

The Bayou Review

The University of Houston - Downtown Literary Journal

Fall 1993

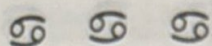
The University of Houston - Downtown
One Main
Houston, Tx 77002

Comes the Dawn

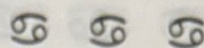
*After awhile you learn the subtle difference
Between holding a hand and chaining a soul,
And you learn that love doesn't mean leaning
And company doesn't mean security,
And you begin to understand that kisses aren't contracts
And presents aren't promises,
And you begin to accept your defeats
With your head held high and your eyes open,
With the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child.
You learn to build your roads
On today because tomorrow's ground
Is too uncertain for plans, and futures have
A way of falling down midflight.
After awhile you learn that even sunshine
Burns if you get too much,
So you plant your own garden and decorate
Your own soul, instead of waiting
For someone to bring you flowers
And you learn that you really can endure,
That you really are strong
And you really do have worth
And you learn and learn... and you learn
With every goodbye you learn.*

Veronica Shoffstall

Kerry McGee



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- √ Photography Award Recipient
 ✎ Artwork Award Recipient
 ✎ Adjunct Faculty/English Department
 ♦ Professor/Computer and Mathematical Sciences
 ✎ Poetry Award Recipient
 ✎ Short Story Award Recipient

Winner - Fall, 1993 Bayou Review Short Story Entry

Bipin Patka, my brother's best friend, was lanky; he had a neat face, as if someone had made a careful drawing of it before he was born. The lines of his thin eyebrows and thin nose were straight. The lower lines of his eyes were straight and the arches above were as round as the pretty hollow at the back of his neck.

Like all boys he leaped and bellowed in the street, but he was quiet and shy when he came to our house on rainy or cold days to make trains of boxes or spools and to match baseball cards with my brother.

Although they lived in our apartment complex, two stories below us, we knew very little of Bipin's family. His father was one of the many anonymous men in caps with paper bags under their arms who rushed to the subway in the morning and drifted back at night. Bipin had a younger sister whom he began to take to school when he was eight. She was a dark-gold little girl who clutched his hand and wouldn't talk to anyone. Once home from school, she stayed in her house; we rarely saw her on the street, even as she grew older.

Mrs. Patka was also rarely seen--a silent, solitary figure, like a tree alone in the center of a field. Mrs. Patka had few English words to exchange with her neighbors, and there were no other Greek families in our complex. Nevertheless, families in immigrant neighborhoods are inevitably interdependent, asking each other for shopping advice, medical information, the care of each other's children, and the exchange of kitchen recipes.

Mrs. Patka was offered strudel by Mrs. Yen who was the Chinese baker on our block. Big, clumsy Mrs. Milano, the loudest behemoth of the neighborhood, took Mrs. Patka a length of kishka (stuffed intestine), her specialty, which Bipin told us they couldn't eat--too rubbery. My mom's contribution was to ask Bipin if his mother would like to go to English classes with her, explaining that the classes met in the early afternoon during school hours and that Mrs. Patka would be back before three o'clock when her children would return from school. He said, "She won't go. She's too ashamed."

There were a number of women like Mrs. Patka on the block, who had no one to speak with then their husband and children were away, no one to ask where to buy feta cheese or Greek oil. Tall and slender, with Bipin's long eyebrows and straight nose, her sandy hair in a long, full knot at the back of her head, her eyes fixed straight ahead, she looked like a lady on the front of a storybook ship--strong and lonely.

My mother and the other women in our neighborhood said that if Mrs. Patka had taken them into her house to see Bipin when he got sick or had asked the Khan boys to take him to Markham Hospital, Bipin might not have died. We never

never about the deaths of children, a knowledge too painful to speak.

Our first knowledge of Bipin's illness came from my brother, who was hanging around one rainy October day feeling mean and restless. He got in my mother's way as she was trying to boil diapers in the steaming cauldron on the stove; he woke our little sister who had been sick and was napping. He hid my brand new pencil with the removable cap eraser. My mother suggested he go down to play in Bipin's house or to ask him to come up. He said Bipin was sick and hadn't been in school that day. The next day and the next when he was asked if Bipin had returned to school he answered, "No." Although the weather had cleared, he refused to go down the street. He pushed spools and boxes around for a while. Then he read a book and colored a picture with the baby. Mostly, he hung around like a tired little old man.

That afternoon the apartment complex was quiet. The women didn't talk much. Only Chris Parker clattered noisily up and down the stairs of the apartment complex. My mother must've known that Bipin was dying because he had finally been taken to the hospital, but I knew nothing until my brother burst into the apartment, tears falling onto his sweater, his fists clenched and shaking as if he were fighting.

When we calmed him a little, he told us that Mr. Patka had come to see him and told him that Bipin had died, that we would never see him again. "What does he mean, 'never'? That I won't see Bipin again? What does he mean?" My brother stomped his heels against the floor and punched the air with his fists. I wanted to console him, but I didn't know what to say. My mother held him on her lap, a big boy of nine who allowed this indignity because he was in terrible trouble.

That evening, when my father came home, he went straight to our bedroom and saw that my brother was still crying. My father was lying on the bed with the baby, who offered him her doll and conversation. He didn't respond, which made her cry. That night my brother didn't eat. He slept deeply, shuddering every once in a while.

Like our neighborhood, school was hushed the next morning. The news of Bipin's death carried in whispers through the auditorium, in the playground, on the stairs, in toilets. It was funerary garland that wrapped itself around the whole red brick building of our school. Street life stopped--no ball, no marbles, no ropes lashing at the sidewalk, no stickball, no fights, no singing on the stoop.

The day of the funeral was Saturday. We had seen funerals in the movies and in the news, but they were of grand and old people, not of a boy, not on our street. It was a cool, sunny day. The big garbage cans and the metal roof of the Khan garage shining bright and hard. As we sat on the stoop, we heard stirrings on the inside stairs.

The inner door opened and two men carrying a long, black box came into the small hall where mailboxes lined the wall. My brother gasped and I dragged him out from the stoop. We ran down the block. I looked back to see what was happening. As the box was carried down the stairs, Mr. Patka, in a black coat and Mrs. Patka, with a black veil over her head (and falling down her black coat) walked slowly behind the box. Behind them was a woman in black, holding the

hand of the little Patka girl whose head was also covered with a black veil. The box was carried down the stairs, followed by the Patka family, and the procession headed toward Finch Street.

I told my brother that funerals were quiet and that he shouldn't make any noise. I ran ahead and looked at Mrs. Patka from where I stood on the sidewalk. She wasn't crying; she had died too, with only the clear drawing of her features left on dull white paper.

As the family slowly followed the black box (held high by four arms as black as burned tree branches), the children began to trail after, led by the two Khan boys, both in their early teens. The Italian children who knew about funerals followed; Rosa Silvestri and her brother Louis, Caroline and Petey Santini and the Bianchi kids.

My brother and I ran into the gutter to join Petey. The Jewish kids who were watching from the sidewalk began walking with us. Other people we knew from our neighborhood joined behind the children.

My brother began to cry quietly and I went to him while Caroline comforted Petey, whose face was quivering. There was more crying around me and behind me that grew louder and louder every minute.

I couldn't understand why they were crying. My brother, yes. Bipin had always been his best friend and he liked him more than anyone else in the world--more than our mother. The other boys liked him too. He was an easy, gentle boy who would yield to them rather than fight. But why were the girls crying over a Greek boy who had never played with them? What did they know about death that I didn't? What were they seeing? What were they feeling? Like them, I knew that dead people were put in a hole in the ground and covered with earth. Were they crying because the earth might choke Bipin? Because he might open his eyes in the dark, alone, screaming and no one to hear him? Maybe then he would truly die. Was that what they meant by 'frightened to death'? Was there a saw in the coffin to cut through the black wood and shovel to dig away the dirt? And once out, how long would Bipin have to stand in the dark, alone before God sent the blonde lady with the naked baby down through the windy night clouds to carry him back up with her?

Seeing sick Bipin standing alone, waiting to be rescued from the dark made me cry as fully--with my whole body--as the time when I wandered over to Third Avenue in the dark, alone and lost, when I was five. Maybe my brother was crying for the same reason that we hid our heads in the movies when we saw a child wandering the aisles alone, or why we quickly skipped the pages in a book when they threatened to tell us about an abandoned child. Like the women who went to the movies "to enjoy a good cry," maybe we were crying for the relief that was not often permitted us.

By the time we reached Finch Street, my mother had caught up with us. Taking us each by the hand she said she didn't think they would let us into the Greek church and certainly not into the cemetery. "Come home. Stop crying," she said.

We ate, we slept, we went to school and we asked no questions. One of the block chroniclers said that the Patka family had gone back to Greece. Another said

they moved to downtown, near cousins who were no longer interested in the family. The godlike child's gesture quickly dissolved anything that wasn't immediately attached to our ears, our eyes, our greeds or our envies. Our fears hung on for a while.

No one mentioned Bipin. His name was a blank, a black omen, a sign that children could die, and as fast as we could we obliterated his name too.



To My Children

Once I made you paper dolls
and pretty pictures for your walls.
When you were playing with your toys
I'd often join the fun and noise.
Upon my lap you sat to look
at pictures in a story book.
In a circle we'd sit and sing
of flowers, animals - everything.
To parks with swings, sand and bars
we went with snacks, dolls, and cars.
With all my heart I hope and pray
We'll share these times again someday.

-Adia Curtis Kilpatrick



The Gift

Danita Spivey

If the arrival of a newborn baby
is a Gift from God,

Then the ability to raise that baby
with acceptable morals,
is a Gift from God
that arrived in Pandora's Box.

The Quintessential Cat

A cat's life tends to be
strange and frenetic,
Living in two world's,
wild and domestic.

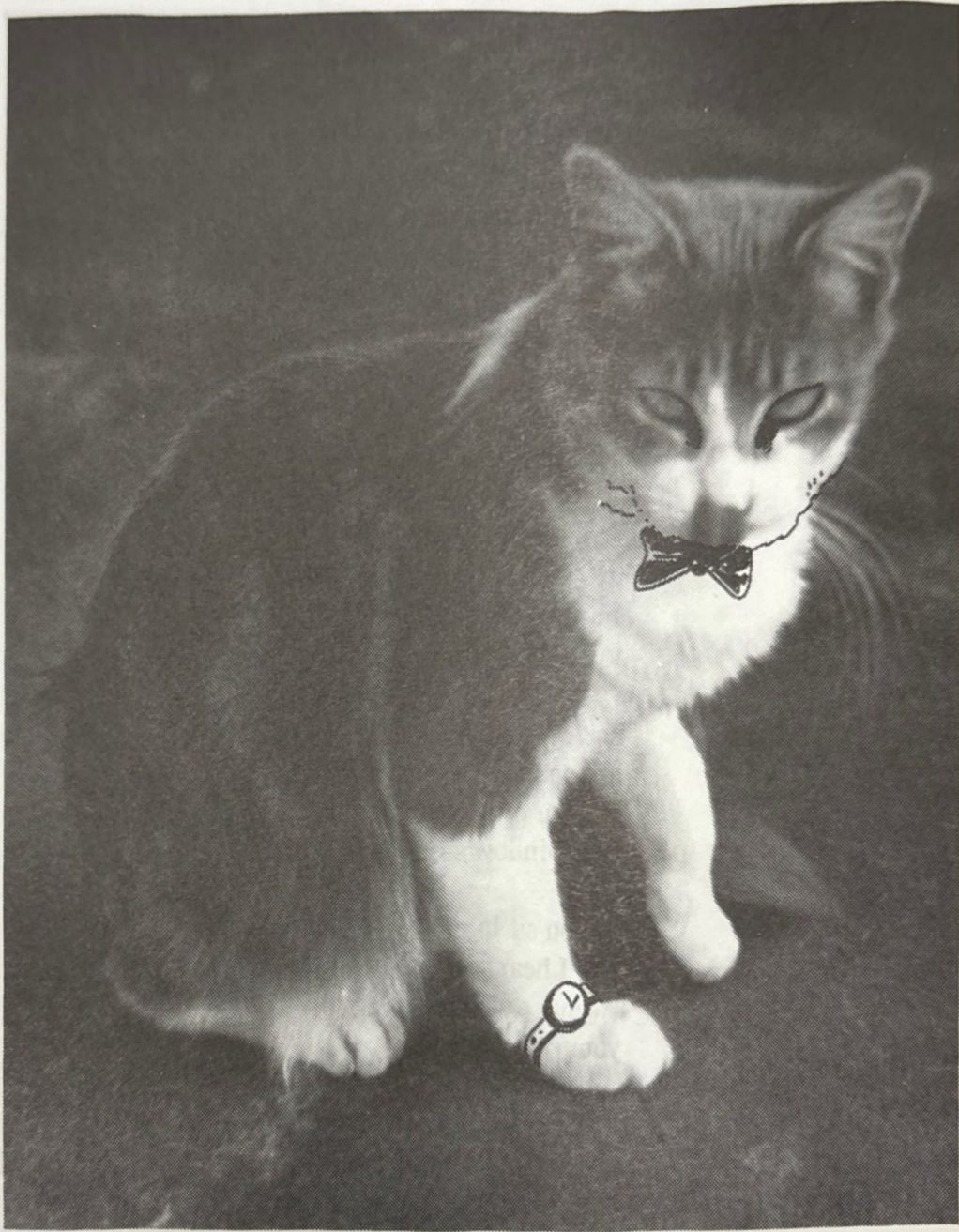
Sleeps curled in a ball
as if in the wild,
Preferring a blanket
with thick fuzzy pile

An accomplished hunter
whose skills rival man's,
But perfectly content
to eat tuna from cans.

The eyes and reflexes
are amazingly cunning,
For one who spends his days
in a window sunning.

As you sit in my lap
and I hear you purr,
I wonder which world
you truly prefer.

-Christy Golden



Photograph by Juan Lopez

As she sits in the bathtub half full of water, playing with a plastic blue and pink bubble pipe, my heart fills with joy. She is only thirty-two inches high and weighs a mere thirty pounds. Her blonde hair is damp, but the ringlets still hang down the middle of her back. She reaches for the bar of soap and begins to wash; her legs, her privates, stomach, neck, chest and last, her arms.

As I attempt to wet her hair she stands and tries to pull away, toward the back of the tub. Laughing, she shakes her head, "No." I notice, her skin is so soft and smooth--not yet harmed by life's roughness. She has no worries now, except for the shampoo coming toward her hair. She makes little devil horns with her hair and says, "Hi, everybody" as she waves to an imagined camera. She tilts her small head up and I rinse the shampoo away.

When I lift her out of the bath she kicks her short legs to get the extra water off. I wrap her slim little body in a towel that is four times as big as she is. She runs into the living room, laughing when she eludes me. I finally catch her, hold her high and blow on her belly. She giggles wildly, squirming and trying to push my head away. This is our favorite game and we play it every night.

The worst part of bath-time comes. I comb the snarls from her wet hair. She does not like this one little bit. "The gremlins came and put knots in my hair," she says while I comb the tangles away.

Now it is bedtime. She gives me a hug and kiss goodnight. I tuck the Little Mermaid sheets and comforter around her small, innocent, fragile body. Again we say, "Goodnight." One more goodnight kiss.

When I turn out the light and pull the door almost shut I pray she will always be this sweet and adorable. All the while my heart fills with sadness knowing how cruel the world can be, knowing she has to fall down to learn how to get up again. But, for now, she is still my Sugie Bear.



*land, hallowed only
when the blood, let of children
lately drenched the ground*

-David Wawrzyniec

Doña Marillita was walking at a fast clip even though she knew that her asthma could flare up at any moment. But she was in a hurry. She had no time to stop at the town's only grocery store to let her son know that the Priest would be visiting tonight. As she passed the store, she reflected about how hard her son had to work at the grocery store to help provide food on the table for his three sisters; and, he was only 14. She sighed, "*Asi es la vida*" (Such is life.).

She quickly looked in both directions of the highway to make sure no cars were coming. Then she hurriedly crossed and entered the empty field - empty save all the mesquites that absorbed every raindrop when the town was fortunate enough to be bestowed that precious commodity. Doña Marillita did not even think about her fear of snakes crawling among the mesquites, so absorbed was she about the impending visit. She just made her way through the brush, not noticing that burrs were sticking to her clothes. A branch even caught the bun at the nape of her neck, and a long strand of black hair came loose.

She could see the road that led to the lone whitewashed house on the edge of a city block. There, her three daughters would be waiting for her, anxious to tell her of the day's events at school and of their needs and wants. They would also want to know how *her* day had gone, whether she had worked too hard and too long. But they would know - the strained features on her face would tell all. Then, the girls would gather round to hug her and lament that their mother should have to work so hard.

Another sigh escaped her small body. Doña Marillita shook herself as she scurried out of the field and half-ran toward the house. She could see the three faces peering out of the one window facing the road. As she made her way to the concrete porch, the door opened; and the girls greeted her in unison.

"¡Ay, mamacita linda!" To them, their mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, and they quickly took turns hugging her until Doña Marillita began gasping for breath. Quickly, the girls let go as they realized that their mother was on the verge of having an asthma attack. The alarm on their faces dissipated as their mother smiled, sat down on a straight-backed, lightly cushioned chair near the door, and began telling them of her day's events.

As Doña Marillita talked about the rental properties she had cleaned that day and of the different things that tenants had left behind, two of the girls - Mercedes, 17; and Gloria, 13 - busied themselves with getting Doña Marillita's shoes off and propping her weary, swollen feet on the yellow hassock. Consuelo, the youngest at 10, took her mother's shawl and struggled to hang it in the closet near the door. The closet was packed with all their clothes, for it was only one of two closets in the entire house. The builder (in his infinite wisdom) had not seen fit to include closets in the bedrooms. Instead, he had put one closet in the living room and the other in the back porch, where the washing machine was hooked up. What was he thinking!

As Consuelo slammed shut the closet door, Doña Marillita made a motion, as if to get up. But she was tired, and she did not resist as her three daughters gently pushed her back down on the chair.

"Siéntate, mamacita. We have fixed supper for you. We will bring your food to you."

Doña Marillita smiled but shook her head. "No, no. Let's all sit in the kitchen, and I'll tell you about our visitor."

"What visitor, mamacita? Is someone coming to visit *us*?" inquired Mercedes in wonder.

"Yes, m'ijita. The Priest will be here at 9:00 tonight. He wants to meet all of you. It is already after 7:00; so, we must eat quickly and clean up before he gets here."

Doña Marillita and her three daughters made their way to the kitchen. The girls had cooked a pot of *frijol pinto* with salt pork and *chile colorado*, the way their mother liked it; and they were ready to display the pot proudly before their mother's eyes. Their eyes focused on the stove top, and the girls quickly began fussing at each other.

"What did you do with the beans? Surely, you didn't put them in the refrigerator this close to supper time." Mercedes looked at Gloria and Consuelo accusingly, but the looks on their faces convinced her that they had left the pot where it was supposed to be - on the stove. Gloria rushed to the refrigerator, looked in, but no sight of the pot. As Gloria turned to look at her sisters and her mother, her eyes followed Consuelo's finger, which was pointing to something under the table. There lay their pot of beans, perfectly turned upside down, with not a single bean or liquid spilled out! The pot was not broken, and it was still warm to the touch from having been on the stove top. The girls crossed themselves at seeing the unexplainable, and the girls huddled close to their mother. What was the meaning of this? No one had been inside the house except them; so, how could the pot have ended up on the floor?

Doña Marillita, too, was perplexed. She would ask the Priest tonight, for it must be a sign from above. She took the girls back to the living room, where they sat silently for a long time - this time in total reverie. The knocking on the door startled them, and they quickly arose. Doña Marillita went to the door, and there stood the Priest. She asked him in, and Consuelo offered a chair to the Priest, a gaunt, severe-looking man of 50. Consuelo shuddered. The Priest scared her, but she knew her duty. The Priest did not acknowledge her presence, however; and Consuelo stepped back.

"I thought you had four children, Doña Maria." The Priest seemed irritable.

"Yes, Father, I do. My son is at work; he should be here any minute now. But these are my three girls." Doña Marillita beamed, for she was proud of her dutiful daughters.

The Priest turned to Consuelo, ignoring Mercedes and Gloria.

"Have you been to Church lately? I do not remember seeing you. Speak up."

"No sir," answered Consuelo in a barely audible voice.

"No Father," the Priest corrected.

"Have you been to confession lately?"

"No sir," Consuelo answered in a louder voice.

"No, Father," the Priest corrected her again.

"No, sir," insisted Consuelo, as she mustered courage. "You are not *my* father." Consuelo did not notice her sisters' alarmed faces. Even Doña Marillita was not prepared for Consuelo's responses.

The Priest was enraged that a ten-year old could be so disrespectful. He turned to Doña Marillita and lashed out in fury.

"Is this the way you teach your children to talk? Don't *you* have any respect for priests either? You are failing in your duty as a mother. But we shall discuss this matter later. I came to see you for another reason."

Doña Marillita stood white-faced, not knowing what to say or do. She turned to look at her daughters and saw that her son, Miguel, had come in unnoticed. He was standing at the kitchen doorway, holding a folded tortilla, probably wondering where the beans were. Doña Marillita realized that the Priest was talking again, and she forced herself to face him.

"Doña Maria, I found out today that you and your husband were not married in the Church." Doña Marillita nodded "yes," but the Priest kept on talking. "That means that you have been living in sin for 20 years and that these children of yours are illegitimate. You must talk to your husband and arrange to get married in the Church immediately."

Doña Marillita's daughters were infuriated that the Priest should accuse their mother of being bad. Miguel, too, was furious; the tortilla had fallen to the floor, soggy and limp from having been in clenched hands. They gathered round their mother, as if to protect her. Doña Marillita sensed their anger, moved closer to her children, and gently placed her hand on her son's shoulder. She must say something to the Priest.

"We were married by a justice of the peace. We had no money for a church wedding. In the eyes of the law, we are married. We still have no money, and my husband - my children's father - is in the hospital." Doña Marillita stammered.

The Priest could not believe the ignorance of this woman. How could she believe that her marriage was valid when a priest had not officiated at the ceremony? A justice of the peace indeed!

"You and your husband will be damned to eternal hell for living in sin unless you do as I tell you. You and your husband must come to see me as soon as he is well. I shall be waiting." The Priest sensed the children's hostility and felt he could take no more of this family's impudence. He grabbed the nearest doorknob. The door slammed shut.

Doña Marillita and her children put their hands to their mouths and suppressed laughter. The door opened wide, and out ran the red-faced Priest looking for the front door. He had just been in the closet! As he headed out the door, the laughter broke out; and, Doña Marillita, with only a smile on her face, gently shut the closet door. It was time to go see about the beans.

Winner - Fall, 1993 Bayou Review Poetry Entry

"Come to the West Coast; we'll start anew.
I will be different, it'll be grand;
We'll all live happily . . ." he said.
His midlife crisis resists work.
He shouts hurt words, raises a hand,
 demands isolation, asserts the unreasonable,
 withdraws from all.
NO LOVE

One job. Ongoing need for rent and food.
Two preteens: one boy without a bed
 one girl, the focus of his ire, without escape.
That Christmas they each receive
 a pocket notebook of coupons full of little
 promises like ice cream and movies,
 redeemable throughout the year.
NO MONEY

Her secretary salary cannot quell the barrage of bills
 before bankruptcy.
She swallows her pride, asks for assistance.
 They deem her income too much.
She alone cleans the rented spacious house he chose
 overlooking the cold and foggy ocean
 with the scent of honeysuckle in the breeze.
She buffers his assaults against her cubs
 as best she can.
She becomes empty.
Just one more day.
SURVIVE

Do Wildflowers Work?
by Judy Bunch

Balding, shriveled smoker behind the wheel;
bumper sticker blaring
"Wildflowers Work."

Ag'ed car moving slowly,
billowing black phlegm.

Gaping atmospheric ulcers
erode planetary health.
Indigestive landfills
belch explosive vapors;

Life-robbing rain, arthritic rain forest;
the greenhouse effect is earth's fever.
The Global virus spreads.

Passing by the cancerous contradiction,
musing the driver's meaning,
I wonder . . .
What do they do?

☆ ☆ ☆

The Crossing by Judy Bunch

Seasonal instincts beckon
in the tiny medulla;
he must keep moving, there is no choice.
Permanent nature-colored shelter sways
rhythmically, dreamy and trnace-like.
Appendages lumber in slow motion.
Day, night, cold, rain, heat;
It calls.
Eyes roll, forever watchful. "I'm coming."
He crosses the vast cement desert.
No water, no food;
It pulls.
Dodged by four-wheeled mechanical giants,
he can't see or know where he is drawn.
Relying on his shell, he trusts
that his protection will serve.

"Mr. Getzinger's out!" a child shouts, and a half dozen others drop what they are doing--tossing a baseball, screeching at a cat, spying from a tree, running through a sprinkler's rainbow--and tear across the narrow street, slowing down only as they reach the blacktopped Getzinger driveway. They are excited to see how calm he is. There is so much to do, so much, but he does what he does slowly, as if each move matters.

A small, sad smile raises the corners of his mouth as he hears the children's stampede cease, and the street they all share falls silent. But Mr. Getzinger doesn't directly acknowledge the children. He only draws on his pipe, tendering an intimate whistle. Then he drops one of the silver shafts he is carrying, takes up the other with both hands, and sights down it at the ground.

Is he an ersatz father figure? An abandoned retiree? An untethered intellectual?

It could be pointed out that the meticulous grooming of his lawn, the absurd spotlessness of his motor car, and his every unhurried action seem to imply Mr. Getzinger has no children of his own. It might also be said that the gathered children's own parents are terse midwesterners whose faces turn hard and real, cracking with the roads in the long winters and softening only by degrees with each spring thaw. But isn't the unfinished Mr. Getzinger a midwesterner too? The children don't consider the question, though the dullest of them guesses his age to be fifty, and notes the thin gray hair combed carefully sideways and the way the glass circles of his always turned-away eyes glint at certain angles in their plastic and metal frames.

Even now, as the children have joined him on his lawn, Mr. Getzinger doesn't look directly at any of them. Do they speak to him? Apparently, because he bows his head when one of them steps tentatively forward. Then he seems to nod, however slightly, but it is hard to discern whether his head is manipulated only by nerves when he drops it into that severe angle. Perhaps this is what intrigues the children, this seemingly reverential posture.

Mr. Getzinger doesn't seem to judge the children. His attention, if his careful movements and monk-like countenance are any indication, is turned inward. Or is he only self-absorbed and oddly distracted at the same time, plagued like most of the country by television and the gap between the promise of any easy life and the actual day-to-day? Maybe he understands more than most. Maybe he doesn't judge the children because he is a genuine humanitarian. But, maybe he just doesn't care, is simply too tired, or too preoccupied by what he has come outside to do.

He reaches down into the bottomless pockets of his trousers, and some of the children start at the hopeful jingle of coins as he pulls out a dozen white balls, dropping them in the thick grass on his little rectangle of lawn. (At least part of this audience, it appears, has arrived only for the reward that sometimes follows the ritual.)

Still-smoldering pipe is dropped in the grass. A practice swing at an imaginary ball, their Mr. Getzinger, with another swing, this one followed by a little "click," sends a real, dimpled ball into the feathered baby blue sky over a long green house across the street. Hushed ejaculations, variations on oohs and aahs, crescendo and echo the arching shot as it flies out of sight beyond the house toward an empty lot the children use for football games. The metal shaft in Mr. Getzinger's delicate hands glints like a magic wand, and in the wake of the children's concerted gasp his held smile escapes this time, like a magician's dove, with a protesting flap of wings followed by a demure tucking and a dignified readjusting of an original, remembered stance.

Minutes later, after all the balls have flown and disappeared in the same manner over the same house, Mr. Getzinger takes a little wooden tee from the breast pocket of his seersucker shirt and scrapes the black dirt from the grooves in his club face. Then he starts across the road, the children following in the cool shadows between houses, until he reaches the vacant field. There they overtake him.

"We'll get 'em for you," one of the little followers boldly and peremptorily suggests, and Mr. Getzinger only stifles his sad smile again (or perhaps it is sad because he stifles it) and the children accept this as an important sign, a call to action, and stoop and scramble to corral the neatly scattered balls.

Mr. Getzinger then drops one of the two shafts he has carried with him, and he again takes up a hitting position. Once more the children move back, the largest of them directing their circle so that it opens this time toward a shining field behind the local high school across the way, a much further distance. The children hold their breath. They are quiet enough to hear the wind in the grass, and they hold very still; they can see that Mr. Getzinger now stands in the shadows they cast.

The shaft glides slowly back again, and then whips forward, slightly faster this time. The children hear the ball whistle over over an adjacent field of weeds (in the middle of which lies a stick and grass fort they have been building.) They see it climb over an unpaved road beyond the field, and then gradually level out and fall beyond a line of ancient oaks guarding the school and its trimmed fields. Meanwhile, the shaft in Mr. Getzinger's hands comes to rest across the back of his shoulders as he watches with the children. Some of them must move quickly to one side to catch the tail end of the ball's flight.

Then, after a moment to let the oohs and aahs die down again, he hits another ball to the same field, and then another, and by the time each lands, it looks, in the thick waves of summer, like a flung stone tumbling into a silver sea.

When Mr. Getzinger has again finished hitting his whole bevy of balls, he repeats the club cleaning ritual and then starts to that shining expanse, the children following, now skipping and flashing to the incessant jangle of coins in his pocket.

Does he care one way or the other that they follow, eddying about him in the tall grass like the fickle summer wind? Has he come outside to be alone, to practice some private balance that the children's presence seems to threaten? The questions linger as he and the children fuse into glinting shadows beyond the trees in the wavering distance.

You - Veronika Alker

You are a chameleon
And have fooled me every time
With your changing colors of kindness and love.
But my saving grace is
That being true to your reptilian species
You always return to your own wretched color.

You are
Eve's serpent in human form.
You tempter, you taker, you hypnotist.

Slither away
And I pray that
You never again place your selfish fangs
Into another Eve
And poison her innocent heart.

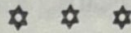


Disadvantaged Love
by Patrick Farrell

Love, love, my
ignorant one.
How can you
love only one?
The honest
man, need not say.
The true are
in love all day.
If the philia
is foreign ground.
How can the
eros be sound?
Until you
love everyone,
you cannot
love only one.

Silent Tears
by Kamilah Puckett

*Alone in my room
Alone in the world
Alone in my heart
I cry for company
I cry for friends
No one hears my tears*



December in Houston
by Judy Bunch

The early December brightness reaches into
the front porch crevices, blinding me.
The plastic straps of the lawn chair imprint cold stripes
through my robe.
My scarf prevents petulant wafts from sneaking
under the loose collar.
Yesterday's warm rain pools in arbitrary puddles.
Today, my coffee cools quickly.
Distracted, I ponder finances, chores,
and this month's festivities.
My companion, beside me, talks but I don't hear;
I brood, unable to attend.
Inner turmoil ferments, needing release,
my calm and cheer forgotten.
I crave a warm cave 'til January.
I look up . . . across the yard . . .
The trees are steaming.

SEASONS

by Therese M. Duke

Winter

Northern winds whip
A snow frosted sheath
Bidding me a chilly hello
Again.
No matter
I was cold before my friend arrived.

Spring

Tender morsels
Breaking
Snowy edges
Promise
Answers unspoken
Questions unasked.
Do I dare?

Summer

Blazing radiance
Enveloping the senses
Of delicate Vincas
Shriveled
Dainty, amidst others
Less hardy or foolish.

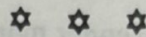
Fall

Golden helix
Wrapping stately sinners
In paper shrouds
Torn by time's
Breezy wonder.
Inhale and repent.
I am here for you.

FEMINISM
by Therese M. Duke

The Cause

Let others argue about
"The Cause."
Unequal pay and just rewards
Will meet squarely
With an empty stare
An outstretched hand
And no love in sight
When dues are paid.



The Fire of Life
by Therese M. Duke

Women draw near the fire of life
When bickering over homosocial
World orders.

Remember --
The gallant prince was only a dream
In a box.
Was his name Jack? Or Jill?

What does it matter
When the cycle of life
Is the fire of life
And those seeking warmth
Breathe upon my neck and
Growl compassion.

Compromise is beauty
Hidden within hearts afire with life
Strong enough to be held
In the hands of ages.
Let go and live
There is more than this.

I stretched out on the narrow cot, wadding up the lifeless pillow in a vain effort to raise my head higher than my chest. It was the fifth time I had been to bed that night. My partner, Ben sat hunched in the corner; coffee, cigarettes and all-night television being his chosen substitute for sleep three nights of every week. The dispatcher slept in that deep, total way that only children and total idiots can. The foot-thick concrete walls of the former slaughterhouse kept the room cool by oozing a dingy dampness through the sheetrock that had been placed over them when the building had been converted to an ambulance station. The chill forced us to sleep under piles of itchy army-surplus blankets even during Houston's blistering summers and contributed to the chronic hacking cough we passed around amongst ourselves, smokers and non-smokers alike.

I stared up at the high ceiling, searching in the dark corners for the rusted iron brackets where the meat hooks had once hung. New medics were told that the slaughterhouse had been the site of the murders that the "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" was based on and then were treated to an all-night screening of the movie. Even when you knew better, the images were hard to erase. The senior medics who had instigated this ritual and the other initiations that sometimes went with it had a sadistic streak that would have made them suspects in the original massacre. It was rumored that the hooks had been removed because the seniors had hung a new EMT from one of them and left him there, mummified in gauze bandages, convicted of stinking up the bathroom. It was hard to imagine these same guys baptizing a dying newborn or holding a senile old woman's hand, but they did.

The phone screamed. Three heavy-duty bells, a buzzer and flashing room lights had been installed in an effort to wake the dispatchers who were all nineteen-year-old narcoleptics. We called all of them Mark because they came and went so fast that learning their names was a waste of time. The name Mark was memorable because one by that name had lasted three months. This Mark didn't even flinch when the phone "went off."

Ben looked at me, determined to keep his vow not to go on a call unless the dispatcher himself sent him. We suffered through two more rings before I finally got up and climbed over Mark's comatose body and answered the phone.

"Yeah, this is the P.D.," the police dispatcher said. "Y'all got a possible suicide out in Oak Mill trailer park. You ready to copy?"

"Go ahead," I said flatly, abandoning hope that the call would be in someone else's district and searching vainly for a pen. "What's the deal tonight? Did we advertise a 'blue-light special' on ambulance rides or what?"

"I think its a full moon or something," the police dispatcher answered, "we never run this many calls on my shift."

"What time did you come on?"

"Midnight. How about you?"

that yesterday morning," I corrected, finally locating a pencil with a flattened point.
"Okay, I'm clear to copy."

"Okay. You got an unknown possible suicide at one, two, two, seven Mill Gap, number eight. Key Map three, eight, seven Alpha."

I repeated the numbers back to her. "What do you mean 'unknown' suicide?" I asked.

"Calling party states her ex-husband was there and he left the house threatening to kill himself about two hours ago."

"Drunk?"

"Aren't they all?"

"Okay, show us en-route. Would you mind keeping a listen for us, I think our dispatcher is a ten-fifty."

"You mean he's dead?" she asked.

"No, he's just acting like it," I admitted.

"Oh, for a minute I thought y'all had hung another one. Y'all really need to hire better people."

"Do you want to work twenty-four-hour shifts for minimum wage?" I asked.

"Come on. We'll hire you."

"Forget it," she said. "Officer five fourteen is en-route."

"Will he beat us there?"

"If he doesn't get lost."

"Toodles," I hung up.

"Hey Mark, your jock strap is on fire," Ben yelled in the dispatcher's ear. The dispatcher jumped up immediately at the word "fire", a clear indication that he, like his predecessors, was a volunteer fireman.

"What a woo-woo," Ben snarled using the derogatory term applied to over-eager adrenaline junkies who entered E.M.S. just so they could drive around with lights and sirens. "We've got a call, and you better stay by that radio and stay awake or you're gonna start finding wet squishies in your turnout gear. Show us clear on the call," Ben said as he started out the door.

"Uh, yeah. Okay. Where you goin'?" Mark asked stupidly as I closed the door behind me.

Ben was already in the drivers' seat of the ambulance by the time I got down the front steps of the station. "Come on baby, start. Pretty please you hunk of junk," Ben begged as he turned the master switch that engaged the heavy-duty alternator required to support the electrical demands of the oversized vehicle. I went around to the front and removed the trickle chargers that were kept on the two batteries any time the ambulance wasn't running. I slammed the hood then went around to the passenger side and pulled myself up into the cab.

"Keep your fingers crossed," Ben said as he turned the key. Surprisingly, the engine immediately roared and the cab began to vibrate. "Damn, I'm good," Ben said as he snapped his seat belt into place. "Where we going?" he asked at the same time Mark's voice crackled over the radio.

"Where are you going guys?"

I unhooked the microphone from the dash and said "Seventeen-oh-one clear on the unknown, possible suicide." I repeated the address and map location from the dispatch card I had brought with me. "I forgot to leave this for Mark," I said.

"Screw Mark," Ben replied. If he doesn't do his paperwork, the board of directors will fire him. They won't fire him for sleeping through calls or being a geek."

"But we'll have to start all over with a new Mark," I argued, wrestling my boots on.

"We'll get to do 'Chainsaw Massacre' night again," Ben reminded me.

"Maybe that traumatizes them and that's why they're so stupid," I joked, pulling off my boot to remove the toilet paper Ben had stuffed inside when I wasn't looking.

"It didn't make us stupid," Ben countered, switching on the lights.

"Then why are we out here at four a.m. with no sleep, after two years of training, making fifty cents an hour over minimum wage?" I asked as I reached up to turn on the siren.

"I've always hated you," Ben teased. "I want a new partner. Three years with you and I'm starting to have a bad attitude."

"I was going to save the world and I got you for a partner."

"Aren't you glad I told you not to bother," he replied grinning. "The world doesn't want to be saved. Besides, if it wasn't for me, you'd never have tried Sushi."

"That wasn't nice. You tricked me. I hate you."

"You can't. I hated you first. Besides, it's your fault I'm like this."

"You were like this long before I got here," I said. "Do you think this guy's gonna be dead when we get there?" I asked, changing the subject, dreading what I should already have learned to deal with. After all, if he was dead, there was nothing we could do for him. It wasn't our problem.

"Well, if he's not now, he will be someday. We're all terminal, just some of us don't know it," Ben said.

One week later, Ben died of Leukemia at the age of 25.

That wasn't supposed to apply to us.

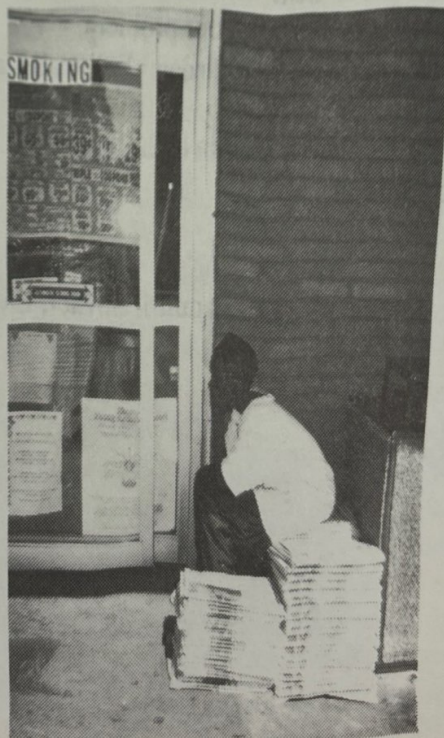
In Memory of Benjamin J. Snyder, EMT/I.

Old Rose

Rolling pin in her hands,
White Flour on her Black face
Looked out her window
And saw the little White Pickininny
With his dirty White hair,
And his dirty White face,
Running, and jumping
(Throwing down with the best of them)
Playing ball and eating barbecue
(not rare) but
Blackend
I like he was

Lori-Ann McGowen

Photograph by
Iris Rozenchwajg ☿



I remember this woman
as a child remembers.
She was vague and beautiful;
and she stood in the nighttime
on a corner near my home
taking offers from those seeking comfort.

That is what we called her, sweet comfort.
It seemed an appropriate name for this woman
who had no name or home
(worth remembering)
as she stood in the night
selling her beauty

She "preserved" her beauty
with a fifth of Southern Comfort
that she drank straight from the bottle every night.
The drink is strong and pure (unlike the woman)
who now, inebriated, cannot remember
her way home

Outside my home
where street lights reflect her sad beauty
in pools of gutter water, I remember
watching sweet comfort
harrassed by those who found her ways unwomanly.
The wives of comfort seekers despised her nightlife.

One night
I looked outside my home,
but I did not see the woman
whom I thought vague and beautiful
Men drove away, uncomforted
for the first time that I could remember

She was laid to rest unremembered
by those she served in the night,
without a prayer of comfort
to send her soul home
Only two girls, sad and beautiful
Mourned the passing of this woman

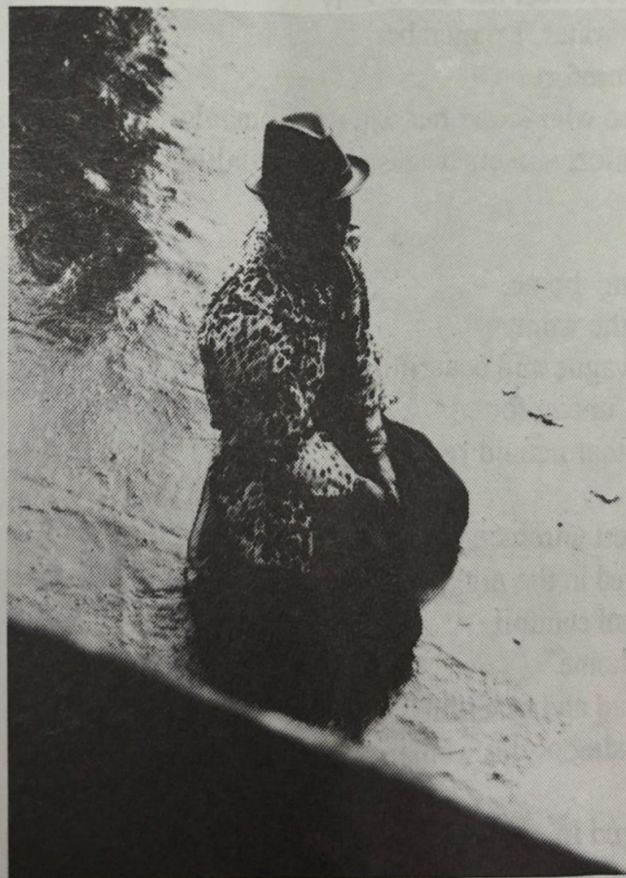
She is Remembered in my home
as mother and friend, Beauty slain by the night
in a world without comfort for Women

Stranger

by David Wawrzyniec

He sits
on the esplanade
he moves not
traffic passes him by
on either side
like time to which he bears no notice
secured in dispossession
Sometimes I see him not
though I never see him go
I look through tinted glass
as I too pass him by
and wonder for a moment
whose life is slipping by.

Photograph by
Brenda Rogers Y



BASEBALL

by Sherri L. Schaefer

A little round ball
hurling through space.
While runners are running
to try to steal base.

Pop, goes the bat
as it shatters apart.
Fans of the game
all yell at the sport.

The runners all running
to make it to home.
The fielders all yelling
"throw it to home"

As he slides to home
on his belly of dirt.
The fans all go
completely beserk.

★ ★ ★

Verdigris Poppies
by Tess Lake

Verdigris poppies
Once shimmered of gold,
Now are just copies
of nature we're told.

Tyler smiled as he stepped off the plane into the hot, humid air of Thailand. It had been ten years since he had last been here, and he was looking forward to this vacation. Tyler took a lot of vacations; at least three or four a year, so it was unusual that he should take so long to get back to a place he had enjoyed so much, but it was just one of those things. With all the changes in the world in the last decade, there were now new areas to explore, or exploit, depending on how you looked at it. Eastern Europe, for example, had been a gold mine in the last two years; he was thinking of buying property there, now that there were governments that let you own property. Still, he had to be careful, its kind were better known there; the old legends died hard.

Tyler was not much to look at. He was of medium height and less than medium build with narrow shoulders, thin arms and a slightly sunken chest. His skinny, unimpressive body was topped off by a head which seemed a little too big for it. The skin was a bland, pasty white and the face was remarkable only for its total lack of any distinct features. The watery blue eyes were accompanied by a shock of mousy brown hair which hung off his head as lifelessly as a mop. No one would ever look at Tyler twice, which was just how he wanted it. Some of his kind were flashy and glamorous, they mingled freely with the cattle and basked in their approval; but, Tyler considered this to be risky at best, and a pointless waste of time at worst. Why bother? Did the pig farmer seek the admiration of the sows before he slit their throats? Better to be around them only when you needed to be.

He slipped on his wraparound sunglasses and secured the big, floppy hat on his narrow head as he headed across the tarmac to the terminal. Even with the SPF 34 sunblock he had liberally applied in the airplane restroom, he could still feel the midday sun beating down on him with its merciless rays. That was one drawback to the otherwise delightful third-world nations he liked to visit; Thailand, Egypt, Brazil, India, all offered special delights and lax law enforcement, but all were, sadly enough, sun-soaked. The damnable rays seemed to burn into every corner, even in the deepest shade; it was sometimes more than a man could stand. This was what made the newly liberated countries of Europe so attractive. With their cloudy, gray days and long dark winters they possessed the ideal climate for abeing like himself.

Tyler, an experienced traveler, did the only thing you could do to escape solar oppression, he hopped in the first cab and headed straight for the hotel to wait out the day. The death-defying cab ride through the crowded, smelly streets would have left the average tourist a quivering wreck, but, in spite of appearances, Tyler was far from an ordinary tourist. Once safely in the cramped hotel room, Tyler set out to adapt it to his special needs. He hung the bedsheets over the windows, and installed a special lock on the door to make it almost impossible to open from the outside. An intruder would have to literally knock the door down to get in, and by

then, of course, Tyler would be ready. After securing the door and windows, Tyler settled into the bathtub to sleep until the evening; he dreamed of the hunt to come.

Father Andrews watched the children run across the yard in a mad, undisciplined dash. He never ceased to be amazed at the resiliency of the young. Many of these children had survived horrors that he could scarcely imagine, but to look at them now you could almost see them running across some suburban playground in the States. Of course, most suburban children in America had something to wear besides rags, and most didn't run barefoot, or wear shoes made of cut-up old tires, but the smiles and screams of laughter were the same. After fifteen years in the Far East, Father Andrews had almost forgotten what an American city looked like. He didn't mind. He had spent four unsatisfying years in American parishes trying to spread God's word to smug, bored, overfed churchgoers, all of whom tended to leave their religion at the front door of the church when they left on Sunday morning. He had come to Asia on an impulse for what he had thought would be a year long stay, but he had been here ever since. It had taken time to get over the culture shock of course, and the food could still make his eyes water, but this was truly God's work. Here was where he could really make a difference in someone's life.

He could still remember the numbing shock and revulsion he had felt the first time he saw a five-year old prostitute coming on to a customer in a sad parody of sensuality. He had felt an anger that day that made him consider abandoning his vow of the cloth and simply shoot every depraved customer and slimy pimp he could get within his sights. A decade-and-a-half later the idea still had a certain appeal, but he figured the way he had chosen was probably best. While the police didn't always co-operate with him, at least they weren't going to throw him in jail.

Andrews had made it his life's work to rescue the children who were forced into prostitution here. Some were lured to the city with promises of legitimate work as waitresses or laborers, while others were literally snatched from in front of their homes in their villages. Worst of all were the ones who had been knowingly sold by their own parents for a few hundred dollars. There was a ready supply of customers for them. They came in droves from all across Europe, North America, Australia, and Japan. There were packaged "sex tours" sold in some of these countries to lure the tourist dollars in. A large number of these customers came specifically for the very youngest children, twelve and younger, all the way down to four.

Andrews ran a mission devoted to getting the children out of the houses of prostitution and away from their pimps and madams. This didn't make Andrews very popular with the outlaw class, and to make things worse, the underpaid police were often on the payroll of pimps. While he had never been touched, Andrews had been threatened more often than a losing high-school football coach, and he always took certain precautions. He never once had considered backing off. There wasn't the slightest question of where his duty lay, and he was certain that God would protect his faithful servant. And if, for his own reasons, the lord chose not to? Well, there was no point to being a Christian if you didn't believe in Heaven.

At six feet three inches, and with his barrel chest and shoulders, Andrews still looked like the football player he had once been. His red hair was an oddity in

a nation of black-haired people, and trips to the more remote villages could still draw a crowd of the curious to see the stranger with fire on his head. He towered over the natives of this nation by a full head, but his sky-blue eyes, warm and kind, were usually enough to put at ease those who were just encountering him. Those eyes could also burn with anger when it came time to confront the flesh-peddlers who bought and sold these precious children like . . . like . . . cattle! The depths of human cruelty and greed still amazed and saddened him.

Some things still made him smile, however, and one of them was coming his way now. Dusk had settled over the playground and the nuns and volunteers were shooing the children inside, except for one. She came across the field with exceptional (perhaps amazing) grace, and carried herself with a dignity more suited to royalty than to a street urchin. She hardly spared a glance for the women herding the other children inside, and they in turn had long since learned not to attempt to discipline or otherwise control the strangely adult child who walked past them.

Father Andrews could feel a smile spread across his face and a warm spot light up in his heart.

"Hello May."

"Good Evening, Father, another lovely evening isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I haven't seen you in a few days, May. What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I've been exploring Father, I've had such adventures, here and there."

"Perhaps you'll tell me about them sometime."

"Perhaps I will."

This was standard with them. In the two years he had known her, Father Andrews had learned not to press May about her activities. He still didn't even know her real name. He called her May because that was the month when he had met her. He guessed her age at about twelve, although she looked much younger, but that wasn't unusual among the Thai people. With her poise and confidence, he knew she must have been older, but he would never have known it from her. She had always brushed aside any personal questions with a laugh, and a smile so bright that just seeing it was enough for him. May could keep all the secrets she wanted as long as she still came around with that smile. He figured that she survived on the streets as a thief. He doubted that even a smart and tough child like herself could make it as a prostitute without running afoul of a rough customer or a pimp determined to recruit her for his stable. That was just speculation though; the truth was hidden behind May's dark almond eyes.

They sat and talked for a while about nothing in particular as they watched the spectacular sunset on the horizon. That was okay. When you were with the right company, doing nothing was more than enough.

Tyler stepped from the hotel lobby into the busy street and smiled. He looked up and down the avenue, watching the cattle hurry back and forth on the aimless missions that filled their aimless lives. Some he had known would say that any one of the herd would have been suitable, but Tyler disagreed. While some of his kind would only take steak and others would settle for hamburger, Tyler had more specialized tastes. He liked veal.

He headed down the street with long, steady strides. An observer might have noticed a change in him from that afternoon. His movements were smoother now, more fluid, more confident. He cut through the crowds like a shark through a school of fish, which in a sense is what he was. He headed down darker, narrower streets now, but there was no uncertainty in his walk. He could see quite well in the dark, and although this area wasn't very safe for tourists, he didn't give a passing thought to the possibility of assault. Any mugger who chose this victim would get a few terrible moments to regret it. He stepped quietly through a stagnant puddle covering a section of the sidewalk. His passing stirred up a cloud of mosquitoes, but few settled on him, and of those who did, none bit him.

(Professional courtesy.)

He found what he was looking for soon enough, a man who leaned in a doorway watching him approach. The business between them was conducted quickly, and Tyler was led to a small, dirty room where she was waiting. She was about eight, and Tyler smiled thinly. She was perfect. Just what he wanted.

When it was over, Tyler moved to the edge of the room and slowly dressed. He didn't look at the body on the bed. It was nothing to him now, and he didn't like to be around the remains of a meal. He truly hadn't meant to kill her. He was only going to take a little of what she had to offer. She was just going to be an appetizer before he headed out to the full night ahead, but once he had started to drink, he hadn't been able to stop. Her blood was so rich, so thick . . . so . . . sweet. Oh well. What's done is done. No use crying over spilled . . . whatever. Still there was the pimp at the door. Tyler didn't have the money on him to simply purchase the girl outright. Although he had done such things before, it hadn't been part of his plan for tonight. Enough money would buy the man's silence, but there was no point in risking anything. No one would care about the fate of this trash, so why leave a loose end?

Luring the fool into the room was easy. Breaking his neck like a dry twig was even easier. Setting the room on fire to cover what he had done was the final touch, and Tyler was off into the shadows. After all, the night was still young. There was much more sweet blood to be had before sunrise.

Father Andrews sat in shock trying to absorb the news he had been given by the Buddhist priest who had just left. The man had calmly informed him that "it" had returned. The "it" being the creature who had rampaged through this area ten years before, leaving behind a trail of bodies. Most of the bodies were dead, but a few were worse. Images flashed before his eyes of that time: of being told that a string of gruesome deaths were being caused by something out of myth; of his refusal to believe; of the procession of yellow-robed priests leading him to a village in the jungle; how they had surrounded a house on the edge of the village and begun to chant; how he had been allowed to accompany several inside; of his shock when these gentle, peaceful men pulled out swords and long sharp knives; and the worst part. They had surrounded the sleeping body of a young man on the bed and, before he had known what was going to happen, had, striking all together, dismembered him. If seeing what he thought was a cold-blooded murder had not been bad enough, what came next was worse. The arms and legs had continued to move; the

severed head had rolled its eyes and snapped its jaws, and the torso had writhed and twisted on the bloody bed. Dousing the body and surrounding room with gasoline and setting it all ablaze had gone in seconds from covering a crime scene to being the best way to ensure the destruction of the thing. His last view of the body before they dropped the match was of the severed head frantically lapping up its own blood from the bed.

He had then been informed that the unfortunate in the room was himself a victim of the killer who had left mutilated bodies all over the city in the last two weeks. The priest told him that the mutilations had been done by the killer for two reasons: to cover up what had really been done to the bodies, and to make sure none of them came back like the man in the room.

The police were not a problem. They wanted nothing to do with what had been going on. This was an unworldly matter, so let the priests handle it, which they had done. The killer was from the west he was told; one of the sexual predators who to use this country as their own private playground, but this one wanted more than sex. He left the country, the priests told Father Andrews, but if he came back, next time they would be ready.

Father Andrews never knew just how these men had so much information on a killer none of them had seen. He didn't ask how because he was afraid they would tell him. They had trusted him enough to bring him along on their mission, allowing him to see for himself the reality of the threat; so, they would probably tell him the source of their knowledge, but Father Andrews kept silent. It would take a long time to absorb the horror of that room, and any more information that upset his world-view might be more than he could handle. All that mattered now was the warning: "take care Father, the beast will be hunting tonight, and it likes children!"

After midnight, Tyler slid through the streets on the hunt. He had been successful twice already that night but he was on vacation, and, like many tourists, he intended to make a glutton of himself. That was why he couldn't resist when he saw the exceptionally young and beautiful girl all alone walking down the street. She was about eight he guessed, and seemed to be just what he liked. He had followed at a discreet distance for a time and now the time was right. She was moving across a playground to a large shabby building; towards a door with a light burning in the window.

The time was now! Tyler could move fast when he wanted to, but, surprisingly, she was almost at the door. How did she get across the playground so fast? No matter, she belonged to him now, nothing else mattered but the sweet smell of her. A strange smell, she was wearing some herbal scent, but that didn't matter either; only her blood, her sweet blood.

Suddenly, the door was open, and a large man was standing there. He heard the words "May, what are you doing here?" and that was all he needed. The prey was about to escape! That would not be allowed. It didn't matter if there was a television crew on the other side of that door. After all, a crew could be killed too.

"Father, close the door!" May screamed, but it was too late. Tyler pushed the door in, shoving the priest aside like he was a child.

"Who are you? What do you think you're doing barging in here?"

Andrews shouted. He saw before him a thin, pale, rather unimpressive man in his mid-thirties standing in the doorway, but then he saw the eyes. Andrews had never in his life seen eyes like those. They were black, totally black, like the eyes of a shark, and they were shiny. He could see his reflection in them. Then the man hissed at him like a snake, and Andrews knew.

"Get out!" he screamed, "In the name of God, I command you to get out of this" Andrews didn't have time to finish before he went flying across the room to hit the far wall hard enough to crack the plaster. Tyler didn't have the time or patience to put up with this foolishness. The man's noise would bring others, but he intended to be gone with the child before more witnesses could arrive. He moved to finish the priest when he smelled it. Sweet blood. Sweet blood everywhere. His sharp ears carried to him the sounds of children breathing and moving and it dawned on him. This place was some sort of orphanage or shelter and was filled with children, warm, sweet, helpless children. Why, he could drink his fill and then some tonight, and an idea dawned on him. Take as many of the young cattle as he liked, and leave the priest to take the blame. There were headlines back in the States about molester priests, so a little evidence planted here and there should be more than enough to make people believe. He smiled, this would be fun, but first for the prize he had come for.

She stood in the corner looking up at him with a look of . . . what? Not fear, curiosity perhaps? No matter, she was his. Tyler moved towards her, and surprisingly, she moved toward him. Good. No need to chase, although he wouldn't have minded that at all. It would help him work up a thirst. He closed in on her and breathed her sweet smell. There was that damn herbal scent again, but he could catch her real essence now and there was something familiar about it.

The shock of recognition caused him to jerk back, which almost saved him, but it was too late. She was on him, her arms and legs wrapped around him, her small, sharp teeth slicing his jugular vein. He was much stronger, but he had no leverage to use his strength, and before he could rip her off him she had drunk a significant portion of his blood. With his blood went his strength, until, in seconds, she was the stronger one. Unfortunately for Tyler he had let his greed and lust blunt his senses. Smell was how his kind usually recognized one another, but the herbal scent and his impatience had blinded him to the danger he was in.

As he fell to the floor in her death grip he cried out to the dark god of his kind. No! No! It's not fair! I'm not even a hundred years old! I can't die yet! I can't! It's not fair, not fair, not fa. . . .

The being called May (even she had forgotten her real name) stood up now and looked at the rapidly decaying body beneath her. The features were drying out, but she could still recognize him. It had been a long time, but it was hard to forget the one who had killed you. She had been found ten years ago after his last rampage by the priests. They didn't have the heart to kill her. They had kept her in the temple, feeding her with blood drawn from their own bodies. They had loved her, protected her, and educated her; and, in the last two years they even trusted her enough to let her go exploring at night, all the while telling her that one day the one who had hurt her would return, and they were right. When May saw him on the

street she had feared he would recognize her but that hadn't been a problem. After all, she had been just another meal to him, and who remembers their last Big Mac?

May stood to leave, seeing that Father Andrews was only dazed. As her cells absorbed Tyler's blood, she also absorbed his strength, and some of his memories. There was a house in Boston, and bank accounts, so money wouldn't be a problem. She had already decided not to return to the temple; she was just a burden there, it was better to try to make it on her own. After all, she was almost nineteen. As she had drank their blood, she had also drank of the priests' ethics and compassion; she would never be like the decaying monster on the floor, still, she had her needs and she would have to learn to deal with them.

As she walked out the door, cleaning herself off like a cat, she noted the taste of Tyler's blood. It was unlike any she had tasted before. It had a unique flavor. It was tangy and bitter. And sweet.



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Pennas

Steven Nassar

Surroundings, it is all
in the perspective

Roman roads run an antiquated
Marathon, philosophizing in the
Dirt
Left
by
Two
World wars.

Wren's houses of prayer
Left, then right, then
Right of left.

Moss eaten brick walls
Number the years like
Stains the Thames
Has left from rising,
Then falling, then
Rising
Again.

Westminster's ministers
Debate in their
Comedians' house
Using crisp
Salt and vinegary
Language, while at

Corporates' corner
An ounce of Bloomsbury
Is worth a pound of
Shakespeare.

Leisurely led to the five
O'clock shadow of
Sir Ben, pints queue up
For traditional thirst.

5:30 a.m.

It is nippy in an October
Announcing November sort of way.

The kitchen knows this intuitively,
Knowing weather in a way a weather
Person does not express it.

Toasted toast, buttered and jammed,
Preservedly sweet, a sweet sealed
Tightly until timely hands tap tap
Spoon-lightly, and a looseness, an
Effortlessness, becomes a breakfast
Pride.

Meanwhile, suspense is indefinite as the
Tricky tea pot with brazen
Presumptuousness perfects the lengthening
Silence before steam whistles its tune.

The bubbling rhapsody of hot water bounces
An egg pleasingly poached, while crackling
Bacon's shape sizes until crisply cooked.

A tea-stained crack holds
Comfortable conversation
With the tea cup having
Known each other for so long.

Creaks in the table remind the elbows, who
Remind the other Joints, that wintery winds
Are rustling through half-naked trees, and
That perhaps a sweater should be worn.

With this in mind, the dishes are Left on the
Table until evening, for the clock's ticking
Has inspired chiming.

HOME ON THE CONCRETE RANGE

by Jim Hudspeth

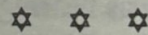
Sluggish Creek
Confluence of two
Muddy brown, not blue.

Buffalo and white
But none there do roam
Can't be a home.

On the state- right- of- way
Antelope and deer can't plan
As we drive on the concrete freeway.

Oh give me a home
'Neath 'lectric lit skies
With horns a honk'n
And sirenes a wail'n

Where deer can't roam
For antelope no home
And the clouds are a light brownish gray.



One Day

by Andre de Korvin ◆

Napoleon escaped from my history book.
He loved to beat up bullies, waiting for action
in lonely streets outside school.
His face was white as ice, so in time
he became smaller
on account of the heat
generated by his heart.
He didn't know back then
he would be killed by a shooting star
that one day came crashing down
on stanza twelve
of some endless poem about war.

Sarah has been sneaking up on me from the beginning. I didn't even know I was pregnant until my fifth month. That being the case, I shouldn't have been surprised when she arrived before the midwife.

I had planned from the beginning to deliver my second child in the most natural way of all: at home where I could be relaxed and comfortable. I had chosen Mercy to be my midwife. Mercy Inyang was a large, self-assured black woman who had studied midwifery in England. Her strong capable hands had assisted in literally thousands of births.

On our first monthly appointment, Mercy encouraged me to buy a book on natural childbirth, preferably using the Bradley method. Bradley teaches the mother to relax as completely as possible while visualizing her body at work, unlike Lamaze, which teaches the mother breathing techniques designed to distract her from what is happening.

The book described in detail the three main stages of labor. The first stage was described with charming stories of women cooking dinner, going shopping, taking a leisurely swim and generally feeling excitement about the process beginning. The second stage was described as the "serious stage", where the woman is required to relax and concentrate on what is happening in her body. This is where most of the work is done and this stage can last for hours. The third stage is the pushing stage which concludes with the baby in your arms.

The book went on to tell about the role of the birthing coach. Bole, my husband, would be mine. He would bring me ice chips when my mouth became parched and snacks if I grew hungry. He would use his strong arms to rub my back during the long hours of labor. Perhaps most important, he would encourage and support me by saying all the right things. He would tell me how strong I was and how proud he was of me. When I was nearing the end of my second stage and experiencing doubt about whether I could go on, he would be reassuring and remind me that those feelings signal the beginning of the pushing stage. I had it all planned.

Bole and I were watching Arnold Swartznegger's movie Total Recall. (Maybe movies should be required to have warnings for pregnant women similar to those you see on large rollercoasters.) I was sprawled on the couch, looking something like a boa constrictor that had swallowed a basketball, trying to get comfortable. Just as another head exploded on the screen, I felt the muscles under my belly tense-up and pull with incredible strength. The sensation lasted about a minute. Not wanting to call a false alarm, I waited to see if it would happen again. It happened again in ten minutes, then in eight and again in seven. I finally spoke those fearsome words, "Bole, I think I'm in labor now." He answered with a stern look, "Don't kid around, Karen, that's not funny." He noticed that I wasn't laughing. Was it really fear that I spotted on that battle-hardened face of my toughMarine? Or was it just the fact that he would miss Monday Night Football?

The contractions were only five minutes apart as I beeped Mercy. By the time she returned my call, I had been in labor an hour. She told me not to worry, that she was with another mother and would be with me in plenty of time. Relieved that she would be with me soon, I followed her instructions and lay in bed on my side.

What happened to the "easy" first stage of labor? What had happened to cooking dinner, going for a leisurely swim and the other fantasies about this elusive first stage? I wasn't even capable of making it to the bedroom without sinking to the floor halfway there to ride out the effects of my muscles straining to release the tremendous bulk I was carrying.

Bole was seated in the folding chair beside our bed. He was wearing his grandfatherly reading glasses and was intensely studying the childbirth book he had put off reading.

I raised my hand to signal him that I was having another contraction. Bole asked, "Does that mean you are having another contraction?" Had he already read the book, he would have probably been aware of the fact that women in labor hate stupid questions. The absolute absurdity of his query spread through my veins like fire, finally erupting in my head as I picked up the nearest heavy object (a book), and finding new strength, hurled it in his direction yelling, "What the ____ do you think it means?" Coming to the next chapter, he read the warning, "If you distract her, she may snap at you."

I had been in labor only two and a half hours when my contractions became very intense. It felt as though even my thighs were in labor. It took all of my concentration to remain clam, but secretly, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to take this for several more hours. Where was Mercy? It became impossible to tell where one contraction ended and the next one began. My universe became one continuous, uncompromising pain.

I was pushing! I didn't even realize it until I had done it two or three times. This was exciting! This was it! I was actively doing something, I was exhilarated. As I was grunting and sweating and pushing, a thought came unbidden into my head. I felt like one of the gorgeous ladies of wrestling. How could something so exclusively female be so unfeminine?

I told Bole the baby was coming. "Get at the end of the bed." He hesitated, "I think we should wait for the midwife." I shook my sweat-drenched head, "I'm not waiting for anyone, this baby's coming now and you better get down there."

The back-up quarterback came through for the home team. he took the snap from center and handed off to Mom. Touchdown! After only three hours of work, I delivered a seven pound, two ounce baby girl. I can still see her little grey face before she took her first breath. She spent her first forty-five minutes of life snuggled warmly on my much reduced belly, calmly lifting her head, doing what Bole had wanted to do. She was waiting for the midwife.

Rumors of money
by Andre de Korvin ♦

They all dreamed of themselves
smiling on bills of high denomination,
a soaring eagle or a palace
in the back of their heads.
Fed by world wide rumors
money was spoken everywhere.
Statues of defunct heroes, arms reaching out,
seemed to beg the nearest bank
and at night, in churches, it turned to green flames
on the open mouths of marble saints.

☆ ☆ ☆

Reasons

by Andre de Korvin ♦

He went in no direction at all
because lamposts couldn't focus any longer
on the true meaning of his verse
and tomatoes sold near water towers
wouldn't rent their redness anymore
to the shame of revolutions
sold cheaper by the dozen.
He went because words weren't pretending anymore
to be wedding rings around his fingers
and clocks, in the final analysis, can't measure
the erratic path of disasters.

☆ ☆ ☆

Blue Horizons

by Andre de Korvin ♦

Men in green had surrounded him.
Cars came to a stop, like clockwork
winding down.
He looked paler than his gray coat,
paler than his beige shirt,
paler than bones in black parking lots.
Every window had started to reflect
the four white clouds that had slowed to a crawl.
He thought: in two seconds
bullets would fly like exclamation points
to punctuate the end of his life!!
Then the sun went darker than official
stamps on his yellow passport and he became one
more immigrant to blue horizons.

Life for many women calls upon them to play a multitude of roles. Like the pages of a script, life contains an interesting array of characters, settings and costume changes. Each role is unique in the specific knowledge it requires and the challenges it presents. Suitable for each part, there must be available a functional wardrobe; portable, wash and wear, and easily changed between acts. One must not forget the smiling face, sometimes genuine, other times, merely a mask with which to play the part. A woman may star in one particular role, but will act as understudy for many others she may be called upon to play. Throughout the day, she must be able to step on and off the stage, changing roles with ease. In a single day, it is not unusual for a woman to play the parts of wife, mother, daughter, student, professional, accountant, friend, cook, maid, travel agent and counselor.

Set in the early morning hours, the first act begins as the wife takes the stage. Walking the husband, with a pleasant good morning kiss, she begins organizing her day. The mother shares the stage with the wife as she wakes the children, dresses them, fixes their hair, makes breakfast and packs lunches. At this point, the travel agent steps in to remind each family member of the day's itinerary, including departure and arrival times. Finally, the children are off to school, the husband off to work.

The student must hurry the wife, mother and cook off the stage as the second act begins, set on the campus of the local university. Wardrobe is important to the role of student. Comfortable shoes, for running between classes, and a blouse that will interchange with the wardrobe of the professional, are necessities. The next few hours are filled with lectures, notes and assignments. By the end of the last class, the stomach signals lunch time. Even so, lunch has to wait; it is time for a costume change before the professional takes the stage.

Jeans and sneakers are replaced with a business suit and heels. Books are removed from the briefcase and replaced with financial reports for the board meeting. Lunch takes the form of a burger and fries, eaten in the car on the way to the office. The professional takes over around 1:00 p.m. as the third act begins.

This act is set in the office of the professional. Her desk is filled with new messages, orders, invoices, and reports, piled on top of messages, orders and reports left over from the day before. Customers, employees and unexpected problems are all handled with confidence and diplomacy until around 5:30 pm., when the professional leaves the stage.

The role of the wife begins the next act. The wife is joined by the accountant, who has consulted with the cook, on what to pick up for dinner. The accountant considers the cost of the purchases and cuts corners where necessary, as the wife shops for the evening meal. The evening act is exhausting. The resources of the wife, mother, maid, counselor and more are called upon during these hours. The evening meal must be prepared, the house tidied, tableset, dinner served and the dishes washed. Children need help with their homework or counseling on how

to deal with a problem at school - night
Intermission now, a cup of tea, before the next act begins.

Once again, it is time for the student to take the stage. Much discipline is required to offer a good performance here. This role, for a few hours calls for complete isolation to enrich the mind. After hours filled with reading, writing and rehearsing, the student is delighted to be interrupted by the leading man in her life.

Without the support of the leading man, life's script would merely ramble on in meaningless words and actions. Appreciation for this supporting and caring companion is expressed most vividly in the role of the lover. This part must be played with tenderness, passion and a burning desire to love and be loved. Love is the strength and drive which enables this and all other roles to be played sincerely and tirelessly within a single day.

Some days life does not follow the well-rehearsed script. Winds of turmoil whisk away the script, swirl it into confusion, and land it in an unorganized pile of rubble. The actress becomes nervous, disoriented and feels as if she has lost her place. Forgetting her lines, looking for help, she realizes there is not prompter. She must pick up the pages, restore whatever order possible, and go on.

Women who are able to balance their lives and play these roles successfully, find fulfillment and pleasure in each performance. Each day brings new challenges and the reassurance that, as the curtain of evening falls, rest and pleasant dreams will replace the chaos backstage. Sleep softly though, for a cry in the night often brings an encore performance of the role of mother.

☆ ☆ ☆

Fried Gissards
by Tess Lake

"Hey, what's for dinner?" he asks as he kicks the back door closed dropping his bag on the floor.

"What do you mean, what's for dinner? Geez, I ain't running no restaurant," Momma snarls back.

"Oh, God," he slowly breathes out as if looking for a nice way of ending this. Of course, he just really got Momma pissed off, and I guess everyone's gonna pay hell for what he done did.

Momma picks up the frying pan; my brother flinches as if he knows what to expect. But Momma just smiles and throws in some lard to fry up gissards.

Where blazing heat met sandy mesa wispy mirages rose over the scorching desert. As far as he could see, the land revealed nothing but pale, yellow, shimmering emptiness. Varying heights of earth reached up to form small hills that were parched by the blasting sun. Nothing moved in this furnace. Nothing tempted the daylight; but after dark the land was shrouded in something else, something moist and green and life itself. A cactus here and there broke the monotony, but no other life intruded--except for the young man.

Too high above, the sky retreated. Empty, blue vastness mirrored the flat, expansive ground and never seemed to meet, even at the gathering of shadowy mountains on the far horizon. This was a desolate place, appropriate in its purpose, yet callow in its method; time had begun and ended here.

For the umpteenth time, the young man mopped weakly at his brow and face with the scrap that remained of his shirt. Red, from the relentless and fiery sun ricocheting off the sand, his blisters had long since burned over. His face was weary and squinting. Little shade protected his nearly naked body. The top of his head brushed an outcropping of crusty sand in a natural hole the dry winds had scraped from the mound of earth against which he rested. This sandy ledge was his only relief from the penetrating and searing rays above.

The young man was dying. His parched, cracked lips murmured quietly and repeatedly, "Lo siento mucho. I feel it much. I'm sorry." He was not Spanish. He was a gringo; white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and in the wrong place altogether.

It had been three days. Three long, twenty-four hour periods, since he could remember awakening to find himself in the midst of this hell. All things, in and around him, were burning. His heart and lungs, overheated by the shelter of his skin and the heat of the desert, were aflame within his body. "Lo siento mucho," the lips moved. He had great empathy. He felt it much. His remorse was intense.

There was nothing to see and nowhere to look. He locked his eyes onto a crusty spot just two inches from his burning foot. Here the pale yellow sand crystals reflected the strength of the galaxy and mocked the frail shell that was his body. Precious water formed and trickled down his brow before a tongue of heat could lap it into her greedy mouth. He waited, and when he could wait no longer, the sun climbed high and he escaped into sleep.

At its zenith, his eyes flew open. Was he delirious? Was that a shadow? What had he heard? The melody of some foreign voice still rang in his head and he chased it with the little strength remaining in his tortured mind. The sun pounded the sand and all the land around him shimmered under the fierce baking, yet suddenly he was cool. "I'm dying," he thought and the truth of this brought a wave of relief, washing him clean.

He raised his chin from his sunken chest and looked out over the vast, yellow emptiness. What is that? He squinted and far off a figure seemed to take shape; slowly wavering like a fragment of silk caught in a high breeze. Just another

mirage. A woman? She was almost dancing, yet at such a distance he couldn't be sure. Side to side and so distant, he watched her move, the rhythm soothing him. His mouth, pulled into a grimacing smile and cracked the thin membranous surface skin. Blood appeared. He licked at the red moisture and closed his eyes in relief.

Closer and closer, she seemed to come. Brightly colored and glittering rainbows almost flowed from her being. Her long dark hair flew in a breeze that enveloped her alone. Who is she? An image of cool, tinkling, silver symbols filled his head, rousing him, coaxing and encouraging. He tried to sit up and was paralyzed. The effort of thought was too much and he slipped into the quiet of his mind. Yet, still she came, always nearer.

He felt her send the image of a fresh, icy cold, crystal stream. It began filling his head--mountain water, tumbling and tinkling over rocks slick with moss, drenching his tortured mind. Then he smelled her, this incredibly beautiful woman. The air was scented with her smell--cinnamon and some exotic spice, and fruits from all parts of the earth. Who is she? His nostrils flared wide, unable to move; he drank in her aroma and was soothed into a pleasant and peaceful sleep.

The sun was abandoning him. The blasting heat of the day was finally ending. The approaching evening previewed its intent through the growing shadows. He knew these shadows were about to creep into his body and that this would be his last night. The knowledge brought no remorse, but rather an excited and expectant urgency. He looked into the distance and saw nothing but more of the yellow, expansive land, slowly fading into the deep and royal purple of night.

Slipping ever westward, the final vestiges of daylight reached their glory. The sun appeared as a prism, its white light dusting the landscape with a warm orange and indigo pigment. Its final glint, before descending behind the distant range, blessed his eyes with a spectrum of living color. The desert was reborn with red, blue, golden and green sun-fingers reaching toward the heavens. It came alive with a cool gentleness of spirit, encouraged by the departure of the sun's dazzling visage.

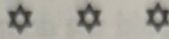
Suddenly, another flash of color caught the corner of his eye. Sluggishly, like a drunken hero downing a splash of tequila, he became aware of movement near the sandy hill off to his right. It was covered in prickly cacti and about twenty yards separated his little alcove from the spot on which his eyes settled.

The beautiful, black-haired woman leaned against the largest cactus, watching him. Her brilliant green eyes glowed with an unearthly phosphorescence. He looked deeply into her being; she was a kaleidoscope of color: skirts flashing, multi-colored and gold flecked, bracelets of antique turquoise, dark green-blue, clinked delicately in the sweetly scented desert breeze. Her wildly loose and cascading hair framed an ethereal face. She was a vision of purity, a vision of love, and yet, an ancient being. She was an answer to a prayer and she had come for him.

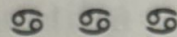
She moved, as if the air itself lifted her. Pushing herself off the cactus, she floated slowly toward him. A gentle breeze carried her presence to him. Again, the aroma of cinnamon and spices, vanilla and tropical lushness enveloped him. His beseeching eyes filled with tears. The fullness of his heart was more than he could

bear and he poured it out to her. His parched, dead lips parted, "Lo siento mucho." The murmured phrase wafted softly across the desert, for her ears alone.

"Lo siento mucho," she replied and placed her succulent red lips upon his own.



The Ring



Veronika Alker

She was rumored to be 168 when she died - people who hadn't looked a day over a hundred. The old woman, Miss Percy Jackson, had no known living relatives; so the government held a public auction of her estate right on the premises. There were fifteen people who had shown up early in order to get good positioning. More and more people trickled in. Some were antique enthusiasts, but most came out of curiosity like me. We all had wondered what treasures this old mansion had kept behind its tight-lipped doors and its sleeping windows. As we waited people gossiped. I stood silently listening to them. I heard the word "voodoo" then "witchcraft" among these gossiping voices. But as more people showed up, the voices pooled together and became a dull hum.

I could feel the excitement growing as curiosities were being visually satisfied; but questions were answered only to tantalize, and tickle one's imagination, conjuring up more questions for our insatiable appetites. I had a preconceived idea of what the inside of her house would look like, as I'm sure everyone else did. My mental image of the place was eerily correct.

Thirty minutes had passed and my excitement was turning to boredom as I waited for the auctioneer to start. I watched the dust sparkling in the beams of light which shone through the many recently unboarded windows. The light splashed across people highlighting their hair, illuminating impatient faces, and refracting the spectrum of diamond rings which flashed momentarily, pricking the eye with blinding streaks. In the ball room where we now stood, a stained glass window stained some very small-minded town folks' faces red, yellow, green, and blue. I laughed to myself because I thought "and some of these temporarily stained people were known to hate anyone with skin any shade darker than theirs." I shook my head in disgust - the sightlessness of hatred . . . My thoughts were interrupted when the voices began to lull, drizzling down to a whisper, until only three or four

people, who upon suddenly being able to hear their own voices, stopped speaking abruptly in mid sentence. The auctioneer stood at the head of this old ball room staring out into the crowd.

Two hours later, after an anxious drive, I arrived home. I couldn't wait to inspect my purchase. To think - I actually own something that once belonged to that mysterious old woman. I only paid ten dollars for this jewelry box which had been able to play music at one time, but apparently was now broken; so, I didn't know what it had played. The box was centuries old and it smelled old and dusty like an attic. It had an oriental look about it. Carvings of intertwining dragons adorned the wooden lid which was dry from lack of treatment.

Opening the lid, I found the inside lined with vibrant blood-red velvet; and at the base of its legs, ivory claws curled sharply out of four wooden paws. (Very unusual) I wondered how many hands the box had passed through. Who had owned it before Miss Percy? Had it been passed down to her, or had she owned it all her life? Just how had she acquired this strange box? I felt drawn to it and loved it as though it were worth a million dollars. I traced the carvings with my finger and felt the energy of its age. My phone rang, interrupting my inspection of the box. I placed the box in the center of my kitchen counter for a moment so I could answer my phone.

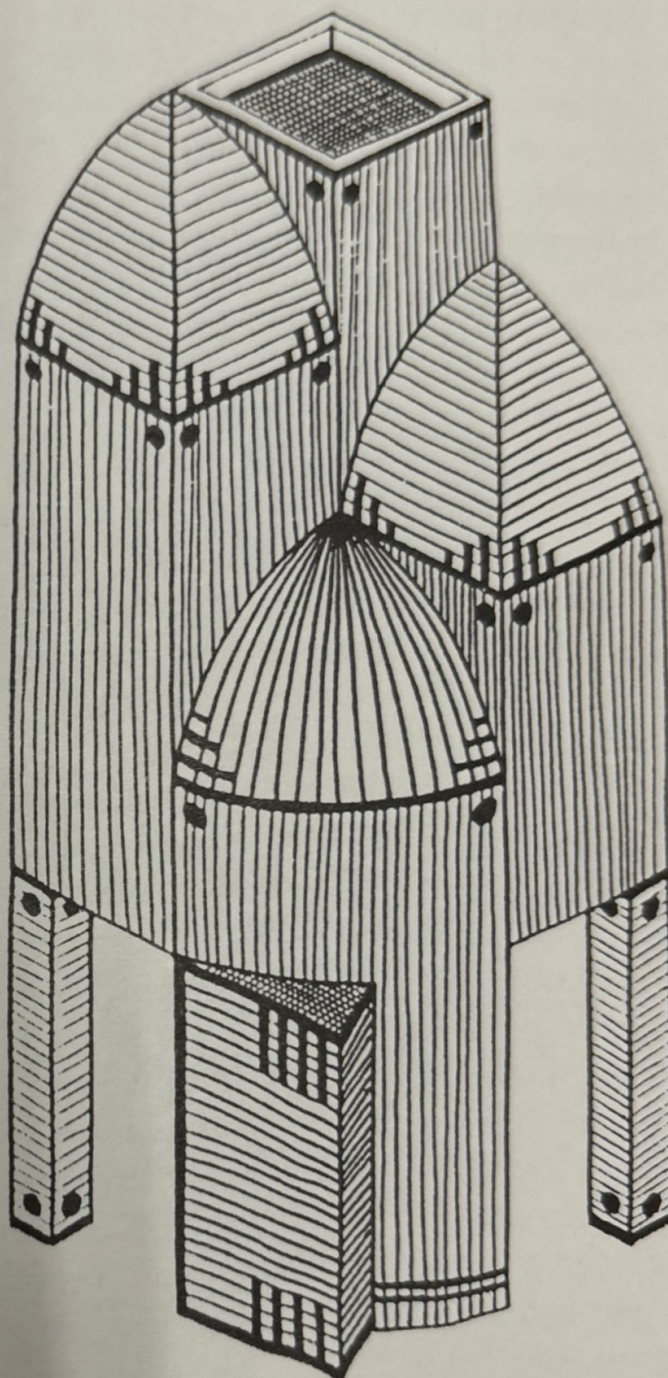
The hair stood up on my head, and my adrenaline rushed when I heard the crash. Dropping the phone, I turned around slowly not wanting to look, but having to. A pool of blood surrounded the broken pieces evaporating before my eyes. I squeezed my eyes shut and reopened them questioning if I had really seen what I knew I saw. My beautiful jewelry box. My old box, just pieces on the floor. I was too stunned to even cry.

In numb silence I bent down to pick up the pieces. I recoiled in horror as a broken claw paw twitched against my hand. I shook off the chills which passed through my body. My confused thoughts were temporarily diverted. Something caught my eye - a ring lying on the floor. It hadn't been in the box before. When I inspected the pieces I realized there had been a secret compartment. I picked the ring up and held it to the light. There were crushed pieces of opal, ruby, emerald, and amethyst covering the band of antique gold. I tried it on the middle finger of my right hand and found the ring to be too small; so, I moved it to my ring finger and it slid on perfectly. In fact, when I had looped the ring over the top portion of that particular finger, it seemed to jump into place, as though the knuckle at the base of my finger had a magnet in it. The feeling that ring gave me when I put it on . . . such a surge of energy, as if I could live forever.

Adjusting the temperature of the bath water to my comfort, I let it run as I disrobed. With effort, I tried to pull the treasure off of my finger. It wouldn't

budge; so, I spit on it to loosen its grip. I twisted and pulled. The ring suddenly came flying off as I fell helplessly to the floor, the wind knocked out of me. It felt as if something had punched me in the stomach, as if I were being strangled, as if my lungs had been removed. My lungs were starving and I tried desperately to suck in air. I couldn't. I was panicking. The tile floor was cold against my body.

"The ring, I need that ring." And in an instant I realized, all the rumors about Miss Percy were not rumors, but truth. The ring had found her as it had found me. I would choose my time to die as she had chosen hers; and then, the ring would choose someone else. My eyesight diminishing, my body weakening, I desperately felt around the floor. With the last bit of strength my hands felt around the base of the toilet. My left hand landed on the ring and with ambivalent feelings, replaced it. My strangled throat released; I grew lungs. Life surged into me, gorging my lungs with air. I threw up and leaned against the bathtub trembling, sobbing, holding and rocking myself on the cold bathroom floor.



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P. Roman