

# The Summerset Review



Winter 2008

# The Somerset Review

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# The Summerset Review

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## Editors' Notes

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Our first quarterly Fifty-for-Fifty reading contest is complete. We promised to award fifty dollars to the person writing the best fifty (or more) words pertaining to work appearing in our issue. We've chosen one winner and two runners-up, and you can read the entries [here](#). See our Guidelines page for details on how to submit your comments on any piece in the current issue, so that you may be our next Fifty-for-Fifty winner.

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If you have not already noticed, we are providing relevant questions and topics for discussion at reader groups, or simply for your own thought. Details are on our [Questions for Reader Groups](#) page. If you think you have all the answers, send them to us. If we find them meaningful, you will receive a complimentary issue of Volume One in print.

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A coffee shop on Hudson Street last week found itself lighter two chocolate croissants and a prosciutto sandwich but heavier a wicker piece that half the customers took for a hat and the other half took for a poorly curved cornucopia. A locksmith at Seventh Avenue and Charles Street was relieved of five key blanks and a frangible shackle padlock but discovered on the countertop a stubby yellow umbrella. And a Tenth Street stationary store adjusted its inventory, without registering a sale or receiving a distributor's shipment, to reflect the removal of a bottle of blue-black fountain pen ink and the insertion of an alpine cowbell, its bulb muted with azure ribbon.

How can you *not* like such an opening paragraph? This one was found in *Tampa Review*, issue 33/34, released earlier this year. The story, "The Trader Thief" by Douglas Danoff, is our esteemed Lit Pick of the Quarter and we highly recommend it. The jacket cover of the issue goes on to say that this story is ultimately about the transformation of an older married couple, but we were too busy reveling in the prose and particular odd happenings in each scene to even notice.

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*This issue is dedicated to my brother, Michael Levens, who sadly left us on November 24, 2007. He was forty-four.*

*A two-minute piano composition is included here in honor of him.  
He will be remembered always. - JL*

"Evalent"

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*The Summerset Review*

Joseph Levens - Editor  
Amy Leigh Owen – Assistant Editor

A literary journal released quarterly on the 15th of March, June, September, and December on the Internet, and periodically in print form. Founded in 2002, the journal is devoted to the review and publication of unsolicited short stories and essays.

All correspondence and submissions should be emailed to [editor@summersetreview.org](mailto:editor@summersetreview.org). Postal mailing address: 25 Summerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA.

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## Fifty-for-Fifty Contest Award

We are awarding fifty dollars and a complimentary copy of Volume One to the reader who submits the best feedback on a piece appearing in each issue of *The Somerset Review*. Runners-up receive complimentary copies. For information on how to submit your feedback, see our [Guidelines](#) page.

Award winner for the Fall 2007 issue:  
Marvin Rabinovitch of Hod Hasharon, Israel

Runners-up:  
Tammy Raynor of Spokane, Washington  
Carly Svamvour of Toronto, Canada

We want to thank all those of you who submitted entries. We recognize the investment you've made to read our publication and write to us. We sincerely appreciate the interest and feedback.

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Marvin writes -

### **Self-exposure in Julie Dearborn's "Unsolicited"**

Quite an interesting narrative stratagem underlies this memoir of a young woman's coming of age in the last quarter of the twentieth century. To maximize rapport with the reader, Ms. Dearborn deliberately exposes the disingenuousness of her own reportage.

Comprising four separate anecdotes about male self-exposure witnessed by the author, this account describes the narrator's responses to such shocking encounters: intimidation, fear, indignation... and humor. Her way of diminishing the act's toxicity is to accentuate its risibility, and she does so by lampooning her own reactions.

This necessitates a counter-movement to restore a sense of the piece's authenticity. Ms. Dearborn provides such a remedy in the form of self-exposure as a caricaturist. What I have just told you is not the unvarnished truth, she confesses. But look at it this way: my candor in admitting such petty dissimulation makes the story all the more believable and compelling!

Personally, I found the essay evocative indeed. The literary device of self-exposure certainly struck a responsive chord in me. It humanized and deepened what could have easily remained a mere chronicle of sexual pathology.

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Tammy writes -

### **Apartment Buildings, Catsup Packets and Eggs to the Rescue**

Reading "Unsolicited" brought back two frightening childhood memories of mine.

I grew up on the north side of Chicago. It was 1974 when I first encountered a "male stalker," as we used to call them back then. I was with a girlfriend of mine and we were walking back from the grocery store. We were only 12 years old. A man drove up, parallel to us, honked his horn, whistled, opened his door and 'Voila!' We screamed and began to run. He kept following. We instinctively darted into the nearest apartment building and began to ring all the doorbells until someone let us in. He finally drove away.

The second encounter happened when I was fifteen. It was in the heat of summer. I'd say it was pushing upwards of one hundred degrees. I was walking alone toward my home when I noticed my next door neighbor standing on a bridge across the street wearing a long raincoat. I thought it odd with the temperature soaring. I wanted to cross the street to see if he was O. K. when to my utter disgust I discovered him 'flashing' to a car that drove by. Yuck! I started to walk faster when he noticed me. He called my name and, of course, I looked. 'Voila!' I ran home as fast as I could and told my mom.

One week later, with summer heat still sizzling, I noticed his car parked in the alley. It was hidden behind a row of tall green bushes. I emptied catsup packets on his windshield spelling out the word "freak" and, cracking two eggs, I watched them start to cook. I heard a noise. It was him. I ran and hid. I never got caught.

I hope they did.

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Carly writes about "Unsolicited" -

### **Golden Gate Transit**

A brilliant lass, the author,  
who shares with us her woe  
at how her life seems plagued by  
these men who like to show.

Now I don't mean a racing bet  
or something like a house;  
I'm talking 'bout their penises,  
Some no more than a mouse.

The first of these exhibits  
was on The Golden Gate;  
the driver couldn't stop to see  
till all was clear, they'd wait.

Distressed she was, and rightly so,  
that no one seemed to mind  
a fellow airing out his dick  
for all to see, that time.

When she told her girlfriends  
they laughed and squealed with glee;  
beg pardon dear, did you say penis?  
Charmed with this, delightfully.

It made a splash, this story,  
she couldn't help but tell  
the whole thing over every time  
some willing folks said 'swell!'

In Switzerland, she and her friend  
were hiking in the wild  
when someone standing in the trees  
got out his thing and smiled.

Oh look! They squealed, it's Cocks R' Us!  
The bloody thing's humungous!  
'Twas really so much bigger than  
the one seen on the bus!

In Barcelona, she and friends  
were ripping up the town  
when she went off to have a widdle,  
found a chap who had 'em down.

Embarassed she, thought she was wrong  
to be there at the time,  
she ran back to her friends and then  
reported same, like some old rhyme.

It seemed she was pre-destined  
to see these sights and won  
much more than she had asked for  
when out to have some fun.

In downtown San Francisco  
when she got home from Spain  
she took a job of teaching,  
felt better, it was plain.

Then one day on another bus  
the time was five-o'clock,  
another chap was playing pool,  
with testicles and cock.

When she spoke to the driver,  
she was quite loud and said  
there is a man who's jerking off,  
thinks he's home in bed!

The driver was indignant  
approached the cad and spat  
'You get your butt right off my bus!'  
And that, he said, was that!

Now our girl's no compunction,  
she'll laugh at your equipment  
and kick you in the rear, my friend,  
should you be thinkin' different!

# The Somerset Review

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## Questions for Discussion



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Readers and reading groups are invited to discuss the topics below relating to the material presented in this issue. Send answers to [editor@somersetreview.org](mailto:editor@somersetreview.org) and you will be eligible for a complimentary copy of Volume One of *The Somerset Review*. All questions must be answered and received by March 1, 2008.

Include your name, town, state, and country (if outside the USA) in your entry. The editors will decide the winner(s) and send out notification when the new issue is released. We plan to announce the names of those who are awarded free copies, so if you do not want your name to appear in the journal, please let us know. Postal and email addresses of all entrants will not be published, circulated, or archived.

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1. Near the end of "Love Spell Box," the narrator says, "Some decisions can't be based on what we will and will not regret. Sometimes we have to make a heavier choice—deciding which of two things we believe we'll regret less." What do you think of this perspective?
  2. In "The Geometry of Closets," why do you suppose Byron was in the closet?
  3. Discuss the pacing and narrative style in "Fan Blades."
  4. Discuss the use of the elephant as a metaphor in "Happiness." Did it work for you?

## Happiness



by Daniel DiStasio

"I'm sorry, sir, the elephant is dead."

The light in Carl's eyes dimmed like momentary darkness when paper lanterns flicker in the wind. We had just huffed up a hundred stairs to the lobby of Victoria Hoi An Hotel. Tired, wrinkled and sweaty, we stood like two toadstools, heads bobbing over the check-in desk. The Vietnamese boy—they all look like boys—smiled, held his hands under his chin, his delicate fingers forming a bridge.

"Happiness?" Carl said.

I heard something break inside of him, like a twig snapping. Tales of that damned elephant had stomped through our dinner parties for years, and now this. A perfect omen: I hadn't even told Carl I was leaving him yet. After two weeks of "Danang—The Final Tour," a private cruise for twenty-two of Carl's former army pals, I was convinced I was making the correct decision. Vietnam seemed the right place to end the forty-year war of our marriage; it was certainly better than Upper Fells, New Jersey. But now, overheated and dripping, dyspeptic from the *Cha Ca* still swimming towards my lower tract, I wished I hadn't waited.

"So sorry, sir. You knew Happiness?"

As Carl trotted out the story, my mind echoed his words. *End of the war. Holed up in the village. Bored. Hotel owner married a Thai girl.*

*The family sent an elephant as a gift. GI's sitting at the bar drinking shots and Tiger beer. Teaching the elephant tricks. Roll the ball... one foot up... up!*

The boy smiled, amused. Given an audience, Carl would drone on for hours. I elbowed him and flashed my cut-the-crap smile, anxious to get to our room. My feet hurt from stomping around rice paddies reliving the glory days, and now this. The goddamn elephant dies.

Carl ignored me. "What an appetite she had for life. Playful. Pushy. Talkative. She had a mind of her own. I loved the bitch." He shook his head.

"She so nice. Veddy old. Over fifty, maybe sixty years. No one knows. You see picture..." He handed Carl a faded black and white photo of a weary looking pachyderm chained to a pole.

They stared at it with reverence. The boy with his shiny eyes and Carl with his stony blues, his square jaw and gray hair rumped with distinction, looking senatorial and serious. Perched upon an embankment on the Thu Ban River, the hotel was like an aerie with views of the river ambling along in front and the ocean behind. The two of them were huddled in the nest, sharing a moment for a gargantuan ghost and I was dying on my feet.

"Very nice, yes?" Vihn, his name engraved on a shiny bronze plate pinned to his tunic, was beautiful. He had high cheekbones, eyes cherry dark and sweet. His frame was a graceful arc. I was jealous of his hips, of his perfect skin. He smiled with the patience of a generation of young Vietnamese who knew the pendulum was swinging their way, willing to bide their time as T-lines were dropped at every café and taxis jockeyed water buffaloes out of existence. Carl cradled the photograph as if it were a sacred relic, while I unglued the pith helmet from my head.

"Our key?" I over-enunciated the words as if I were talking to a two-year old, but he moved so slowly, elegantly.

Carl glanced about as if he had no idea where he was, living up to my vision of a future Carl, stumbling around, lost and confused, an old man in stained underpants, searching for something he can't remember. And there I stood next to him, every bit the dour, unhappy, old bitch. What a pair!

The boy finally set the registration card on the desk. I signed our names and took the key. With one slender finger, the fingernail shiny and pale as porcelain, he rang the bell and a man with a luggage cart appeared and showed us to our room.

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Years ago, walking into a hotel room was the prelude for a carnal festival with Carl leering and pawing me. I'd bounce on the bed, shaking my breasts with excitement and pride. We loved to play nasty, and did a good job with it. Now, I longed to put my feet up, turn the lights out and let the evening disappear. Our suitcases were lined along the wall, and though I usually fussed and hung everything up immediately to avoid wrinkles, I popped the lid, dug out a nightgown and retired to bed.

"Want a nightcap or something?" Carl stepped out of his pants and toyed with the remote control.

"No." I scratched at a heat rash that had developed beneath my bra strap.

"The boys too much for you?" He hit the mute, retrieved a bottle of whiskey, and poured himself a drink.

"They were heaven. I particularly enjoyed Lieutenant Brady tossing bottles of whiskey from his mechanical hand into the air before pouring shots for the crew."

Brady, a second lieutenant from Texas who sponsored the tour, had lost his arm in a mine explosion then made a fortune in bionic limbs, thanks to Iraq. The entire cruise was exactly the kind of thing I had feared when I married Carl.

"For chrissakes, we didn't come to Vietnam to fight. Did we, Hanoi?"

He christened me Hanoi Joan, a reference to Fonda's unpopular trip, when we first met forty-three years ago. I returned the compliment by declaring him Carl the Baby Killer, a dig at his years in the service. After arguing about the war, we screwed in the bathroom at a house party while Jim Morrison sang an anthem about sex and death in the background. Carl was testosterone unlimited, the kind of guy I—a preacher's kid, Grateful Dead and pot, Betty Freidan and Poulenc—avoided like the plague. But he was a great fuck and handsome as hell in a thick Paul Newman way. He was everything I didn't need, but he was determined. Weeks later, he appeared at my apartment door unannounced and uninvited. I poured a glass of Chardonnay and tried to decide whether I was annoyed or flattered, while he eyed me like prey, or scanned the apartment for manly things to be fixed. Resetting a recalcitrant window in the kitchen, he spied pot growing among the herbs in my window garden.

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?" he asked.

"It's an herb garden. Cannabis is an herb." I sipped my wine.

"It's illegal."

"Bad law," I replied.

"Don't pull that commie shit with me." And he launched my terra cotta planter into a garbage bag and marched it outside to the dumpster.

I locked him out of my apartment and he broke the door off its hinges. I was beating him on the chest screaming *Fascist!* when a policeman arrived. Carl took him aside and told him he loved me. Men always confide things to one another; it's easier for them than talking to women. I was furious, and we ended up having sex on the floor. I remember lying by his side, sweat dripping and a fresh breeze tickling me between my bare legs. I looked up through the broken door at the outside world, and laughed. He started laughing too, so I kicked him and told him to get up and fix the goddamn door.

That was our first really good argument, but there were plenty more. Fighting was good for the soul. It kept us honest. Abortion, PETA, turn signals, Iraq, all took their places alongside picking up the kids, land use, WBNA, text messaging, and coriander. Then we slowed down; old age invaded as if a stranger had suddenly broken into our home and neither of us knew what to say. The inevitable medications, nothing serious, started lining up alongside our coffee in the morning. The slowness of movement, the aches of joints, the rustiness of sex if it occurred at all, and more and more, the forgetfulness followed by self-anger, all these things shaped our lives individually, and our life together, without our consent. Gone were the snappy, bitchy, sparring partners who hated to miss a blow, and in their places were two fragile, frightened people I didn't know.

There he sat, still glowing from his days playing soldier on leave with his buddies. I should have been happy for him, but I wasn't; it was too painful of a reminder that we had resigned our best times to the past,

relegated our youth to annual outings of misbehavior. Our children, both single and selfish, would never give us grandchildren. Todd, an adrenaline junkie, was too busy climbing Aconcagua to complete his seven peaks. And Anne, a workaholic lawyer, was uninterested in men. I could see us spending the rest of our lives attending army reunions and medicating ourselves while watching the evening news and *Know thy Shrub!* on HGTV.

Lying in the dark, aware of every crease of skin, every lick of lips, and every uneven breath, the shadows of war crept in beside us. I had learned more about Carl's Vietnam experiences in the past two weeks than I had in forty-three years of marriage. The years he spent clutching an M-16 in the mud had become the most important time in his life, more than any other, including the births of our son and daughter. It had transformed him.

I had no such event in my life. It made me angry and ashamed. I had no past beyond Carl. I was nobody.

---

After breakfast, we strolled along the beach, fine white dust clinging between our toes. It was nearly deserted, and I felt as if we'd walked onto an unfinished canvas, an infinite expanse of white and blue. With the waves washing up beneath our feet, I contemplated another life, perhaps the one I lost when I married Carl. The work I thought I'd do, the books I might have written. I wanted to join the Peace Corps. Was it too late? Do they still have a Peace Corps? What could I possibly offer the world now?

"Here's a beaut!" Carl was collecting seashells: lovely pink cones and ivory stars. He rubbed some grit from his eye and handed me a delicate purple fan. It was three inches across and so thin it was translucent. As I held it up to the sun, I felt I was holding the balance of our lives in my fingers. The thinnest membrane could easily crumble with the slightest force. I held it carefully and knelt down to wash it in the sea. Carl drew a picture in the sand with his big toe and I carried the shell back to our room, certain that it would disintegrate before I got it home.

---

At the hotel, we claimed two deck chairs and Carl called to a waiter, "Bring me a bottle of Jack and some ice." His voice crashed across the infinity pool and out towards the ocean. His booming proclamations had embarrassed me at parties and gatherings for decades. He'd announce his presence—*How's everybody doing?*—interrupting a dozen conversations, and people would stop, turn and chuckle in a way I'd say was dismissive, but he'd call it friendly. We'd set it aside to fight about later, unless a better topic materialized. *You'd argue a starving Chinaman out of a bag of rice, if you could*, he'd say. I'd counter with something vulgar and venal, or both.

As soon as I was really angry, he'd turn on the charm and try to kiss my neck, which infuriated me even more. Those quirks and quips that drove me mad now seemed endearing. Why had we stopped fighting? Didn't we care enough anymore?

"I think I'll go to town." I needed time alone.

"Go ahead." He held up his glass as if toasting me off to a party; the ice cubes tolled like tiny bells.

Carl knew I was contemplating leaving him. He knew I hadn't hung his

dress shirts up last night, just as he knew I was unusually quiet these past few days. But evasion had become standard gear for us; we wore it like armor. Sealed in a secrecy and fear that neither of us had the courage to acknowledge, we were afraid the slightest movement would expose our delicate pretense. He, too, remained silent, but I could see him sinking into the *muck of life*—his expression, something he picked up during the war wading through the Mekong delta. He tried to explain that it was funny, back then. But there's nothing amusing about the prelude to depression. I'd seen glimpses of it before: Carl in his chair at home, in his dusty office, wherever he was with J.D. by his side, sinking into the muck of his post-war life. Now more than ever, it was only a matter of time before it smothered him and I knew that if I stayed with him, the muck would drag me down too.

---

I hired a tuk-tuk to take me to town to buy tranquilizers, to steel my nerves. The pharmacist, a small man dressed in white pajamas, tried to sell me a Chinese herbal medication guaranteed to "settle thoughts peacefully, center mind and promote harmony within." Frustrated, I walked away. Along the dusty streets, circles of men chatted over tea as women hovered in the background, like accessories, pleasant but disposable.

I stepped around an old woman cleaning the sidewalk with a bucket of water and a brush. She was bent over in that way only an Asian seems to be able to accomplish, arms and elbows splayed like wings, knees crooked like a grasshopper. She was scraping dust away from the pavement in a pathetic but noble way. The town was covered in a cloud of red clay; it dusted windows and doors, crept into one's lungs, made a fine film on water glasses set out at cafes for Western tourists. Yet, in the quiet urgency of her circling arm, the woman was fighting against defeat. I admired and envied her determination.

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*Come see! You want? Good stuff!* Although I ignored the hawkers with their colorful leaflets and insistent monosyllabic entreaties, I stopped and spoke with a young woman, stationed in front of a three-story shop housing embroidery and dressmaking. She invited me to come in and see the silk worms. Her long black hair fell perfectly upon the lavender of her *aodai*. I wandered into the dusty shop where six young women, like mannequins, were lined up and ready to serve. One of them guided me to an upstairs room where a dozen seamstresses bent over their needlepoint: swans drifting across an imaginary lake, rocks rising in a bay of mist, doe-eyed girls with conical hats. It was so simple and tedious, both the work and the art itself, profoundly sad. For these garish imitations of life, these girls were sacrificing their youth. Already, I could see their eyes were smarting and their backs were becoming bent. I wanted to grab them by their slender necks and force them outside. *Live, for chrissakes, you're young.* I wanted to shout. Instead, I sneered at the man in the black suit standing over them, smiling and counting every dong he would make from each stitch.

"You like? You like?" he asked me, as I walked between worktables.

"I like not."

I thought of the woman scrubbing the sidewalk.

I thought of the girls and their future. I ordered a dress and held my breath as they measured my waist, my bosom. I felt the coolness of the tape tight against the wattles around my neckline. I stood still and

firm, but I wanted to cry.

---

"Find anything interesting in town?" It was evening, and Carl hadn't moved from his lounge chair. Jack Daniels was half the man I'd seen before, or perhaps a new soldier, I couldn't tell. Carl could hold his liquor. He never got mean; he just dissembled into slower and more carefully pronounced speech. Although lately, there were bouts of melancholy, whispers of self-deprecation, a jocular toss towards pity. These idiosyncrasies arrived with the same unheralded reception as our first Social Security checks, the dietary recommendation of our physician, and the AARP discounts we shrugged at but accepted.

Vihn was standing next to Carl, holding a serving tray. Carl had probably talked his head off and the boy was too polite to leave. For a second, I was an intruder, a feeling I often had in the company of men. On the boat surrounded by others, Carl would strike a more youthful pose. His arthritic elbows reclaimed elasticity as they poked a soon-to-be septuagenarian in the ribs. They seemed to transform themselves, feeding off the memories of their youth. The few women friends I had spoke of fiber and bone loss, of men's prostates and breast cancer. We creaked through Pilates classes and whispered about those women who opted for plastic surgery and botox—a sisterhood of denial and complaints.

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I missed Hanoi Joan and Carl the Baby Killer: their naiveté, their ignorance, their resilience. I watched Carl still chatting up the Vihn, as a row of palm trees bowed obediently in the wind. The air was dabbed with sea salt and tamarind, the scent lingering like an imprint of a hand on a mist-covered window. It was a beautiful place. One would never know a war had been fought here. But isn't that always the way? After the wraps, rubs, treatments, oils, exfoliates, comes the foundation, eyes, lips, and highlights. And beneath it all, who would know what woman lived there before?

"You order dress?" A Vietnamese man, holding a package, smiled and waited for instructions.

"Come with me." I took the *aodai* I had ordered to my room for a fitting. The delivery man was taller, a bit broader in the shoulders than most Vietnamese. He seemed an indeterminate age. His hair was slightly thinning, which made me think of him as older. But his eyes, the smoothness of his skin, the way he moved, erased his years, rendered him youthful, strong, and essential.

Inside my room, I stripped down to my underwear and slipped the robe over my head. Although the man waited respectfully outside the door, I called to him. He stared at my bare legs, sixty-four-year-old heifers, but without the scourge of varicose veins or too much cellulite. I wanted to pull him to me, slide my panties aside and have him take me right there without warning, protection, or the necessary lubricants. I was shocked by this momentary lust, quite out of character for me, but now, with the caress of soft silk against my bare thigh, I wanted to feel alive again. I wanted to believe my feet didn't hurt and my breasts weren't sagging.

He touched me. His hand cupped my face and he smiled. "Lovely," he said and lowered his eyes.

I thanked him and held his hand there a moment. He handed me his card. "In case you need something else." His voice was soft and

unassuming, there was no impropriety veiled behind his words.

I wondered at the thinness of his waist, the sharpness of the crease in his pants. Giddy with the feeling of being wanted, of seduction, I imagined him easing into me without either of us undressing. Overwhelmed by the thought of passion, not the deed or the act, but its power, I was lifted by memories of uncontrollable lust.

"Miss...?" I watched him back away.

"I'm sorry." I reached for my purse to find a tip. I had no idea how long I had kept him there waiting. He bowed and closed the door behind him. I felt the muck beneath my feet pulling me down. I sat on the bed and didn't realize I was crying until the maid knocked on the door and called, "Turn down!"

---

Carl hadn't moved, and I took my place in a matching deck chair alongside him. On the bay, fishing boats passed by, their tiny lights twinkling in the dark. Smoke from an outdoor grill filled the air with the smell of meat searing. And the hollow silence between us was underlined by the faint quiet chatter of couples having dinner on the patio. It was a perfect night except for the demons that haunted me and even they had settled down for the moment. I was running out of stamina. In the sea-dark sky, with a half-moon stretched like a cupful of cream, slightly out of reach, I admitted it was the inevitability of old age that I hated. And Carl, the poor sucker, was just a mirror for my insecurity.

"Have a drink." He nodded towards the bottle. "Boy! Bring us another glass here."

Vihn brought a glass and Carl poured, handed him a tip, but the boy remained.

"Sir, I have something for you, if I may?" His hands were folded in front of him as if in prayer, his head tilted to one side, as he waited for permission before he disappeared and then returned with a large strap of leather, cracked and rippled with age. It was nearly two feet wide, soft and damp on one side, and hard and brittle on the other. The distinctive smell of old age interrupted the perfumed air of spring.

"What is this?" Carl took the strap and stared.

"It's a piece of her collar, sir. Happiness. Is O.K.?" Vihn asked.

"It's wonderful." Carl held it up to his face and inhaled.

Vihn bowed slightly and then, his face beaming, slipped away.

Carl smiled too, as he traced the wrinkles of broken leather with his finger. Was it the elephant of years ago or the men he left behind? Whatever it was, Carl the Baby Killer was gone. And in his place was a different man. I watched him caressing the leather.

All this time, I thought I had changed and grown away from stuck-in-the muck Carl. But it was I who *hadn't* changed. I was clinging to the past with regret, and unable and unwilling to accept a future I didn't understand. Carl understood history. I lived in it.

The whiskey in my glass glistened alongside Carl's watered-down version. I tossed it in me and it burned, neat and smoky. I don't like whiskey, but tonight it was strong and pure. I imagined the soldiers lined up at the bar ordering shots, steeling themselves against unknown tomorrows. The shadow of Happiness in the distance waited

for them to come and play. I could see her eyes shining in the dark like ponderous globes, her tongue thick as an Oriental carpet, her tail swinging gloriously. It's easier to love a memory; there are no hideous facts, no telltale stains to remind one of reality. But to embrace the future, one must have faith.

I picked up a napkin and began cleaning water rings on the glass, wiping the table in perfect circles. Carl reached out, grabbed my arm, and stopped me. Even in the darkness, his bloodshot eyes still had the thunderbolt of blue I had marveled at years ago. The scent of bourbon and the musk of an earlier cigar lingered on his breath. Damn him, he really had taken the fight out of our marriage.

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Carl stood up, handed me the collar, and walked fully-clothed into the pool. The sound of the splash was festive, as if signaling the beginning of a party. Carl's body disappeared for a moment, then re-emerged dripping as the waters calmed.

"What are you doing?" I laughed, surprised and worried. I looked around to see if anyone was watching.

"Floating," he replied as he lay upon the water, his silk shirt sticking to his chest like a second skin, and his sandals drifting away from his feet.

I sat down and cradled the fragment of the harness to my chest, as a cloud erased the moon. The air sat silent and sullen around us, like the many nights we hid at home in the near dark, Carl with his J.D., and I beneath a reading light shining upon some book I would never finish.

As Carl continued to float on his back, I waited, wondering if in his drunkenness he might drown. Then, as if he could read my thoughts, he spoke. "I'll be all right. We used to practice wading in water for hours at a time. Survival training."

I understood survival mode, although fighting was my way. I still longed for those heated moments, but Carl had learned diplomacy. Without an enemy, there is no war.

As the clouds moved on, I was surrounded by a nervous circle of light, thinking of the *aodai* carefully folded into my suitcase, my toiletries sealed and secure, and the garment bag zipped up and left hanging like a mummy. I set the collar, brittle and broken, alongside my empty glass, and imagined Happiness finally free and away from the muck of life. Carl drifted in a halo of luminescence as the water rippled away from his body. He was a man floating, and I was on the edge of a battle against losses.

I stood up and walked from the table. I kept moving until I felt my body descend into the water and then rise again buoyant and supple. When I opened my eyes, the pool lights shone blue in the infinity of water. I lifted my legs to the surface and fluttered my arms like wings, my body floating, turning in circles, round and round.

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Fan Blades  
by  
Sandra Gail  
Teichmann -  
Hillesheim



*"One, two! One, two! And through and through the vorpal blade went  
snicker-snack..."*  
- Lewis Carroll

"Pueblo..., Walsenburg, Fort Garland, Taos... all aboard."

Ella shifted with the waiting, the bus driver saying to the woman in front, "Taking a short ride, aren't you? Only fifty miles south until Pueblo."

Ella listened, Ella coughed, and she waited her turn. The line was long, and she wanted the driver, when she got to him, to ask her too how far she had traveled, wanted him to notice how far she had yet to go.

It came, her turn, but the driver said nothing. He didn't lift his eyes. He took her ticket. He read it, and Ella removed her coat, her sweater, her blouse, her undershirt to stand bare to the cold mountain air, and he saw nothing, said nothing, and she didn't, couldn't lift, didn't, her eyes to his face. She studied the ground, the floor of the steps into the bus, and she climbed them, moved over the dust, the broken stones jamming the safety of rubber grooves, and Ella counted and counted the layers, the stones, the degrees of cold, and she climbed the three steps into the bus for moving on.

Ella, goodness unto all living things: perfect body, courage, wisdom, justice, beauty of voice, of thought, hair, teeth, of secrets. No woman alive, no man, could equal Ella in her youth. Youth had been ... and then passed beyond consciousness, taking with it the gloss of slick photos, but in resistance to the dissolving illusion, the essence of Ella's frame had been rubbed to the smooth of patina. Ella had ventured beyond. Always. She had known joy and sorrow, the expanses and the confines, and she had made the choices, taken the consequences, and then absenting herself from the cooling cup of tea left to the sun-flooded warmth of her sitting room, Ella had planned this going once again in search of an extreme. She wanted to know the mercenary, and she wanted to know the selfless. She needed yet to understand the reach and grab of the thumbled hand that was always, it seemed, opposing the expanse of the human heart. She thought she might engage these opposites, hold them, examine them in conflict before they would disengage—oh, yes as she knew they must and would—disengage, each whole and potent unto self. It may have seemed paradoxically naïve to others, but for Ella, a focus on, a holding and letting go of this incongruity, might give her the knowledge she needed to live out what was left of her life.

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Ella was coming, Mercedes, coming to meet you.

You hadn't answered her last letter, not the one before, yet Ella hung to the line where you wrote that the two of you understood, understood one another. Ella was getting each line, each image: a sun that never changed day into night, an edge to the dust that accumulated at the open window, the thirst of lost dogs, their panting and gasping drying up the wells, tattoos of desire everywhere, feet consuming themselves in the heat of the sand, and the silence, ever the need for, yet the absence of silence. Ella saw the whole of it in your words, Mercedes. Translating your words one by one, Ella had been moving through your poems, stepping over the boundaries, the walls, rivers, streets, wading into your seas of concrete, slabs vertical, slabs horizontal, slabs tilting toward what she too knew, and she wanted to talk, find the invisible rivers, assemble the dismembered dreams, and it was, Ella said, said to you more than once, as if she herself could have written the words.

Ella, cynical yes, but not yet totally without hope, was consumed with coming, driven by force beyond her own summoning, force beyond her own control.

Ella was coming. Ella on the bus, bus Number Four heading for León, bus pulling from Colorado Springs, beginning the roll, putting at a distance—three miles, five, fifteen, twenty-seven, seventy-five—the snow-capped

Front Range, Ella's home, her life, the land in shadow down to the foothills. Four in the afternoon, and the March wind blew cold and snow, thirty degrees above zero, burying all that didn't, couldn't move from under the piling up. Ella wasn't sorry to be leaving, not sorry to be going south, south into Mexico, south to open tile patios where she knew parrots with names, elaborate names, would ride on her shoulders, count out the hours, talk with her through the days: Fermin, Sextus, Sagramor, Ambrosius, Florian, Quijano, Arveragus, Medoro,

"Eight days."

Eight and eight and eight more: Alcina, Pasqualita, Fortunata, Speranza, Violetta, Aldonza, Aquilina, Fidelia, Laetitia, Cloelia, Lavinia, Coelia, Doralice, Dulcinea, Egeria, Faustina, parrots all, chattering complaints, colors, deceits, hungers, copulations, deaths—little deaths—resurrections, erections, stories, a boil of stories collapsing air waves, smothering the earth to implosion.

"On the bus all eight days?"

Sixteen names for female parrots; eight names of male parrots. Ratio 2:1, and why not?

And Ella would tell you yes, of course, and continue her count. She'd say she had stayed over, hotels in Chihuahua, Torreon, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende, places like that. Some, if she chose, more than one night. Little hotels, windows, three or five or seven, to the plazas, morning light once and again the next day and again, morning light ever almost overcoming the dawn darkness when she'd be leaving to find the bus station and board again.

Road construction, a slowing down, and Ella ignored others sitting ahead of and across from her, others real and beyond her approach. Ella looked down to the dogs, the unwanted abandoned to the road, torn-up, their hunger and thirst denied, passed by—a group of three, five, then a single—dogs given rides to a distance too far to chase after, follow the cars home, cars driven by maybe her neighbors, persons she knew the names of, persons she watched disappear (end of construction) ahead of and behind the speed of the bus. The mountains diminished, and she felt nothing on leaving the high valley but an elongation of the distance she could never draw to a close, twenty-nine, fifty-two, eighty-eight miles...

There had been leavings. Many, only numerous, because she had not been counting so much then. Yet each time was as if she were running away for the first time, leaving town, on a bus, on a train, in a car, on a bicycle, even by foot, leaving Mother, leaving Daddy, as if she couldn't get over being sixteen, needing to go, wanting to know, yet forbidden. She did leave though, did what she had to, did it over and over, and she returned, again and again, and always the distance grew ahead of and behind her, and she counted the miles, five hundred, three thousand, seven, two hundred and forty..., counted the miles as if they might give meaning to who she was and where she might go.

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As the miles this time accumulated to that elusive but definite point of separation, fifty, sixty, seventy miles of interstate, she turned to the woman across the aisle: chewing gum. The woman's mouth open, the gum there, and Ella watched the white of it, the jaw expanding the heavy and wrinkled cheek, teeth, first incisor, second incisor, canine, first molar, yellow with age, masticating the plasticity of gum, gum everlasting, even unto the hard glob holding to, holding nothing, stuck to the underside of Ella's seat, the armrest, the floor. She knew there would be a wad though she'd not run her finger into that darkness. She knew the hardness would exist as sure as the molars across the aisle ground into the white tensile

glob, arranged the mass to create and to then release the trapped air. Pop. Crack, fracture of air pocket, and Ella listened to the rhythm of the jaw, and she gave the woman a name. Beatrice. Two syllables, accent on the last, Beatrice, the gum stretching itself into half, no, the whole length of the tongue. Beatrice across the aisle, Beatrice in profile on a bus headed for El Paso. Beatrice. Ella would have liked the name, the gum for herself—explosion of air, air free of the rubbery cavity—would have liked the white of the gum in her mouth. Beatrice, a name refined, round, almost certain, definition to an end.

Chewing gum and then turquoise. The hold of the gum gave way to the confines of a chain, and Ella fixed on the green stone connecting the ring on Beatrice's third finger, third phalanx from the tip, to a bracelet on her wrist, sixteen bones, two of them trapezium, two trapezoid, the skin lined, spotted and furrowed with sun. Ella watched the link of the chain, the stone, the press of the silver to Beatrice's skin, the slip of it from the arm of Beatrice to maybe the arm of a Gaelic-speaking red-haired Irish beauty, maybe Ella herself, Ella young with freckles from the sun, freckles over the curve of her chest, down her thighs, legs, down her arms, the fragile brown of the freckles, twelve, twelve hundred, twelve thousand blossoms in the sun.

Ella wove the turquoise and the freckles and fine black lines in the green stone around the curve of her own arm, wove it in with the baby's fine hair, red, baby heavy, baby covered with crab lice. She wove, and she drew the thorns, the buds, the hips of red roses into and through the fissures exposing the depth of the stone, and Beatrice cracked the gum for the both of them as both listened, couldn't help listen to the woman in the seat behind, listened and heard the woman read from her Bible when she wasn't telling, wasn't lamenting her life: a poor widow for two years now.

*"...if I have now found grace in thine eyes, let them give me a place in some town in the country, that I may dwell there..."*  
— 1 Samuel 27:5

Beatrice turned, said to the woman, "Well dear, stay or go, this country or another. Take your pick."

"But my husband. He's gone. I'm alone."

"Happens."

"Huh?"

"My husband passed. Ten years now," Ella said.

"Ten?"

"It gets easier."

"Ten years," Ella blurted out, and then coughed quietly into her handkerchief.

"It's nothing," Beatrice said to the Bible-reading woman, ignoring Ella. "Your grief will be your comfort, your companion."

"No. It's so hard. Two years now."

"Two years," Ella said.

"You don't know. He wasn't even seventy."

"Seventy," Ella said.

"Not ill. An accident, not his fault, and he's gone. It's not fair, me here. Me alone now."

"You coming from Wyoming? Casper?" Beatrice asked.

"From my daughter's, coming by myself, hours on this bus and before this another one, another daughter, another bus. I get tired."

"Two daughters, two buses." Ella whispered and coughed.

*"And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias."  
— Mark 9:5*

"Three."

"Why go then?"

"I need them."

"Tabernacles?"

"Need my daughters. They're all I've got now. Three daughters."

"I go too, city to city. I visit friends." And in a whisper Beatrice said to the new widow turning her filmy pages, "A boyfriend in Phoenix."

"Boyfriend?"

"Yes, boyfriend. I go all over as long as I can buy bus tickets. I visit my children, grandchildren too."

"Two women," Ella said, and she listened.

*"...the land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness." — Ezra 9:11*

And the boyfriend? Old man? Sixty-seven, seventy, eighty-nine? Bald head? Young man? Twenty-eight? Shaved head? What? What would they do when Beatrice arrived? An embrace? Beatrice run her hand over the slick skin of his head? Spit out her gum? Not have it? Left it under the seat of the bus, across the aisle? A ride from the bus depot through a burst of desert doves startled to lifting at a car's passing? His house in the sunset, a trailer parked permanently, added on to, four walls of screen stapled to two-by-four and four-by-four supports, garden overgrown in mesquite, shaded by palms, seven palms, draped with Christmas lights January through December, and the un-mown eighth-of-an-acre fronting the roadside where each spring came always the surprise and glow of yellow-orange? California poppies, hundreds of poppies. Yes.

It was that time of year. Fields of yellow. Welcome, Beatrice, welcome to the permanent travel trailer. Call it the mobility, the motile, the plastic possibility. You choose. He can't make up his mind, can't, can't quite invite her to stay, stay for more than the weekend, but... maybe later. Yes, try again later.

Once, Ella too had taken a trip to Phoenix, driven through the Arizona flats when the poppies were everywhere. Beautiful. Spring in the desert, flowers, and she'd stopped the car so she and her son, a little boy then, could roll in the yellow, back to front to back. They'd taken pictures of each other, horizontal and low and level with the flowers, and never had the two of them once worried that there could have been snakes though they had seen one run over in the middle of the road miles back.

*"Two of them and one snake, one run-over snake. "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die."  
— Genesis 3:4*

And so the question became: what would the boyfriend do when Beatrice wasn't there, when she was on the bus always arriving, when she wasn't sitting with him, side by side in his screened-in, added-on-to travel trailer, parked on the poured-concrete addition? What would he do sitting alone in one of the two open, yet folding lawn chairs? What would he do the morning she again rode the bus away from him through and to the spread of country, the poppies faded, dried to the brown of the desert? And Ella wondered about Beatrice's children. What would they be doing now that she'd left them before morning light to board this everlasting bus? What would the children think about the boyfriend, any boyfriend to whom Beatrice might travel, their mother having him, trying to have him, after their father was dead, father buried at some Hope Cemetery under some thousand-dollar stone. Thousand-dollar beloved husband, beloved father, beloved grandfather, beloved, beloved, until death do we part.

*"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." — Genesis 3:16*

Oh yeah. Well, you bet. Ella didn't think much of boyfriends or husbands, those of others, those of her own, those in the past, those to come. She'd taken them though, wanted them, had them, loved them, and knew that she wasn't unusual, knew that women were like that, drawn to what they could not control, could not understand.

And Ella counted. She counted the number of steps into the bus, the number of passing cars, the number of telephone poles between red and blue cars, but she hadn't count boyfriends. She hadn't count husbands either. They were all bastards pretty much, pretty much no good, drinking beer, spitting, playing and watching softball and baseball and football and golf, having no jobs, wearing cowboy hats and silver belt buckles, roping calves by the neck for branding, trip roping the larger cows, breaking their bodies just to show man's dominance over her and the dying cow. Yes indeed, those cowboys could ride bulls, scratch the lice in their crotches, watch television, or sit in her best chair to smoke pot and dream labyrinths of geometry and physics and philosophy and sports beyond the job she had to keep to pay for the house, the heat, the food, the health insurance, the cowboy boots, laundered white shirts and pressed-arrow-straight-down-the-leg Levis.

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Distance. Yet Ella still hated those years of old boyfriends and husbands, hated who she had been then, maybe yet was. It wasn't the men; it was herself, what she made of the years and the men and what she made of herself. Ella pulled the sleeves of her sweater onto her arms. The new widow might have been right. One might not get over grief as Beatrice promised. Grief, tangled with unspeakable guilt, ribbons drawn in on themselves, straining, stretching past all elasticity, pulling at the cover of skin, ribbons revealing themselves in front of her face, a wadded snarl. So it would be no matter how many buses she rode, how many cities she came to and went from.

In the light of approaching cars Ella examined the women, their faces, didn't know what more to think of them, so she tuned to thoughts of her son, beloved-beloved son...

Ella wanted him to be gay. Though she wished for him only what he might want, she encouraged him subtly at first and then openly, making a joke about it, and he humored her. Wearing her straw hat and her oversized linen shirt at the last family reunion, he had "the walk" down. Beautiful, and he would strut it whenever she asked because she loved it so, loved him so, and he did love her, loved to see her happy and laughing. She was

most beautiful then, her smile dazzling and her eyes alight. Of course, both mother and son knew that, if it were true that he were homosexual, it would mean that she, Ella, would be the number one woman in his life. But alas, such didn't seem to be. There were women, girls really, "girlfriends" he called them, and the last "girlfriend" incident had taken place two or three weeks before. She couldn't get the sequence out of her mind. It ran there like a dog pacing a backyard fence line... nothing really, just a girl, a bit of a girl, taking charge and rubbing her position in until Ella did it, blew up and scared the poor thing away. The girlfriend did, though, have a rather lovely name, Illivia, but then there couldn't be much in a name... so it was decided, after all the yelling and tears, that she and Ryan would have a supper uptown at one of their favorite Italian restaurants with who else but each other, and they laughed until they cried as they ate their way through plates of ravioli swimming in butter and swallowed glass after glass of Bardolino.

So there Ella was running this episode through her head yet again and adjusting her seat forward and then carefully back. She was keenly conscious of the person behind, always conscious of those around her, but this woman especially. The woman had yelled at her to stop it about five minutes ago. Restless, Ella couldn't help it, had released her seat three more times into the woman's knees, smashing into them, and she was sorry. Looking out the bus windows didn't help. Ella was uneasy, coughing, and she wanted sleep.

The points of yucca softened in the dusk, and the bus pulled to a stop for gas and a rest at Fort Garland. Ella wanted to, might have walked into the darkness, the space out there before her deceptively smooth, inviting, but the white light of the cafe drew her, held her. She followed the other passengers who followed the bus driver to the light and to sit at chrome-legged tables over the steam of watery coffees no one wanted. Ella sat, and she waited, and she watched the woman who had been sitting behind her, the woman with the hurt knees. Ella knew the face, knew it from before, from somewhere else, knew the woman in the incandescent light spreading down from the ceiling, knew the face. The woman looked up, and Ella asked, "You grow up in Salida?"

The woman hesitated, nodded, "I lived there. Why?"

And Ella, forgetting her own face, and what the woman's question might have been if there had been no end stop, told the woman, "My name was Ella McVey then, graduated from Salida High in '63. I think you were a year ahead, but I don't know why."

"Oh yeah."

"Sorry about my seat. I get restless."

"Yeah, O.K.," and the woman turned away.

"And my cough. Sorry."

The woman's gaze drifted between from the door to Ella and back to the door. Ella turned to the window, the flat night beyond, and she waited, stifling her cough, knowing, just knowing the woman remembered.

"My name is Mary Giuseppina," the woman finally said, and Ella wanted to cartwheel through the night of yucca. One, three, seven cartwheels. A person, and the person was from her past and was going on the same bus into her future. It surely wouldn't hurt to talk now. Ella, tired to death of the Bible across the aisle and of her own thoughts and the swirling black fur of the cat and the elastic white of flavor-gone gum, wanted to talk yet hesitated, not wanting the contract, yet craving it. Ella waited, and there they sat, the two of them, in the same room yet separate, two strangers yet from the same past, five years, seven, twenty-eight, thirty-five years melting away, the decades passing from them as though the two women weren't yet born.

Mary Giuseppina was the first to speak again. "Where you headed? Santa Fe?"

Ella answered, she knew, too eagerly, saying too much and too fast, "No. No, I'm going to Mexico."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Mexico. León, Mexico. I'm translating a book. Poetry. The poet lives there, lives in León. I'm going to meet her, talk with her. Mercedes. Her name is Mercedes."

"Um."

The driver gathered the women together, two, three, seven, and one outside smoking, "All aboard for Albuquerque." He stood at the door, and Ella didn't look up to his face. She followed Beatrice up the steps, and Mary Giuseppina followed Ella.

First leaning over the seat and then coming to sit next to Ella, Mary Giuseppina began and couldn't stop telling her story, story of family, children, one and then another, a husband, "... two daughters, grown up now. One in Ohio and one, named Laura, just married, living in Antonito."

Two girls. "You miss your girls?"

"I guess. Yeah, I miss them, but I've worked for all these years at the telephone company, Mountain Bell. Remember it used to be Mountain Bell?"

"I remember. I worked there too, you know, got the all-night shift, locked in that building there by myself, making the long-distant calls, taking the emergencies, calling an ambulance, the sheriff, talking to men through the night, 1, 1:20, 3:00, 4:40, lonesome, cold, eating a lunch my mother packed there at the desk, listening in through my headset on old lady Patterson talking love to that kid one-fourth her age, hearing her tell him just what she'd do for him if he'd ever come over. You know, hot chocolate, a hot bath, bubbles, hot sauce on his tacos. I warned Frankie the next day. Told him just what had happen to Jimmy Martin and how I had to call for someone to pick Jimmy up from some telephone booth the night he got away. Hot caramel it was for him. A dipping it was to be. He couldn't talk about it after that night, never would. Embarrassed. He was, and it was understood that I wouldn't talk either, except I had to tell Frankie, well not tell exactly. I had to warn Frankie, though.

"The whole range of mountains there, all those little towns depended on me. Did you ever work the all-night shift?"

"No, well, there were all those little towns remember: Avon, Springtown, Twin Lakes, Minturn, Granite, Eagle, Edwards, Gilman. I was their safety, their well-being through those nights of thin air. Air can get so thin, you know, the lungs will bleed, middle lobe, inferior lobe, superior lobe, cardiac notch. Horses at the turn of the century hauling supplies and stuff to those altitudes used to collapse, their lungs flooded with blood. The miners, driving those horses, cursed a new blue mountain stream of never-so-new oaths, cutting into the almost, but not yet, dead flesh to remove the harness and load to double the weight for the poor horse still standing, still breathing. The miner's tyranny over those beasts was outrageous, the animals suffering, helpless, and the man indifferent, focused only on his own cold and heavy breathing and some underground vein of gold he'd most likely never find."

Ella was talking too loudly. She knew she was, but she wanted to be overheard, wanted to see what verse the Bible-reading woman would find to justify the ravage of living horse flesh for a dream of a cold and golden wealth. There was no response. The woman hadn't heard, but then Ella sort of knew the verse herself, something about man being given dominion

over the beasts, over the world, the veins of it, the rolling red blood of it all for godsake.

Listening and pulling her hair into a ponytail, Mary Giuseppina smiled, changed the subject, "I have a shop in the mountains now where I sell things, sell art, like paintings. You know, local artists—watercolors, pottery, carved wooden things, polished stones." Mary Giuseppina had always worn her hair pulled back, exposing the curve of her nose and her cheek bones, high, almost magnificent.

"Consignment? Do you take work on consignment? I have some pieces, art, you know." Ella, then wanting to establish herself, justify what she'd just asked, say who she really was, who she had become beyond the head-set voice of the night operator protecting young boys and helpless horses already half dead from the high altitude, said, "I got a degree in fine arts a few years ago. I do painting, but mostly I do conceptual stuff. You know, idea pieces, ideas typed on white paper and hung on the wall?"

"Hum."

"Yeah."

"On the wall?"

"Once I proposed to display a red wagon, three feet by one-and-one-half feet. A Radio

Flyer. A new one. Put it in a gallery space. It would have had black tires, four black tires. The tongue of the wagon up against the bed."

"Up?"

"Yes, up, the tongue leaning against the front wall of the wagon, and the circumference of the rim would be smeared with Vaseline, and inside the bed would be an ant pile, live with ants, fire ants, if I could get them."

"Fire ants?"

"I'd sprinkle water on the ant pile every day and leave pieces of bread and fruit."

"Ants?"

"Yes, water for the ants. I would place a container, *aguamanil*, for carrying the water, water the most precious and necessary natural resource, next to the wagon. And the ants would wait for, anticipate my coming with the water."

"Why the Spanish?"

"Oh, practicing. What do you think?"

"Ants in a wagon?"

"Yes, but not really. It was the idea, the idea typed on a sheet of white paper that the curator would hang on the gallery wall."

"White paper?"

"Yes, white paper, you know, eight and a half inches by eleven inches, and, you know, a week after I got my idea I saw a poster when I traveled to Santa Fe: a red wagon—just as I had thought it—a pyramid of sand in it. Can you imagine? The synchrony? You know, synergistic waves? Collective subconscious? Old fashioned, as if the world were still small. My idea the same as that of another person? The idea bigger than both of us? Bigger than you and me."

Mary Giuseppina looked down at her feet.

"Sometimes, though, I do what I think of, execute the idea you might say. But best is the virgin idea, the purity, the initial simplicity of thought, right here in my head, like my idea for when I die. You want to hear?"

"Um."

"More ants, lots of them, and me, my body laid out on the pile until I'm clean to the bone. Fire ants will do that, you know, clean a fish skeleton up just as slick as you please."

"I didn't know that."

"Would have myself, my bones strung together then, and hung in my son's apartment, right there where all the action takes place, in the midst of his friends, by the computer, by the Eames chairs I just bought him, by the fireplace, the kitchen table, wherever. I wouldn't be alone then, and neither would he. I've told him. He hasn't said he'd do it, but he hasn't said he won't either."

"Really?"

"It'd be a legacy. Nothing wrong with a skeleton. There's beauty in the form of the bones, the skull. Eight cranial bones: frontal eminence, superciliary arch, parietal bone, supraorbital notch, glabella, great wing of sphenoid, pterion, temporal line. Fourteen bones of the face. An elegance. It's a terrible shame to bury a body, the beauty of it covered with soil."

"Um."

"Another time I proposed a ball bearing that would reach a concrete floor from the height of four feet in a time period longer than the exact same ball bearing would fall straight down according to the laws of gravity."

"Ball bearing?"

"Uhuh. Falling."

How?"

"I would ask seven women, any seven women to form a circle. Each person would extend her left arm into the center. The palm of each hand would be up, the first at four feet and each successive hand three inches or so below the one above it.

"Seven women?"

"Yes, seven women. Wouldn't that be grand?"

"Um."

"I would drop the ball bearing into the palm of the top hand at the level of four feet. Each hand would let the ball bearing land and then drop through the fingers, not too slowly and not too fast. And then the women would hold the circle, and we would listen for the sound of the ball bearing hitting and rolling."

"I don't understand."

"It's not about understanding. It's about the idea, about being in the circle, expecting, feeling the weight, the roll, and the fall of the metal ball through the fingers, trusting, knowing the ball would move to a hand below, knowing the weight that hand would bear, waiting for the ball to drop to each hand, and finally to hear the drop to the floor, the roll.

"Roll."

"I actually got seven women to do this, so my concept materialized."

"What women?"

"Women I invited."

"But, where did you find them? On the street? Were they your friends?"

"Yes, and yes. See, you do understand. Women on the street, maybe my friends, maybe not. I asked them, and they made a circle. A circle on a corner of a city block. Imagine it as seen from above."

"You saw it from above?"

"No. Imagine it. All those city blocks below, a grid, and on one corner, only one corner, a circle of women and a ball bearing falling through the seven extended hands to the concrete walk: one, two, three, four... five, six... seven."

"Yeah."

"Another time I thought about and then cleaned up and exhibited an old electric fan missing the grill for protecting fingers and toes from the slice of the rotating blades. It's still in the attic. One of these days I'm going to do a performance with it.

"Performance with a rotating blade?"

"Yes, performance, like with the ball bearing. I'll set the fan in a gallery with four white and bare walls, do something with the fan and some raw flesh and the blood from it. Splatter the white walls or something.

"Really?"

"Yeah, or I might paint the fan white and glue gems to the blades."

"Why?"

"Turned on, the blades would become a spiral, circles of reflected light dissolving into themselves. Or, maybe I'll paint the fan black and glue blades of fresh-cut grass to the blades. I'd turn out the lights before I turned on the fan for an eddy of black in the darkness, the green of the cut grass gone, only the scent of summer, a coagulation, left from the rotation of the mower blades. Dangerous, any way I do it, any color, the fan will be dangerous."

"Yeah. Dangerous."

Mary Giuseppina looked at Ella's lips, not her eyes. Maybe it was fear, maybe it was disbelief, maybe she should have moved to the back of the bus, but she took a deep breath, adjusted her ponytail again, and took up her courage, took up her side of the conversation. They were, after all, from the same home town.

"Sure, I'll take a look at your work. Bring something in sometime."

"Really? That's great, that's really great. I will. I've got this sculpture..."

"You know, Ella... It is Ella, isn't it?"

"Yes, Ella."

"Well, you know, Ella, I'm divorced from Ed now? We had some hard years, but I stayed through them, stayed through all the crap. He left after Laura graduated from high school." Standing up, starting to move toward the empty seat next to Ella, she said, "And now, I'm alone."

---

The bus rode on and Ella, after a moment, placed the Ed that Mary Giuseppina was referring to. He was the brother of Nancy McGraph, who

married Ella's boyfriend, David Gomez. That was easy enough. David Gomez was sixteen and the first boy Ella loved. Ella moved the books so Mary Giuseppina could sit, and when Ella asked about David, about the old boyfriend, Mary Giuseppina said, "David and Nancy are divorced from each other too. He was hard on her, wore her out, took her beauty too."

"She was a beauty."

"Yes. She was." Mary Giuseppina talked on about herself and the people they both knew, Jack and Freddie and Sheila and April, and Ella listened, sometimes asking a question. Mostly though, Ella got stuck thinking about the nights at the club, nights riding and drinking beer and smoking cigarettes in an old brown and beige Hudson, and then she tried to imagine the lives of those old friends, their mornings and evenings, twelve and thirty and thousands, and the things they said and did to themselves and each other through the years, two, seven, fifteen, seventeen since then and what it was like now until Mary Giuseppina again changed the subject, cut into the counting.

"I'm going to a rock show, going to buy crystals and stones for the shop." Mary Giuseppina told Ella about the power of crystals.

"Power."

"You don't know about crystals?"

Ella didn't.

"If you want, I'll buy one for you."

A crystal, one crystal, to hang from her neck, inside or outside of her blouse. A possibility. Might clear away memory, replace it with sweetness, heavy as the scent of the lilacs her mother tore from the spring bushes for bouquets that died in airless rooms on the dining table, dressing table, end table, tables layered with life Ella couldn't dust or count away. A crystal like a lilac. A crystal, clean from some broken-into geode, might be white, angular, and new. A crystal breaking light, breaking images into fragments, a crystal especially for her. Ella's neck the first neck it would hang from, the edges to become rounded from the friction with her skin, her clothing, dissolve itself into the wind of her movement. Sharp edges, carefully selected, white crystal edges to erode only as Ella chose to expose them, expose the fragments of herself, fragments of the whole, alienated from the present, but Ella would have control, would develop a theory of fragmentation, and the sharp rims could press into her chest, tear through her blouse, cut into her skin, rip through her very throat. Or if she chose, the crystal could glide over her blouse, exposed to light and others, sway easily from her neck, blunt its boundaries slowly with grace until it wouldn't, couldn't cut, smooth as a marble, smooth and secret as the geode it came from, a sphere to hang then from a short cord at the concave base of her throat. Superb.

"Yes, I'd like one. You'll pick one you think would be right for me?"

"Yes, O.K. When you get back, come to the shop, come to pick it up, and I'll show you around. You can't miss it on the highway past Evergreen."

---

The bus pushed south with the wind through the narrow Rio Grande Valley. Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range, and the driver was careful of the new snow and ice coating the road. At Taos he pulled into an all-night store, made a package drop. Mary Giuseppina and Ella got chocolate and coffee. Taos and the quiet, unsettled air parted cold and only for them as they cut through it an hour past midnight. Orion and Sirius, Cassiopeia, the Seven Sisters of Pleiades in reach, and they were on board and the bus rolling.

"Feels good to be back in here. Warm."

Ella felt warm too, and it was good to be on the bus with Mary Giuseppina. Safe. Good to have a friend near, good to exist for another, even transiently on this bus headed for Mexico.

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# The Sunnerset Review

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I place red rose petals into an antique cologne box, wooden and hinged. I add pink stones, a paper clip for binding, a silver ring I bought at Woolworth's, and Bela's autograph.

When he signed it, I didn't have the nerve to say anything to him, felt silly standing in line with people holding posters and T-shirts. When my turn came and I handed him the slip of paper, I couldn't look at his face. His hand hesitated for half a second before he took the heart-shaped paper. "To anyone in particular?"

I shook my head, silently lying.

He signed only his name, Bela Shroud.

I burn a red candle beside the cologne box and read about Bela in the paper, talking about his wife and son, how he tries to forget how happy he is when he writes songs because, "Happy songs are all right, but they don't say enough about the human condition, which is what interests me—how we can relate to each other, though our lives may be different. And often, what binds us is very sad." I'm glad his wife isn't his son's mother, as if this is going to work, as if casting this spell is going to make him leave her for me. But it makes me feel better doing something, anything that feels productive, like how I imagine writing a song or creating a painting would feel.

It would be easier if he were an asshole or racist or something counter to my fantasy of him. It would be better if he lived in a different town

than me, if he wasn't so physically close. It would be better if I wasn't an idealist or whatever it is that makes me so susceptible to obsession. This hurts, and I only want to make it go away.

I burn the candle for eleven minutes and pinch it out.

On the second day, I don't slip into daydreams as much. I ride my lawnmower in spirals and figure eights around the stones in the grass. I eat lunch and catch up on paperwork, make some calls. But by dinnertime, when the sun fades, the funk hits me. Halfway through a bottle of Gewürztraminer, I open the box and light the candle.

In the picture of him on the inside cover of his newest CD, he's reclining on a couch, looking sleepy, a lazy smile on his lips. I read some of his lyrics: *You can't make me disappear. I keep it hidden, but I may feel like this forever. So your telephone makes me lonely.*

He must have really forgotten he was happy when he wrote that.

On the third day, visitors wander the cemetery. I don't get visitors much. Brokenhearted people bring their dead pets to me. I hold services for them, put them gently into the ground. But after a few weeks or months, people learn to love other animals, and I become the only one who tends the little graves. Relationships with most pets are like that, quick, because their lives usually go by so fast compared to ours. Maybe animals move through time more rapidly than we do. At the end of our lives, don't their lives seem like blurs? Do we seem like blurs to the animals who outlive us? If I had a giant tortoise for a pet, I wonder how long it would grieve for me after I died, whether it would bury me and set off immediately looking for another human.

I'm sure the melancholy will come after sundown, and I hope to stave it off with this amateur philosophy or physics or whatever the mash in my mind resembles. I walk through the cemetery, imagining it's a small planet, inhabited only by me and whatever spirits may be attached to these small bones.

A little Shiraz may help this tiny planet fantasy along, so I open a bottle. At eleven, I find myself lighting the red candle, opening the box as if I had faith in such things.

The days and nights go by like this until I stop counting, until the night when the red candle burns out and I empty the box's contents into my hands and carry them to the cemetery's edge. I slip the ring from Woolworth's onto my finger and put the stones, petals, and paper heart into the ground.

---

Just after autumn starts to flirt with the breezes and leaves, I look out my front window to see my love-spell-intended and his son wandering up my wooded lawn. The boy holds a shoebox between his palms. I pace in front of the door and remind myself to breathe, waiting for them to knock.

The knock startles me, anyway. I open the door with my eyes trained at boy-level.

"I have to bury my bird," the boy named David says. "He died." David's eyes cloud with the seriousness and understanding of a boy who has seen his mother die. I wonder why his stepmother isn't here.

I also wonder why his father isn't saying anything, but I'm too nervous to look at him, afraid he's recognized me as the weird woman who made him sign a cutout heart.

"How old was your bird?" I ask David.

"I had him for two years. But he was eighteen when I got him." David's sad eyes turn up to his father. I make a silent wish that he won't remember me, and I look into the devastating brown eyes of Bela Shroud.

Not only does he not seem to remember me, he looks ashamed. "He wanted the old parakeet." He shrugs. "I offered him any pet he wanted."

"I wanted Scott," David says. "I loved him."

I try not to smile at the thought of a parakeet named Scott. "I'll bet he really loved you, too," I say, moving out of their way. "Come on in." Two minutes later, I'm sitting across from the man I've been dreaming of since junior high school. He's on my living room couch with his seven-year-old son, browsing a catalogue of pet coffins.

"What's the smallest animal you've buried here?" Bela asks. His eyes drop for a moment, as if he may be looking me over, and I feel self-conscious.

"A skink." I hold up my hands to show how long the little guy had been, about three inches. He'd been the first pet of a rich girl David's age who'd insisted on the most elaborate ceremony for him.

Bela stares at my hands. "How about the biggest?"

"A couple of horses."

Bela looks away, and his gaze locks onto the antique cologne box on the end table beside him. It's probably the most interesting thing in the room, etched with an ornate spiraling pattern that draws the eye. I study Bela's tall frame, his square shoulders, his narrow thighs and hips. I wonder at the reality of him, linger on the details I didn't allow myself to observe before—the shape of his fingernails, the creases on his lips. His tangibility attracts me more than his ideality did.

"This one," David says, pointing to a picture of a yellow coffin with gold handles. "The same color as Scott."

My legs tremble as I walk to the boy's side. Bela watches me cross the room, looking at a spot at about the level of my hips, and I realize he's looking at the Woolworth's ring on my left hand, on the same finger he wears his gold one.

"I can have that one delivered in two days," I say. "We can keep Scott here until it comes."

"Do you have a freezer or something?" Bela asks.

I glance at David, afraid the mention of the freezer might upset him.

"I know," he says. "So he doesn't rot."

"Let's go outside and choose a spot for him." I motion to the door leading directly to the cemetery. Bela seems to leave the room reluctantly, his eyes back on the cologne box as he follows his son. I walk behind them, touching Bela in my mind, slipping my arms around him and feeding on how unfamiliar he'd feel.

As children do, David leaves us, running to the most wooded area to read the stones there. I know the names on them all.

"Do you live out here alone?" Bela asks me, watching his son.

To anyone else, I'd lie, for my own safety. But, "Yes," I say.

Bela nods, looking around at the tombstones, the woods. "Seems like it might be kind of nice."

The spot where I buried the spell box's contents looks like a fresh unmarked grave. I wonder what would happen if I dug up Bela's autograph and lit it on fire. Would David change his mind and decide to bury Scott in his backyard? Would Scott flutter back to life inside the shoebox?

"Strange day," Bela says, squinting in the afternoon sun, on a day when anyone else would have remarked on how beautiful it was.

I fight a compulsion to touch his hand to see if it's warm or cool.

"Do you have any hawthorn growing around here?" he asks. "It has an odd effect on me." He sounds like he's in a trance. David, head hung low, wanders from stone to stone. I mourn Scott as if I'd loved him, too, and I think of the falseness of some things, of plastic trees and empty graves and how hollow they feel.

"I'm afraid," I tell Bela, "that I may have indirectly killed your son's bird with magic. I didn't mean to." I feel so much smaller than him than I really am. "And I'm sorry."

A fascinated frown is on his face.

"I think I can undo the spell," I say, "but I'm pretty sure it won't bring the bird back."

His voice is quiet. "If it won't bring the bird back, why undo it?"

More slowly than I've ever moved, I raise my hand to Bela's. His skin is warm. It makes a hollow spot in my soul, but only the size of a pinprick. I look for David, who kneels before a carved stone, the grave of Sunshine, a yellow lab who's been dead nine years.

When Bela's fingers close around my hand, I know in my heart that it's the spell affecting him. My hollow spot dilates to the circumference of pencil lead, and I wonder how big my soul is, how much hollow space it can hold before it disappears.

Still clutching my hand, Bela looks for David, who has moved on to the stone for Imp, a tiny black and white cat I buried in the spring. "I knew it," Bela whispers, looking down at our hands. "As soon as you opened your front door, I knew it." My hollow spot grows again, but it feels good, and I know I won't be the one to stop it.

I move an inch closer and the breath comes out of him as if he's been squeezed.

"I have to take my son home," he says, and I think he'll escape after all, that my fantasies have run away with me, and I nearly laugh. "And then," he says, "I'll come back."

When the hollow spot grows again, it feels like scratching an itch, like a drink of wine at sundown.

David is watching us now. Bela notices, but moves still closer to me. What am I doing to all of us? And who do I think I am, believing I've managed to do anything at all? It's far more likely that he's a flirt and a cad than bound to me through a spell.

But there is a way to find out.

"How are you at digging holes?" I ask, gesturing to the patch of dirt where I buried the spell box's contents. "It could set you free."

He shakes his head, tilts his face toward the maple leaves that have begun to yellow. "I'm not digging up a dead animal, am I?"

"Reversing the spell."

He follows me to the shed to get a shovel. The cemetery must have eyes to witness this. Maybe the maples have only today begun to turn color.

David joins us at the mound of dirt. "Is it a grave?" he asks.

"No," Bela tells him, plunging the shovel into the earth. "Magic."

"Oh," the boy says, as if he's familiar with these things. He sits in the grass and watches his father dig.

The maple leaves seem to grow paler as the soil turns over into the grass. The lightness I feel would make me float slowly to the ground if I let myself fall. When the shovel dings against the pieces of rose quartz I buried, Bela drops to one knee, scrapes his fingers into the dirt.

"It's a piece of paper you want to find," I tell him, and a second later he pulls the autographed heart, wrinkled and smudged, from the ground. He shakes the loose soil from it and holds it in both hands. From the worried expression he gives me, I can see that he remembers me now, that he knows who I am.

He stands, and the spell is broken.

Bela gives the paper to me. I wonder what he expects me to do with it. He reaches his dirty hand for his son's clean one. "We'll call you in a couple of days," he says to me. "About the coffin."

I don't believe he will, but I nod, looking hard at him, hoping to burn his image onto my retinas. I can't see David at all now. I don't want to know how he's looking at me.

When Bela turns away, I close my eyes. I keep them closed until I hear car doors shut, until I hear an engine sound recede until it's gone. My hands reach out toward nothing.

---

Everyone I know regrets something. I regret opening this Beaujolais, but here is the glass in my hand. We certainly choose what we do, no matter how much the fatalists argue otherwise. Fatalists probably have more to regret than others, and can only forgive themselves by training their ideologies to tell them they've had no choices.

I have made choices. And from the moment I cast a spell I thought I didn't believe in, I doomed myself to feel regret, no matter what might have happened.

*So your telephone makes me lonely,* I think, staring at my phone.

It rings.

"Be honest with me," Bela says when I answer. "Did you bury that paper heart again?"

"No." But I did put it back in the cologne box.

It sounds so quiet where he is. I suppose it sounds quiet here, too. It's one thirty-three in the morning.

"Can I come over?" he asks.

I feel light again as I answer him, and it occurs to me that this weightlessness may be due to the hollowing-out I felt earlier. Maybe

my entire soul has disintegrated like limestone reacting with carbonic acid, turning into a cave.

Rather than *Yes*, I answer, "Please."

Bela hangs up.

I wait for him on the dark porch, the cologne box on my lap. I think I'll tell him about the box, give him the choice of taking the paper heart out, swallowing it, setting it on fire, whatever he wants to do with it.

But when his headlights sweep between the trees and blink out, I then think that I'll place the box beside the stoop, in a cold corner, let the spiders build their webs around it until they all go to sleep in November.

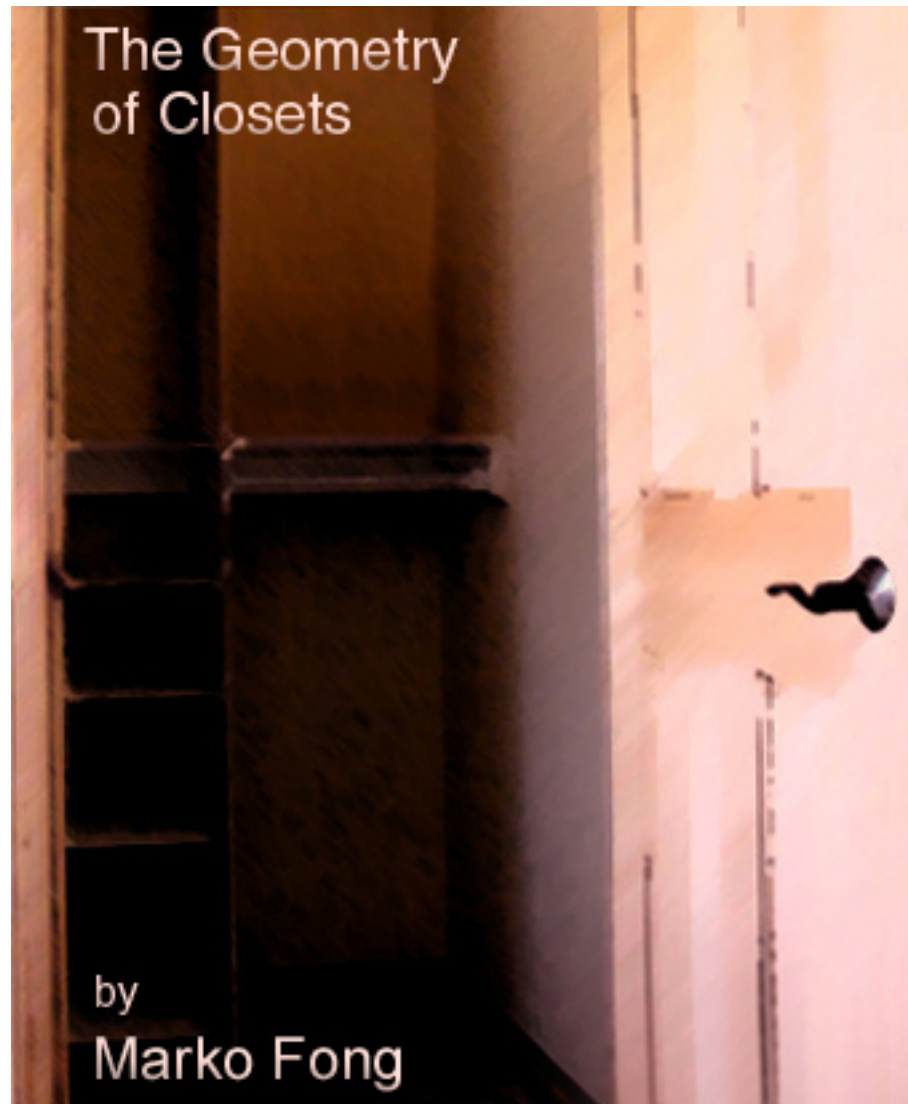
Some decisions can't be based on what we will and will not regret. Sometimes we have to make a heavier choice—deciding which of two things we believe we'll regret less.

When Bela arrives and parks down on the road, when his tall silhouette moves up the hill toward me, I feel so empty that I can almost tell myself it's only my hand and not me who pushes the box along the cement step behind me, into the deeper shadows.

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I find my best friend from college, Byron, inside his housemate's closet. He's dressed only in a pair of blue gym shorts and the housemate, Melanie, is female. He doesn't seem especially happy to see me.

"Why are you in Melanie's closet?" I ask.

"Why are you in Melanie's bedroom?"

"Your front door was open."

"I was just helping her get something."

"Can't she get it herself?"

Melanie's closet has a cheap accordion door that lost the ability to play in harmony long ago. Byron's leg pushes one of the pleats out at an off key angle. He hooks his foot around the edge of the door to bring it

back on track. The inside is dense with brightly colored clothes, even some dresses, most of which I've never seen Melanie wear. Up to now, I thought she only owned faded jeans and some version of a sweater. The light in her closet is off. Byron reaches up to the metal chain to switch the light on.

"She has a bad back. You know that."

I nod, but want to ask what that has to do with finding things in her closet.

"Where's Melanie?"

Byron doesn't answer right away.

"I think she's taking a shower."

The sound of running water suddenly comes from the other side of Melanie's bathroom door. Even though she's the newest one in the house, Melanie managed to claim the master bedroom when she moved in seven months ago. Byron, who is normally rigid about the protocols of shared rental housing, let it happen. I took that as a good sign.

"Do you need help?"

"No, she doesn't need your help."

"I didn't mean the shower, I meant looking for whatever you're looking for."

"No..." he pauses, "I already found it."

"So you just decided to hang out in her closet?"

At four in the afternoon, Melanie's bed is unmade.

---

Ever since early childhood, the geometry of closets confounded me. How can there be all this extra space beyond the walls of a room? Shouldn't the volume of the closet show somewhere on the outside of the house? My grandparents' house had nine closets. Each one had hinged doors with circular doorknobs. The shelves inside were painted and finished, the light switch had a cover plate, and even an adult could stand in the middle comfortably without brushing against hanging clothes. I remember walking the perimeter of their house more than once convinced that I would find signs of protruding closet space. As I got older, I was surprised to learn that other people talked of hiding things in closets when I'd wondered instead how they manage to hide the closet itself.

Melanie's closet shelves aren't level. Nails stick out of one end of the wooden dowel that serves as the closet rod. The metal half-circle bracket that connects it to the wall shows signs of having been bent. The closet itself is so shallow I'm surprised to find that my best friend fits inside.

Byron stands up. I note that he has nothing in his hands. "I'm sure Melanie is going to come out any minute. You shouldn't be in here."

"You shouldn't be in here either."

He nods.

"Right," he mutters, then starts to walk me out her door, but he doesn't make it to the living room with me.

For several minutes, I am alone with two cinder block bookshelves, a couch rescued from a dormitory common room, and a black and white television. I note that the door to Melanie's room is now closed.

I think most people would jump to the obvious conclusion. After all, things are generally what they look like. Pretty much anyone else would ask, "Are you two fucking?"

Byron hasn't had a girlfriend, or at least he's never acknowledged one in the four years I've known him. Instead, he likes to talk about his ideal woman who he insists has the graceful neck and arms of the women in paintings of Tokugawa Japanese nobility, displays pre-Raphaelite fashion sense, and who has the mind of Virginia Woolf without the whole acute depression part.

Byron became my friend in college when he told me he could explain the rules that helped guys get girlfriends. Everyone else laughed at me. Byron was different. He could prove things just like Euclid. Everything fit and he had lots of ideas about ideal parts and logic.

An expanse of paper squares, the playing map for Dungeons and Dragons, covers the carpet on the far side of the living room. Byron and Godfrey, the other housemate here, have hosted their Dungeon for two years. I've sometimes wondered how Byron expects to find his ideal woman when he spends twelve hours each weekend playing this game. Some of the female role characters in D&D match Byron's ideal woman, but none of the players I've met ever do.

Two years ago I got out of playing by telling them, "I am terrified of any world where dice have more than six sides and things have hit points." I'm happy to read about sorcerers and orcs, but this is Halloween without the candy. I was the kid who wouldn't wear a costume, but trick-or-treated anyway. I understood the candy, but role playing had no appeal.

Melanie comes out of her room in jeans and sweater. It's summer, but she prefers clothes that cover all parts of her body. She's attractive enough in a non-pre Raphaelite way, but as Byron points out, she doesn't know how to dress. Since she moved in, Byron told me three times that Melanie had never heard of *Mrs. Dalloway*. "Can you imagine that?" he would ask. I never told him that I hadn't made it past high tea in Clarissa Dalloway's day, and that I only know *To the Lighthouse* through Cliffs Notes.

Melanie puts on her glasses, we exchange greetings, and then she asks me, "Why were you looking in my closet, Lucky?"

"I wasn't *looking* in your closet," I tell her.

"The front door was open when I got here."

"Please don't go into my room without knocking."

"I didn't mean to snoop. No one was here. I was just making sure you guys hadn't been abducted by aliens."

She laughs. I laugh even though you're not supposed to laugh at your own jokes.

"Where did Byron go?" I ask.

"He had to get something out of his room for the D&D marathon."

Melanie used to play too, but she quit a few weeks ago after some incident with Byron that neither of them talks about. The last few Saturdays, Melanie and I have wound up hanging out together until the dungeoneers take their break. I should have more interesting things to

do with my weekends, but I don't.

"Do you want to walk again?" I ask.

Usually Melanie says yes, but this time she says, "Maybe in a bit."

"I hope they grow out of this dumb game. Maybe if Byron found a girlfriend or something."

"How do you know he hasn't?" Melanie looks down at the floor as she says it.

"Because he'd say so. I'm his friend. He'd tell me. That's how friendship works."

"I see."

I don't think of myself as socially retarded, but people say that from time to time. My mother sent me to a doctor once who concluded that I have a mild case of Asperger's Syndrome, which basically means that I'm socially retarded.

Melanie leans against the wall of the living room. She picks at her fingernails, but doesn't say anything.

"I hope you find a boyfriend some time too."

Melanie shakes her head. "That's not something I'm looking for."

"Why wouldn't you want a boyfriend?"

"I don't need one right now."

"Byron thinks you should find one." He told me that.

"He did?"

Melanie's face falls. She excuses herself and slips back to her bedroom.

---

I used to wonder if you could stuff more things into a closet than you could into the house that contained it. At the time, I had decided that I wanted to be smart or at least have people think I was smart because smart people didn't have to be like everyone else.

Somehow it got in my head that being smart was more like filling a closet than organizing one. I purposely read books that were too advanced. Real nine-year-olds do not understand Quantum theory, Kant, or the Albigensian heresy, but I would try to read them anyway. In fact, I read through Will and Ariel Durant's entire history of western philosophy. I understood most of the words, but never caught any of the meaning. I had a knack for remembering things out of context well, so it sometimes appeared to others that I really was reading the stuff. It was as if those stray words and anecdotes hung on rods in my head. I figured I'd grow into their meanings some day.

Instead, I've gotten unnaturally good at observing and remembering without drawing conclusions. Maybe that's why I've managed to get along with Byron for so long. He eventually gets in fights with most other people. They're not physical fights, just odd disagreements. One time, our friend, Nikki, said that she liked the Eagles. Byron told her, "No one can logically like the Eagles. They aren't musically advanced enough."

Nikki tried to change the subject. Byron persisted, "Tell me one thing that makes them musically significant."

After that, she stopped coming by.

Over the last few months, Byron has been helping Melanie develop more sophisticated tastes. "She's never thought about things like this, never been exposed... It's sort of sad." This does not explain why she always beats him at games like Scrabble.

Suddenly, Byron appears.

"Lucky, we've talked about this before. Some of the things I say to you are private."

"What things are private?"

"Melanie told me you told her I said she should find a boyfriend."

"You did. What's so private about that?"

"She's very sensitive for some reason."

"Sorry."

"I can't trust you with things like this if you talk about them with her. It's like you're Inspector So Clueless sometimes."

I almost say, "*That's why we're friends,*" but instead tell him, "You didn't say to keep that private."

"I shouldn't have to."

I once asked the doctor what you're supposed to do about having Asperger's. "You just have to make the best of it," he told me, "There's no real cure, but it does help to be aware of it."

Now I know about it, but that doesn't help much. I try to be nice, but there appears to be something more to navigating actual friendship. I asked the doctor if he had a map I could use.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Don't navigators use maps or charts?"

He laughed, wrote it down on his notepad, then explained to me that Asperger's people often are very literal.

I've made some progress though. I didn't repeat what Byron said that same night about Melanie looking and acting like a spinster, or how he wishes she wouldn't hang around him so much and just doesn't know how to tell her.

A few minutes later the Dungeons and Dragons crew arrives bearing bags of potato chips as big as pillows, two-liter bottles of soda, and backpacks filled with science fiction and fantasy books that they trade. Melanie decides to hang out and watch the game. I do the same for a few minutes, then go for a walk by myself.

I trace the perimeter of their house as I study the fading paint on the exterior walls. I've never had an easy time making friends. I'd like to keep these friends even if they aren't perfect because it's better to have friends than not.

But, here's my problem. It's the way Byron talks about Melanie. If she's not ideal, then there's a problem with congruence. I gave them a chance to explain why Byron was in the closet. I'll tell myself, whatever happens in this house is their business. I can leave it hanging.

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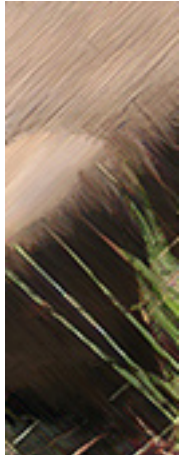
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## Contributors' Notes



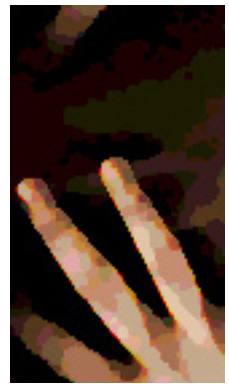
**Daniel DiStasio** has a MFA in Creative Writing from Spalding University. His fiction has appeared in *The Minnetonka Review*, *Pinyon*, *Gertrude Press*, and *The Caribbean Writer*. A former editor for General Media, his feature writing has been published in *The Out Traveler*, *Southern Voice*, *New Jersey Magazine*, and many regional newspapers. He won the Key West Literary Guild's Short Story contest in 2003 and 2004. He works for Alyson Adventures and leads adventure tours in Peru, Southeast Asia and Iceland. He lives in Key West, FL and can be reached at [dantidi@aol.com](mailto:dantidi@aol.com).

**Marko Fong** spends much of his free time watching reality television and surfing the web. His family often asks "What happened to you?" He maintains a blog at [www.chancelucky.blogspot.com](http://www.chancelucky.blogspot.com). He did go to college, but avoids all reunions out of fear of embarrassment. He remembers the Cuban Missile Crisis but has never claimed to have been at Woodstock. He lives and works in Northern California with his family, pets, satellite dish, and DSL connection. Sometimes he plays basketball on the Astroturf-covered floor of his local school's multipurpose room with a bunch of other middle-aged men.



**Sandra Maddux-Creech's** work will appear in *Thema* in the spring and has appeared in *Arabesques Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Ballyhoo Stories*, and other places. She has been a finalist in contests sponsored by *Glimmer Train* and *Many Mountains Moving*. She earned her MFA at Colorado State University and can be contacted at [madduxcreech@msn.com](mailto:madduxcreech@msn.com).

**Sandra Gail Teichmann-Hillesheim's** books include *Slow Mud* (poetry), *Killing Daddy* (novel), and *Woman of the Plains* (edited history). She is a playwright, with *Mockernut Street*, *Corinne*, and *Not Laughing* recently staged. Her stories, dramas, essays, and paintings have appeared in a variety of literary journals and anthologies. She is professor of literature, theory, and creative writing at West Texas A&M University. Write to her at [steich0613@aol.com](mailto:steich0613@aol.com).



# The Somerset Review

## Guidelines for Submissions

### Fiction and Essay Submissions

Writers are invited to submit literary work of up to 8,000 words. To get more of an idea of what we are looking for, please read *The Somerset Review* or consult our [Recommended Reading List](#).

Email submissions to [editor@somersetreview.org](mailto:editor@somersetreview.org) as an attachment in MS Word, or as plain text. We suggest you include the word "Submission" in the title of the email, so that we don't mistake it for junk mail. Be sure you specify whether your piece is fiction or nonfiction. We prefer single-spaced manuscripts in font size 11, but this is not an absolute requirement.

You may alternatively submit in hard-copy by sending to 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA. We prefer disposable copies of manuscripts but this is not an absolute requirement. We can respond via email in lieu of a SASE if you so designate.

All submissions receive replies as quickly as possible. If we have not responded within three months, please hassle us. We read year-round and never go on hiatus.

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, and will receive twenty-five dollars at release time for their contribution.

Writers retain all rights to use their work elsewhere, however, we reserve the right to republish the material, without modification, in a nonprofit print volume. We also reserve the right to quote brief excerpts of text at literary events, with no connection to monetary gain, crediting the author in all cases.

We have nominated stories annually for various anthologies and awards, including *Pushcart Prize*, *New Stories from the South*, *Creative Nonfiction's Best Of anthology*, *storySouth's Million Writers Award*, *Sundress Publication's Best of the Net*, and others.

### Enter Our Free Fifty-for-Fifty Contest

Readers are invited to submit comments on stories and essays appearing in the current issue of *The Somerset Review*. We will award fifty dollars and a copy of Volume One to the person contributing the best entry over fifty words, and will include the comment in our next issue, along with the reader's name and home town.

Reader comments can be in any form and there is no fee. Only one entry is allowed per person, per quarter, and the entry must pertain to a piece appearing in the current issue. We are particularly interested in how the story or essay affected you; what impact it had, what memory it stirred, what idea it precipitated. Be honest and lucid.

Email your entry to [editor@somersetreview.org](mailto:editor@somersetreview.org). Include your name, town, state, and country (if outside the USA). Qualified entries will receive acknowledgement of receipt within a few days. The winner will be notified when the new issue is released. The deadline for comments is one week before release date. Issues are released on the 15th of March, June, September, and December.

Email addresses will not be published, circulated, or archived. Writers making content submissions are eligible to participate as long as they do not discuss their own work.

We may choose to publish more than just the winning comment. If we decide to do so, readers will be notified and although it is not likely monetary awards will be given, we may send complimentary copies of Volume One to runners up.

By offering this prize, we hope to increase the awareness and appreciation of literary magazines in our world and culture.

### Questions for Reader Groups

Readers and Reading Groups are invited to provide answers to questions we have posted on the material in our current issue. See "Questions for Reader Group Discussion" in the Table of Contents for details on how you can win a complimentary copy of *The Somerset Review* if you or your reading group provides meaningful answers to all questions.

# The Somerset Review

## Recommended Reading List

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	<a href="#">Night Swimmer</a>	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
Brooks, Ben	Wildflowers	From the Spring issue of <i>Georgetown Review</i> , 2005
Broyard, Bliss	<a href="#">Mr. Sweetly Indecent</a>	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	<a href="#">Veronica</a>	A novel published in 1996
Clark, Susan	Besides the Body	From the Spring issue of <i>Red Rock Review</i> , 2004
Coake, Christopher	Solos	A novella from Vol. 9, No. 1 of <i>Five Points</i> , 2005
Crane, Elizabeth	When the Messenger Is Hot	A collection published in 2003
Crowe, Thomas Rain	<a href="#">Firsts</a>	Online at <i>Oyster Boy Review</i> in January, 1997
Dancoff, Judith	Vermeer's Light	From <i>Alaska Quarterly Review's</i> Intimate Voices issue, 1997
Dormanen, Sue	<a href="#">Finishing First</a>	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
Hyde, Catherine Ryan	Dancing with Elinor	From the Summer issue of <i>Gettysburg Review</i> , 2006
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	<a href="#">Enchanted Night</a>	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	<a href="#">Last Things</a>	A novel published in 1999
Orlean, Susan	The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup	A collection of essays published in 2001
Peelle, Lydia	Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing	From No. 87 of <i>One Story</i> , 2007
Perry, Rachael	Sullivan's Inventory	From No. 82/83 of <i>Confrontation</i> , Spring/Summer 2003
Pope, Mary Elizabeth	Divining Venus	From the Spring issue of <i>Florida Review</i> , 2006
Raboteur, Emily	The Eye of Horus	From <i>StoryQuarterly</i> #40, 2004
Robison, Mary	Why Did I Ever?	A novel published in 2001
Row, Jess	The Secrets of Bats	From the Fall issue of <i>Ploughshares</i> , 2000
Russell, Karen	Haunting Olivia	From the June 13 & 20 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 2005
Ryan, Jean	Paradise	From the <i>Massachusetts Review</i> , Autumn 2001
Salinger, J.D.	For Esme - With Love and Squalor	From the collection <i>Nine Stories</i> published in 1953
Sellers, Heather	Tell Me Again Who Are You?	An essay from Fall/Winter issue of <i>Alaska Quarterly Review</i> , 2006
Tilghman, Christopher	The Way People Run	From the September 9 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1991