

Spring 2006

The Somerset Review



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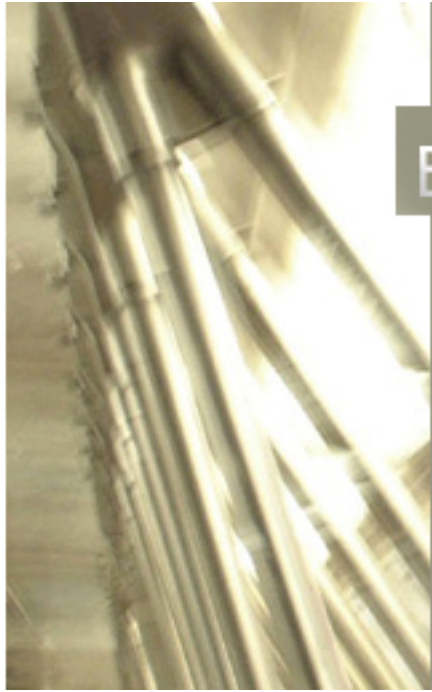
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The Sunnerset Review



Editors' Notes

We thought to start this issue off by sharing some engaging characteristics of a short story, at least in our humble opinion. We feel a truly great one operates on different levels: There is the overall premise, of course. Then there is an underlying means of carrying the story, a suspension of disbelief or a strong running metaphor, like a mini-story or a place the reader keeps coming back to. Finally, there are simply beautifully-styled sentences or isolated concepts sprinkled throughout the piece, breathing life into it, making it stand tall.

Though we don't want these notes to turn into a writing lesson, we do want to say these elements are all present in a wonderful work we read in the Summer 2005 issue of *Hayden's Ferry Review*, a story by Liza Kleinman entitled "Trompe L'Oeil." It's the tale of a father whose son is soon to be taken away by his mother. The story is carried by a surreal "game" of sorts the father and son play, transforming the boy's bedroom into a café, the boy a waiter Mario, the father a diner. The sprinkled sentences that pull the reader in come by way of cleverly-acted dialogue, and here is an excerpt:

"So, Mario, are you new here?"

"Oh, no, I've been working here forever. I have a family to support." He wiped his hands across the suit jacket, leaving a small smudge of peanut butter.

"Kids?"

A shadow flickered across Mario's face, and then he nodded slowly. "I have a son," he replied. A moment passed. "Vito. That boy is nothing but trouble."

We've decided to release a print issue in 2007. We are not yet sure if this will be a Best Of collection or a combination of previously published pieces as well as new ones. All we know at this point is that we will try our very best to generate a volume of the highest quality literature we are capable of producing, and that everything in the print journal will also be available online. As with this web site, the print issue will be nonprofit. If, by some stroke of good fortune revenue is higher than expected, proceeds will be rolled into sustenance of this journal and then applied toward charitable causes. We are looking for one or a few volunteers to help in this endeavor, having typesetting, printing, distribution and/or marketing experience. Please email us at the address below if interested.

A warm thanks goes out to the faculty, staff, and students of Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. *The Summerset Review* was invited to spend several days there to talk about online literary magazines and the literary world in general, answer students' and faculty members' questions, review students' writing and portfolios, experience the famed Rose O'Neill Literary House, and revel in campus magic inspired by the annual Sophie Kerr Literary Award.

Below is the front view of the Literary House, historically a sanctuary for writers, the place where many a famous author has once read.



In our issue this quarter, Robert Villanueva's lead-off short story, "A Scent Like Daphne," provides some wonderful images. A college professor wants to close his eyes and open them again to something else. He sees hours he spent in the past illuminated with black light, the daylight now a kaleidoscope in his eyes.

"No Tenth Cat," an essay by Phoebe Kate Foster, takes us through a memorable life of a father and his felines. "He's my ninth cat, you know," the father says. "One to mark each decade of my life." There's an endearing father-daughter relationship explored here, as you will see.

Dee Dobson Harper describes a woman who lays a certain claim at the corner of Ninth Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street in Manhattan. Her essay, "The Traffic Lady," visits the condition of homelessness, providing background and color not many of us have had the opportunity to experience.

The protagonist in John Riha's story, "Standing Dead," wants to go parasailing in Bonaire, but his wife doesn't. Perhaps there's a mid-life crisis afoot and an interesting, useful way of working with it.

This issue introduces Amy Greene with her first accepted story for publication, "The Award." A mother wins business recognition, but longs to be somewhere else with her aptly-named daughter, Eden. There's not much dialogue here, but we found the piece nonetheless captivating.

Finally, D. W. Young takes us on a yo-yo route between Pedasi and Playa Venao, where the characters in his essay, "Panama 3-Ball," become inventive with a beat-up pool table. The narrator experiences the perspective of living in the moment, and we felt it resonate as we read the piece.

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A literary journal released quarterly on the 15th of March, June, September, and December. Founded in 2002, the journal is a nonprofit Internet magazine devoted to the review and publication of unsolicited short stories and essays. All correspondence and submissions should be emailed to editor@somersetreview.org. Postal mailing address: 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA.

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The Somerset Review

The *Summerset Review*

A Scent Like Daphne

*by
Robert
Villanueva*

She calls him "Daddy" as he dresses, and this, for him, is the worst kind of truth she has ever uttered. The word is a stray bullet, piercing his starched white shirt and red silk tie, the armor he carries like a shell. His now mute body—a swimmer's build out of water—squirms under his other skin.

"Don't call me that," he tells her, the taste of sex and regret lolling around in his mouth, the aftertaste of her skin.

When he turns to look at her, he realizes he towers over everything, floating above what is real and what is manufactured. He can't look her in the eye for fear she will see the shape of his soul, but he suspects she has plied her own shapes in him, her own elastic strands of complacency and control.

He finds his jacket on a scarred Salvation Army Thrift Store chair and walks toward the bedroom door. With too much ease, he thinks to reach into the breast pocket of his jacket where his sunglasses are. He doesn't feel the absurdity of putting them on in the dusky room.

The whole apartment is cluttered with her clothes, a misleading trail of lacey bras and panties, Lakewood University jerseys and mismatched socks. They writhe and curl on the floor, on furniture, on doorknobs. They hang out of a dresser that looks like it came from the children's section of a furniture store. A moth-eaten bedspread, thin enough to let some of the daylight in, cascades over the curtain rods. Jasmine tinges the air in wisps like whispered promises.

"Whatever," she says, sitting up in bed. "Just don't count it against me, professor."

She drops her chin and feigns a pout, letting her hair dangle over her breasts, vines sheltering a garden arch. When she grins, she shows all her teeth. She reaches for her cigarettes and lighter on the bedside table, and he catches a glimpse of the butterfly tattoo on her shoulder, as small and fleeting as a birthmark. The sheets covering her legs form ridges where shadows can hide, like swirls of vanilla ice cream.

"I'll let myself out," he says, not looking back.



In his car in the apartment complex parking lot, Professor Frank Harmon presses out the imagined creases in his clothes, in himself. He finds a comb in his back pocket and runs it through his hair in short strokes. His knuckles slide along the smoothness at the top edge of his forehead where his sandy blonde hair recedes, and he scowls at this detail, telling himself thirty-seven is not old enough for this.

The scent of jasmine chases him, and Frank thinks he can feel it on his lips, his tongue. He flings open the glove compartment and scavenges for the tin of breath mints he didn't intend for this, spilling six out onto his palm and popping them in his mouth all at once. By the time he pulls out of the parking lot, the jasmine is gone, replaced by a strong ghost scent he cannot identify.

He drives home, stopping only once at the Kroger four blocks from his house. When he returns to his car, the interior is still air-conditioner cool in the late August afternoon. He drops the brown paper bag in the passenger seat like a silent stranger. They didn't need the chicken breasts or the deli ham, and Sarah will turn her nose up at the frozen waffles, but Frank's only reason for stopping at the store was to use a cologne tester at the fragrance counter. Now he thinks he smells more like himself.

Frank sweats in his refrigerated car. He pulls into the driveway of his home, and the perfectness, the neatness of everything overwhelms him. Box hedges form lines up and down the block. Lawns are weedless, trimmed and verdant. Flowerbeds hold their soil in precise rectangles. Even the trees grow straight. Nothing is allowed to stray.

Holding the brown bag in front of him like a shield, Frank walks up the sidewalk to the front door. Sarah awaits him behind the storm door, but she won't step out onto the porch. At three months, her belly is beginning to show, and she has told him something is wrong in being blatant about her condition.

"Supper is almost ruined," she says. She starts to hug him but backs away as her eyes wander up and down his face. "You're sweaty. Get cleaned up for supper."

Frank knows the meal has been ready for exactly seventeen minutes. It is 6:17 p.m. He smiles a suffocating smile knowing she cannot touch the untidiness he has brought into the house. She is too neat, too clean.

Sarah takes the bag, peeking into it. Her hair slips forward like golden waves of silk ribbon, framing the roundness of her jaw line.

"We really don't need any of this. What took you so long? I called your office an hour ago, and you didn't answer."

Sarah saunters over to the kitchen. Frank doesn't miss the kiss he used to get when coming home, in fact he is happy she doesn't breathe him,

just in case. The carpet under his feet feels as if it is falling away and holding him up at the same time.

"Long lines. I think the cash registers were down for a while, too."

His voice is as hollow as the house. The house is as hollow as his life. All are filled with things he thought, at one time, were supposed to be there.



In his office at the university, Frank stretches out in his chair, letting his head drop back and his eyes close. It is Friday at the end of his day, but he's not ready to go home. He is not ready to go anywhere else, either.

The door is locked, and every now and then he hears the muffled conversations of teachers or students passing by. The small room feels separate and neutral and his. Piles of student papers and folders cover his desk, bumping up against the computer and other knickknacks. Books crowd the shelves on two of the walls and sit in short stacks on the floor. Many of them are histories of local people, places and events of western North Carolina, written by colleagues. Plaques and awards hang on the walls, surrounding his diploma from Lakewood University, already more than ten years old.

He inhales with his entire body, trying to remember how he got where he is. He wants to figure out where his former self went. Memories flood him, drown him. He is drinking tequila with a border runner in a Tijuana dive. He is camping under the stars in the Arizona desert. He is on a midnight watch for the moonbow at Cumberland Falls, Kentucky. Everything is spontaneous, unplanned, exciting. Yet somewhere in all of that, the whisper of stability touches his ears. Some vision of what should come next imprints itself in his mind's eye.



The September nights are cold in Frank's house. The bedroom is coldest.

Ever since she found out she was six weeks pregnant—almost two months ago—Sarah has become a restless and solitary sleeper, and this means Frank cannot sleep in peace either. Some nights he walks the length of the house, counting the steps away from his wife. Nothing clutters his path, and because Sarah insists on night-lights in all the rooms and the hallway, the house is not dark enough to hold surprises.

Frank ambles into the kitchen and doesn't bother to turn on the light. Everything is crisp and clean. The dish drainer and sinks are empty. The counter displays only necessary things.

The light of the waxing full moon sears the café curtains covering the window over the kitchen sink. For a moment Frank pictures another backyard, one with a rusting tool shed, weeds beginning to poke up around its base. Or maybe the other backyard would have a half-court for playing basketball with a few friends. Maybe the grass would need a clipping, but it wouldn't be so urgent that he couldn't do it the day after he threw a cookout for some neighbors.

Frank stands before the sink facing the window. He leaves the curtains drawn. He knows what is on the other side, and he knows how close it is. It is, in fact, all around him. He can feel the rending pull of the polished oak furniture, the glistening porcelain bathtub and the gleaming silver cutlery. Every part of his life is like that around here. His backyard is no different.

Keeping the silence intact, Frank opens the sliding glass door, descends the steps and stands on the back patio. The lawn is the sleek surface of a calm, deep sea, spreading out beyond vision. Frank feels the presence of the winter daphne behind him, beneath the kitchen window. It looms like a shadow.

They've only seen the winter daphne blossom once, earlier that year in late February. They planted the shrub a year ago after Sarah read about how it kept a good shape, didn't require pruning and bloomed in February or March.

When the tiny rose-pink blossoms first appeared, Sarah was pleased. She made Frank walk out with her in the freezing sunshine to look at the flowers, each petal as tiny as a baby's fingernail, she said. Frank was amazed at the strong fragrance of the plant. The sweet scent was too perfect, too appropriate.

Frank stares at the moon. Everything is silent except for the heartbeat in his ears, like drowning alone in a swimming pool.



He prepares to meet with her in his office before midterms in October. He feels his pulse in his throat as he cinches the knot of his tie closer to his neck. He buttons his dress coat. Though he is meeting with all his students to discuss their progress in his sophomore sociology class, this is decidedly different.

She is his one chance or his one mistake. He doesn't know which; it doesn't matter anymore. When she showed up in the front row of his fall class he remembered her from the summer semester, where she had hung careless flirtations and innuendo on him like new clothes. During the first week of the fall semester he had taken her invitation as if taking a dare. He feels the ghost of her on him, and he squirms in his suit.

As she arrives, he stands briefly before nodding at her to have a seat. He mumbles through her test grades, her quiz scores, her overall participation. She smirks at this last topic, and it is all he can do to keep his voice steady.

She is wearing an off-the-shoulder sweater that hangs in folds like the shelter of a baby's blanket. She leans back in her chair and twists her hair between her fingers. He finishes by telling her she has a solid B going into midterms. He avoids her eyes.

"If I made an A on midterms would that bring my overall average up? I'd really like an A in this course."

She leans forward. He hears the offer, but he looks for something safer in his student record book. His fingers stick to the pages as he flips them.

"It's all up to you," he says. "I've given you all the help I can."

He waits in the silence, not looking up. He wants to close his eyes and open them again to something else. He wants the understanding that evades him, the knowledge of reason. Or maybe he just wants everything to be easier.

"Don't sell yourself short, professor," she says, standing up.

The door creaks when she opens it to leave, and she doesn't shut it behind her. He looks up in time to see the butterfly float around the corner and disappear, chasing the trail of jasmine.



At Thanksgiving dinner at his parents' house, Frank gets drunk on the wine before the meal is served. He sits in the living room with his father, his younger brother, Thomas, and his brother-in-law, Wayne. Sarah and Frank's sister, Celia, whisper as they set the table.

Frank is not a loud, obnoxious drunk. He is the more dangerous introspective drunk. Every so often he slurs a cynical comment or wanders into another room. He constantly tugs at his shirtsleeves or tie, and none of his clothes seem to fit right. To Sarah's horror, Frank eventually rolls up the cuffs of his shirt.

Kate, his mother, has a hard time holding her smile in place when she sees him like this. She tries to smooth it over by telling everyone Frank has too much stress in his life. He has finals to think about, a new baby on the way, too much work. She speaks as if Frank is not in the room, and Frank's father, Mort, ignores the comments and talks over her to ask when the turkey will be done. For this interruption, Mort gets a reprimand from Kate, and the ensuing apology floats around the room like smoke from a warning signal, the translation of which Frank is all too aware.

The conversation becomes a continuous buzz in his ears, and Frank finds himself standing up and wandering down the hall to his old bedroom, now the den. The family photos lining the hallway walls hang with precision, forming straight lines along their edges. The house is uncluttered and bright, and images flash behind Frank's eyes. He feels sick.

Frank leans against the doorframe of the den and peers into the room. Sunlight streams into the chamber, illuminating everything inside: the comfortable, overstuffed couch, the shiny cherry wood desk, the warm mahogany veneer of the table.

He crosses the room to the far wall plastered with photos. Photos of him on a donkey in the mountains near Monterrey, Mexico, on a beach in front of a lighthouse on Cape Cod, in the California hills with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. Photos taken by friends or bystanders during lazy summers or spring breaks. Photos when he had no boundaries.

When he looks at these photos, Frank can see the carelessness in his frozen laughter. He can see the unconcerned youthfulness of his face. He sees no hint of the deep lines that appear near his eyes without warning these days. He thinks of days before the expectations, before the supposed-tos, before the invitations by students looking for better grades, before the life he somehow sank into.

"Everyone's ready. Are you?"

It's Sarah. Her voice is dispassionate. She stands at the door as if she cannot step into that part of the house, and maybe, Frank thinks, she will always be unable to take those steps.



By the time they leave, Frank is sober. Sarah doesn't speak until they are well out of Asheville. The roads to and from Willow Dale are barren. The highway glistens with wetness.

"I'm afraid for us," Sarah says, staring out the passenger-side window.

Frank feels the need for reassurance in her words. But he also detects an accusation. He realizes much too quickly he cannot respond to either.

"I am, too," he finally says.

"I thought we knew what we wanted. I thought this was part of it." Her left hand moves away from him to rest on her stomach.

"It was, until the doctors told us it would never happen. Anyways, it's more than that. You know that."

"I don't know what you want, Frank. I don't think you even know."

He lets it go at that. He doesn't have the words he needs. And those he has would be poison for someone.



At 1:30 a.m., Frank is drinking again. This is unusual for him, as he rarely drinks these days, and the only alcohol they have in the house is half a bottle of rum Sarah uses to make rum cakes.

In the living room, Frank flips through channels with the sound muted. He gulps his drink and thinks about his wife in the other room. Sarah is unaware of what Frank is doing. She went to bed shortly after they got home, and the house allows isolation.

One, two, three drinks later, Frank can hear his thoughts better. They seep into his skin, his bones, his blood, even as the important things ooze out. He staggers into the kitchen, glass in hand, drink sloshing over the sides. He stands in the center of the room for a moment before walking over to the light switch and flipping it on.

He downs his drink and puts the glass on the counter. Condensation and spillage slide from the bottom of the glass. He grabs a cola from the refrigerator and mixes another drink, leaving the rum bottle on the counter. He picks up the empty glass of rum and puts it in the sink.

In three gulps, Frank finishes the cola. He feels the tug. His thoughts are floating away. But he seizes one and holds it long enough to allow it to evolve into action.

Reaching over with an unsteady hand, Frank opens a kitchen drawer. The glittering silverware pulls him. His hand hovers over the forks, spoons, knives. Large knife. Carving knife. He holds it and wields it with something like familiarity.

The house is quiet and cold. Frank's thoughts are loud and hot.

Without regard for the silence, Frank steps onto the back patio. The tie is the first thing to go. With one hand, he snatches it off and tosses it onto the lawn. He peels off his shirt, slashing at it and rending it to shreds before discarding it. The heaviness in his chest rises up and emerges from him as laughter. In his undershirt, the November night is frigid and damp.

Frank walks to the winter daphne. He begins cutting at it with the knife, holding limbs with one hand and swiping at it with the other. He cuts his fingers more than once, but this is nothing to him. He is slicing leaves and shoots, perfectness and comfortableness.

"Take everything," he says, through ragged breath. "Take this. Take it all."

Sweat forms on Frank's brow, and his work becomes frenzied. He whittles away at the shrub until the evergreen is tattered and torn. Frank's laughter is interspersed with sobs.

"Frank? Frank, what are you doing?"

Sarah's voice comes at him from all directions. He can't find her at first. Then he sees her at the back door. When he looks at her, she covers her mouth with one hand and tries clutching together the front halves of her housecoat with the other. She drops the hand from her mouth to speak, and Frank can hear in her voice the tears threatening to escape.

"Frank, you're bleeding. What are you doing?"

"It's poison," Frank says, his voice bouncing off houses and shooting across lawns. "This is poison. It's dangerous."

"Frank, please come inside," Sarah says. Her voice is like a lesson recited to a child. "Put the knife down, and please come inside."

She hesitates, but then she moves past the doorframe, onto the top step. The shift confuses Frank, and now he wants to explain.

"It shouldn't be here."

"It's O.K., Frank. We'll take care of it later. Just please come in."

Something in him isn't listening, and Frank can't stop the space from expanding in his throat. He walks toward Sarah, and something clicks on the patio.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's O.K., Frank," she says. "Come back to me."

"It's not O.K., Sarah. I don't know why ..."

Frank squints at the bright kitchen light. He doesn't remember stepping inside with her. She hugs him, and he is aware of her disregard for the things he's capable of, the mess he can make of everything with his blood, his plant-stained hands.

"I'm sorry," he says, backing away from her. And he finds he is shivering but not cold. "I want to make everything better. I want to try to make everything better."

He looks into her eyes. Sarah is crying. And he feels things drifting back into him, important things he didn't know he missed.

"Don't say anything else, Frank. We can fix things. We'll fix everything."

And this, for him, is the most hopeful thing she has ever uttered.



They do not speak of the incident the next day. They are both different from themselves when they awake, yet they have been brought together. They rise just after ten o'clock to a day full of yellow light.

Everything from the night before is cleaned up or discarded. The debris, the clothes, the blood all vanish. The winter daphne is pruned and salvaged. It still appears healthy, and Frank thinks it is because the roots are so strong and deep. They will replace the shrub in the summer, Sarah tells him.

During the coming days, Frank tries twice to confess his indiscretion. Both times Sarah stops him before he can get it out. She tells him their future is the only thing that counts, and he thinks this is his penance, to keep his failure, his weakness, inside. He thinks she doesn't want this scar across all of them. He accepts this.

Three weeks before Christmas he has finished giving his last round of finals to his students. The building is silent on his last day, and he feels grateful for so many things he never planned on.

Driving home, Frank thinks of the apartment complex, an invitation. Outside the car, the gray clouds of twilight spit out specks of snow. He thinks of the smell of winter as he drives past the apartment where careless dustings on the asphalt swirl off the ground and die without notice.



On an afternoon glowing with newness in mid-March, Sarah rests in her bedroom. She rocks in a chair next to the bed holding their sleeping new daughter, and Frank stands in the doorway watching his future.

Sometimes it takes his breath away so completely he can't feel his own body. He knows what almost happened. He saw his child cling so hard to life she almost took her mother with her. The hours had been like a black light then, illuminating the things he valued, the things he wanted, the things he could not claim to deserve. And in that time, Frank felt his smallness, his helplessness, so much more than an infant.

Frank walks over to his family. He kneels beside the rocking chair, resting one arm on Sarah's shoulders and the other under his daughter.

"Hi, Daddy," Sarah says, smiling.

The word sounds good to Frank. He kisses Sarah, a soft feather against her cheek. He leans down and kisses his daughter, the realness of her and the bitterness of possibility mingling on his lips and sliding into his body. He feels grateful and new and high, and he wants to hold this moment forever. He wants the fear of what might have been to dissolve away, but it looms like a ghost in a lonely place near his heart. Everything feels better than he could have ever dreamed, and he knows it is.

Frank stands up. He doesn't want Sarah to see him like this.

Before walking away, he leans down one more time. The baby smells soft and warm and healthy when he kisses her.

Careful of the silence, Frank finds his wool coat in the hall closet. He steps outside, the daylight a kaleidoscope in his eyes. Everything looks different and fresh and wonderful, and his legs barely support him as he drops down on the porch steps. He sits there, crying in the frozen sun, the taste of possibilities fading from his lips, the scent of daphne overpowering him.



No Tenth Cat

by

Phoebe Kate Foster



Once a week, my father calls to tell me how Theodore is doing. Not well, to sum it up, but every Sunday afternoon, there is a progress report—or more accurately, a painfully detailed description of his decline. "His sight is going," my father informs me one week. "He bumps into things and it really hurts." Another week, I hear about Theodore's failing coordination. "He gets food all over his face when he eats, and forgets to wash it off. The rest of the time, he drools. He's a mess." Next, it's his legs. They're so stiff he can hardly move. "He creaks when he walks." My father's wheezy sigh reverberates in the receiver like the hollow sound heard when holding a seashell to your ear. "He's my ninth cat, you know," he reminds me. "One cat to mark each decade of my life, as it were."

I know the chronology of his cats by heart.

The first had been Abby Tabby, who'd wake him every morning by breathing on his eyelids when he was a little boy. One day, she crawled into a dark place to die. "I cried for weeks," he said. "I didn't cry as much when my own *mother* died."

After Abby came Buster, a yellow tomcat who was rambunctious, randy, prone to roam. When my father left for college, Buster understandably grew bored with the old farts at home and took off for good, too.

In New York City, where he got his first job, my father met Ginger as he wobbled out of a Greenwich Village bar at three a.m. She was sitting in a tree on which he was planning to pee. With the impetuosity of the young and the vulnerable, she fell for him and followed him home. I don't know what became of her. My father was always evasive about that. Naturally, I suspected the worst. He neglected her and she died, a little forlorn heap in a forgotten corner, while he calypsoed in Jamaica on vacation or wassailed in some fashionable Upper East Side watering hole.

Next was Omar Khayyam, a silver Persian, the perfect ornament for a velvet ottoman. He was disdainful, imperious. He peed on the antique Kerman, mated with the sofa pillows, and sashayed across the dining table in the middle of parties, waving his plume of a tail perilously close to candle flames. My father adored him, of course, and loved to recount how Omar threw up a hairball on some visitor's mink or sampled the pâté on the tray of canapés, to the guests' horror and my father's delight.

"I married my next cat," my father used to claim. My mother cast withering glances at him every time he said it, which was rather often. Tabitha was my mother's cat, acquired long before she acquired him. "She loves that cat more than me," he always made sure to announce to dinner guests, usually between the entrée and the dessert, after he had finished off a flock of martinis and a bottle of Mouton Cadet.

"Daddy, *please*," I would plead. I knew where this line of conversation was headed. From the time I was old enough to use the correct fork with each course, my parents required me to join their company at the dinner table, wearing my party dress and party smile, and desperately hoping that somehow that evening's script would be different.

It never was, though. Everyone always laughed at my father's remarks, though I saw nothing funny about them. My father would call to the Siamese, who was inevitably draped over my mother like the perfect fashion accessory. "Pussy, pussy," he'd croon. "Pretty pussy, pretty pussy. Whose pretty pussy are you?" Then he would smirk in a way that made a certain male guest look uncomfortable and my mother's perfect ivory cheeks turn the same color as her Paint the Town Red lipstick.

"Shut up, dear," she'd snap. "You're drunk and disgusting." She'd glance at me as I sat with eyes closed, perfecting the art of invisibility. I had just about convinced myself that if I could not see the faces at that tense table, then they could not see me either. "You may be excused, Phoebe Kate. Dora will give you your dessert in the kitchen. Say goodnight to our guests now."

My father's next cat came disguised as my tenth birthday present. He took me out to lunch at his club. As I sat, dwarfed in the oversized burgundy leather wing chair, dutifully trying to consume the bloody rare T-bone he had ordered for me, he grinned over the rim of his cocktail glass and said, "Have I got a surprise for you, Bananas Foster." He used that nickname for me when he was feeling expansive, claiming I was just as sweet as his favorite dessert.

After we finished eating, we walked around the corner to the pet shop, where a beribboned cat carrier awaited me with a card saying "With love from your dad." Miss Kitty was pure white with unusual little black markings on her forehead that looked like bangs. "Can't you call her something less prosaic?" my father sighed, rolling his eyes. The name on her pedigree papers was Camilla's Silver Mist Maiden of Glenmorrah. She was a beauty, but she was neurotic, unhappy. She either refused to eat or ate too much and then threw up. She fretted for attention, but shied away from any proffered affection and went into hiding if anyone came too close. "The most unsatisfactory cat I've ever known," my father pronounced, as he tried to flush her out from one of her hiding places, like a hunter in the jungle after big game. "What the hell is the matter with her?"

When my parents parted company, he got custody of the cat. My mother made sure of it. "Serves him right. *He's* the one who made her weird." During the weekly dinner visits with him, as I fidgeted behind my fettuccine in the over-decorated and overpriced Italian restaurant where we always dined, my father complained bitterly. "That goddamned cat is driving me insane. Do you know she bites her nails? *Crack crack crack* all the time. With all the possible cats in the world, I have to get the maladjusted one. *God.*" Then he would glare at my plate. "This place got raves from the food critics. Must you order *spaghetti* every week, Phoebe Kate?"

Finally, Miss Kitty vanished. One night she was under the bureau, cracking away at those claws, my father claimed, and the next morning she was nowhere to be found.

"Poor little thing," my mother wrote me when I informed her my birthday gift had mysteriously disappeared. "She probably threw herself out a window to get away from the bastard. But *he'll* never admit it." By then, I was grown and gone from whatever had passed as home, living on the West Coast, trying to invent a reasonable facsimile of a life, trying to like sashimi and sailing, trying not to overdress or overeat or over-react—all serious faux pas in Southern California. I just managed to learn the latest trends when the kaleidoscope of contemporary style would turn again, and I'd need to develop a taste for tahini or take up tai chi. I felt like a juggler, perpetually spinning plates on sticks for an audience whose expectations kept escalating.

Around that time, my father inherited Alistair from an old friend who'd died. "He is the ugliest cat I have ever seen," my father jotted in a Christmas card to me. Hallmark was the only mode of communication to span the three thousand miles between us, and we availed ourselves of it as infrequently as familial courtesy permitted. He wrote about his cat. I just signed my name. "I didn't know a cat could be so unattractive," one Easter card read. "His ribs are like slats on Venetian blinds. His fur is greasy, and his skin sags and hangs in wattles, like an old man's. *Disgusting.*"

Alistair preferred to live in high places, where he could look down on the rest of the world. In the obligatory greetings on the customary occasions, my father enclosed photos of the cat that resembled an old rag draped across the top of the refrigerator, or glowered gargoyle-like from the heights of the armoire or grandfather clock. When Alistair failed to budge from the top shelf of the credenza for two days, my father wrote me, "He

died of terminal ugliness. Did you know that ugliness is dangerous to your health?"

Yes, I silently screamed, *yes*, as I tore up the card and went for another appointment with a new therapist, who was already thoroughly fed up with me. He was trying to regress me under hypnosis to past lives, but I couldn't remember any. "Jesus Christ!" I shouted at him in the middle of a session, bolting upright from the couch. "Isn't *one* crappy life more than enough?"

After Alistair's demise, my father still sent the *de rigueur* cards but now he just signed his name, too, having no neutral and mutually acceptable subject to write about. Then, on my fortieth birthday, he surprised me with a phone call, knowing very well that I hate surprises. I didn't even recognize his voice after all the stony, silent years. "This is your old man," he repeated, speaking very loudly and slowly, as if I were hearing-impaired or half-witted. "Dad. Pops. *The old fart*. You remember?"

How can I forget? I thought, clutching the phone in clammy hands. *What does he want with me now?* I wrapped my arms tightly around myself so I wouldn't shatter into a thousand pieces that could not be glued back together.

He wanted to tell me about Dandelion, a kitten that a divorcee half his age gave to him. She fancied him a lonely man needing company in his retirement. "It keeps getting under my feet," he fussed. "Yesterday I sat on the bloody thing. Who in their right mind would give a *kitten* to a man my age? If I don't squash the damned thing by accident, it will probably outlive me."

He started calling every week. Dandelion continued to be a nuisance. "I have to remember to put the toilet lid down because I'm afraid it'll fall in and drown," he said. "Last Friday, I couldn't find it and ransacked the entire apartment looking for the blasted beast. It's so little that it's easy to lose. I'm getting too old for this sort of thing."

Finally, he gave Dandelion to the widow in the apartment across the hall. "She was thrilled. 'You're so sweet,' she said. I told her that I'm a goddamned s.o.b.—just ask my daughter and my former wife. She just tittered and brought me brownies. Now she's invited me over for meatloaf. I hate meatloaf. It gives me gas. How the hell am I going to get rid of the old bat?"

"I don't know," I told him. I really couldn't help him. I couldn't manage to get rid of my millstones either.

My father found his ninth cat outside the Church of the Resurrection one Sunday after Mass. He named him Theodore. "The name means gift from God," he informed me.

"You haven't darkened the door of a church since they threw you out of confirmation class for being incorrigible when you were a kid. Since when did you get religion?" I demanded.

"Since lightning didn't strike this old apostate dead as he walked up the church steps," he replied mildly. "I was quite surprised and really rather grateful."

This Sunday afternoon, when my father calls, he is agitated. When I ask him if he's all right, he says, "Theodore is slipping fast. He gets confused a lot now, doesn't remember who he is, where he is. He just stands in the

middle of the room and cries." There is an unhappy pause. "Then he pisses all over himself. It's . . . humiliating."

I listen silently, studying the raw sadness of my bitten nails, childlike and incongruous on the hands of a woman looking fifty dead in the eye. *I've got to let them grow out, I think. If not now, when?*

My father's sorry litany continues. "He has trouble breathing. Just getting out of a chair makes him gasp for air."

I pick my way around the next question carefully. It's prickly and painful and I'm not sure I want to know the answer. "What can be done for him?"

"Theodore doesn't want to be kept alive with tubes and drugs. He's old and tired."

I'm silent for a moment, then tell him to give Theodore a hug from me.

"Thank you, Bananas Foster," my father says softly.

It has been nearly forty years since he last used that nickname and the sound of it shocks me.

"Don't call me that, Dad. I'm not sweet at all."

"Yes, you are," my father says to me. "You really *are*."

We say goodbye and the sandpapery old voice is replaced by the empty hum of disconnection stretching over the distance that separates us. Between my California condo and his Manhattan apartment loom rocks and deserts and rivers that are treacherous for old bones and broken souls to traverse.

But maybe, just maybe, it can be done.

When the last call comes, I will not be surprised. I will be utterly feline, perfectly resigned, completely composed. I will turn around and around, from past to present to future and back again, and gracefully settle down in the life that is mine, curling into a soft ball to keep warm and secure in the cold lonely night of no tenth cat.

In memory of Michael

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The Summerset Review



She directed traffic. I didn't know her name, but I often saw her motioning to cars, trucks, bike messengers and other vehicles that passed through the intersection of New York City's Ninth Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street. The worn, blue toboggan covering her straggly gray, shoulder-length hair, and her multiple layers of clothing—shirt upon shirt beneath an unbuttoned secondhand trench coat—distinguished her from the city's official traffic cops, whose brown uniforms earned them the snide nickname of "turd." I knew by the woman's attire and by the bulging plastic bags crammed into a small, pull-behind grocery cart that she was homeless. She carried her worldly possessions on her back and in a chrome cart, but she commanded the corner of Fifty-fifth and Ninth as if she owned the universe.

I first saw the traffic lady on a sunny fall afternoon on my way to a new neighborhood laundromat. I walked down the street with a full drawstring bag slung over one shoulder, stopping at intervals during the two-block trip to catch my breath or switch my cargo to the other shoulder. The sidewalk was moderately crowded, typical of the side streets bordering the residential Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan just north of the Broadway theatre district. This part of West Fifty-fifth Street was lined with old brownstone apartment buildings and storefront businesses.

As I approached Ninth Avenue, I noticed a tall woman standing in the street at the corner. She didn't cross with the other pedestrians. Instead, she stood in a small area a few feet off the curb, her left arm aiming southward while her right arm revolved in rapid circles to urge vehicles on the westbound side street onto the busy avenue. She looked fiftyish or thereabouts. Her frame appeared lean and lanky, and her bare ankles were visible under a pair of boldly patterned but tattered plaid slacks. I saw the familiar dryness and red patchy skin on her ankles that I'd seen on other homeless folks in the six years I'd lived in New York. It comes from exposure to weather and filth. Sometimes the condition lent itself to open sores, but this woman's skin wasn't at that stage. A pair of old, laceless blue sneakers, like Keds, covered her feet. She wore a dingy beige trench coat, opened to expose several untucked flannel shirts. Atop her head was the blue wool ski cap. She was slightly overdressed for the mild temperature, but I knew she was acting as her own closet.

The woman was talking to vehicles as they turned the corner to head downtown. The expression on her face was excited and her arms waved wildly. Cars and trucks came within inches of her, but she never flinched. She appeared to give orders to them, her voice deliberate and sometimes audible above the sounds of the engines. As I got closer, I heard her directives more clearly.

"Come on, come on! Let's go! Round the corner, round the corner! *Step on it! Let's GO!*" She waved both arms simultaneously in large, sweeping motions and moved her body in the direction in which she wanted the cars to go.

The vehicles rolled by with no acknowledgement. To them, she was just another pedestrian who'd better watch her step. So much action happens on the New York streets that residents become jaded, and homeless people tend to be particularly invisible to the city's hurried population. People step over them as they sleep in subway stairwells or huddle on church steps. People ignore them as they walk the streets with their meager belongings or rant to passersby. However, having moved to New York to pursue an acting career, I observed everything. This city offered much for actors to watch, people of various occupations, ethnic backgrounds, appearances and behaviors. Actors never know when they may be able to use what they'd seen. The traffic lady struck me as a real character study. I set my heavy laundry down onto the sidewalk while waiting for the light to change and watched her.

"Hurry up! Keep it movin'! Move it, move it, move it, people!" The traffic lady shifted on her feet from side to side, then walked up to a slow-turning delivery truck as if to usher it around the corner. She shook her fist at the driver, yelling, "That's right, mister! Clear the roadway."

Once the truck made its turn, she retreated to her position, approaching oncoming traffic with a blur of hand signals. She began muttering at the cars, and I couldn't make out what she said. The stoplight turned yellow, then red. Cars stopped. Taking a break, the traffic lady stepped back onto the sidewalk. She was still muttering as she squatted against the brick building beside her pile of belongings. Pedestrians noticed the traffic lady as they passed her corner. Some shook their heads at her street antics and kept walking. Others just glanced at her and continued. For the moment, her show was in intermission. I hoisted my laundry bag over my shoulder and crossed the street, leaving the southeast corner of Fifty-fifth and Ninth under the traffic lady's care.



Over the next several months I saw the traffic lady whenever I happened to pass that corner during the day. Sometimes I'd stop and watch, unafraid of insulting her because she never seemed to be aware of my presence. She never seemed to be aware of anything around her except the passing cars and trucks. I never saw her there at night. I didn't know where she slept. But I wondered where she came from and what compelled her to stand at that corner and direct traffic.

One afternoon I ran late for work and decided to take a cab downtown rather than wait for the subway. Since Ninth Avenue was a straight shot to the restaurant where I worked in the West Village, the cabbie headed west on Fifty-fifth a couple of blocks. As we approached the intersection, I saw the traffic lady in her regular position, motioning vehicles onward. The cabbie slowed to make the left turn and stuck his arm out of the open car window. I saw the traffic lady reach for something the cabbie handed to her. It was a small wad of folded dollar bills.

"There you go, doll," the cabbie said with a Brooklynese accent that sounded charming and matter-of-fact.

"Thank you," replied the traffic lady, taking the money and putting it in her pants pocket.

We drove on. I looked curiously at the driver in his rearview mirror. His dark eyes intently watched the road ahead. His brown hair was combed back off his forehead. I could see its length brush the back collar of his light blue shirt. His skin was tanned, and what I could see of his face was handsome. "Do you know her?"

"Oh, she's been around here for years," he said. The cabbie looked to be in his forties or so. His voice had a friendly tone. I imagined he was Catholic because he had a small, plastic Mary Mother of Christ affixed to his dash.

"Really? I've been watching her direct traffic since I moved to this neighborhood last fall," I said. "I can't get over it."

"Me either," he said, looking at me in his rearview mirror briefly, then looking back at the road. "But she's a very interesting case."

"How so?"

"I had this passenger one time ask me to stop so he could give her some money. He told me he heard that she used to live in the neighborhood, right on that block, in fact. He said the story was that she left her apartment one day to run errands. When she came back, her building was on fire. The traffic was so heavy that the fire trucks couldn't get through in time, and the lady's kids ended up dying in the blaze." The cabbie shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"That's awful."

"Yeah. You know, only in New York," he continued, checking his side view mirrors to change lanes. "Apparently things got so crazy that the lady started directing traffic so the trucks could get through. But by the time they were able to put the fire out, it was too late. She lost her kids, everything. The guy told me that people in the neighborhood said the woman just snapped afterwards."

"Is that really true?" I asked.

"Hey, that's what he told me," he said, glancing at me in his rearview mirror. "I don't know where he got the story, but he believed it and had me stop for him so he could give her some cash. Ever since then, when I'm in this neighborhood, I stop and give her a few dollars. Makes you think about how people end up the way they do."

"Yes, it sure does," I nodded.

We continued down Ninth Avenue in silence, passing block after block of storefronts and apartment buildings, people coming in and out of them or simply walking along. The flavors of the neighborhoods changed as we went southward. I noticed the urban residential low 50s with old ladies pushing chrome grocery carts and young Hispanic mothers pushing toddlers in strollers. I saw the gritty edges of the theater district in the 40s, where small neighborhood eateries operated beside rundown peep-show palaces with blinking marquis. I saw native Africans, tall and ebony skinned, hurrying in and out of the numerous African grocery stores that line both sides of Ninth Avenue in the 30s. We passed through the family-oriented blocks of Chelsea in the 20s, heading towards the eclectic Village with its population of artsy folk, gays and beatniks.

I thought about the traffic lady and the cabbie's story. I didn't know whether it was true or not, but who was I to say? If it was true, how tragic for that woman. If it was just legend, it was no less thought provoking. The cabbie struck me as having a real heart. To think that he would stop and give her spare change when his fares took him past her corner was inspiring.



Some weeks later, I noticed the traffic lady was gone. I don't know what became of her. Perhaps she had moved to a shelter with winter coming. The cops may have given her the bum's rush and made her leave. Maybe she had found a different corner with different traffic to direct. Maybe she had gotten sick or died.

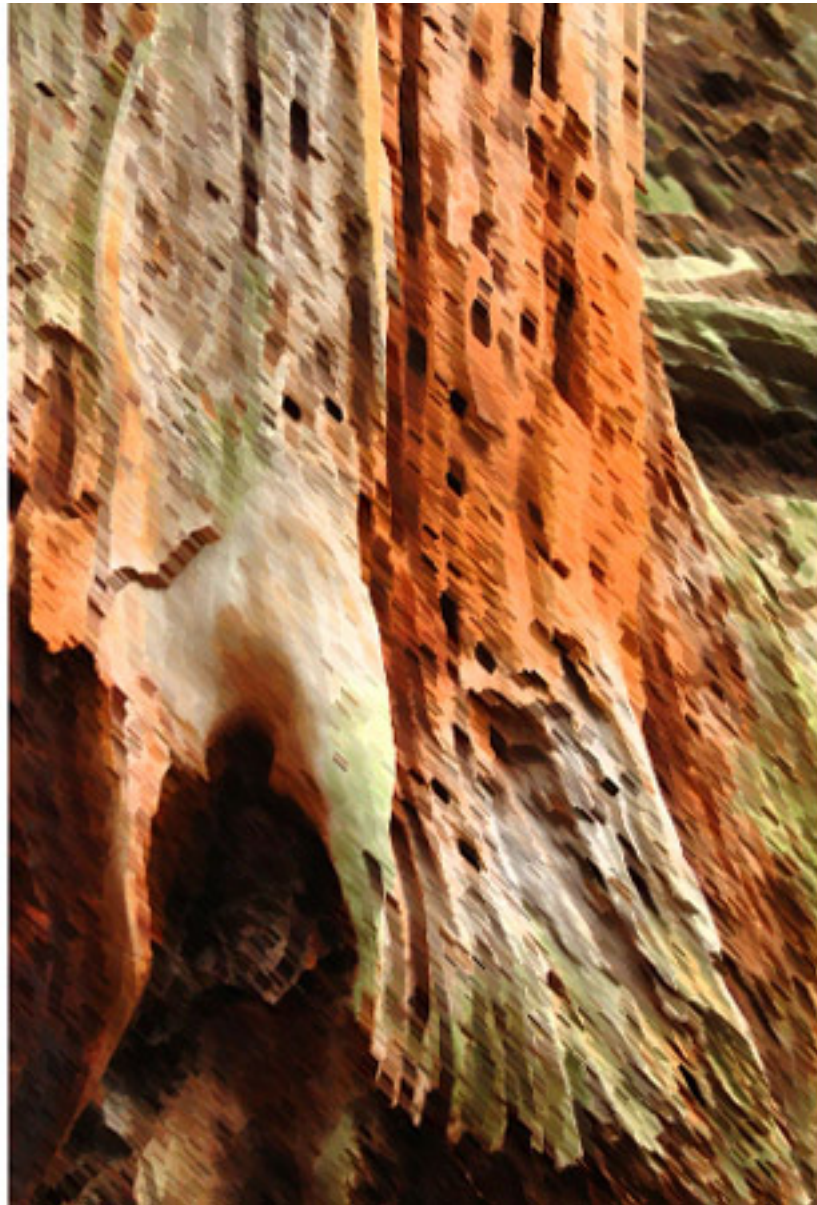
Wherever happened, I never forgot her or what the cabbie told me. In fact, I thought of it with every homeless person I encountered from then on, including the thin, black woman who lived under a blanket on the steps of a Catholic church on East Twenty-Ninth Street, her incessant mumbling often the only clue she was there; the chubby, red-bearded man who rummaged through garbage cans on the number six train platform in Grand Central Station; the frail, elderly white woman I saw sitting on flattened cardboard against the wall in the Port Authority bus station, whispering inaudibly while holding out her hand for spare change from passing commuters; and the black man of indeterminate age I once saw curled up on a discarded sofa bed on the Upper West Side, sound asleep while city life buzzed around him.

The traffic lady's story made me think twice about them all.



Standing Dead

by
John Riha



Several weeks after his forty-seventh birthday, Jules decided that he and his wife, Laura, should go parasailing. He had read about it in an outdoorsy type of men's magazine and later, when he Googled "parasailing," a web site popped up from an outfit on the island of Bonaire. There were pictures of toucans and grass-thatched taverns and sunsets that struck the horizon with passionate colors. The water appeared unnaturally clear, as if two layers of pure air had been set atop one another, separated only by a thin, glassine membrane beneath which swarmed fantastically hued fishes. The parasailors in the web site photos were all grins and thumbs-up, adrenalined to giddiness. It was all so perfectly antithetical to his current state that Jules was immediately heartsick for the lack of it.

Parasailing itself promised the unfamiliar rapture of sport. Jules imagined the visceral twist as he lifted out of the water, the thrum of electrons surging along rarely used neural pathways. Beyond his dangling toes lines of sea drift would be etched white across a cobalt bay; the startled stares of gulls would reach him at eye level; the balmy air would flutter the rigid hairs on his forearms. Afterwards, he and Laura sipping some syrupy concoction in the shelter of a grass-roofed bar, peeling fat shrimp, giggling and licking their fingers—the hedonistic foreplay of lovers by the ocean.

"It sounds dumb. Paragliding."

"Parasailing," he said.

"Whatever."

"It's not dumb. It's beautiful. You're way up in the air. You can see everything."

"I'd get sick."

"It's not like that," Jules said. "It's very smooth."

"How do you know?"

This was a delicate matter—proposing something he knew nothing about to his pragmatic wife—and a well-designed buoyancy was required. He originally had thought to romanticize Bonaire, paint the vibrancy and lure of island travel. The gorgeous weather. Visits to lush, vanilla-scented spas. Then he had out-thought himself. Reasoning that Laura wouldn't respond to travel-brochure imagery, he tried a quick opening gambit—ta da! We should try parasailing! In Bonaire! It was a doomed strategy. Instead of piquing her curiosity, he had put her on alert—pushed the needle of her malarkey meter into the red zone. What middle-age angst was afoot? She stood by the family room sofa, folding clothes fresh from the dryer, snapping out T-shirts and towels and not looking at him, her reserve pointed as a lance. His round, plump enthusiasm was deflating. "I saw it in your woman's magazine. You know the one. People of all ages do it. It's not dangerous at all. It's exhilarating. Life-affirming."

"Life-threatening maybe. Anyway, we've hardly paid off the patio furniture." A trump card played—finances.

"You're missing the point. It'll be an adventure. It'll be good for us. To do something incredible. Together."

"We've got two boys in expensive colleges. Or have you forgotten?" Ace of trumps.

"We can afford a vacation now and then. We deserve it."

"If you want to take me for a vacation, take me to Santa Fe like you promised."

"Santa Fe isn't original. It isn't exciting."

"It is to me."

"This would be different. It would be, um, life-affirming." Had he said that already? He was hacking at a fast-growing jungle with a butter knife.

"What about sharks?"

"Sharks?"

"I'm not parachuting into an ocean full of sharks. We'd be bait."

"We're not going to get attacked by sharks."

Laura creased a pair of his jeans with the blade of her hand. Jules winced. He did not like frontal creases in his jeans. "The ocean is full of sharks," she said. "It's not like they're not there. That poor kid from Germany was eaten the other week swimming near Tampa."

Jules sighed. His wife's logic was seamless, quicksilver, providing no entry point. She might even be right. It probably was a dumb idea. And probably more expensive than he figured. And truly, to think about it, the notion of sharks made him uneasy. He imagined how the tow boat might lose momentum near the end of his run, allowing him to drift closer and closer to the water. Looking down, he would see eager fins cutting toward his skimming shadow while those in the boat laughed and sloshed beer, oblivious to his frantic signals.

The fact she might be right, however, was beside the point. Ideas were at stake. Imagination. The inalienable right to think up dumb stuff. Certainly fielding these little outbursts was a precious and necessary spousal skill, and here his wife had failed. She could not bring herself to indulge his fantasy for the briefest of moments, to provide the slightest breath of air under his wings. What would it cost, a moment's indulgence? It had become characteristic of her. His more inventive notions were nothing more than clay pigeons. The powdery residue of his exuberance hung in the air.



That afternoon Jules took his coffee on the newly installed patio under the canopy of their unpredictable ash tree. Some summers, the ash behaved marvelously and provided thick, gorgeous shade. Others, the leaves curled as if they had been blowtorched. Jules had taken samples of malignant leaves to experts in the area, the local nursery and such, where he was directed to do a variety of curatives that included the subterranean injection of vitamins, and boring holes in the trunk and filling the cavities with solutions of iron. It all seemed to make little difference, and the ash cycled its capricious way through good years and bad. Perhaps environmental factors were involved. Microwaves and cell phone radiation playing havoc with phototropic responses. Nevertheless this year had begun well, and the foliage was luscious.

Although the ash was the only substantial tree in the immediate backyard, Jules and Laura owned a nicely wooded New Jersey property of almost two acres. A smooth green oval of lawn, bordered by perennial beds of hostas and lungworts, ultimately yielded to a cacophony of twisted trunks, branches, and scrub brush that composed the wood lot. Early on, when they had first purchased the property, Jules had attempted to tame the wood lot with judicious thinning and other worthy management practices, to little avail. He had cut up some small scrub trees, thinking to fuel romantic fires he occasionally envisioned but rarely kindled, and to this day a stack of eighteen-inch long logs sat moldering by the side of the garage where they housed a chipmunk colony. Spindly hawthorns and soft maples now proliferated, and whatever worthwhile trees existed were

content to develop at a retarded pace, accompanied by an abundance of stubborn flora that splurged across the forest floor and vined its way up the thick gray trunks.

Today as he contemplated, Jules noticed that one of the big trees that stood at the edge of the woods had died. This struck him as odd. How did one of the largest living things in his domain get so thoroughly dead without his reckoning? As he understood, mature trees take years to die. Had it been that long since he last appraised his little forest?

Jules walked over to the tree, carrying his coffee mug. It was bigger up close than from far away, resplendent with bulbous warts and knobs. From the brownish leaves that clung to the tips of branches he could tell it was an oak. The bark seemed lighter than brethren trees in the wood lot, ash gray rather than deep slate, and in places the bark had lifted up to reveal an inner surface with a suspiciously grooved texture. Perhaps some kind of larva was to blame. He could sense the enormous weight, the dense mass lifting overhead into the sky. He looked up the length of trunk to where the upper branches dissolved in fuzzy blue and his sense of balance came undone. Jules stood back, took a deep breath and tried to judge the girth. A good two-and-a-half feet thick. Call it three. It would have to come down, of course. If it was diseased or infected, it would put other oaks in the neighborhood at risk. But such an operation wouldn't be cheap. A good-size tree cost thousands to remove. That certainly would punt Bonaire into the distant future.

As he returned to his deck, Jules had an inspiration. He would take the tree down himself. He owned a chainsaw, although he hadn't used it in years, and he was fairly sure it would do the job. It was an eager tool, and years back he had come to some proficiency with it. From a distance he studied the oak and tried to judge where the topmost branches would land. The tree had a slight natural leaning toward the west. The crown was decidedly off-center that way. When it came to felling a tree, you couldn't fight gravity; you went with it. This much he knew. The line of fall would be parallel to the edge of his lawn, making access to the carcass easy for limbing and cutting up the trunk. West it was. He calculated a rough geometry that placed the crown well within the southern border of his property, a good thirty or forty feet from the precious rhododendrons of his neighbor, Mrs. Higgins.

His chainsaw, a Husquavarna, was stashed in the far reaches under a workbench in the garage. He had to move an old washing machine drainage hose and a rusted sewer snake to get it. He tried to be quiet. If Laura detected unnatural noises coming from the garage, she surely would investigate. An inept liar, he would confess. She would insist he didn't know what he was doing and that professionals should be called in. He would be obliged to get at least three bids, in writing. Common sense would triumph. Which, in many regards, would be a pity.

Dust and grime had settled on the oily surfaces of the chainsaw and covered the engine housing with a spongy crust a quarter of an inch thick. The twenty-inch-long blade looked smaller than he remembered. An examination of the chain recalled the last time the tool had been used. Or, more accurately, his sons had used it. Blake, the eldest, had tried to cut fireplace logs from a felled soft maple but, lacking the common sense that God gave snails, had run the blade completely through, plunging it into the dirt and a hidden rock, causing a spectacular geyser of sparks and ruining the chain. Examining the saw now, years later, Jules recalled the long trip to the hardware store and Blake's resentful purchase of a new chain—a lesson in accountability that probably had no long-term effect other than to foment filial resentment (*it was an accident, for Crissakes!*), and to make Blake long for the day when he would be free of Jules' nonsense. Ah, autonomy. This Jules understood. The freedom to make one's own decisions, and to profit or perish by the results. He ran a thumb along the new chain and immediately cut himself on one of the precisely honed teeth. A thin line of blood appeared. Jules smiled and sucked it clean, relishing the iron taste like a hungry shark.



On Saturday, Laura had a date to meet friends for lunch and then go shopping for bridal shower gifts for somebody's daughter. As she got ready Jules waited impatiently in the living room, feigning interest in the *New York Times*. As soon as he heard the garage door begin to descend, he crept to the windows and peered out to verify that she indeed was driving away. With an outlaw's elation he raced upstairs and changed into a pair of crisply creased jeans and a faded T-shirt. Out in the garage he retrieved the chain saw from its hiding place. He found the gas can and gave it a swish to check for fuel. He certainly didn't want to spend precious time down at the filling station. A gurgle and shifting of weight indicated there was leftover gas. True, it was years old. He had heard that old gas should be replaced annually, but he was skeptical. Surely gas was gas. Put it to spark and it would undoubtedly ignite. Anyway, time was of the essence. He filled the saw's tank, grabbed his gloves and goggles.

The wood lot smelled of damp, rotting nature—wood and leaves nibbled by dark little beetles and worms and masses of microorganisms, a vaporous stew of decomposition. Wrens and robins flitted through the dark tangled canopy and he could hear male cardinals bullying each other with clear, precise declarations. He studied his quarry. The tree was forlorn, its branches confused and purposeless. Taking down a standing dead tree, especially one that might be diseased, was excellent stewardship.

He fitted the goggles over his eyes and hefted the saw, feeling gladiatorial. He stabbed at the primer four times and gave the pull start a hearty tug. Nothing. Again, a few primes and forceful heaves on the starter handle. Each time the rope eased its way back into the machine, limp and sheepish. He repeated the start-up requirements for a good five minutes, his exasperation tinged with panic. He was sweating and hadn't even begun to work. At last he realized he had failed to activate the On/Off switch. He toggled it On and at his next tug the machine gave a throaty snarl and farted out a spinning globe of gray exhaust. The sudden torque nearly pried the tool from his hands. He gunned the engine, spewing poisonous fumes. Old fuel. Acrid vapors seeped behind his goggles and made his eyes water, and he had to take a moment to reorient himself. With the saw burbling at an uneven idle, he lined up his cuts. Bottom cut, angle cut, back cut. One, two, three. Nice and easy.

The factory-sharp teeth were sweet. The blade melted into the timber and spewed out a torrent of cream-colored chips that covered his gloves and arms. The pungent smell of oak, the bitter exhaust, the manic scream of the engine were tonic, purging and cleansing his sensibilities, leaving his core wondrously focused and primal. There could be no turning back now. He had moved ahead, invoked the gods of self-determination, severed xylem and phloem. What man has put asunder, let no woman join together.

He leaned his weight against the tool, muscling it into the tree. The blade was shorter than the diameter of the trunk and he was obliged to work back-and-forth, rocking the blade to complete a semi-circle, but in a few minutes the first cut was complete and he toggled off the saw and stood back to inspect his work. Unfortunately, the line of his cut wasn't at all parallel to the ground but dipped, creating a dark indelible curve. "Crap," said Jules. He would have to do much better with the trickier angle cut. Picking up a stone, Jules scratched a guideline in the bark. Smart. He looked around, half expecting to see Laura, fists on hips, recording his transgression with her dry blue eyes. In fact, he almost wished that she *would* come home and find him like this, nobly defending the property from decay and attrition, presenting an uncharacteristically swashbuckling figure: damp T-shirt, leather gloves, his forearms covered with the

pulverized flesh of his adversary, face (he could only imagine) striated with grime, the whole of himself blurred within the smoke of battle. She would see his essence, his core maleness, and she would be overcome with regret for each petty riposte and touché by which their marriage had bled. Her insight would be belated. He was beyond mercy. He would stride up to her, a leer dangling from his lips. Grab her, pin her hands behind her back, tip her onto his perfectly thick, green lawn (*thank you, Scott's Summer Weed 'N' Feed*), press his sweaty, grimy face into her soft mouth. Afterwards, he would leave her. Call his lawyer, pack his bags, be gone before she could catch her breath and pull up her panties. He peered through the haze toward the back door and the deck. No Laura.

Entertaining as that scenario might be, Jules balked at the thought of divorce. The protracted, legal wrangling stretched to satanic lengths by oily-haired, one-hundred-dollar-per-quarter-hour lawyers; him huddled in some stale apartment while Laura, happily untethered, flitted merrily to and from her—formerly *their*—tidy, well-maintained house in the woods. He supposed this was a primary reason why people selected spousal murder as an alternative to divorce—it was a so-much quicker and cheaper solution. But how to proceed? He supposed he could simply do away with her. It wasn't as if people who had been married for decades didn't entertain such thoughts now and then. Lure her out into the forest on some pretext, bash her skull with a rock or—consider the irony—a branch of sturdy oak. Dismember her with the chain saw, bury the pieces in separate little elfin graves. How long could he maintain a deception? He sighed. Not long. Laura was too well-networked. She would be missed immediately. Her sister, Helen, from Pittsburgh, called almost every day. Excuses such as, *she's in the shower, she's at the store*, would only go so far. Two weeks, tops. He might buy more time with a more elaborate lie. *She's gone to Bonaire*, Jules would tell everyone. *She's run off with a tree trimmer. She left a note claiming she wants to be a professional parasailor.*

The second cut was harrowing. Although he tried to follow his roughed-in guideline, the saw seemed to have its own will in the matter and the blade kept wandering off. He had to wrestle the tool to follow his line, forcing the blade and bogging down the engine. An unfortunate burnt smell ensued, and the chips that spewed forth now ranged from deep brown to black, like crumbs of charred toast. The angle cut overshot the first cut by a good two inches. When Jules shut off the saw and pushed back his goggles, he realized that both cuts were past center. The weight of the unsupported mass was more than the supported weight, which was not good physics at all, and there was more cutting yet to do. This kind of unskilled tomfoolery, he judged, is what kept emergency rooms busy on weekends. Perhaps, if he had not been in such a rush to finish before his wife came home with her withering disapproval, he would have taken more time, been steadier. Buttressed by spousal confidence, success might have been assured.

It was gruesome work. The chain, dulled by the hard oak fibers and by his awkward manipulations, refused to cut effectively. The smell of scorched wood mingled with the stench of rancid exhaust. Sweat ran across the lenses of his goggles, distorting his vision. When he at last finished a ragged apex to his triangle, the resulting wedge of wood would not budge. Somewhere in the stoic trunk, uncut fibers held fast. There was a metaphor here for life, he supposed, and the futility of even the mildest aspirations. He kicked at the wedge with the heel of his sneaker but could not dislodge it.

So Jules edged the tip of the blade into the cut, grinding away more wood. He surely was nudging ever closer to some catastrophic point where the tree would violently explode from the unnatural pressures accumulated within, blasting deadly splinters into his neck, chest, and groin. The enormous trunk, stricken, would rotate on its shattered base, a wounded Goliath, and then slowly fall as he, bleeding and stunned, tried to stagger out of the way. He would only reach the edge of his lawn before the big

tree would find him, crush him, its mighty weight pressing him into the fescue and squishing the juices out of his guts. Laura would eventually discover the mayhem, the realization unfolding in slow motion: the enormous fallen tree, the errant chain saw (perhaps still pattering away), and then his arm, a single limb, sticking out from underneath, the gloved hand. The casket would have to be closed. There would be some sorrow and excellent wine at the after-funeral get-together. Laura, still a trim size eight, would make a comely widow.

Amazingly, the wedge moved. It went limp in its pocket, as if it had decided to give up. Jules withdrew the saw and struck the wedge with his heel. The chunk slid out and fell to the ground, leaving a ragged but impressive void, surfaces blackened and still smoldering from the horrendous friction. He was relieved but anxious, for the big tree—it seemed to grow more massive each time he considered it—was now held upright by the most tenuous of possibilities. He quickly moved to the other side for the coup de gras. The chain was hot and running dangerously loose in its track. Any sort of real woodsman would have sharpened the teeth, lubricated and tightened the chain, but Jules' only thought was to get the whole thing over with. He leaned his weight into the work, and the saw began to gag. The cut line was agonizingly shallow.

Then, it happened. There were a succession of startling cracks, like bullwhips snapping past his ears, and the oak began to lean. At first it was a barely perceptible shift, but immediately Jules stumbled backwards a few steps and shut off the saw. The gray trunk lingered upright, snared in a web of spidery sun and shadow, and within that moment the unknowable future struck perfect balance with the inevitable, and the world was hushed. There came a rustling overhead, the tree groaned, then a roar gathered as the crown moved through the surrounding canopy, tearing out limbs and branches from other trees; a sound that grew vast and absorbed every sensibility. Jules was fixed by the spectacle, unable to move. With a thunderous exclamation the trunk hit the ground, and then there was a soft shimmering rain that Jules realized was not a rain at all but the drift of tiny twigs and severed leaves falling through the hazy air and pattering onto the forest floor.

Jules took a deep breath, pushed his goggles up onto his forehead. It was done. He looked around, certain the commotion would attract attention. Kids running over, *Hey Mister! Hey, Mister! Did you cut that tree down?* Neighbors would come trailing into his backyard, hands-over-mouths. *Good Lord, Jules, what have you done?*

But no one came. No one yelled. No sirens approached. Jules stood for several minutes, letting normalcy reassert itself. The birds resumed chirping. Leaves meandered through the air; wisps of exhaust hung like forest wraiths in the scattered sunlight. He put down the saw. His hands tingled from vibration. He began to walk the length of the old oak. The dry, brittle canopy was enormous, and pushed out a good thirty feet onto his lawn. Thousands of little branches littered the grass. Thankfully, the crown had come up short of Mrs. Higgins' rhododendrons. At least he wouldn't have to endure any awkward diplomacy there. He pulled off his gloves and wiped his brow. Then he looked for his wife.



By the time Laura returned from her shopping, Jules had showered and was relaxing in the living room with a pinot noir, listening to jazz. She hadn't bought much and carried only two little packages, but she appeared refreshed and energized.

"So," she smiled, loosening hair from the back of her collar with a girlish flip of her hand, "what did you do today?" She in fact looked radiant.

He sipped his wine. A flag of late afternoon sun had draped itself across the arm of the sofa, and he considered it. It struck him that this rectangle of sunlight had not moved during the entire time he had been sitting; a glowing edge had remained tangent to a throw pillow for what seemed like the better part of an hour. Perhaps time had paused in its infinite unreeling—planets slipped into alignment, and moons as well, as ethereal beings sat on the edges of clouds dangling their toes in cooling vapors, waiting. Or perhaps some force of will had mutated the fretwork of the future and created a possibility—hope that balanced between what is now and what is next. Jules smiled. This was exactly such a moment.



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Each night since the phone call, Annie has dreamed of falling. The dreams are horribly specific. She slips in the shower and breaks out a front tooth, then watches her blood swirl down the drain. She trips over a supermarket curb, spilling her groceries, and hears the crunch of her shoulder dislocating on the pavement. This time she stands before a fitting room mirror looking young and formidable, even beautiful. She thinks that she's found the perfect dress for the awards banquet. She's relieved, until her eyelashes sprinkle out and her hair drops in thick clumps onto her shoulders. Even the dress is coming apart, seams popping, threads unraveling and buttons flying like bullets. When she tries to run, her feet get tangled up and the fall seems to last forever, her body slicing through the air until her cheek finally scrapes against the department store carpet.

Annie sits on the edge of the bed, heart knocking. She looks down at her legs for a long time, afraid to get up. She remembers that she was opening a can of soup when the call came, still tweezing the dripping lid between thumb and forefinger. She glanced over at her daughter Eden standing in front of the refrigerator, eating olives out of a jar. Trying to listen to the professional voice on the other end, she felt a pang of guilt (it was automatic) that she doesn't cook like her mother. Even scribbling information on the hall table notepad, Annie had barely heard about the award. Later she tried to decipher her own shaky handwriting, and ended up calling back for details.

The dreams hadn't started that night; the phone call had only worsened them. It was that embarrassing spill she took on Richard's doorstep. She had this idea of putting on a short black skirt and making him sorry. She would show up unannounced and he would feel ashamed. And she might get a look at the woman. So she rang the doorbell of the apartment where her husband lived with someone else, holding a box of his things. When Richard opened the door to let her in, she stumbled across the threshold and fell at his feet, scattering green tennis balls everywhere. He asked with real concern, "Are you O.K.?" Annie kept her mouth shut, hiding her bleeding tongue.

Now Annie has fallen at Richard's feet, and she is sure to fall at the banquet on her way to the podium. She wants to spring out of bed and go running (she has ten pounds to lose), but her legs might collapse beneath her. She crawls back under the sheets instead, the pillow cool against her face. She breathes deeply, picturing the farm again, and her six-year-old reflection in the pond. She's wearing an outgrown sundress, a strap hanging off one shoulder. Her hair floats like anemones, tentacles alive and searching in the wind. She tries to think about swampy water, brown shadows and lying on her back in the dirt. She tries to remember her dog standing with heavy paws on her chest, his pink tongue dripping and ticks growing fat behind his ears.

Annie wants to be happy. She's being given the Salesperson of the Year Award by her real estate firm. She deserves this because she never tires of showing houses, as if she's searching for her own home. She should be excited, but she's only scared. She's beginning to worry that she's losing her mind. It's probably stress about the banquet and about leaving town with her mother in the hospital. Annie's mother got sick the same night Annie fell across Richard's threshold. When she returned home, the message light was blinking on her machine. It was her mother, saying that she had decided to check into the emergency room. Annie drove all the way to the hospital crying, not only because of her mother but because of the way her scraped knees throbbed and burned. She hid her wounds from Eden until they healed, as if they were dirty tattoos.

But Annie's mother is getting better, while Annie is only getting worse. She can't eat, and when she sleeps there are these dreams, which have now come seeping into real life. Lately her heart races and she begins to sweat before standing up. Basiphobia, she's heard the word in a college psychology class. It means a fear of falling, but it's mostly an affliction for old people. Annie feels ridiculous. If she doesn't take hold of herself, Eden will notice. She's six now and watches Annie closely all the time, as if taking notes.

Annie has named her daughter Eden, after the biblical garden. Eden is wild, savage with life and color and scent. She used to eat bugs as a baby. Now she plucks garter snakes from the bushes, stalks birds and squirrels in the fenced backyard. She has managed to become a nature girl in the city suburbs. Annie thinks it must be in the blood. Sometimes she feels guilty, watching Eden running on their patch of lawn, watching her splash in the muddy creeks she makes with a water hose. They don't go to the farm enough; the drive is too long and Annie is busy. It must have all paid off, though, because Annie is receiving an award.

Annie lies rigid on her side, eyes squeezed shut. If she stays here on the pillow she will keep thinking of things like this, guilt and sickness and falling at the banquet. This bed where she dreams feels like an island. She flings off the sheet and leaps up suddenly, like plunging into icy water. She keeps moving as she pulls on her rumpled sweats, barely pausing to force her feet into running shoes with the laces already tied. She leaves the front door standing open, even though her daughter is sleeping inside. She can't stop to close it; she feels as if she's being pursued.

She almost slips in the dewy grass and her terror mounts. She runs and runs, and when her toes strike a stick or skitter over a pebble she feels like screaming. She tries to focus on the shopping she needs to do, on the dress she will buy for the banquet, but she can only think of the ten pounds she needs to lose. Richard used to jokingly poke at her middle. Annie hates him,

wishes to bite him and scratch him and pull out his hair, the way he used to say to her, smiling, "Look, a gray one," and pluck it from her scalp. She always tried to smile back through the stinging.

But it's not only Richard chasing her through the fog, up the hill, past picket fences and tall Victorian houses. It's the award, and all that it does or does not mean (she thinks the promotion to general manager should matter more to her). It's the image of her mother shrunken and old in a hospital bed, when she used to race with Annie piggyback across the pasture, sending up flocks of brown birds. Annie is afraid to stop. She runs until her chest hurts and her sides are on fire, until she bends over and vomits into the bushes.



She stands in front of a three-way mirror at the department store. This moment is so much like last night's dream that her hands are shaking. She tries to be casual because Eden is here, bored and fidgety. Annie has found a tailored pantsuit that flatters her figure, and shoes that make her look taller. She glances over at Eden, thinking of popping seams and flying buttons with a mixture of dread and longing. Eden watches as always, her eyes reflective green ponds.

Annie has found the perfect outfit for the awards banquet, just like in her dream. If Richard could see her now, slim and powerful with highlighted hair, he would be sorry. She should feel relieved. Leaning close to the mirror (her eyebrows need waxing) she discovers a new line in her face. Her nose is studded with blackheads. Her eyes have dark circles under them. If Annie were more like her mother, who wears shapeless dresses that sway in the wind, it wouldn't matter so much. Annie thinks how wind is always blowing at the farm, livening everything (dresses and hair and sheets on the line). It scares Annie when her mind wanders like this. She will have to focus now on keeping her eyelashes and her freshly-done hair; she will have to concentrate on not falling. She almost walks off with the pantsuit, tags dangling, until Eden asks, "Are you going to pay for it, Mom?"

Annie spends more money than she expected. Absurdly, she hides the receipt from Eden. She will stop at the hospital on her way home. She tries to sing along with the radio as she drives, but now she worries that someone will steal her pantsuit while she's visiting with her mother (it was the last one in her size). Annie tries to smile at Eden, who looks up at her searchingly, but she's too sick inside.



Annie and Eden stand together at the foot of Nell's hospital bed. Annie doesn't like seeing her mother this way, and resists clapping her hands over Eden's eyes. It's true that Eden doesn't seem disturbed, but she's never seen this woman leaning off a wooden bridge, long hair hanging forward, to show Annie a frog. She's never seen this woman rinsing fresh-cut grass from her feet under the well house spigot. She wasn't there when Nell covered dark paneling with fresh white paint, decorating herself with splatters, every door and window of the old house thrown open.

Nell is still like that, all her doors thrown open. But Annie can barely remember how it felt drifting in to grab an apple, then drifting back out to roll with new puppies in the grass. She can't smell the wind anymore, billowing the curtains and ruffling the newspapers spread across the floor. Annie keeps her own doors and windows fastened, not because the neighborhood is unsafe, but because she's come to hate insects. Even moths, which she used to catch and cup in her hands just to feel their wings tickling.

Standing at the foot of Nell's bed, Annie thinks how she's changed as much on the inside as her mother has changed on the outside. She's suddenly terrified for both of them, and for Eden. She decides not to bring Eden back here anymore (Nell will be well enough soon to go home). She will take Eden to the awards banquet instead. She wants Eden to be there when she strides to the podium, trailing perfume and fire.

At least Nell has remained cheerful. She doesn't seem to care what's happening, that she's getting old and sick. This angers Annie a little. It seems wrong that Nell should accept it all so easily, the wrinkling and the flabbiness and the dimming eyes. Annie remembers gathering fodder to adorn the porch posts, lugging a heavy pumpkin between them, getting the big knife, scooping out slimy guts, collecting the seeds to plant as an experiment, and thinking all the while how much like autumn her mother's eyes were.

Annie sends Eden down the hall to watch television in the waiting room. She knows what her mother wants tonight. Nell needs a sponge bath but she doesn't like the nurses. She insists that she could probably do it herself, but Annie knows that her mother is still weak. If she were to fall in the bathroom, Annie would never forgive herself.

Helping Nell to undress, Annie hears blood rushing in her ears like the sound of the ocean (she could get tangled up in her mother's IV, the pole and bag crashing down with her). She tries to breathe normally, first washing Nell's face and then moving downward. Annie dreads the sagging planes of Nell's breasts (they will need cleaning beneath). Bathing the freckled hills of her mother's shoulders Annie tries to plan how the cloth, squishy with soap, will move across Nell's breasts when the moment arrives. They are beaten flat, pressed soft by a man and a baby and loads she has carried against her chest (groceries, firewood, animals, and when she was younger, school books). Annie aches for Nell when she thinks where these breasts have been, round and sweet in the cups of her brassiere beneath a high school sweater, straining against a sterile-smelling gown in a maternity ward, bent over an assembly line in a toothbrush factory. And so many times mashed against Annie's own face as she tried to squirm closer. Now they rest deflated on the ribs of a sick, aging woman being washed by her daughter in a hospital room. Annie's thigh muscles tremble as she struggles not to fall.



Annie sits on the hotel bed, listening to her coworkers' muffled laughter in the adjoining room. Eden is coloring stomach-down on the carpet and Annie thinks distantly of germs, the possible dead skin and stray hairs of strangers. She feels trapped. All the doors are closed; this is nothing like that day with her mother covering up darkness, white paint flying from the roller in spangles and dots that seemed magical to Annie, landing everywhere (on skin, hair, clothes, newspapers, and the cats twining between Nell's ankles). All is hot and stale. This is the air her daughter breathes. Her daughter, named after the biblical garden.

The fear of falling has never been more oppressive or dangerous. Annie thinks she might not get up this time. If she sits here, at least until tomorrow, there will be no chance of stumbling as she steps forward to receive her award (no chance of falling in front of Eden). Since leaving the house yesterday morning, Annie has been second-guessing her decision to bring Eden along. Maybe if her daughter wasn't here, Annie wouldn't be so afraid. She sees it happening again and again. Her name is called and she steps smartly into the aisle. She glances back at Eden as she approaches the podium, watching wide-eyed. Just when Annie reaches out to claim her award, the heel on her shoe breaks and she pitches forward onto her hands and knees, hairpins scattering and curls tumbling into her eyes. She can hear

the exclamations of surprise and concern, the embarrassed murmurs (and after a stunned pause, the hands will come to help her up). But Annie won't let herself picture Eden, sitting on the first row red-faced and scared, confused about what has happened.

Annie closes her eyes and goes back to the farm. She sees herself shucking corn on the front porch with Nell, licking rain beads from the tender pink heads on the peony bush. She sees herself walking with her mother into the woods behind the barn with a gallon bucket for blackberry picking, wind tearing at their clothes (they have to hurry before a storm comes). The wind on the farm smells so good. Annie needs a breath of air, but there is no wind in the city. Even if there was, this room has no balcony and faces a hallway that leads to the elevator which will take her down, down to the banquet. She's seen the conference room, mostly empty right now, with chairs in a semi-circle and bunches of drooping flowers that would probably make raindrops taste bitter. She looks at Eden, messy hair and sandaled feet swinging (little toenails painted pink). If she doesn't begin getting ready soon, she'll be late.

In the hotel bathroom, changing clothes in a hurry, Annie catches a glimpse of her own breasts in the mirror. She stops moving, mildly shocked to discover how much like her mother's they look. The stretch marks are fresher but the nipples are the same (pale, flaccid, ineffectual). In all likelihood Annie has fed her last child with these breasts, impressed her last man with them. She's ashamed that Richard has ever seen her this way. She wonders what the new woman's breasts look like.

She hears her coworkers moving outside the bathroom door, playing with Eden now, and wants to shout angrily, "Look at this!" She has an urge to point out the injustice, but she will tell no one what she has seen (what she has realized). If she doesn't tell, maybe no one will notice. Someday the daughter that she nursed with these breasts will bathe them in a sickroom. Until then, her breasts will be her secret, the way Nell's breasts had been a secret.



Annie takes the elevator down to the conference room, holding tight to Eden's hand. Her coworkers might be speaking to her but she's preoccupied. She's trying to feel attractive but her self-image is trapped in a square of hotel mirror, a big irreverent postcard showing her aging breasts and surprise-widened eyes. She clings to Eden like a cane or a crutch. Without Eden, it feels as if her legs would give out early, even before the award. It wasn't supposed to be this way (this is not what she meant to show her daughter).

When the elevator doors ding open, Annie thinks she might vomit like that morning after running. Her coworkers will have to step around it. She squeezes Eden's hand. Her heels click as she emerges onto the marble floor, moving forward on automatic pilot. She searches for another memory of the farm. This time Nell shows her a tightly-woven nest edged with a chain of hard, glossy bird droppings like decorative pearls. Nell bestows it ceremonially, a prize for good behavior at church. She's taken a ladder from the shed and brought the nest down carefully, the way she might convey a holy relic. It's the most magnificent thing Annie's ever seen, not just for its artfulness but for its emptiness somehow, because she knows that its former occupants have flown away to ride currents of wind, to skim treetops and sit on wires overlooking green fields.

Annie stands in the wide conference room entrance as it begins to fill up. A suited woman is tapping on the podium microphone. The light is dirty in there. She can smell wilted flowers. She sees, on a table among others, what must be her award. It is small and glass, like a paperweight. Annie's not sure

what she expected. Looking at the award, there is a sudden sense of everything else (the high ceiling, the vast floor, the noise, the gathering people) shrinking back into place.

Slowly, she lets out the long breath she's been holding. The tailored pantsuit seems to loosen its grip on her body. Someone touches her back, speaking to her graciously on his way inside. Annie doesn't respond. She is thinking about driving straight to the farm when this is over. She imagines pulling up alongside the field, stepping across the mucky ditch with Eden and running fast through the weeds, grasshoppers leaping into startled flight all around them. Inside herself, she feels they are already gone. Her daughter looks up expectantly, pond-water eyes alive with all creation. They walk into the banquet hand-in-hand, Annie floating on air she knows will be strong enough to hold her.



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The Sunmerset Review



Panama 3-Ball

by
D.W. Young

The road from Pedasí to Playa Venao runs through cattle country. It's a well paved, winding two lanes mostly traversed by farm trucks and the occasional bus to Tonosí. The drive takes forty minutes, maybe a little longer if you're delayed by one of the small herds of cattle that also use the route. A few *vaqueros* will be riding alongside, calm astride feisty horses. At your approach they will coax and prod the grudging cows, which will make room for you to pass with only an inch or two to spare.

As it rises and descends through the steep hills of Los Santos, the road provides occasional glimpses of the ocean to the south, a ribbon of blue on the horizon. Many of the hills have long since been deforested to provide grazing pasture; otherwise they are covered in thick and tangled tropical brush. The combination lends a roughly sculpted texture to the terrain. Since it's the rainy season, everything is lush—for once the word verdant truly applies. The skies are grey but shifting—spells of sunlight interchange with flash showers without notice. Sometimes you can drive from a patch of sun into one of rain while still seeing more sun on the other side.

The fences that line the fields are simple constructions. Their closely spaced posts (almost adequate barriers in their own right) support four taut strands of barbed wire. These posts are distinctively natural, often crooked, knotty lengths of branch cut from local forests, other times actual small, living trees. The vegetation here grows so fast that keeping it at bay is a constant battle and this strikes me as an especially novel solution.

It's just after dawn. We're up this early to surf, not sightsee, but we all appreciate the remote, bucolic setting. Tough old farmhands sit along the road, the brims of their Panama hats turned up at the front, their sheathed machetes hanging from their sides by twine cords as they await their rides to work. They watch impassively as our shiny, silver, rental SUV flies past, two longboards strapped to the roof. We scream gringo, but there's not a whole lot to be done about that if we want to surf.

I'm traveling with my oldest friend, Will Hasler. Our two passengers are Antonio and Eric, who comprise the only other tourists staying in Pedasí (population 2100). Antonio is on an extended surfing vacation; Eric is on an even longer haul and wandering more or less indefinitely across the continent. They're both stretching every penny, which in Central America can take you far. Until now they've been relying upon the twice-daily bus to Tonosí to reach the beach. Will and I are on a mere ten-day trip, a mini Endless Summer sort of deal, and we need to cram in as much as we can. For us the car is essential, for them an incredible luxury. This only makes us even more inclined to share it.

Inside the truck, the tip of Antonio's surfboard protrudes across the back seat, forcing him to scrunch up and tilt his head awkwardly. His discomfort becomes even more comical when we hit a pothole and half of his cup of coffee spills onto his lap.

"Oww! Dude. That sucks."

He rubs his newly-shaven head self-consciously, the way people do after dramatic haircuts.

"Man I feel weird."

Will and I never saw him with long hair so we don't appreciate the transformation.

"Damn, I hope it's better out there than yesterday," he adds.

"Yeah."

Yesterday stunk all right. An unusually strong onshore wind left the waves blown out and pointless to surf. Still novices, Will and I tried anyway but only managed to flail around a lot. The sport requires patience but you have to learn this the hard way.

I'm driving, and when I check the rearview mirror, Eric is visible in the left corner. He doesn't surf, just likes the beach vibe. So far he's roamed for one year and eight months straight. He's dropped out completely, hasn't been back to Boston once. With his scruffy beard, Castroesque military cap and threadbare clothes he's far more inconspicuous than the rest of us. But you can tell this lifestyle has worn him down too. He's glad for the company, glad to swap stories and shoot the shit. He starts recounting his experiences working on a coffee plantation for a spell and that passes the time until we arrive at the beach.

"Shit, it looks pretty blown out again," observes Antonio with a sigh. "I was afraid of this."

I bring the SUV to a stop in a patch of dirt in front of the open-air restaurant that represents the beach's only facilities. Little more than a long concrete porch covered with a corrugated metal roof, it offers beer, soda and a few basic dishes. Occasionally local workers will stop by for a

quick meal, sometimes even arriving on horseback. They keep to themselves. I scan the beach, a half-mile crescent of black sand facing the open Pacific. Waves roll steadily in. Some days they get pretty big—too much for chumps like me and Will. But it's a beach break with a sandy bottom, so it's forgiving. I can see what Antonio's talking about—the waves are capped with lots of froth and closing out fast. The only other structures in view are a ramshackle trio of tiny one-room cabanas. Painted a garish turquoise, you can rent them for twelve bucks a night, but they're total dumps. Most people prefer to stay in Pedasí, which has several very clean and cheap hotels. Ours is run by a genial, wizened old woman who doesn't speak a word of English and uses a tattered, college-ruled notebook as her guest ledger.

Currently the cabanas are unoccupied. On weekends rowdy groups of Panamanians drive down from Chitré to surf and party, but other days it's blissfully quiet. A top-notch break all to yourself—that's every surfer's paradise. That's what getting way off the beaten path can offer. If you're lucky.

"I'll go see if Jack is up," declares Antonio.

He marches off down the beach towards a small tent that's flapping in the stiffening breeze. Will and I get more coffee and discuss the conditions.

A few minutes later, Antonio returns with Jack, whom we met briefly the night before. The youngest of everyone present, twenty-one at most, he's also the best and most hardcore surfer. A Kiwi, he's been doing it since he was ten.

"Morning," he greets us, sleepy eyed.

The five of us settle into chairs on the porch. The sky remains a pale grey. Other than Eric, who's in jeans, we sport the same standard uniform of board shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops.

A lazy hour passes.

In dialogue laden with almost the entire repertoire of surfer lingo—dude, stoked, gnarly, thrashed, etc.—Antonio and Jack display a knowledge of the ocean and weather patterns that would impress the saltiest fisherman. They know the tides, the seasonal swell, the currents and the shorelines. Jack gets to talking about how he's going to meander down to Chile to try and catch the *really* serious waves.

"Dude, I just don't know if you'll get the best swell that time of year," Antonio conjectures. His knowledge of Chile is based entirely on reading, but he sounds convincing. "But even then it gets *big* down there. Like double and triple overheads. Personally, I doubt I could hack it. Water is damn cold too."

Jack just grins. "Yeah mate, that sounds good, real good. That's why I bought a killer three hundred dollar wetsuit!"

"Nice. Which brand?"

Antonio still has a life and a job—or at least college—back in the States. Jack is a surfer. That's how he defines himself. That's what he lives to do. He's just spent half a year slaving on a farm in the UK to save up for this trip. He's hoping to eek out eight months on this nest egg. All he has with him are his board, his wetsuit and a duffel bag. (The digs aren't his—he's tentsitting for some Panamanians who are due back on the weekend).

"I did see what looked like a decent break at that town beach in Pedasí," Antonio remarks. "Not great but you know, O.K."

"What's that one called again?" asks Jack.

I break out my guidebook and look it up.

"Playa El Toro. You really think it's worth checking out?"

"Well, the wind wouldn't be onshore there..."

"True, but it's probably fairly protected too," notes Jack. "I can't imagine it gets much swell."

"I'm game to go take a look," interjects Will. Sitting around killing time is not his forte.

"Cool. Let's do it."

Suddenly we are in motion. Hope is renewed; to El Toro we go. And no doubt we would go to much greater lengths yet if it meant a chance to catch a wave. Eric comes along for the fun of it. Jack does too, but he's skeptical and leaves his board.

Five minutes later we are all back on the road to Pedasí.

On the outskirts of town we pass an unassuming bodega off a side street. It's no different than the rest that dot the country's roads—single story, concrete, faded paint, dusty racks of dry goods. And like nearly every convenience store in Panama, it's run by Chinese immigrants. Brought over as semi-slave labor for the building of the canal, the Chinese population seems, at least to an outsider, eerily confined to this one trade. Or maybe they are quite content with their little monopoly.

As we go past, Will notices a pair of pool tables tucked into the open-air lean-to that extends from one side of the store. The space is ramshackle and a little forbidding. If Pedasí were another kind of town you could imagine the local thugs hanging out there.

"We can always shoot some pool if we don't find waves," Will says.

Everyone laughs, although I'm not sure how seriously they're taking the proposition. A rutted dirt road brings us to the beach, whose waters are depressingly calm, just as Jack predicted. Apart from two local kids hanging out under a copse of low, gnarled trees, there isn't a soul in sight. Unwilling to climb back into the SUV quite yet, we linger around for a bit. The Pacific stretches off seemingly forever.

"It was worth a try," Antonio says, a touch apologetically.

Everyone concurs. No blame here—at least we scoped a new beach. But neither is anyone ready to resume our yo-yo route between Pedasí and Venao.

"Pool?" suggests Jack.

What before seemed like a passing fancy is now, in its unlikelihood, strangely compelling. Everyone is for it and we park across the street from the bodega in what may or may not be someone's yard. The two teenage kids loitering about next door assure us it's cool.

When we inquire about the tables inside the store, the dour middle-aged Chinese woman perched behind the counter reacts with bemusement. Apparently this is an uncommon request. Antonio presses in Spanish. Reluctantly, she accedes and shouts something to the back. A few seconds later, a shy young girl in pigtails appears holding two cues, a rack, and a few balls. They turn out to be the cue ball and the 13, 14 and 15.

"Guess we'll have to make do," chuckles Jack.

Everyone takes a moment to buy snacks and drinks and then we head for the tables.

"Holy shit! A beer, a candy bar and a banana only cost me forty cents!" marvels Will.

"Wow, that's just crazy dude," agrees Antonio. "Forty cents! That's fucking sick."

"It's like when you see prices from the Fifties up on the wall in some diner and imagine them still being real, " I add. "Except here they are."

Only one of the tables turns out to be playable. The felt surface of the other has been ripped to shreds, the pockets are mangled and the rails are covered with a mysterious white powder. Somebody jokes about it being toxic; somebody else suggests cocaine.

"Yeah dude, I dare you to snort it."

The floor is worn, uneven concrete. Scattered heaps of junk and discarded PVC piping occupy the back half. Most of the bodega wall is covered by a big red Atlas beer logo, a ubiquitous sight down here. The real kicker, though, the defining aesthetic feature, is the bathroom. A bright powder blue swinging door leads to the Ladies. Crooked and nearly off its hinges, it's surmounted by an enormous, downward red arrow with the word *Damas* printed in a bold white font. The entrance to the Men's is so negligible as to be laughable: one half of a tiny, saloon style door in the same blue stuck permanently open. Beyond lies a small, rectangular chamber. A rusty metal trough runs around its stained tile walls. Above this threshold another, similar oversized arrow reads: *Orinal*.

Across the street the two kids start to blast American hip-hop, starting with some Eminem. Nobody's sure if it's in our honor or what. Either way, it's totally incongruous. A light rain resumes, the soft patter blending into the background of the music.

"Why don't we do a mini version of 9-Ball?" I propose. "The 15 can simply act as the 9 and so on. Call it Panama 3-Ball."

The name earns me a few laughs. Nobody objects, but Eric and Antonio don't know how to play 9-Ball. I quickly recap the rules. One of the cues is missing a tip, so we all share the other. The first break isn't pretty. And surprise, the table is slanted. But who can complain?

Right away we eliminate table scratches as being too easy. Panama 3-Ball continues to evolve from there. I'm not at the table when it's suggested that the person racking ought to be able to arrange the rack in any shape or position they want. This leads to all sorts of wacky setups—straight rows of three pinned to the back rail, inverted triangles, diagonals and zigzags. I'm a pretty good pool player, but not taking the games seriously and not very on either. The games are quick and friendly. Nobody holds the table for very long until Jack goes on an extended streak.

Crack! He breaks another rack. The balls scatter. Nothing drops and Eric steps up to take his turn. The rest of us are gathered around the ruined table.

"Can you imagine this place in its heyday? I bet it was the hottest spot in town," remarks Antonio.

"The only spot in town, you mean."

A strong sense of prior inhabitation does pervade, of drunken boasts, loud salsa and money changing hands. If only you could strain hard enough, you feel you might catch a whisper of these dissipating traces of humanity, touch these vague emanations of time past.

Jack wins again. I don't want to but I brave the *Orinal*. There are too many locals around outside for another option to be advisable. Inside it's dank and reeks of piss. A scummy layer of water rests in the trough. I stand as far back as I can to avoid splatter.

"Yo, be careful in there!" jokes Will.

Somebody else makes a crack I don't catch.

When I come out, our game has reached what will be its final incarnation. An empty can of Atlas beer has been placed, standing, on the original spot for the rack. It represents a seventh pocket. All a ball has to do is touch it to be counted as sunk. And wherever it moves or tips it remains in effect.

This variation renews our interest for a while, until an unusually tall local saunters in without warning. He doesn't say a word, just surveys the room with a squinting, ornery look. Then he beelines for the *Orinal*. From there he watches us play through the gap in the wall while he takes a leak. We share sidelong glances and try not to laugh. It's weird. Really weird. Will snaps a surreptitious photo. I'm convinced the guy notices and is going to take offense. But he leaves as abruptly as he entered.

"You know what's amazing?" I turn and say to Will. "How acutely conscious I am of being *exactly* right here in time and space. It's like a pure, pinpoint of existence. I almost never feel like that, which is a real fucking tragedy."

"Too true."

Jack wins yet another one. By sudden, mutual agreement, that's it. Time to leave. The rain has lifted, the air is dense and sultry, the beach beckons.

"We really might have a shot now," muses Antonio.

"The wind did shift around this time yesterday," adds Jack. "O.K., let's go surfing!"

Will needs no convincing. We pile back into the SUV and ply that familiar blacktop to Venao. Panama 3-Ball remains the topic of conversation most of the way. Eric conjectures that maybe it's the national sport and we unintentionally reinvented it. I joke that wouldn't it be funny if, twenty years from now, one of us were to walk into a bar and encounter some total strangers engaged in a game.

"I invented Panama 3-Ball you'd say, but of course they wouldn't believe you..."

The beach greets us with the same overcast skies but, lo and behold, the waves *have* improved. Conditions aren't great but are good enough. Boards are hastily retrieved, leashes strapped on and in no time we are paddling out into the warm, equatorial water. Soon I reach the breaking surf and as it crashes and froths around me, all my focus and energy are directed towards a single goal: reaching the far side. Once I'm there, I can turn my board around and proceed to harness this elemental force. But first I have to earn the right, which is only fair. There are no chairlifts here.



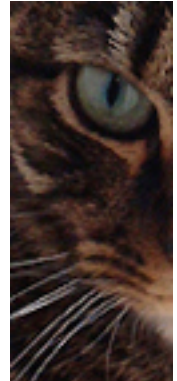
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Guidelines for Submissions

Writers are invited to submit literary short stories and essays of up to 8,000 words. Pieces of light or subtle content are likely to be given more serious consideration. To get more of an idea of what we are looking for, please read *The Somerset Review* or consult our [Recommended Reading List](#). We suggest that contributors be familiar with the writing typically found in literary publications such as [these](#).

Email submissions to editor@somersetreview.org as an attachment in MS Word format, or as plain text. You may alternatively submit in hard-copy by sending to 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, NY 11787. All submissions receive replies as quickly as possible. If we have not responded within three months, please hassle us. We read year-round.

All submitted work is assumed to be original. Book excerpts will be considered if you believe the work stands alone. Reprints will be considered if the work has not appeared elsewhere within the last two years. Simultaneous submissions are encouraged.

We do not give previously-published authors any more attention than new writers, and judge submissions objectively on literary merit. Even so, a brief note accompanying the submission is preferred. We are not sure what we want to read in this note, but would appreciate the extra effort, rather than a blank email with an attachment. We are always interested in knowing how you've heard of us, and what you like about us.

Authors will see drafts of accepted pieces for review prior to release. Beginning in December 2005, we pay twenty-five dollars at release time to each writer appearing in the issue.

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We nominate stories annually for the *Pushcart Prize*, *New Stories from the South*, *storySouth's* Million Writers Award, and elsewhere.

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Author	Title	Source
Aciman, Andre	Cat's Cradle	From the November 3 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1997
Altschul, Andrew Foster	From A to Z	From Issue #1 of <i>Swink</i> , 2004
Anderson, Dale Gregory	The Girl in the Tree	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Alaska Quarterly Review</i> , 2003
Ashton, Edward	Night Swimmer	Online at <i>The Blue Penny Quarterly</i> , Spring/Summer 1995
Baggott, Julianna	Five	From <i>Other Voices</i> #28, 1998
Bardi, Abby	My Wild Life	From <i>Quarterly West</i> #41, 1995
Baxter, Charles	Snow	From the collection <i>A Relative Stranger</i> , published in 1990
Benson, Amy	Vectors: Arrows of Discontent	A memoir excerpt in Issue 29.2 of <i>New Orleans Review</i> , 2004
Borders, Lisa	Temporary Help	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Bananafish</i> , 1998
Broyard, Bliss	Mr. Sweetly Indecent	From the Fall issue of <i>Ploughshares</i> , 1997
Burns, Carole	Honour's Daughter	From <i>Other Voices</i> #31, 1999
Cain, Chelsea	Pretty Enough To Be a Showgirl	From the Spring issue of <i>Grand Tour</i> , 1997
Cheever, John	The Stories of John Cheever	A collection published in 1980
Christopher, Nicholas	Veronica	A novel published in 1996
Clark, Susan	Besides the Body	From the Spring issue of <i>Red Rock Review</i> , 2004
Crane, Elizabeth	When the Messenger Is Hot	A collection published in 2003
Crowe, Thomas Rain	Firsts	Online at <i>Oyster Bay Review</i> in January, 1997
Dancoff, Judith	Vermeer's Light	From <i>Alaska Quarterly Review's</i> Intimate Voices issue, 1997
Dormanen, Sue	Finishing First	From the Summer issue of <i>Lynx Eye</i> , 1998.
Doyle, Larry	Life Without Leann	From an issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> in Fall, 1990
Kennedy, Thomas E.	Kansas City	From Vol 62 No. 4 of <i>New Letters</i> , 1996
McInerney, Jay	Model Behavior	A novel published in 1998
Millhauser, Steven	Enchanted Night	A novella published in 1999
Moses, Jennifer	Circling	From the Spring issue of <i>Gettysburg Review</i> , 1995
Murakami, Haruki	South of the Border, West of the Sun	A novel published in 1998
Offill, Jenny	Last Things	A novel published in 1999
Orlean, Susan	The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup	A collection of essays published in 2001
Perry, Rachael	Sullivan's Inventory	From No. 82/83 of <i>Confrontation</i> , Spring/Summer 2003
Raboteur, Emily	The Eye of Horus	From <i>StoryQuarterly</i> #40, 2004
Robison, Mary	Why Did I Ever?	A novel published in 2001
Russell, Karen	Haunting Olivia	From the June 13 & 20 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 2005
Salinger, J.D.	For Esme - With Love and Squalor	From the collection <i>Nine Stories</i> published in 1953
Tilghman, Christopher	The Way People Run	From the September 9 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1991

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