A boy knelt at his side, bearing a silver salver on which reposed the ashes of all those heretics burnt in the diocese during the previous year. It was dark now - the stars showed like pinpricks of light in the black dome of night and moths were singeing their white wings

among the candles. The choir had left off singing, and in the sudden silence the eerie chant of the flagellants sounded louder than before. I even fancied I could hear the whistle and crack of the whips. In silence we fell into line, in silence crawled on our knees towards the gilded episcopal throne. The alate boys had put aside their trumpets in favor of little silver-handled flagelli with which they struck our shoulders as we passed. The floor was jagged as well as hard, and I feared for the knees of my velveteen breeches. Once through the gauntlet one knelt before the Bishop to receive the black thumbprint of Death upon the forehead, and hear the murmured reminder from the episcopal lips, Dust thou art, to dust returneth. One then kissed the bishop's bared foot, which was wiped clean after each kiss by an acolyte with a linen napkin. When it came my turn I kissed the foot hurriedly, not wishing to linger upon the sight and smell of aged flesh. I looked up into the smoothly powdered face, the eyes like two blue-white eggs below the penciled brows, the thin mouth painted carmine, moving in continuous repetition of that Dust thou art...dust 'turneth...dust th'art...'turneth... At the same time I became aware of the enormous dome of night opening above my head, and looking up I saw stars falling like fiery rain into the dome, and the black wings of demons and the white wings of angels swooping in great arcs that momentarily obliterated this or that vector of the sky. The greasy thumb pressed upon my brow. I turned and scuttled on my knees back to my place in the relative safety of the nave. Babies and children received the mark as well as adults and it was strange to see, in the streets that evening, the grim admonition on the brow of some oblivious infant nodding contentedly in its mother's arms. Those who had stayed away and did not bear the telltale mark had thus acquired a temporary air of immortality, and went about with their eyes averted, as if ashamed to be reminded of our impending doom.

After the service the Bishop again blessed the flagellants, and they departed up the steep road into the mountains. Their numbers were increased by two brothers from the town who joined them at the last moment, to the fervent admiration of the crowd. But I imagine they must have frequent need of new blood, for many must succumb to the rigours of such self-punishment. I could hear them chanting for a long time afterwards, more softly as they passed on into the distance. Just when I thought they had finally passed out of hearing, when I had begun to forget them and to think of other things, a sudden gust of wind from the hills would bring to my ears another crescendo of wailing sound. Soon the piazza was empty and nothing remained to mark their passage but the splashes of blood which shone darkly in the moonlight upon the dust and stones.

Ein Schwarzer Pudel

The observation of fast days is less than rigorous among the Sicilians - this I had opportunity to observe at dinner where we were served with ample portions of seasoned white-fleshed fish, and a creamy risotto in which nuggets of pink seafood were hidden like gems buried in yellow earth. We drank the frosty greenish wine from Alcamo. Not having broken our fast since morning (with the exception of the minor lapse at the Abbess's behest) we ate heartily and without much conversation until the plates had been cleared and the fruit brought in. The nutty, sweet aroma of the food had permeated my hands and lips, the wine I had drunk had perhaps rendered me less vigilant than is my custom. I placed one of the firm black grapes in my mouth and allowed my eyes to close for a moment - the burst of pungent juice caused me to open them again. The candles had been lit at all the tables, and the little wire-bright flames gilded the plates and silverware, the wine goblets, the beautiful hands of

the waiter, and the faces of the guests, which were rendered more secretive by the chiaroscuro play of flickering lights. The draped white cloths and burning candles were reminiscent of so many biers, and I asked the waiter why the room was kept so dark.

"There is no electricity after six o'clock, Signore. We are too high in the mountains...the generator is not adequate. I hope the Signore will not be inconvenienced?"

"No, no," I said, wishing him away. I didn't like the way he was smiling at Danzig, who was pretending not to notice anything. The many little flames burning on the tabletops and in the hands of the ceramic slaveboys were redoubled in the mirror, where they appeared to float as on a dark sea, and again in the plateglass, where ghostly flames were superimposed upon the jewelled blanket of the city that seemed to lie just the other side of the glass. The lights of Palermo have a curious manner of twinkling in and out of the visible field, due, no doubt to some atmospheric condition with which I am not acquainted. They appear and disappear at different points on the plane, at apparently random intervals of time. The lights from the candles, on the other hand, burn continuously both in their reflections and in themselves, and give the effect of, on the one hand, a double screen onto which the fluent images of candleflames are continuously being projected, and, on the other hand, in three dimensions all around one, of a graveyard or shrine on the occasion of some great religious festival when the peasants come flocking, candles in hand, to beseech the saints or quieten the dead.

"Disappointing on the whole, was it not, my friend?" I said, speaking, of course, of the cathedral but interested to see whether he would follow my train of thought or mistake this for a critique of the meal. He answered me at first with a startled flicker of the eyes under the long lashes which was, however, instantly replaced by his habitual expression of alert amiability.

"You have read too much in Adams, Meister," he said. "You expected too much - probably you had built up an image in your mind, between reading and imagining, that no reality could have justified."

"It didn't affect you that way, then?" I said sharply, affecting a certain irritation. He shrugged, and displayed the smile of spurious disingenuity to which I was becoming accustomed.

"No, Meister, I can't say that it did. But then, I am not well-read like yourself. What is the cathedral of Monreale, or any cathedral, or any other building if you like? To me it's a pile of stones, that's all, more or less beautiful depending on my mood, on the time of day, on the weather, and also, although not necessarily most of all, on the skill of the men who made it. Yes - it's a pile of stones like any other. That's what I was expecting to see, that's what I did see, and consequently I wasn't disappointed. Whereas you were expecting a demonstration of highest principles, even a spiritual revelation of some sort - all this you ask from a pile of stones? I'm not surprised you were disappointed, though I'm very sorry of course. You see, for me, art is not a spiritual but a sensual thing - it belongs to the eyes, and then to the nose, the fingertips...The most beautiful building I have ever seen was an ordinary country railway station on the Adriatic coast, just north of Trieste, from which you could neither smell nor hear the sea and in which nonetheless the sea itself was somehow contained as in a beached ship. To disembark at this station was to feel instantly the whole of the seaside - the rocks falling into the sea, the low, purple hills, the open sky. I felt it much more keenly there in that station than later on the beach itself. But that was a day in summer, impossibly hot. The place stank of diesel fumes and geraniums...I wouldn't want to see it again in

another season. It would be an altogether different place and no doubt perfectly ordinary, perhaps even ugly or depressing in a winter rain."

"You're right about Adams," I said, musingly. "It's like finally coming face to face with another man's mistress about whom you've heard so much. The poor woman can't possibly fulfil the expectations which her devoted lover has taken care to impress upon you. And, acquainted as we are with our friend's rapturous hyperbole, be she ever so beautiful, we must exclaim to ourselves, 'Is this all! What does he see in her?' I can't agree with you about the sensual nature of art, however."

"I didn't expect you to," he said. He seemed pleased at the soundness of his own estimation of my character. "You see, you're a Puritan, Meister - you don't really approve of art."

"My dear boy, it is not as simple as all that. In the first place, I am not a Puritan. On the contrary..."

"Kiss me, then," he said. There was a pause in which I became aware that the waiter had left off his tasks behind the bar and was watching closely for the outcome of this challenge. The candle flames swayed and sighed in the sweetened, slightly putrid atmosphere that lingered over the fruit and wine. Then I burst into a loud guffaw - his childlike audacity amused me so - and laughed until the tears ran down. My laughter had the unintentional, although not unwelcome effect of loosening the inhibitions of the gentleman at the adjoining table (whom I have previously identified as the lesser-known nephew of the great Beethoven). His curious eyes had scarcely left my face during the whole course of the meal, but had fastened themselves with persistent appetite now upon my cheek, now my nose, now my chewing mouth, until he might be said to be dining off my visage more than off his victuals. He was wearing a white tailcoat this evening, and had powdered his hair, which costume served to elevate his already remarkable pallor to the level of the grotesque. This young man now rose and presented himself, with much Teutonic bowing and heel-clicking, at my elbow.

"Paul van Beethoven at your service," he said. "My friend and I were wondering if we might share in your little joke? Forgive me if I am intruding, but do I not have the honor of addressing the greatest of living poets, His Excellency Professor Doctor...?"

"Not so loud!" I hissed. "Not so loud, young man, if you please. For reasons which it is entirely superfluous for you to know I prefer to enjoy a relative incognito when I travel abroad. Pray, take a seat, sir, and your friend also. We are two gentlemen sorely in need of additional company. That noise you mistook for merriment was merely the eruption brought about by an excess of sustained contact between two friends of unequal temperament." Beethoven's nephew sat down on my right and motioned to his physician to join us, which the latter did with alacrity.

"Doctor Praetorius," said young Beethoven, presenting the Doctor. "Our fellow traveller is indeed the illustrious poet," he said to the doctor, "but he prefers to remain anonymous for the moment." The doctor bowed low and took the remaining seat on my left.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying," said young Beethoven, "about the sensual versus the spiritual in art." His voice was high and soft, as if it came from a long way off; it put me in mind of a choirmaster with a sore throat. I had known such a choirmaster in my youth - a gentle young priest who brought upon himself successive fits of laryngitis by the exasperated shrieks with which he would importune us, sixty-five in number, between the ages of seven and fourteen, to reproduce with greater accuracy and attention the sublime music of Mozart and Palestrina. He eventually had to be sent to a sanitarium in Davos,

where he soon died of consumption. Now, most unexpectedly, I heard his voice again in this pale, attenuated nephew of Beethoven, who no doubt also suffers from laryngitis, and who was clearly desirous to lecture me on his infantine theories of aesthetics. (I am not in general fond of the conversation of people younger than myself.) Hearing this voice of my former choirmaster reproduced so exactly by Beethoven's nephew, speaking from out the dark, murmuring ocean of the past, I felt myself waver and lose my footing in time as on an icy path. I felt myself again a jaundiced and cynical ten year old, yawning over the endless coloratura of Exultate Jubilate and pondering with disgust the dirty neck of the boy in front of me. The candles before me on the table, taking upon themselves the identity of those candles that burned so long ago in the choir, refracted, as in a prism, the room where I sat - the walls spread outwards to the curved delimitations of the apse, the roof flew up to a bossy vault lost in shadows, the jasmine on the table wafted a smell of incense to my stupefied brain and I was thoroughly startled to hear the words, My Uncle Ludwig.

"Your Uncle Ludwig?" said I, once again finding my footing in the world of the hotel dining room, in the company of Beethoven's nephew Paul, his physician Praetorius, and my young friend Danzig. "What has your Uncle Ludwig to say on the question?" I asked this with keen interest, for the opinions of the great composer could not fail to enlighten me somehow.

"I was just saying that I am not really very well acquainted with my Uncle Ludwig," said young Beethoven apologetically. "It is Carl who has lived with him all these years. Despite repeated attempts on my part to recommend myself to him, he has never taken much notice of me. It is Carl he prefers. And Carl is a most worthless fellow! See here - I have even gone so far as to shoot myself in the head in my efforts to attract my Uncle's sympathy. But while this was a most successful coup de théâtre for Carl, in my case the results were very disappointing. He has sent me to Italy to recover my nerves, he has placed me under the care of a private physician, but he takes no personal interest in me whatever." Passing his white hands over his face, he began to sob piteously, and the black crusted hole in his temple throbbed convulsively and vomited a few drops of blood, which fell conspicuously upon the white tablecloth. "Grotesque, grotesque..." he cried, sobbing into his hands, and in this grotesque, grotesque I could hear the echos of other cries belonging to other nephews of other Uncle Ludwigs, nephews on the Wartburg and in the Salzkammergut, at Linderhof and Neuschwanstein, nephews as far afield as the shores of Lake Erie and Baffin Island. I felt that by this grotesque, grotesque he saw and passed judgement on myself, on my violet silk frock coat, on my teeth, on my poetry manicured into mythic grandeur, on that ill-hidden voluptuousness which draws me towards people like Danzig and Faustina despite all my reservations to the contrary. And yet there was nothing personal in this grotesque, grotesque - one felt intuitively that it was a pronouncement on life itself, and would affect each hearer differently according to his own taste for and sense of the grotesque. In a sense this nephew showed himself worthy of his great uncle in his ability to load with meaning a single phrase, for much as his Uncle Ludwig will load a phrase - say, a modulation to the sub-mediante - with a meaning at once exhaustive and untranslatable, his nephew had loaded his exclamation of grotesque, grotesque with a meaning that transcended all immediate associations and thereby succeeded in describing a reality instinctively felt but resistant to any further, non-musical as it were, elucidation.

"You must not excite yourself, Paul," said the Doctor, but the sobbing continued unabated. Slowly, with an expression of some annoyance, the Doctor got to his feet. "You must forgive my young charge, gentlemen - his nerves are in a deplorable state. Come

along now, Paul," he said, and laid a hand upon the boy's convulsive shoulder. "Perhaps now that the ice is broken, you gentlemen will do me the honor to visit me in my room one of these evenings. I have several items that might interest you very much, Professor, pertaining to my researches in natural philosophy." He jerked young Beethoven expertly from the chair and, holding him by the loose cloth between the shoulder blades, propelled him towards the door. The youth proceeded to drop his hands and his lamentations, and to move, puppet-like, in the direction required. Still keeping a firm grip on his now well-nigh catatonic charge, the Doctor turned to us at the door and made a little bow, bidding us good evening.

As the Doctor and Beethoven's nephew were leaving us, a small shadowy something took advantage of the open door to enter the room. It ran swiftly, stealthily, without hesitation to our table and leapt into my lap. It was a little Siamese cat. Her small body was covered with fur the color of almond cream. Her tiny oval paws and conical ears had the color of dark chocolate and the nap of silk velvet, and on her pretty face she wore a Venetian mask of the same dark hue. She lashed me with her chocolate tail and settled on my thighs, purring like a small, overheated electrical motor. I reached down to stroke her - she arched her back in pleasure and plied her nacreous claws in the cloth of my trousers. Startled by this attack upon the tender flesh of my thighs, I pushed her to the floor. She then commenced to rub herself most lasciviously against my leg and to mew in a piteous, strident tone, all the while fastening on me her enormous blue glass eyes. When she opened her mouth to cry she displayed the pink plush interior of her tiny mouth, lined with snow-white, needle-sharp teeth. I didn't like the way she was looking at me; I didn't like the feel of her silky fur stretched taut over the brittle bones rippling under my palm; I didn't like the impossibly narrow circuit of her pulsing throat, and it occurred to me that it would be an easy thing to wring her neck - I could do it in a moment with one hand - and at that moment I felt within me how the tiny vertebrae would crack, how the silk-clad body would writhe under my grasp, the pink, needle-edged mouth twisting helplessly in the air; I didn't like the voluptuous thrill that accompanied this train of thought and brusquely I said to Danzig, who was leaning back in his chair with the air of someone enjoying a spectacle, "Get that animal out of here, can't you?" By using the expression that animal I tried to dispel the idea of lubricious femininity which the cat had aroused in me.

"Right away, Meister, " he said, and stooping down he took hold of the cat and sat her on his shoulder. "Will you be requiring anything else, Meister?" he said, again with that disingenuous smile. Or is it? On my answering in the negative he went out, not through the inner door of the hotel, but through the glass door to the terrace.

It was then I became aware of another person in the room besides myself. (The waiter had long since retired to the kitchen.) In the darkest corner of the room, at the only table without a lighted candle, sat the huddled figure of my former friend, Barton Beale, in his habitual greatcoat and muffler. Whether he had materialized at that moment, or had been sitting there unnoticed in the dark throughout the evening, I had no idea. He sat as motionless as the dead. The moment I saw him sitting there in the corner in the dark I felt rather than saw his eyes meet mine and I was sure that he, too, had recognized me. We sat for a long time thus regarding one another in the dark. The night wind blew in from the sea and extinguished the candles, and what had been gilded was now argent in the moonlight. The plates glimmered like huge silver coins, the glasses held a bright, mercuric liquid. All the darkness in the room seemed to concentrate itself in that one corner. Once I heard him shift ever so slightly in his chair and I was certain he was about to speak. My throat suddenly

went dry - I was frightened and terribly curious, but he quickly subsided once more into that moveless silence at which he now seemed to excel. I felt that his eyes were no longer upon me, and, being weary in body and soul, I took the opportunity to go up to bed. Only later, as I lay there tossing in my usual fruitless quest for sleep, did it occur to me that perhaps he had been waiting for me to speak first.

All my life I have been unable to sleep. As an infant I was the despair of my parents and the unwitting nemesis of a continuous stream of well-intentioned nurses by virtue of my incorrigible sleeplessness. As a young child I learned subterfuge, and became expert at the simulation of sleep - the moveless eyelid so difficult to maintain, the slow, quiet breath, a respiration painfully contrary to the restless anxieties of my heart. In my youth this persistent insomnia revealed itself as an unsuspected asset, for I was able to devote to my studies those hours which others squandered in sleep. Rarely did I sleep more than two or three hours a night, nor was my condition amenable to intervention, for my peculiar and personal form of insomnia is coupled with a hyper-susceptibility to nightmares which every known soporific serves only to heighten to truly unbearable levels of terror and verisimilitude. I have had dreams under the influence of opiates which even now, twenty years later and in broad daylight, cause me to break out in a cold sweat should some inadvertent association call one of them to mind. To the sleep-inducing properties of these drugs I proved all too sensitive and, typically, under a very mild dose, would drop off to sleep for twenty hours of uninterrupted mental torment. It was after one such session of pharmacopic terror that I emerged from the strangling embrace of Morpheus under the delusion that I was being followed by the amphisbaena, an enormous serpent with a head at either end of its hideous body. On the verge of a total breakdown, I was sent by my frantic parents to a sanitarium in Davos, where I came under the care of the notorious Hofrat Behrens. The doctor forbid me all drugs and rebuilt my constitution from the ground up by means of long walks at top speed through the snow, and a bottle of champagne three times a day. It is to this regimen that I still adhere whenever I feel my health to be in danger. Throughout my student years and early manhood I stuck to the regime and was no longer troubled by excessive nightmares. I took top honors in my class. Meanwhile I became more and more aware of an entire nocturnal universe of which the ordinary man in need of eight or ten hours of slothful oblivion is forever ignorant. It is at night that insects creep across the floor, mice scamper, cats prowl, owls shriek, angels speak, ghosts walk, devils talk...At night the cities open their sewers and vomit up the floating faeces, blood, and sperm...In the streets the lights are lit, the windows dark, and I met young girls, powder-white in moonlight under bobbing aigrettes - I met small boys who tugged at my hand and offered themselves for a handful of coins. I didn't dare give myself up to these pleasures. I knew I was being followed by the Censor, by the agents of the Archduke, by rivals who longed to discredit me, by the long long file of insects that creeps across the floor, by the amphisbaena...I stayed at home and indulged in surreptitious solitary pleasures behind closed doors with the blinds shut tight. Gliding the wet, sticky palm in an ecstasy peopled by a hyperactive imagination, I indulged in lonely orgies that went on till dawn.

Unfortunately, as I grew older, my need for sleep increased but my capacity for it remained unchanged. The result is a condition of perpetual exhaustion. I am always tired. Every night I toss for weary hours on my bed of invisible nails. I have become acquainted with all the Proustian intervals between sleep and wakefulness, but sleep itself, for the most part, again and again eludes me. My eyes burn - I must wear dark glasses now during the brightest hours of the day. When at last I do sleep, often it is only to enter a dream world that

mimics with additional vigour all the torments of my waking hours - for I dream that I am awake and unable to sleep! Occasionally I achieve a real slumber, I escape momentarily from my obsession, only to enter some dark primeval forest of my own making where new terrors of infinite absurdity and inventiveness await me.

This, then, was a night like any other. A night on which I was unable to sleep. I had blown out the candle and lay under a light blanket, for the night was mild and pleasant. I lay with the window open, listening to the distant thunder of the sea, the silver tinkle of moonlight on the blinds, the deep-voiced thrum of clouds over the mountain, the attenuated whisper of my own febrile respirations, the passionate irregular tattoo of my anxious heart, when I heard, like an intimation of immortality blown hither on a wind from heaven, that immaculate annunciatory gesture that serves to introduce the spiritual-pianistic exercises of J.S. Bach, the aria to the Goldberg Variations.

Someone is playing the piano in the hotel dining room, I said to myself, and at the very moment I said it I added, It's Beale, of course, of course, for the style was unmistakable, partaking as it did of a vigour, a seriousness, a moral beauty, a contrapuntal clarity all long familiar to me from the recordings. Yes, the little sarabande from the Goldbergs - it sounds of starlight, snowy skies, and night air, of echoing rooms filled with empty coffee cups and stubbed out cigarettes, and the lights that glow on sleeping machines. Quickly I rose and, putting on my dressing gown, went downstairs. Taking care not to startle or alarm him, I did not venture into the dining room but took a seat on the terrace just outside. I couldn't see into the darkened room, but I could hear him quite well, for the door was open and the night clear. I sat on the terrace under the lemon trees; the odour of citron lent to this arctic music a faint, borrowed note of tropical ardor. The moon was bright overhead and the sharp black shapes of leaves and branches rippled upon the paving stones like the images of trees that rustle deep within a lake or fountain. He played the aria in a tempo so remote from time, in any other hands it would have dissolved completely, one would have heard only single, isolated fragments drifting like leaves, one by one, upon the languid air. But Beale somehow managed to imply in each note both its progenitors and its progeny. There were unheard reverberations that reached like silver filaments into the ear, connecting moment to moment and note to note. Under this process of intensive deconstruction, one was drawn irresistibly by those silver filaments into closer and closer contact with something felt to be at once invisible, inaudible, unknowable.

The Two Goldbergs

[from the *Alldeutsche Musikalische Zeitung*, February 1982]

Barton Beale made two famous (or infamous) recordings of the Goldberg Variations - they stand like twin headstones at either end of his career, for the first was also his first-ever recording, the vehicle that catapulted him to fame and an international career, and the second was his last. The earlier sounds like a ghost behind the later, and vice-versa. Whichever one samples one is intermittently aware of the other's pale spectre hovering in the background. Goldberg I is bursting with the sexual exuberance, the joie de vivre and malicious humour of a boy of twenty, and bursting at the seams with a prodigal talent. Despite the breathtaking technical facility, the playing is a little uncertain, a little amateurish - it relies heavily on convention in the conventional bits - overture, fugue, quodlibet. In the adagio something happens, something surprising given what has gone before. A revelation of such tenderness is, on the whole, painful to witness. It is like watching a girl undress - a

girl who is very pretty and very young, and not quite sure if she is more proud or more ashamed of her nakedness. It is a romantic adagio, as Liszt or even Wagner might have written it; it is moonlight beside the rest, which lies all in sunshine.

The later recording is of a profound and arctic sadness. It sounds in turns puritanical, mawkish, hymnal, almost sexless, and then again twisted and degenerate. What was formerly prodigal musicality is now absolute mastery - there is no shaping of the phrase, but the phrase itself, the very thing. There is no piano-playing, there is, almost, no piano. The tempi are more extreme - of a glacial slowness, or rushing like Gadarene swine towards the precipice of chaos. The lowering bass lines gather like storm clouds. The adagio is now of a beauty altogether different from the shy sensuality of Goldberg I. A militant masculine beauty, emphatic, relentless, even harrowing. After this adagio the remaining variations explode one after another in a crescendo of erotic desperation. Then the quodlibet - no longer a piece of Deutsche Freundlichkeit (pace Beale) but a grim little joke from a man to whom everything, including his own despair, is funny. The aria da capo seems to disown and disembodify itself, to transcend time and space. The whole unfolds in the hard white light of an empty studio in the farthest hours of the night, the windows dark and a few colored lights shining like cats' eyes from the consoles. Then the dawn comes up - a winter dawn, flat, stale, and unprofitable - while the greatest pianistic mind of our century sleeps it off in a shabby motel room on the outskirts of Toronto. He lies in the flickering blue light of a television screen wherein whirl the tiny gray and white couples of the Central Canadian Ballroom Dancing Competition. The music? The Beautiful Blue Danube.

* * * * *

The aria was over - the last G with its chromatic appoggiatura drifted by on the wings of the night wind and was caught by the moon-streaked leaves of the lemon trees, who tossed it back and forth among themselves like a plaything, until at last it died a natural death among the shadowy, odorous fruits. I heard the creak of the door and looked up. Beale came out onto the terrace, swaddled in his usual array of heavy outer garments, a hat pulled low over his forehead. He hesitated for a moment, turning his head from side to side as if in search of something (the errant G?), then seated himself on the bench beside me. Again, I felt his eyes fixed on my face.

"Hello, Barton," I said, cautiously, not wanting to frighten him. Although he sat in shadow, I thought I saw him smile.

"Hello," he said. His voice was softer than I remembered it. Again he subsided into silence, but I took his presence as sufficient invitation this time, and plunged with abandon into an opening conversational gambit.

"I'm surprised to see you here," I said.

"So am I," he said. "To tell you the truth, so am I. I'm not here willingly - I was sent. I hate this kind of place. I hate anything at all tropical. The light actually makes me feel sick - there's a profusion of color that's really nauseating. I can't function in this whole overheated, operatic environment. But - I have to just now...I...It's very important for me to be here just now."

"I thought you'd given up the piano for good?"

"I have, really. It's just that, to a certain extent I still rely upon it. It's a spiritual weakness of mine, I'm quite ashamed of it really. But I find I'm unable to sleep - just

completely impossible - unless I have contact with it, just very minimal contact, say, once a month. But this place is getting to me - it's the second time this week..."

"Is it always just the aria?"

"No, no...some nights I break down and play the whole thing. Some nights...I play something else altogether. I'm not actually all that crazy about the Goldbergs, to tell you the truth. I'm sick of them. Now the Metamorphosen of Richard Strauss - that's my idea of music. Would you like me to play you the Metamorphosen?"

(? ? ? ! ! ! ! ? ? ?)

"Yes."

I followed him into the almost total darkness of the deserted dining room. To my surprise he sat down, not at the piano, but in the same dark corner where I had seen him earlier in the evening. The moonlight gleamed on the open keyboard. Baffled, I too took a seat. Suddenly the piano, by itself, began to play the Metamorphosen of Richard Strauss. Beale had not moved from his seat in the corner. Impossibly, the piano reproduced the entire piece of music as written for twenty-three strings. I heard voices that simply could not have been coming from a single piano. The music was characterized by Beale's typical purity of voice-leading and nervous clarity of tone; there was the usual Bealean out-on-a-limb recklessness in the hectic action of the keys. And yes, it was astoundingly beautiful. Grateful for the cover of darkness, I wept as if I were in pain.

"How do you do it?" I said, when it was over. "Is there a piano roll, a tape, or what?"

"Telekinetic piano," he said, and I could feel him smiling in the dark. "It only works over short distances - at least so far. I've had success at up to fifty feet, under ideal conditions. But ten to twenty is more the norm. You see, there's a superfluity of physical contact in most piano-playing. I've felt that ever since I was a kid, but I was never able to work out the practicalities of it until the accident."

"Then there was an accident?"

"Oh yes - there was an accident."

"And you were killed instantly?" He only smiled again by way of an answer.

"This still is not the final step," he said.

"What then?"

"Unheard music. That's the ultimate goal."

"Augenmusik?"

"Augenmusik is only the substitution of one area of sensual perception for another. I'm talking about a perception completely independent of the whole tactile-sensual experience. The ear and the eye are both visible appendages to the brain. Located as they are on the outside of the body they're continually bombarded with all kinds of stuff, and corrupted, coarsened by this continuous contact with the world. Because you're a poet immediately you want to substitute eye for ear - you know yourself how much of what you do is dependent on the functioning of the eye. All those poetic images you're so fond of - they couldn't exist without the eye. But music, in its purest form, would enter the brain directly, without the mediation of any sensory apparatus. We're used to thinking of music as sensual, as basically a very sensual experience that insinuates itself through the ear. If you look at the ear you'll see just what sort of thing it really is! It's pink, fleshy, curvaceous, it looks like a seashell from some tropical island, like a rococo staircase, like an orchid. It's loaded with

nerve endings! But the brain is safely imprisoned inside a real fortress of bone - nothing can touch it. And it's gray - my favorite color."

"Suppose you could apprehend music somehow with the naked mind - the mind alone - whatever it is you're trying to suggest I'm not sure - what then? What would remain for the mind to apprehend without the sensual knowledge of tonal values? A series of mathematical relationships?"

"Maybe...I don't know," he said sadly. There was silence for several minutes, then he began again in a more animated tone.

"Listen, do you really believe that music - that art - does us good? I tell you, it's exactly the opposite! Just to begin with, take performing. A deliberately demeaning...I mean, you take a situation that's intrinsically private and...How would like to have thirty-five hundred strangers watch while you made love? And then to read a critique of your performance the next day in the newspapers? It's so embarrassing - I felt like a performing seal. I always thought somebody ought to throw me a cracker, you know, or some mackerel, whatever, like they do to the seals. In the opera, if they like the prima donna they throw flowers at her, but I always thought it would be more appropriate to have these little titbits...Bread and circuses, that's what it is, bread and circuses...So you move on to recording - you try to eliminate that whole Roman amphitheatre aspect from your performance. But recordings also falsify and distort. They create an audio-sensual matrix. The good society will have no art, absolutely not."

"And no love?" I said, just to play devil's advocate. He was clearly insane - there was no sense in what he was saying, but his madman's logic interested me.

"Love - the emotion or the theological concept? One can love things but not people. Machines, for example. I love machines because they are intrinsically good and kind. They approach the Godhead- they protect us from one another. Music - there are certain pieces of music, yes. And the arctic, that's something you can love. It lets you breathe - you're alone up there. But people? People are essentially unknowable. You can't love what you don't know"

"And God? Also unknowable?"

"To be sure."

"Then we cannot love Him," I concluded. "And the Virgin?"

"Oh that's different, that's another thing entirely," he said, and again lapsed into a meditative silence that lasted several minutes. Outside on the terrace the lemon trees bent their dark heads together as if in conclave. I heard them whispering to one another, and the moonlight tinkling on the plateglass, and a dog barking somewhere not far off.

"You know, my mother taught me to play the whole of The Well-Tempered Clavier by the time I was ten," he said. "It's good music, very upright - but does it make the world better - or worse? More bearable, or less? When I was ten the answer was definitely yes - better, more bearable. Later on it was no longer so clear. Music is arousing, it excites...rapture, something over-extended in the soul. People imagine all sorts of things under its influence. There was the Kreutzer murder of course. Can you imagine a poetry murder? One where the murderer was motivated by fear and jealousy of the poetic power? I can, easily. I've even read about such a case - it's in a book by a Russian, a man by the name of Turgenev, but you know the case I'm referring to, I can see. The one where the mother comes back from the dead and kills her own daughter rather than allow her to fall under the spell of a certain poem. Unless I'm mistaken, it's one of your poems this Turgenev has in mind, too."

"I chalk it up to professional jealousy," I said. "I don't believe a word of it."

"Neither do I, really, but you have to admit it's possible. That you simply cannot deny."

"So art is dangerous - that's hardly a startling or an original observation. You put the blame on us, but it's life itself that's dangerous, my friend, life itself." He shuddered and hid his face in his heavily gloved hands.

"All right, all right," he moaned.

"What about your *Metamorphosen*? How many people died in the bombing of Munich? A thousand, ten thousand? Some obscene number. But if it hadn't been for that supreme dramatic stage-set, the bombed-out ruin of his home town, Strauss would never have written your *Metamorphosen*. Was it worth it then? Come here a moment," I said. "I want to show you something." He followed me out onto the terrace. The night had grown cold, the wind keen. "Look down there," I said, gesturing towards the glimmering lights of Palermo far below. "Suppose for an instant that each of those lights represents a human being - a stranger you have never seen and will never know. If I told you that for each of those lights that was extinguished you could have another *Metamorphosen*, would you really tell me to keep my masterpieces? Think of it, Barton - hours and hours of beauty, serenity, wonder..." He was breathing hard; he turned away from the brink of the hill and faced me.

"Shut up," he said. "Don't talk like that. It's devilish to talk like that. You only confirm my entire fallacy. Let's get down to fascistic practicalities - it's evil, what we do." We stood side by side in the wind, and the lights of the city twinkled below us like the stars of the Milky Way. "My God, it's cold," he said, and I noticed he was shivering despite his heavy apparel. "I've achieved zero sum circulation," he said, in an explanatory tone. "It's a sub-clinical arctic condition, a lot of Eskimos have it. Listen, I'll tell you what I object to. It's not art per se. It's the pleasure principle - because art is pleasant, to a lot of people, it's a pleasant way to pass the time."

"So is sexual intercourse, so is caressing little girls, so is eating and drinking..."

"Exactly! That's what I object to - the hedonism of art. It may be there are things totally untainted by sensuality. You mentioned the *Virgin* before. A lot of religious art might qualify. A lot wouldn't of course. I mean, that whole grand opera school of Italian painting has got to go. But there are things...the voices of women, for example. They don't even have to be singing, but just speaking in their pretty voices. Or the lights of a recording console - they have these arctic blue and white tones in the middle of the night...And frozen lakes have certain reverberative properties..."

"Stones," I said. "The stones of Venice, the stones of Chartres, the stones of Monreale. And there are statues of the Buddha that have such purity, such goodness. Stone is incorruptible - if you smash it, it merely rearranges itself into a thousand million little fragments of inviolate loveliness. Do you know that the Japanese have temple gardens devoted only to stones? Some of these stones are very ancient - they've been revered for centuries. Some are covered with moss, others immersed part of the way in water. For the most part they appear to be perfectly ordinary stones - I mean they're not startling formations or anything like that. They're just - stones. The monks use them as aids in meditation, I believe."

"I went to Garmisch once," he said. "I wanted to see Strauss's grave, but it wasn't there. They seem to have moved it - no one knew anything about it. It was beautiful there. All this snow and ice, and these huge rocks... I wound up staying a week. It was like *Der Zauberberg* - I never wanted to leave. I love any place where there's snow."

"Then what in God's name are you doing here?" I couldn't help but ask again. His eyes shifted evasively.

"It really wasn't my own idea at all. Listen... do you ever have strange dreams? About angels for example? Most of my dreams are polyphonic - there's very little visual element at all. Then one night this Angel suddenly appears. I knew it for an Angel right away - there were several indications. First of all its size - it was enormous, bigger than a man. And it was black, always a somewhat intimidating color, at least to me, and not one I'd associate with ordinary dream-persons. When it opened its mouth it didn't speak but sang, in a gorgeous, full-out, Wagnerian soprano. The music was like something out of the *Götterdämmerung* but more intense, if you can believe it. It told me to go immediately to this place in Sicily. I'd never heard of it before - had to look it up in the Baedeker. There's an old cathedral, isn't there? And a convent of Carmelites. Neither of which interests me very much. Something is supposed to happen to me here, something important. I wish it would happen already - I can't take much more of this. The light makes me ill, you know, actually nauseous."

"You should try to sleep a little," I said, for he really did look wretched.

"I've become an insomniac, like Count Kayserling," he said, laughing. "I suppose I'll have to try his remedy as well." Shaking with amusement at his own joke, he went inside and lay down on the sofa under the mirror, and in another moment I heard the buoyant notes of the first of the thirty variations, rippling like laughter in the dark.

Back in my room again, I lay down in the dark, my astringent wakefulness soothed nearly to somnolence by the sounds of Beale's telekinetic piano. The moonlight, entering through the slatted blinds, threw narrow strips of light across the floor that flickered in visible counterpoint. By this same flickering moonlight I saw the door swing slowly open. At first I saw no one. Then I heard a snuffling sound and cast my eyes lower down, where I beheld a little dog - a little black poodle with fiery eyes that glowed in the dark. He sat down at the foot of the bed and growled at me. "Sei ruhig, Pudel!" I cried. With that he ceased his growling and lolled a pink plush tongue from the side of his mouth in a comical grin. I sat up and called him to me. There was a small envelope affixed to his collar, embossed with the coat of arms of the House of Wittelsbach and inscribed with my name.

Villa Nebbiosa, Palermo

Most Highly Honored Professor!

On behalf of His Majesty, Ludwig II, Prince of Palermo and titular King of Bavaria, I write to inform you that your request has found favor in His Majesty's eyes. Be at the west gate tomorrow night, one hour before sunset. Come alone. The poodle will carry your answer.

The Royal Gardener

This was surprising! I had not been unduly disappointed when a request to view the gardens of the Villa Nebbiosa, submitted on my behalf by the Archduke, had met with no reply. The Prince of Palermo was a notorious recluse and no one was ever admitted to the fabulous gardens. I looked, in some perplexity of mind, at the poodle, who lay on the ground licking his paws. "Come here, Pudel," I said. He rose and approached me, wagging his tail and whining hopefully. I scribbled an answer in the affirmative and re-attached the envelope

to the collar. "Go home now, Pudel!" I said. He leaped up, placing his paws against my knees, and licked my face, then ran three times around the room, barking furiously, and out into the night whence he had come.

Thoroughly unsettled by this doggy apparition, as well as by the prospect of an entrée to the mysterious gardens, I found sleep had gone to the devil. I therefore composed myself to set down this record of the day's events. Whence it is now dawn. I hope to snatch an hour or two of rest before the sun is up in earnest, for it promises to be a busy day.

ⁱ Bradley writes: "The literature of the progressively experimental community I am addressing coexists in the pages of the small press with examples of 'cleaner,' non-hybridized works in the forms I mentioned above (and many more) and with mainstream speculation. These other works have received critical attention in the past under the rubrics of the larger classifications they belong to (i.e. fantasy, science fiction, horror); however, the truly experimental and truly progressive have not undergone as much consideration. For this reason, and for the venues wherein this literature appears, I refer to this mode as the 'little weird.'" (Darin Bradley, *Spotlight! Genre: The Little Weird* (<http://membradisjecta.com/thoughts/?p=8>))

Douglas Hutcheson used to edit physics papers for an older professor who also happened to own a Chinese restaurant Douglas sometimes managed. One day another of Douglas' professor friends was eating there when the professor/owner trudged through brandishing a shovel. Douglas asked: "Wonder where he's going with that shovel?" The other professor answered: "Probably to bury Schrödinger's cat."

When not pondering mysteries of science, Douglas has written stories including "The Travellin' Show" that is available in *History is Dead* from Permuted Press and which earned Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. He co-edited *Harvest Hill: 31 Tales of Halloween Horror* for Graveside Tales. "A Beauty" appears in *Probing Uranus* from The Library of Science of Science Fiction & Fantasy Press, and "An Uncloudy Day" will appear in *Groanology 2* from The Library of Horror Press. "XMAS" appears in *Timelines: Stories Inspired by H. G. Wells' The Time Machine* and "The Giveaway" will appear in *Fallen*, both from Northern Frights Publishing. You can both find and not find Douglas through one of his strange quantum superpositions including

<http://www.facebook.com/douglas.hutcheson>

and <http://twitter.com/DouglasHutch>

Patricia Russo's stories have recently appeared at Fantasy and Chizine. Her first chapbook, a novella titled "Hearts Starve", was published by Not One of Us last year. More of her work can be found online at Abyss and Apex, Lone Star Stories, and Cabinet des Fees. Her stories have also been published in the anthologies *Corpse Blossoms*, *Zencore*, and *Neverlands and Otherwheres*, as well as in many issues of *Tales of the Unanticipated* and *Not One of Us*.

Susannah Mandel was born in California and currently lives in Philadelphia. Her fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in Shimmer, Strange Horizons, Goblin Fruit, Sybil's Garage, Peter Parasol, Lamplighter Review, and Escape Clause (a Canadian anthology). Her flash fiction appears regularly at the Daily Cabal (www.DailyCabal.com), and her creative nonfiction has appeared in the Philadelphia City Paper and in the anthology *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (MIT Press, 2007).

Susannah holds degrees in English literature and in comparative media studies from Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has lived in San Francisco, Boston, and northern France, and has worked in teaching, translation, editing and linguistics, as well as a brief stint in pastry retail. She enjoys reading and writing, bicycling and languages, films and comics, science fiction and Shakespeare, and looking at everything.

Alexander Katsenelinboigen writes about himself:

"My interest in art arose during my last year at college where I studied mathematics and economics. I took a course in art history and was fascinated by various 20th century 'isms', particularly the ones that emphasized the conceptual aspects of art. Eventually I gravitated toward the more "visual" movements, such as post-impressionist and expressionist art, which employed innovative pictorial devices rooted in the autonomy of the means (and ends) of expression.

As source and inspiration for my work, I seek images that conjure up ambiguity and distortion. This dissonance often provides the impetus for the work. I work primarily from sketches and photographs, often using a computer to mutate the image in order to test the various possibilities. As the work progresses, I try to move away from the

'naturalistic' depiction to a pictorial idea that emphasizes expressiveness and innovative (hopefully!) complex interaction of pictorial elements. My working process is largely governed by trial and error until I arrive at a satisfactory result.

I work in a painterly manner using loose expressive brushwork, counterbalancing descriptive brushstrokes with 'abstract' ones that break the monotony of literalness. I hope that in the words of Chaim Soutine "my results are not entirely banal".

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Rachel Kendall is the editor of ISMs Press and Sein und Werden.

Writer of twisted fiction. Mother of Violet. Photographer of obscurity. Collector of all things meat and bone.

Yveta Shanfeldova writes about herself: "Being rooted as I am in two languages, Czech and English, helps me to see things clearly while it also obstructs my view – like all information does. And having two backgrounds, music and literature, accomplishes similar results. Out of this confusion have grown two published books of poems: Night Jugular Shaft (Noční krční hřídle, Host, Brno, Czech Republic 2006) and In Place of Sundays (Místo nedělí, MaPa, Brno, Czech Republic 2008), stories, articles..."

tresnovka@gmail.com

Yelena Dubrovin is a bilingual Russian-English writer published two Russian collections of poetry and an English novel, "In Search of Van Dyck" (co-authored with Hilary Koprowski). Her short stories, poetry and literary essays appeared in various periodicals, including *The World Audience*, *Gold Dust*, *63 Channels*, *Ben Pint Quarterly*, *Cantaraville*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, and many others.

Jay Caselberg is an Australian writer who travels the world in his day job.

His shifting landscape informs his work along with a love of multiple genres.

Whether at novel length or short fiction, Jay likes to ask his readers questions, or rather, likes his work to do it for him.

Dennis Danvers writes about himself: "Fiction is always a collaborative enterprise between the writer and whatever audience the words find, and one way or another they answer their own questions. That's the beauty of fiction: its essentially wanton nature. Once you've even overheard a story, it's yours to do with as you will. Some fiction fights this reality; I embrace it. I've published seven novels, including *The Watch* (HarperCollins, 2002), a *New York Times* *Notablebook* I would describe as QW. Recent short fiction sales include *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *Realms of Fantasy*. I was particularly struck by this passage in your discussion of QW, which could be a gloss for "True Story":

Unlike the traditional fiction that focuses primarily on the artistic meaning QG is mainly concerned with the expansion of unusual realities. The meaning, at this point, can't be explained by the interpreter, only created by him as another unusual reality of what he "visited."

Other versions of myself may be found at <http://www.dennisdanvers.com>

Annelyse Gelman hatched in the San Francisco Bay Area, Annelyse Gelman coordinates synchronized swimmers with pyrotechnics and writes poetry. She derives inspiration from dreams, urban exploration and suburban dysphoria.

Adam La Rusic writes: "I am, in order of profitability, an engineer, musician, writer, cave explorer and father. Politically I am a reformed anarchist which is just as well because I have a serious government job these days. Artistically, I'm eclectic, distracted by whatever shiny bauble catches my eye at the time. My music and writing is normally dark, humorous and fantastical. I have a life-long fascination with entropy and quantum physics. Most of my investigations have been in the scientific and philosophical veins—complex dissipators in far-from-equilibrium thermodynamics, the quantum nature of intuition, and recursive set theory. "No Body" is probably my first articulation of some of these ideas as an artist, probably infused with a little of the bureaucrat's ennui."

Dorothee Lang is, among other things, a freelancer, a gardener, a writer, a capricorn, a visual artist, a traveller, and the editor of *BlueprintReview*, an experimental online journal. In her work, she tends to follow the themes and meanings her short name holds: Do – "way, method, road, truth, reason, skill, to speak, to talk, to say". Currently, she is into skies, collaborations, and growth. She lives in Germany, her website is: blueprint21.de.

pablo vision is a multimedia art anarchist who lives in England and Spain, but not simultaneously. He is published extensively in print and online. There are several published stories about 'him'. His artwork (dis)graces the covers of numerous books and magazines. Links to his work – including audio, film, and reviews - can be found at <http://pablovision.blogspot.com> and his virtual office space at Epic Rites Press can be located at <http://www.epicrites.org/>

John Beleskas is a short story writer and poet living in Weymouth, Massachusetts with his wife and a fine collection of pets. He is currently working on his first novel and writes mostly in the afternoon.

J. A. Tyler is founding editor of *mud luscious* and the author of *SOMEWHERE* (ghost road press, 2009), *IN LOVE WITH A GHOST* (willows wept press, 2010), and *INCONCEIVABLE WILSON* (vox press, 2010) as well as the chapbooks *OUR US & WE* (greying ghost), *ZOO: THE TROPIC HOUSE* (sunnyoutside), *EVERYONE IN THIS IS EITHER DYING OR WILL DIE OR IS THINKING OF DEATH* (achilles), and *THE GIRL IN THE BLACK SWEATER* (trainwreck press). Visit: www.aboutjatyler.com.

Nicholas Alexander Hayes is preoccupied with process and structure since an obsession with subject signals an often reactionary defense of Aristotelian plot. Text, like people, is just a machine in a machine (or something like that...)

Michael S. Blehman was born in 1951 in Kharkov, Ukrainian, the USSR, into a lower middle-class family. He defended his PhDs dissertation in 1985, in Leningrad (St. Petersburg). Michael writes about himself: "During my whole life, I have been and am working as computational linguist, and I have also doing fiction - poetry, parodies, stories, novels. Since 1998, my whole family - my wife Nadia and my two daughters - live in Montreal, Canada. I set up a company here, which I named *Lingvistica*. Well, linguistics and languages make up all my professional life."

Debbie Vilardi always wanted to be a teacher. In fact, she spent five years teaching English to speakers of other languages. When she was laid off, she felt lost. Debbie wasn't fulfilling her calling. In time, she realized she had an opportunity to teach a broader audience by sharing her experience and knowledge through the written word. She is the proud author of *Animal Hospital* (Unibooks, 2009), an emergent reader for the English as a Foreign Language market and *Juggling Time* (The Christian Communicator, July 2009), a personal essay about juggling parenthood with her writing career. Debbie is seeking publishers for other essays and poems, two picture books, and three novels for young readers. She tries to meet each opportunity head on.

Lee Tyler Williams was born in Dallas, Texas in 1983. Schooled in California & now living in Germany. He's working on a book of prose pieces about the Berlin U-Bahn system and poems about, among other things, myths of origin and the logic of political language.

Benjamin Robinson is a writer and visual artist. He was born in Northern Ireland in 1964. His essays and short stories have recently appeared in *A cappella Zoo*, *Existere*, *Crannóg*, *The Benefactor*, online at [3:AM Magazine](#), [Recirca](#), [10,000 Tons of Black Ink](#), [TQRstories](#); forthcoming in *ART From ART – An Anthology of Fiction Inspired by Art* (Modernist Press). His art has been exhibited in Ireland, Germany and the UK. He lives in Dublin with his wife and young son.

Seth J Rowanwood. I began telling stories through images as a young boy in school. I would grab paper from anywhere and everywhere I could get it, drawing spaceships and battles. I found it frustrating that I was not being able to draw or write fast enough to capture and render all the ideas that I imagined. I finished high school with some recognition of his budding talents; however, art college proved to be more challenging to me. With some reservation, I took up a graphic design job for money. But my real dreams of becoming a storyteller never left me alone for a second. Stories waiting to be told kept bubbling up, some written, some drawn, others shared during conversations. After a long career in graphic design, I finally decided to surrender and pursue the calling, instead of being pursued by it.

I write stories and create images depicting spiritual struggle and surrender, vistas of expanding awareness, places and times of death, rebirth and transformation in the guises and genres they wish to show themselves. I also love collaborating and will be working in new media, film and print on interesting projects that come my way.
<http://www.sethrowanwood.com>

Colin Meldrum works in the ESL field and has several artistic hobbies. He is obsessed with reality and variation, and his writing is often an attempt at inflicting honesty and exploring empathy, which have come together via quantum modes in interesting ways. "Blank" as a story has blossomed as various incarnations, beginning as a flash fiction piece in a creative writing workshop, extending into a full short story in *Underground Voices*, and now appearing in alternate form as a quantum genre work. Colin is working on several writing projects, large and small, including a composite novella, or short story cycle, called *A History of Halves*. One of these stories has appeared in *Neonbeam*, and another is forthcoming in *Morpheus Tales*. Colin is also the founding editor of *A cappella Zoo*, a journal and ezine of

magical realist and experimental writing from around the world. He lives in Seattle with his partner and their monstrous, unfruitful tomato plants.

www.colinmeldrum.com

Chrystal Blue (Chrystal Berche) is the former editor/Web designer for Seasons in the Night, a bimonthly Dark Fantasy/Horror magazine, and has had poetry published in Hadrassaur Tales, Outer Darkness, Demon Minds and Sinister Tales as well. She loves to read, loves to write and loves to flitter between music and movies with a zeal that borders at times on manic. She currently resides in a small Iowa farm town where everything brings inspiration and every night a time for creation.

When **Tom Bradley** was a little boy he was given a gazetteer for Christmas. As little boys will, he looked up all the places in the world that start with the F-word. There were two, Fukien in China and Fukuoka in Japan. Little did he suspect that he would one day be exiled to both.

Tom is a former lounge harpist. During his pre-exilic period, he played his own transcriptions of Bach and Debussy in a Salt Lake City synagogue that had been transformed into a pricey watering hole by a nephew of the Shah of Iran.

He taught British and American literature to Chinese graduate students in the years leading up to the Tiananmen Square massacre. He was politely invited to leave China after burning a batch of student essays about the democracy movement rather than surrendering them to "the leaders."

He wound up teaching conversational skills to freshman dentistry majors in the Japanese "imperial university" where they used to vivisect our bomber pilots and serve their livers raw at festive banquets. But his writing somehow sustains him.

Kyle Muntz is interested in the literature of ideas and images. His work blends postmodernism and the avant-garde with elements of magical realism, surrealism, and speculative fiction.

Tantra Bensko writes what she calls Lucid Fiction. "The Quantum Fool" is an example of that style, intersecting with Quantum Fiction, expanding the potentials of what a person, and thus, a character, can be. Going into parallel lives, past and future existing at once, and the higher self, through fiction, may help readers acknowledge the reality of their experiences. She likes to push past the formal ideas of traditional plot arc, to let go of the need for conflict oriented duality.

She is also an artist, and lets her life be her art too, which is often humorous play. Sometimes her life as art turns into music and video as well as spontaneous absurdity.

www.LucidPlay.com

Grace Andreacchi was born in uptown Manhattan, New York City in 1954, but has lived on the far side of the great ocean for many years - sometimes in Paris, sometimes Berlin, and nowadays in London, where she keeps a newt for special company. Rigorously educated by the Sisters of Saint Ursula, she went on to study drama with the great queen of that art, Stella Adler, dance with Margaret Craske, and philosophy at the finest institutions of higher learning in New York and London. All this was rather a while ago. Since then she has done many things, some of which

may or may not be shadowed forth in the novels *Scarabocchio* and *Poetry and Fear, Music for Glass Orchestra* (Serpent's Tail) and *Give My Heart Ease* (New American Writing Award). She has also written several collections of poetry, including *Elysian Sonnets and Other Poems* (chapbook 1990). Her work appears in *Horizon Review, Eclectica, The Carolina Quarterly* and many other fine places. The award-winning play *Vegetable Medley* played to enthusiastic audiences in New York and Boston (USA). She was a noted collaborator in the multi-media show 'Violin Music in the Age of Shopping' (international tour), for which she was made an honorary fellow of the Rosenberg Foundation. Grace is managing editor at [Andromache Books](#) and writes a regular literary blog, [AMAZING GRACE](#). She is still married to the economist and clever boots, Edward Hadas, and is mother to their three occasionally delightful, now fully grown children. Website: graceandreaacchi.com

Rochelle Dinkin is an artist residing in Philadelphia area. She has participated in group and juried shows and she also has exhibited in a number of solo shows. <http://grimmsistersart.com>

Rachel Isaac works in pencil and oil. She has participated in group and juried shows and she also has exhibited in a number of solo shows. <http://grimmsistersart.com>

Izya Shlosberg was born in the small town of Pinsk, Belarus, in 1950. He began painting at an early age, had his first art exhibition at age 13, and graduated from Moscow Art University in 1981. His paintings have been exhibited in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Spain, Israel, and the United States. He is the well-known, prolific artist, having created over 500 works in the last decade, many of which are in museums, galleries and private collections. He moved to the United States in 1994 and currently lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Betty Jo Tucker is a film critic, a writer and a reviewer. She is a founding member of the San Diego Film Critics' Society, is a published author. Her two movie related books, [CONFESSIONS OF A MOVIE ADDICT](#) and [SUSAN SARANDON: A TRUE MAVERICK](#), have received rave reviews from film fans and critics alike.

The Romance Club E-Book version of [IT HAD TO BE US](#), a romantic memoir Betty Jo co-authored with her husband (under the pseudonyms of Harry & Elizabeth Lawrence) was honored at the 2006 Hollywood Book Festival as the winner in the E-Book category, and *SUSAN SARANDON: A TRUE MAVERICK* received Honorable Mention in the Wild Card section of the 2007 New York Book Festival. <http://www.bettyjotucker.com/Bio.html>

Fort Worth writer **Jonathan Shipley** has never bought into "newer is better." Old houses, old furniture, and old portraits are his way of life, and like many collectors, he cohabits with more antiques than strictly fit into his house. He has had fantasy and science fiction stories published in *Weird Tales*, *Dragon Magazine*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, and several recent anthologies. However, he is actually a novel writer at heart and spends most of his writing time on a vast story arc that ranges from Nazi occultism to vampires to futuristic space opera. Several principal characters in this created world are also collectors of portraits, so there is a mirroring back and forth between art and reality throughout the story arc.

Gareth D Jones has four children and a stick insect. He finds time to write science fiction with the aid of many cups of tea and his wife, who reminds him to write something every day. His stories have been published in 12 languages so far.

You can keep an eye on what he's up to at:

<http://garethdjones.co.uk>

Louise Norlie has been writing for four years in an attempt to overcome the tedium of her day job, and is still experimenting with a variety of genres and styles. She has dabbled in prose poetry, straight realism, horror, fantasy, flash fiction, humor, and experimental fiction, and has also published commentary on the works of Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, Susan Sontag, and H.P. Lovecraft. She has a rare bone condition with the scientific name of osteogenesis imperfecta, and has published fiction and non-fiction based on her experiences having a disability, including a chapter in an anthology from Bettany Press. Her blog at <http://louise-norlie.blogspot.com> contains links to most of her online work as well as a listing of her print publications.

Marc Lowe is the author of an e-book collection, "Sui Generis" and Other Fictions, and of the chapbook *A Tour of Beaujardin*, both from ISMs Press. His fictions (and the occasional review) have appeared in a variety of publications, including *5_trope*, *580 Split*, *Big Bridge*, *Caketrain*, *Dark Sky Magazine*, *elimae*, *Gone Lawn*, *>kill author*, *Metazen*, *Neon Magazine*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Salt River Review*, and others. Marc holds an MFA from Brown University and was a recipient of the 2010 John Hawkes Prize in Fiction. Please visit him at www.malo23.com for more information.

V. Ulea is a bilingual writer, a scholar, and a filmmaker. She has published books on poetry, prose and literary criticism, including most recently, *Snail* (Crossing Chaos, 2009). She received her Ph.D. in Russian Literature from the University of Pennsylvania where she is currently teaching courses on the art of decision-making in film, literature and the game of chess. Her works have appeared in *Dream People*, *Sein und Werden*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Vagabondage Press*, *Lunarosity*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Blueprintreview*, *Neobeam*, and many others. Her cycle of poems, "Letters from Another Planet" was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. <http://www.v-ulea.net>

Misha Chariton is a filmmaker and a freelancer, and has been actively working in television and film production for over 8 years. He fell into directing by chance during late summer of 2007, and he has been doing it ever since! He directed an Award-Winning TV show which recieved two [Telly Awards](#) (Silver & Bronze), and two [AVA Awards](#), a Platinum and Gold. In May 2009, he successfully directed his first [48 Hour Film Festival](#) project in Philadelphia. Him and his team, [Delaware Independent Filmmakers](#), had received two awards for their project entitled [Money Talks: Audience Award](#) and [Best Use of Prop Award](#). One of his short films has also received a Best Original Score award from WestFEST short film festival in 2005. Misha is also a contributing writer for ReelTalk Movie Reviews, and also works as a script supervisor, teleprompter operator, videographer, and editor.

Irene Frenkel (<http://www.ulita.net/paintings.html>) resides in the Philadelphia area and works in oil and pencil. She received her MA in Arts from the Moscow Institute of Graphic Arts. She has participated in group and juried shows and she also has exhibited in a number of solo shows. She received a grant from a Ministry of Culture of Schleswig-Goldstein Land and a Fellowship of a Jewish Museum in Rendsburg (Germany) for her outstanding work. Her works have also appeared in journals and magazines, such as *Sein und Werden*, *Golden Visions*, and many others. Besides

they are included in anthologies, books and poetry collections, most recent, *Snail* (a collection of V. Ulea's short stories.

http://www.crossingchaos.com/Snail_by_V_Ulea.html).

Mikhail Yudovsky was born in 1966 in Kiev (Ukraine). After school he studied at the Technical College for Art and Design, then at the Institute for Foreign Languages. Since 1988 Mikhail Yudovsky has been a freelance painter who has taken part in numerous exhibitions in Eastern and Western Europe and America. His first book („The Adventures of Torp Turp“, written together with Mikhail Valigura“) was published in 1992 in Kiev. Some of Yudovsky's poems, verses and stories were published in Ukraine, Germany, Russia, Great Britain and the United States. Since 1992 Yudovsky has been living and working in Germany.