

More Great Writing

by people you've never heard of

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Edited by Joe Molnar

More Great Writing by People You've Never Heard Of

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ISBN 978-0-557-24461-4

Walpole Writer's Group
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www.walpolewritersgroup.org

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Introduction

Imagine a coffee house in Vienna in a bygone century. The walls are paneled with dark oak interspersed with ornately beveled mirrors. The smell of espresso permeates the room. A young man steps in from the dark street. Perhaps it is winter and he brushes fresh flakes of snow from his coat and hat. As he does, he glances around the room, surveying the mix of patrons. His party is already in the far corner, occupying a pair of tables pushed together to make one. Some are partaking of delicate Viennese pastries along with coffee or cognac.

His contemporaries are an eclectic, some say eccentric, circle of women and men — all intelligent, free thinkers of the time. They've met weekly in this coffee house for as long as they can remember. They gather to share their writing, hash out cutting-edge ideas, and perhaps walk away a bit wiser for investing a night with good company.

Now imagine a bar in a hotel in Havana. Hemingway finishes the last sip of his Papa Doble. The tropical heat and the exotic setting make the ideal fermenting ground for his writing. In his mind, he compiles a story, all the while entertaining contemporaries from the mainland. He signals the bartender to bring him his next drink.

Today's scene is somewhat different. The Walpole Writer's Group meets in a coffee shop, run by a multinational chain, in a bookstore, that is run by another multinational

chain; such are our times. Those Viennese delicacies are now slices of cheesecake, scones, or cookies. Hemingway's potent drinks have morphed into frozen lemonades that we sip during the summer months. We meet to write. We meet to offer critique. We meet to hone our craft.

We, too, are an eclectic — I say eccentric — bunch. Each of us comes from varied backgrounds. We welcome all who find us. All we ask of new members is to come to the table with open minds and an earnest desire to improve their writing.

It is too early to tell if our venue will someday be known as a focal point of new writing talent, or how many of our group will ever make a mark for themselves. Will future generations of aspiring writers sit in our café and smile at the thought of famous ghosts who were at these tables before them? Thoughts like this are presumptuous at this stage of our collective careers. Yet, some of us are already published. Others ought to have been published by now, judging by the outstanding quality of their work.

Here, you'll find samples of our writing for your consideration. These pieces are as diverse as we are. *More Great Writing by People You've Never Heard Of* is our second collection, coming a long two years after our premier publication showed the world a glimpse of what we can do. This book is dedicated to those who believe in our writing. Thanks for your love, encouragement, and support!

Joe Molnar, editor

Writers on writing

Why Do I Write?

by David Sahl

I write because I cannot sing.

If I could sing, there'd be no dancing.
There'd be no movement at all.

If I could sing, crowds of people would wait
to hear the saddest sounds ever.

And, when I opened my mouth they'd see themselves.

I'd feel heaven;
they'd feel heaven;
and I'd keep singing.

And they'd look up to see what I see;
And they'd see what I see; hear what I hear.

And when we'd sing together, we'd impose on God to come to
the front to lead
and it would be unnecessary.
He'd be embarrassed and return to the chorus.
And when we were exhausted, we'd know it was time to
leave.

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And then would come the saddest time of all.

In the quiet afterwards, through my singing
I'd be forced to see myself.

Discontent

by Ray Benjamin

I discover art as I make it.

Unlike some, I cannot draw an idea out of myself,
coaxing it out to play as if it were a timid kitten.

No, the initial glimmer becomes my master,
flowing through me and onto the page,
picking up pieces of my soul that latch on,
(remoras, or leeches?)

perhaps hoping for a glimpse of greater meaning.

No matter how swift my pen,

no matter how I scramble to capture inspiration on paper,

no matter how I struggle with the words,

no matter how long I forgo sleep,

the expression invariably falls short -

unable to match the perfection of the ideal.

Sometimes – too often –

I cannot finish before another idea climbs from my
subconscious

lithe and nubile, vibrating with the energy of youth.
I try to resist.

I try to remain faithful to the concept I've nurtured.

The glimmer that has ripened into a curvaceous complexity
rich with subtext,

but imperfectly transcribed.

No matter how tightly I embrace my first inspiration,
the next beckons – a seduction of intellect –
while the first melts from my mind

like a wave disappearing into the sand.

Truth to tell, I don't always resist.

I abandon my current project –
already tarnished by the imperfection of my talent,
and skitter off after the new temptation,
for there is always a chance that this will be the one,
the one I capture and wrap neatly in prose,
and present to the world as my gift.

Great Stories

by Ray Benjamin

Most of us take stories for granted. We really don't think much about their history – the story of stories, unless we're in English class talking about Beowulf, Chaucer, or Shakespeare. We don't think about their history because it is nearly impossible to think about life without stories.

I believe it is our stories that distinguish us from all other creatures. All kinds of other theories have been advanced as to what sets us apart, such as tool use, the use of language, abstract thinking, and others, but many other animals use tools, there is evidence that whales may have a primitive language, plus animals ranging from dolphins to chimpanzees have shown the ability to think and solve problems using symbols.

I got this idea while I was doing some research for a story I wanted to write. Part of the story was to take place back at point in time where our ancestors first learned how to make fire, about eight hundred thousand years ago. As usually happens to me, I wound up reading articles on all sorts of tangents, and started to wonder, when did we start telling stories? When did we first get language? It turns out those are questions that are hard to answer, because telling stories doesn't necessarily leave any artifacts around, no fossilized bits of cooked meat, no smoking branch – if you will allow the abuse of an innocent metaphor.

But, as I continued to read more, I discovered that some pretty unusual things have happened on our way from

Northern Africa three point nine million years ago to our current world dominance. In that time, we moved from trees to savanna, we learned to walk on two legs, figured out how to make tools by banging rocks together, how to use fire, how to make fire, how to talk to one another, and yes, how to tell stories.

Before you can tell a story, you have to be able to communicate, something we are very good at. Has it ever occurred to you just how good we are? I'm not talking about technology. I'm talking about our incredibly versatile vocal apparatus. Most creatures are severely limited in the kinds of sounds they can produce, but we can create sounds ranging from beautiful arias, to hog calls.

It wasn't always this way. Our voice box evolved along with other traits we consider distinctive to modern humans like our big brain, tool use, and wonderfully dexterous hands. Originally, the voice box, or larynx, was too high in the throat to give us the array of sound we can make now. The larynx originally acted as a valve to seal off the throat and lungs, so when a creature is drinking or eating, food can't go down the wrong pipe. (Remember, this was all long before the Heimlich maneuver.) The best place for that valve is at the top of the windpipe, but, if you want to use the muscles of the larynx, or vocal chords, to make wonderful resonant sounds, it's best to move the larynx lower in the throat so that the sound made can resonate and be shaped by the mouth and sinus cavities. When we are born, the larynx is at the top of the windpipe. It starts to move lower about the time that babies start to make cooing noises (3 months), and reaches it's permanent location about age four, which is when children become easy to understand even to those not used to being around children.

About two point five to three million years ago, *Homo habilis*, or "handy man" shows up. *H. habilis* is a very adept tool maker, which is how the moniker arose, but probably wasn't much of a talker. Over the next five hundred thousand years, the brain of *H. habilis* almost doubles in size. The additional brain power probably developed in response to the need to improve control over hands, which resulted in even better tool making, and was probably quite sexy to *H. habilis* females. ("He might not be much in the muscle department, but did you get a look at those hands, girl?" – oh forgot, not much on talking yet.)

One of the wonderful things about the hominid brain is that ease with which it can adapt to changes. As *H. habilis* got better at making tools, which lead to better survival odds, there were more individuals around, meaning interpersonal skills became more important. Being able to pass tool-making skills on to relatives and descendants must have been critically important. But at this time, all teaching had to be by rote, students watched and copied. Learning hunting meant on-the-job training, which was undoubtedly very dangerous. I suspect that a lot of our ability to use body language to communicate was fine-tuned during this period.

The next big development in our proto-history of story telling was the emergence of *Homo erectus* around one point eight million years ago. (No, *H. erectus* does not mean “Viagra man.”) *H. erectus* had an even larger brain than *H. habilis*, but more importantly, we can see from fossil skulls that *H. erectus* possessed two brain structures, called Weirneke's area and Broca's area, that are now used primarily for understanding words and grammar. This was true even though *H. erectus* still lacked the voice box that lets us imitate other animals calls, encourage Luke to use the force, and make rap music. So what were those brain structures doing?

Well, I believe *H. erectus* was a pretty good communicator, even if limited vocally. Grammar is really all about the appropriate sequencing of signals, and words are, at their core, signals. *H. erectus* probably had some ritualized interactions. These brain structures might have helped our ancestor recognize such interactions and respond correctly.

Another huge advance for *H. erectus* was learning how to make fire. Hominids had been using fire for a while, but finding fire and keeping it alive while moving around chasing game was very difficult. We've found evidence, in what is now Israel, that about eight hundred thousand years ago, at least one tribe of *H. erectus* was making fire when needed. This opened up a world of possibilities for *H. erectus*.

Before they had fire, *H. erectus* had to hunt in a very wasteful manner. The typical hunt involved chasing the game over a cliff or into a swamp, where it was easy to get close and club it. They did this with whole herds of game. The reason for the overkill was that *H. erectus* didn't have the powerful teeth and jaw muscles of a predator and couldn't eat the tough muscle meat. That meant a lot of each kill went to waste, once

the tribe had eaten all the soft tissues, like the brain, bone marrow, and organs, they had to abandon the rest.

Once they had fire, though, they could cook meat, rendering it tender and delicious. They could feed more tribe members with fewer kills, which meant tribes could get bigger. Bigger tribes meant even more social interaction. The new technology of fire also demanded better communication in order to teach others how to use it. Using fire on hunts was extremely effective, and again required coordination and communication.

Fire also meant that the setting of the sun no longer meant the end of the day. The light given off allowed the men and women in the tribe to continue working and socializing. It also provided the perfect time to start telling stories, and I believe this is where they were born.

At the end of the day, when the hunters returned, I imagine everyone was curious about how the hunt had gone, what dangers they had faced and overcome. After eating, and as the sun set, perhaps the hunters tried to show what had happened by acting it out. At some point, someone got the idea of using the hides of the prey animals as costumes for the actors who represented the prey. It was natural to use the hides of the predators as costumes, as well. Eventually, I suspect many of the tales became ritualized into dances that told stories that resonated with the audience. The concept of conflict, the keystone of every story, was born in the struggle between the hunter and the prey, between the attacking predator and defending tribe.

Then along came *Homo sapiens*, or “wise man,” about two hundred thousand years ago. Two sub species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and *Homo sapiens neanderthalis*, co-existed, and presumably competed. If you look at just the bare specifications, it seems odd that *H. sapiens sapiens*, our ancestors survived rather than the Neanderthals. That's because the Neanderthals had larger brains, larger frames, and a jaw better adapted to their diet. Some people have argued that despite the fact that the Neanderthal brain was larger, they weren't as bright as our ancestors, even though that goes counter to the fundamental assumption that brain size is related to intelligence. For a while, some scientists believed we had bred Neanderthals out of existence by intermarriage. But there's no sign of any of their DNA in our DNA. Another group has suggested that we were just meaner and better at

making war, so we wiped them out. While that could easily be true, so far there isn't any real evidence of violent conflicts between our ancestors and Neanderthals. So, what could it be?

The Neanderthals disappeared about fifty thousand years ago, during the Upper Paleolithic Revolution or Great Leap Forward. At that point in our history, something wonderful happened. Up until then, pretty much every H. sapiens sapiens did things the same way, no matter where they lived. The tools made in Africa, Europe, and Asia all looked substantially the same. I believe that's because the rate of incremental improvement in tool making and other technologies was so slow, that tribes spread out faster than they changed how they did things.

But, fifty thousand years ago that changed. Suddenly these ancient people started doing things differently. They made tools differently, weapons, music, dance, and art. There was an explosion of creativity.

Now, it's possible, I suppose, that a UFO stopped by and shot us with a "be more intelligent beam," but I believe it's more likely that the Great Leap Forward is the result of the invention of true languages allowing abstract thought and stories, which gave us the mental tools to compare experiences and judge between them. We'd been primed by millions of years of small changes. Then, with the invention of a true language, our real potential exploded.

I think the reason that we survived and the Neanderthals didn't is that we learned to tell stories, and they did not.

Stories have shaped who and what we are. In a sense, every story is a Great Story, because every story we tell, read, or listen to, makes us a little more human.

Interesting Reading:
www.babelsdawn.com

Lifeblood

by Sara Letourneau

I couldn't write a single word today.

The page was empty, glaring at me, reminding me that it had a purpose to fulfill. Yet, empty it remained as I twiddled the pen between my fingers, until I scribbled down the first thought that came to mind. At first, it read like perfection, a Hallmark greeting that glides off the tongue and caresses one's heart. But after a moment, its meaning grew stale. I crossed out the line, ending its short poetic life, and waited to start anew.

And so the jaws of anticipation devour me again tonight. I had hoped to perfect this calligraphy and show it to my readers, to complete the cycle of creation and begin another one. Strangers and friends alike inspire me with their stories and humble me with flattering remarks. They tell me my words bring them to tears, brighten their cloudy skies, or purify their lives like fresh air. Tonight, however, I'm not sure I deserve such praise.

I couldn't write a single word today,
and so I failed.

Writing is a tricky craft, I've discovered. It's not a simple matter of taking a pencil to paper and performing magic. Instead, it's born as a passion, a passion that sometimes stumbles and stutters and other times kicks and screams. Then

it has to grow. Naturally, nurturing the skill of writing – and learning to balance its split personality – takes patience and practice. In my case, I've had to befriend a thesaurus, become one with pens and computer keys, and restrain a desire that churns insatiably during my forty hours of obligatory service each week. Despite my valiant efforts, I am still a novice. Shape, muse, and language still flap wildly in my grasp at times, but when they surrender at last, they melt and flow through my funnel of meditation.

The result is extraordinary: A whitewater stream of vision and emotion, a flood of rhymes and dreamscapes. In this stream, I become a mermaid and find my siren voice calling from within. In this beautiful rush, I cup my hands to catch drops of brilliance and pour them onto paper. When this river runs through me, I can write – and when I write, I am content. Tonight, I thirst for that stream, but the riverbed runs dry.

And so
I have failed myself today,
and my blood burns through me
as black ink.

I call it a case of creative anxiety – when words dart out of reach and feelings refuse to be molded, when the voice I've found and tended can only choke and sputter. It's a weight that puts so much pressure on my spirit, I can feel it writhe when I sleep. And as I sleep, I dream of drinking the sweetest panacea from a silver goblet – only to watch the liquid evaporate the second it touches my tongue. This makes me wonder: Does rest ever find its way into the restless writer's soul?

Something about that question doesn't surprise me. I've been a restless writer ever since I was a child. With crayons I wrote stories about talking zebras and friends eating pancakes on the beaches of Hawaii. That was the first wave of my passion, and everyone applauded my talent.

Meanwhile, I grappled with this strange power that had started to swell in me. It had clouded my path, hiding the twists and turns I would face along the way, yet it bathed the end in starlight. Without a second thought, I set off on the journey. Through the fog I saw the outlines of branches groping for me. Whispers of doubt and disapproval dogged

me along the way, but rarely did I listen. All I heard – and all I knew – was the poetry inside my head, the meter of my life's free verse.

So, even as the scalding ink
leaves a blistering stain,
I cannot be dissuaded
from the heartbeat of my existence.

I close my eyes, relieved to feel the flow of slumber for just a moment. Yes, even for the restless, labor is always followed by a lull, pain by clarity, and fear by faith – a belief that neither cracks nor falters. Such conviction comes from only one place: A sense of purpose. Even when I have no time to answer the mermaid, I know what I would say. I'd tell her I am the architect, building on ideas and toiling under the sun until the structure takes its final form; I am the attorney, preparing to print my case and persuade the jury with images and alliteration; and I am the head of state, a rebel who reigns over her microcosm and constantly seeks reform – not in law or justice, but in color and wit.

Satisfied for the night, I close my journal – and epiphany strikes. At first I swear it's an outlandish notion brought on by anxiety and lack of sleep. Yet, as I ponder it, I realize it makes even more sense. I have not fallen short, as I had thought earlier tonight, but rather I am in the midst of rising. Yesterday's poem was the latest crest in a chain of highs and lows. My next piece – to be written tomorrow, in three days, or next week – will continue that pattern. Tonight, therefore, is only a valley between two peaks, and I am bound to swing upwards soon.

I open my journal again, not to write but to reflect. Perhaps this passion transcends all purpose. It's not a casual hobby or an addictive drug, regardless of what others may think. For me, writing has become what roots are to a tree. It catches inspiration in its many forms – life events, people, novels, song lyrics, the woods surrounding my house – and feeds it to me. It stimulates my intellect and encourages me to observe, make mistakes, learn, and grow. Most of all, it sustains me. Even when I can't complete a sentence, I know I have not died. The world has not suddenly crumbled or gone to black. I am still alive. I still have my craft – my lifeblood – and I refuse to abandon it.

So, even though
I didn't write a single word today,
I smile at my crossed-out lines
and half-finished phrases.
Tomorrow is another empty page
waiting for my felt-tipped pen,
and I will never fail
as long as I try to fill it.

Damsel in Distress

by Joe Molnar

It was a dark and stormy night as Jessica Snow drove along the treacherous curves of Highway Thirteen. Or rather, she hoped she was still on Highway Thirteen. At 10:00 PM, she veered off the interstate to take, what she thought was a shortcut through the mountains. With pounding rain, she wasn't sure if she'd missed the road sign and was driving along some back road leading to who-knows-where. It was now one minute to midnight, and her worst fears were realized, she was off course heading in the wrong direction as the lightning storm intensified.

Jessica glanced at the passenger seat and the sack of cash. Hers was a heroic mission, a mission for the children at the orphanage. She picked up the money earlier in the evening, nearly one hundred thousand dollars, from a reclusive benefactor. Her task was to deliver the cash to the bank by 9:00 A.M. The benefactor was from out of state, the bank was in the city. Should she be late, the bank would foreclose on the orphanage, leaving sixty children without a roof over their heads.

"Oh brother!" Jessica said. Another bolt of lightning struck somewhere ahead. For a moment it was light enough to see the entire landscape. But there was not much to see. Tree's, with gnarled fingers, reached down from either side of the road. With the wind whipping them, they seemed to beckon to her:

"Come, steer to us, crash your car here!"

She drove on, not heeding them, clutching the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

Then it happened, the engine stalled, as is inevitably the case in stories like this. A glance at the instrument panel told her she was out of gas! How could she have been so foolish as to not fill up when she turned off the interstate?

Jessica rolled her eyes.

She coasted until she found a safe place to pull over on the narrow curvy road. It was a driveway carved between the trees. Houses were few and far between so she should consider herself lucky for this find.

"Yea, real lucky," she said in disbelief over this entire situation.

Another strike of lightning illuminated a wrought iron gate crossing the drive. Beyond that, at about a hundred feet up was a Victorian house. The gate was slightly ajar and there was a light on in one of the upstairs windows.

She reached to the back seat and grabbed her rain poncho and a flashlight. It was late but she hoped whoever was home would understand and let her call for road service and perhaps let her wait out the storm. She slipped into her rain gear and prepared herself to make a mad dash to the front door.

"Hold on, wait a second," she said before jumping out. She took the flashlight and trained it onto the imposing wrought iron gate. There was a sign on it. "Ah, ha!" She tried to make out the words, they read: "Dr. Zacharia Zum, Taxidermist."

Knowing now who awaited her, Jessica prepared herself for that dash to the house.

"But wait, there's more," she said, flashlight still on the sign, "another smaller line of print, it says ... 'and mad scientist'."

Deciding it must be a flavor of local humor, yet one more time, Jessica prepared herself for that dash to the house. She opened the car door —

"You must be crazy if you think I'm going in there! I'm waiting right here. I've got my cell phone, I've got Triple A, and I'll stay here until road service arrives."

"No, you're going up to that house and ringing the doorbell. The mad scientist and his Igor type assistant are peering at you already from the belfry window. They've got everything prepared for an exciting story."

"I'm not moving from this spot!"

"You have to."

"Uh uh. No way, no how. I'm not going up there. Who knows what kind of situation I'd be getting myself into."

"Let me explain something to you, I'm the writer, and you're the character. It's my job to put you into inescapable predicaments. And using your wits and the meager resources I throw at you, you'll come out victorious in the end. But, before that, you'll be chased around by the mad scientist and his equally mad assistant. Of course, they'll eventually catch you, and when they do, they'll tie you up in chains in their dungeon."

"And as you're struggling to break free of your bonds, you're be watching the mad scientist as he prepares some bubbling concoction made of a disgustingly green fluid. Then you're going to look on in horror as Igor turns on a giant machine by throwing a monster sized knife switch on the wall. You'll get to hear as the electricity courses through the machinery while it hums up to speed. You'll scream in horror as you watch as they prepare the instruments that will turn you into their docile serving robot. And then the mad scientist will approach you as you continue to struggle with your wrists bound to the table, and he will make his maniacal laugh -"

"Stop right there. Don't you think this is a bit too much? Your story line reeks of a bad black and white movie. And what's all this about a sack of cash for the orphans on 'a dark and stormy night', who are you kidding?" Jessica looked into the rearview mirror to check her eye shadow. "When I'm written into a story, I expect to be treated right. After all, I go the trouble of dressing for the part, doing my hair and makeup, getting into the right frame of mind ... Some date this has turned out to be."

"You're forgetting something, you're not real. I made you up out of my imagination. And you're going to do exactly what I tell you. And right now I'm telling you to go up to that house, ring the god-damn doorbell and ask to use the phone."

"No way, I'm not doing anything of the kind. What kind of dumb blonde do you take me for?"

"It's the only way you can proceed. I've written you into a tight situation. You have to go up the house in order to move the story along."

"I'll see about that!" Jessica said as she fumbled in her handbag for her phone. She pressed 9-1-1. "Hello, I'd like to report a case of bad writing."

"I see, where are you now, ma'am," the dispatcher said.

"I'm in front of a spooky old house. The sign says 'Dr. Zacharia Zum, taxidermist and mad scientist'."

"I know where that is. Have you gone into the house yet?"

"No."

"Good. We advise that you don't. I suppose your car is disabled."

"Yes it is."

"Out of gas, or a flat?"

"Out of gas."

"Yes, you certainly are a victim of bad writing. We'll send an officer by with a can of gas. And for what it's worth, the Zum place has been slated for destruction years ago. It's old and cliché, and isn't used in today's fast-paced stories. It's only standing because of the county's budget issues. Stay in your car, and if the writer tries to get fresh with you, like sending down a space monster or werewolf, call us back. The patrol car should be there in a few minutes."

"Thanks, I'll be waiting." Jessica clicked off the phone.

"Are you happy now?"

"Happier than I was."

"Because now there's no story."

"Sorry about ruining your plot. But, I'm not changing my mind."

"Then, I think there's just one more thing I need to write."

"What's that?"

The End.

Parenting and the Pen

by Jennifer L. Rogala

After eating a hearty lunch consisting of the crusts from my children's grilled cheeses, I turn on my daughters' favorite show. This gives me 30 minutes of needed downtime. Fully aware of evils of television, I proceed without guilt. My children get plenty of physical activity and social interaction, plus Mommy's pooped.

Written on the back of an envelope is today's agenda. I love lists. Correction, I love crossing items off lists. Groceries, done; Sew bunny's head back on before Jillian notices, done; Shower, yeah-right; Bathe children, done; Play at the park, done; Finish acrostic poems manuscript, not yet.

Writing stories for children is my passion. I'm a late bloomer and didn't start writing until I was 35 and pregnant with twin girls. I wanted to create something that would give my children insight into who their mother is. A cat story had been purring in my head for some time. Doctor's orders forbade me to do anything except sit around, so I decided to transcribe the story from my head to paper. I was hooked.

After the birth of my twins, my writing was put on hold for two reasons. First, my husband and I were on the verge of lunacy from sleep deprivation. Second, any free time we found was spent with each other, usually sleeping.

After the first year, known in twin-circles as "the blur", we had settled into our life as parents and I returned to writing. Gone were the days when I could spend all day on a story. Twins are very demanding, but I was relieved we hadn't acted on our threats to leave them on the steps of St. Catherine's of Sienna for the nuns.

Infants are born with reflexes crucial for their survival. Place an infant in water and the diving reflex causes the throat

to close so no water is swallowed. The sucking and rooting reflex ensures their ability to eat. As infants become toddlers their reflexes mature. These instincts ensure that Mommy never eats hot meals, never has uninterrupted phone conversations, never has privacy in the bathroom, and never has more than ten minutes to write or research a story. Despite their tactics, I have been able to pour enough time into my writing to self-publish four picture books, write several short stories, and complete the first draft of a novel.

It's fascinating watching my daughters experience the world. Jillian kisses and hugs the phone after a conversation with her grandparents. Samantha likes to pee after she poops so her poop can have a drink. I keep a notebook to jot down their antics, and to document story ideas that seep into my head before they spill out. I've been known to write ideas on napkins, cereal boxes, and the palm of my hand. One of my picture books is about figurative language and was inspired by my children learning to walk. As they wobbled near tables I'd say, "Watch your noodle." Hmm, a food that means "head" - write that idea down in the dust on the end-table.

In an attempt to further discipline myself and improve my writing skills, I joined a writer's group that meets every Tuesday night at a local bookstore. I've learned so much from the other writers, and it forces me to produce four pages of writing each week. I negotiated an "all about me" night every Tuesday, and in return, my husband gets Saturday mornings to himself. On-line workshops are also great, since I can go at my own pace and wear my pink fleece pajamas with the snowflakes on them.

To market my work, I developed a website. I found mailing lists (Did I say I love lists?) for schools, libraries, and local bookstores. I created news releases, business cards, bookmarks and postcards, and tri-fold brochures.

The combination of parenting and writing is an exercise in patience, prioritization, and time-management. Motherhood can be demanding and frustrating, yet nothing has made me happier, prouder, or more fulfilled. When days pass with no time to put pen to paper and I start feeling discouraged, I remind myself; were it not for my twin daughters, I wouldn't have picked up the pen in the first place.

A touch of the whimsical

96%

by Joe Molnar

When I checked myself in the mirror this morning, I saw that I was 4% evil. That wasn't bad, 4%. Most people on the block are between 12 and 20%. Grouchy Mr. McKinety in 7D is a full 26% evil, but we excuse him because of his age. I met someone once who was only 2.3% evil. I wondered if I could ever get that low. Is there some kind of theoretical lower limit? Anyway ...

I watched people at the bus stop. There was a man who was 18%, and another who was a full 30%, yuck, and two young women on their way to their office jobs who were 16 and 18%, respectively. A couple was holding hands, she was 9% and he 14. I wondered if he was corrupting her.

Take me and my girlfriend, Prudence, for example. She's 8% evil; twice that of me. I guard my goodness very closely, yet she isn't concerned about the state of her immortal soul at all. Like the other week when we went out to the movies: I was in line for tickets, and she for popcorn. Her line was slow, and she was still waiting when the movie began. I saw what she did then: she cut in front of an elderly man when the clerk called, "Who's next?" I admonished her for that later, and still don't understand why she got mad at me. She called me holier-than-thou. But of course I am. After all, I have 96% good, while Prudence has only 92.

I rode the bus downtown, then staked out a seat on my favorite bench. This was a good place to watch from; the park is close by; there are dozens of bustling shops and restaurants;

people are always coming and going. I started watching. For that's what I do. I look for evil.

There's almost no one greater than 30%. Once or twice an hour I may see some degenerate between 30 and 45. Very rarely do I see anyone above that. A week ago I saw a filthy old man — not his clothes but his mind — at 48%. To think: there was 48% evil in him and only 52% good. Of course, I went after him, a man so close to tipping. He got into a cab and drove away before I could catch up to him.

That was a failure on my part: if I'd have only seen him coming a bit sooner, or if I were more aggressive in the chase, I could have saved his soul by killing him while he still had a sliver more good than evil. I bet if I see him again he'll have tipped — to become more evil than good.

It's not that I wouldn't kill him if he were more evil. I'd have to. But that would indicate failure: another damned soul. There's an argument to be made that someone hovering around 50 to 55% shouldn't be killed since they may tip back to good. If one such individual is spotted, they are to be watched. I should wait until they move out of that critical range, either way. If they fall back to 49%, it's time to make a move. Better to kill them while they are at a point where they are more good than evil, lest they tip again. On the other hand, if they drift higher than 55%, well, then they're lost and it's better to rid the world of them.

That's when he walked by me. Right in the full noon sun. He was 96% evil. How could anyone, anyone, have that much evil in them! I watched as he bought a newspaper and stuffed it into the inner pocket of his trench coat. My blood boiled thinking what else he's got under there. Candy to lure children? A knife to slash someone's throat? Would he flash someone? He dropped the change from the paper into the cup of a homeless man (9%) and disappeared around the corner.

I followed him — ran after him, actually. As I turned the corner, I knocked over a guy (14%) then bumped into another (9%). He'd have gotten away, the 96% man, but he stopped to talk to a woman selling flowers. Even from down the street I could see him sweet-talk her. I bet he was seducing the young lass. He bought a small bouquet, left her a tip, and turned to continue on his way.

I grabbed him by the arm and swung him around.
"Yes?" he asked.

I was staring into the face of evil. It was a boyish face.

Or, at least it would have been if he were younger. Wrinkled around the eyes, he was. He was pale, pink really; he'd burn easily in the sun. He had short, stringy white hair. He looked back at me with his graying blue eyes.

"Can I help you?" he said smiling.

"Um," I said. All of a sudden I was too nervous to reach into my coat for my knife. I realized my hands were shaking too hard to stab him anyway. I was looking at 96% evil!

I watched as he reached into his coat pocket. He pulled a few one-dollar bills out of his pocket and held them out to me.

"Here," he said. "Get yourself a meal. Do you have some place to stay?"

"I, I'm not homeless. I don't need your money."

"Ah, I know what you want," he nodded, his smile widening. "An autograph. You recognized me. It's true, I'm Johnny Hazelwood, writer of erotica and porn extraordinaire."

Yes, it's him! He was on TV just the other day, peddling his latest book. I found myself taking his scrap of paper where he scrawled his signature.

"Goodbye, now," he said. He turned and walked away.

There was something final in his words, and I was left standing there with the scrap of paper. When he disappeared into the crowd I finally snapped out of my stupor. Then I read the note.

Johnny Hazelwood, it said in his illegible signature. After that he wrote: there's an erotic party at my digs tonight, hope you can make it – 7 Montrose Place.

I decided to take him up on his invitation. I'd get a chance to rid the world of his 96% evil tonight. And who knows, there might even be other evil characters with him.

When I got there, I must admit I was taken aback. First off, the young lady who answered the door had a charming smile, and the fact that she was in lacy underwear almost took my attention away from the fact that she was 84% evil (no 85, she went up a percent as I was watching).

"Come in," she said. "The party's cooking." She took me by the arm and led me in. The place was packed: 74%, 78%, 80%, 82%. Men, women: in various stages of dress and undress. There was even a naked man (90%) tied to the wall in chains. A woman in black leather (only 60%) was doing unspeakable things to him. The guy seemed to be enjoying it. Oh my God, what have I walked into? I can't possibly kill

them all!

I turned to leave, but bumped into Johnny Hazelwood himself.

"Hey, you made it. I was wondering if you would," he said, pumping my hand. "Come on, let me get you an autographed copy of my latest. That'll be twenty-five, they don't grow on trees, y'know."

I found myself shelling out the cash and taking a signed copy of his book. I wondered if it would burn my hand as I took it. I was relieved it didn't.

"You still look a little dazed and confused," he said, putting a drink in my other hand. "A high-ball is what ya need right now. Don't be shy, there's plenty. And if you get too tipsy, you can find a place to crash. Most of the girls are staying the night; who knows, you might find a warm place to lay your head, if you know what I mean." He slapped me on the back as I was taking a sip.

I should have stabbed him right then and there, but I found myself drinking his liquor instead.

Yes, I should have stabbed him and as many of the others as I could. But instead, I ended up partaking in Johnny Hazelwood's debauchery. You see, after he talked to me, he went off and started to torment the naked man chained to the wall himself. I couldn't look, so I turned to run. Then I ran into her. Janie, what a sweet name she had. She told me she was Johnny's wife. Despite her slender figure and innocent face, she was 98% evil. 98! And I was talking to her. And I did more than talk, for as her husband was debauching himself, Janie took me to her room, and we debauched each other.

It was about 4 A.M. when we finished. Finished the debauching stuff, that is. I got up to get us drinks, more highballs. I walked through the sleeping naked bodies all along the hallway, living room, and kitchen. They all slept with arms and legs intertwined, all in their post-debauched repose, dreaming of more debauchery, no doubt. I found Hazelwood himself, sleeping between two very debauched young women. I wished I had my knife with me, but I was naked and both my hands were holding highball glasses. I took them back to Janie. And after we drank, we debauched some more, then we fell asleep. I must admit that I had my own dreams of debauchery.

In the morning — actually it was afternoon by then — I awoke to find most of the other guests dressing and leaving.

Some were still having breakfast. It was the smell of frying bacon that woke me. I found my clothes under Hazelwood's bed and got dressed quickly. I went to the bathroom and after I peed I checked myself in the mirror.

That's when I noticed that I was 49% evil. Ahhrrgg! Me, the paragon of purity and virtue. To think, overnight I had gone from 4% to 49%. One more impure thought and I'd tip over to evil.

"Hey, did you enjoy yourself?" It was Janie, naked as last night. She put her arms around my shoulder and hugged me.

Boink. I watched myself in the mirror as I went from 49% to 53% evil in a heartbeat.

"Oh my God, I can't believe it!" I cried, not believing it.

"Yeah, you were really good. And, what you did with that ice and those high-ball glasses!"

Boink, 57%.

I ran out screaming, ran past everyone milling around or having breakfast. None of them had changed. But then again, they were already as evil as they could be.

I ran out of the house, down the driveway, and onto the street. People were coming and going. I was sure they'd noticed the 57% evil in me. But no one said anything. And no one tried to stab me. I walked home, too ashamed to take the bus. What would my girlfriend, Prudence, think of me? She being only 8% evil after all, she'd surely give me a few holier-than-thou speeches of her own.

When I got back to my own neighborhood, I started looking at people with fresh eyes. The man I walked past, he was well within the limits of good, yet I noticed something I never saw before, he was 54% kinky. And that old woman feeding pigeons, she was 60% kinky. And that couple holding hands, 79 and 81%, respectively. I've gotta sharpen my knife, so many new people to stab.

Two Me's

by Gilda Horgan

(Dedicated to working moms.)

I wish that there were two of me.
I'll tell you why that's true.
Then one of me could go to work,
While the other stayed with you.

If I were double, it'd be no trouble
To finish all my chores.
One of me could clean the house,
While the other played outdoors.

A pair of me would be just right
To make it through the day.
Mom number one could get things done
And number two could play.

If I were two I'd have four hands.
Oh, think what I could do!
The first two hands could cook a meal,
While the others tickled you!

With two of me, there'd be more time.
To laugh. To sing. To run.
So many things I can't complete
When I am only one.

If I were more, say three or four,
We could have a team.
A group to care with time to spare,
Is every mother's dream.

I'd like to spend the day together,
Making plans with you.
I could do this so much more
If only I were two!

Mommy twins would be of use,
When I have to go away.
One could travel here and there,
And the other mom could stay.

A couple moms would give me time
For all I have to do.
The first could rise and exercise,
While the other played with you.

There'll never be enough of me
To do what must be done.
And I wish each day, with all my heart
That I was more than one.

But even as I think these things
I know that we'll be fine.
A mother's love can do the work
Of two, or four, or nine.

Imagining two mothers
Is a very special game.
But, even if I had two hearts,
I'd love you just the same.

Don't Bug Me

by Harry Fraser

A bug fell in my pool today, I thought, "Too bad for him."
But once he hit the water, I saw that he could swim.
When he got tired of swimming he tried to climb the wall,
But a wave would always hit him and every time he'd fall
And finally exhausted, there in the pool he lay.
Should I let this creature die, or help him get away?
Then with my awesome power, my finger I extended,
And deposited him on solid ground, just as he intended.
Without a pause or backward glance, I watched him strut
along
And hop up on my favorite plant, as if nothing had gone
wrong.
He chewed on every petal until they all fell down
If he's ever in my pool again, I just might let him drown.

A Bud and a Doughnut on the Side

by Harry Fraser

Things were never better.

Some of my friends down at Sulley's Tavern said that Krispie Crullers was going to build at the corner of Main and Central.

They knew Krispie Crullers was going to be a gold mine, and suggested, since I have been gainfully unemployed for some time, I should sign up to be part of that organization.

I realized early on, that school was not for me, and left when I was fifteen.

I have, however, done very well in the many temporary, part-time jobs I had since then.

At one time, I was a janitor at IBM and was personally in charge of cleaning the office of the CEO, and I sometimes chatted with his secretary in the elevator.

I would have gone steady with her but she worked days and I worked nights and our shifts only overlapped for about an hour. She told me a lot about the corporate world, and with all that experience, I was ready to launch my new career.

I wrote to KC and told them I'd been working in the corporate office at IBM and would consider working for them when they opened their new store here in town, even though

they had only just entered the planning stage for the building. That way I would be the first to be hired.

The guys were sure that I would be the manager within three months, since I was the first to apply, and with my background in IBM, I was a cinch for the job.

I had a bright future ahead of me, the money would soon be rolling in, and I thought this would be a good time to go steady with Betty Sue, one of the bartenders at Sulley's.

However, the guys said they heard she had a boyfriend and was almost pregnant, and I was afraid that might not be good for my career, so I never told her.

It had been over a week since I applied for work and I was about to call KC and see why I hadn't heard from them. Then I saw in the paper that a representative from the company was coming to town and I knew it was time to take action.

I arrived early at the hotel suite that KC had rented, and waited for them to open.

Promptly at 8:00 AM, a woman in a business suit arrived. She appeared to be 30 years old, ordinarily too old for me, but it crossed my mind that, maybe I should go steady with her; it might help me on my journey to the top of the corporate ladder. I'd have to check with the guys to see if they thought that would be the right move.

A few minutes went by and I was about to remind her I was waiting, when she beckoned me into her office.

She introduced herself as Ms. Carol Jones and asked my name.

I was going to remind her that I was the first to apply for a job, and after a week she should have been aware of who I was, but she seemed to be in a hurry to proceed with my interview, so I decided not to bring it up.

"It says here," she said, "you have worked in the office of the CEO of IBM. Did you know him well?"

"I never really met him," I said. "When I was hired it was suggested that I might be well suited to straightening out his office at night, then he would take over during the day."

"Very well, I think that is all the information I need at this time," she said. "If we have any questions we'll call you."

I was impressed that when she stood and indicated that I should leave, by gesturing toward the door, she smiled broadly, almost laughing. I thought right then how much she

must like me and figured I was as good as hired.

When I told the guys that night at Sulley's, and they said the phrase "We'll call you" is a kiss off, I was shocked.

However, now that I have had time to think about it, I'm glad I turned down the job, I don't think the food industry is for me. Something in hotels, like Donald Trump, would be more my style.

I decided to go steady with Ms. Jones anyway, just in case.

Bad Waiter

by Jennifer L. Rogala

Our waiter makes me fretti, he forgetti my spaghetti.
I am really so upsetti, this is such bad etiquetti.
Mommy gets her crepe suzetti, so does auntie Antoinetti.
They both wait 'till I am fedi, but I tell them, "Go aheadi."

Here he comes! I'm getting ready for my meatballs and spaghetti.
Darn! He only brought more breadi and balsamic vinaigretti.
My spaghetti's not here yetti. There's a bad ache in my headi.
Mommy tells me not to dreadi, and to please stop being petty.

A good waiter, he is notti, for he broughtti manicotti.
Since I don't want to be naughty, I'll just eat it on the spotti.
He brings Mom her coffee potti, but it isn't what she thoughtti.
So, now Mommy is distraughtti. He forgotti her biscotti.

Echoes of our existence

Someone Who Left

by Beth Chariton

Jack's key generously slid into its grooves, the knob turning without the usual hesitation. The door swung freely open, the old heaviness in the air now gone. As an unsure peculiar smile crossed his handsome face he sensed she had left for good as his note had instructed. The closing door echoed as he dropped his keys into the empty chipped porcelain dish. He had bought the silly dish for a quarter at a yard sale but she had claimed it from the day she moved in, as simply as she had claimed her place in his life. He realized that he had his choice of coat knobs and suddenly he wondered what they had been so full of before. She had avoided the collecting of unnecessary new things because of her constant traveling, so she usually borrowed his. The button-down shirts, sweaters, and tees that usually hung there must have been washed and put away.

The kitchen sink was cluttered with today's breakfast dishes and those from last night's dinner. He had fidgeted through that meal, knowing of his plan but unable to speak directly to her. While she was out he laid in bed writing note after note, searching for words that would never be right for her ears. Before dawn he had tip-toed out leaving \$100 in guilt funds and a note requesting her to leave his apartment preferably the way she had found it a year ago. Although she must have been insulted, he knew the extra cash would be enough to ignore her pride. Before leaving she had cleared her space at the table, leaving a clear sponge mark around his

remaining breakfast crumbs and the torn and empty cash envelope.

Like many other women in his past, he had met her at some drunken party, telling charming stories to a group of bachelors, all of them drawn to the intensity of her voice and the curve of her hips. While Jack's blues band took a break he casually strolled into the room, slid into the group and laughed along with the others until he caught her attention. His thick hair and charming grin naturally drew women to him. But her smile was particularly addictive, her eyes dark, and both were surrounded by unruly, sun streaked waves that she couldn't stop touching as she talked. And she talked a lot, in a manner that enticed him to talk more openly than normal. Her gaze was as wild as his was curious, and she eagerly answered all of his questions. She had been all over the country, wind swept and seasoned by the experience of travel. When it was his turn to speak he proudly informed her that, at the young age of 28, he was an established accountant, well rounded and successful. They were drawn to each other, both of them too tipsy to be making decisions about love, but three dates later he couldn't imagine being in his bed without her, wanting all or nothing from this mysterious gypsy. Attracted to the concept of being the one who could tame her, he decided that waiting was foolish, that she needed his shelter now. She needed to be in the same bed for more than three nights in a row. So, like a stray cat, he brought her home with a mug, a towel, a toothbrush, and change of clothes in her backpack.

Clarifying exactly what he couldn't take anymore and exactly why he needed her to leave had been the toughest. She was never moody. She was polite. She never asked for anything – not money, not commitment, not even exclusivity. Yet the attention she required was draining. She spent hours looking at young girls in fashion magazines wondering what she wasn't doing to look like them. When she laughed she seemed 25, but when she was depressed she appeared over 40, never bothering to confirm if either were true. He only knew she was 29 from the date on her driver's license, which she had accidentally left out once while she was in the shower. She had no sense of long term planning. She talked incessantly, asking questions that she never waited for the answers to. She couldn't do laundry without ruining the whites each time, and he had grown tired of hiding his dirty laundry from her.

Yet he was uneasy with the thought of setting her free, and found himself waiting for the panicky waves of regret and loneliness to overwhelm him. Material abundance hadn't interested Candy. She was more concerned with his astrological sign, what music he listened to and if he had tried yoga or meditation. She was an artistic free thinker, something he wasn't used to in his rigid, conformist life as an accountant. He had seen things differently through her eyes, seen them with a fresh and accepting outlook. But still he had denied for months that they were just not cut from the same cloth. Now that he had followed through he was calm and peaceful, and confident in his choice.

He toured the small townhouse to make sure, to let it sink in. The air still held a faint mix of incense and her musky perfume. Very few physical objects were missing from his house. Candy had remembered to take her mug, mud stained from consistent caffeine consumption. She had won it on their first date at a fair when she got three bulls' eyes playing that ridiculously expensive dart game. She was comfortable in places like fairs and carnivals, places where loners could come together as some kind of family, not worrying about where they actually came from. In fact, he still didn't know this about her and wondered if she did either.

His heels echoed on the walk down the barren hallway, no longer obstructed by her two pair of shoes, overstuffed pocketbook, and the occasional yard sale find. The blanket that she had crocheted for his last birthday was balled up in the corner of the loveseat. Otherwise the living room was tidy. All the video rentals were gone and the plants had been watered. She hated the neglect of any living thing and had nursed his potted nuisances back to life. He tried to step over the vacuum tracks in the plush carpet. She had loved that vacuum, having never used one before living with him. Next to his civilized ways, she appeared, well, rustic. All else appeared to be intact; no graffiti, no broken glass, no sacrificial fires.

Could she have fit all of her things in a few boxes or grocery bags? It was possible since she had only moved in with a backpack and a box full of belongings. Did someone he had met in her casual circle of acquaintances help her? She knew so many people, but yet was close to none of them. Did she have to throw some of it out? He started to wonder, to worry about how she had managed.

He paused, straining to see his reflection in an oval mirror purposely hung too high on the wall so Candy wasn't constantly reminded of her age and what she referred to as her "downward spiral of biological deterioration". Mirrors made a room look bigger, she would say, you just shouldn't have to see yourself in them all the time. Yes, that was one thing. She had been consumed by the race of time, by the effects of gravity on human flesh. She had collected push up bras and control top panty hose. As soon as she made a little money, she'd come home with a bag full of hair color, self-tanning cream and teeth-whitening strips. Her eating was regulated and she rarely swayed from her caloric rules. She had disciplined herself to choose between a second glass of wine or a piece of bread, between an appetizer or a few bites of indulgent dessert. He had loved her body, unable to see the marks and blemishes she pointed out to him, but she was obsessed with her appearance and the disappearing of her youth. It seemed as if maybe she hadn't had much of a youth at all. Somehow when he inquired about her family, she managed to avoid any clarity on the subject. There was no answer to how long she had been traveling nor if she had a home base with a family, a backyard and a Christmas tree waiting for her.

He continued to cautiously examine every ceiling, floor and wall surface for the right or wrong of his decision. Was he cruel and heartless to evict such a helpless, self-destructive woman? Although you couldn't really call a woman who lived her life traveling the country helpless. Candy could probably make it down a dark and shady alley unscathed much more efficiently than he could. Had he really made an effort to help resurrect her character? He had begun to accept that she was well rounded in an alternative way, that she was content with who she was. He examined the world through clear binoculars, she through the organic view of a kaleidoscope. Should he have sheltered her a little longer, hoping to heal her core by protecting her in his cocoon, waiting for a butterfly to emerge? He didn't want to admit that instead of offering her shelter and protection he had neatly manipulated her with limits and boring boundaries.

He found his way to the bathroom. What had been Candy's favorite room was now the most barren. Here she could make herself into someone she wanted to be, at least on the outside. The exhaust fan was still on and humming softly.

He found this ironic, since the environmentalist in her scolded him daily for abusing the privilege of electricity. She never let the water run while she brushed her teeth and every possible scrap was recycled instead of thrown in the trash. On her allotted shelf there had been potions from late night infomercials, shampoos, and perfumes from various boutiques. The shower was void of all her secret elixirs and concoctions promising youthful glow and supple skin. She had emptied the cabinet of a curling iron and hot rollers, her blow dryer and facial steamer. At one point he had begun to feel like a guest in his own bathroom, his things shoved aside to make room for her necessities, an ever-expanding collection of overnight fixes. And his radio was gone, the one she would croon to behind the locked door. It had made Candy's list of possessions along with the chipped dish. Jack remembered the first time he'd heard her voice singing along with that very radio, never privileged to be in the same room with her when she sang. Her voice was for her pleasure only, she had told him. He had stood in the hallway swaying, his eyes closed as she sang so sweetly and unprotected, the last innocent part of her spreading through his bones. After all the love and acceptance, she could not share this openly. Yes, that was another thing. She had been selfish with her inner beauty. There was no way to really touch her soul, for she would not let anyone in. She would entice you physically, flirt with you until your heart ached, but hers was always out of reach. There would be these moments, full of connection, seeping with intimacy, but only for Jack. As soon as he wanted to talk about his feelings he'd get the same reply.

"Now Jack, don't be so serious. Just enjoy the ride, get the most out of the experience," she'd say, with no desire to know the end result of their time together.

Jack knew, though not from his own life, that jaded souls like Candy didn't believe in long-term stability. As nurturing as Candy was, there was an unhealable hurt in her that Jack would never fix, and it drove him crazy. Truthfully, he had gotten attached to her, gotten used to working on her like a project at the office. Shouldn't she have felt indebted to him in some way for what he'd done? It was a shame, there was only so much help she was willing to take, and she had so much potential. He never expected that she would one day be his wife, but a girlfriend he could be proud of at office parties and awards dinners would have been nice.

His examination ended in the bedroom, where he smelled the flowers before he saw them. Carnations. "By the dozen, by the bed," she had said. "The shortest price and the longest life." She was right. He never would have given a girl carnations, except for Valentine's Day in high school when they were a dollar and could be sent anonymously. Other women had wanted roses or birds of paradise, flowers a white-collar man could easily afford. But Candy wanted youthful, strong flowers, hearty and colorful. Wild and from a field would have warmed her soul and suited her fine.

The bed had been made with clean sheets. His guitar case sat sinking into the Bill Blass down comforter. Sometimes when he played, she would stand and rock back and forth, lights off, candles lit, and he could watch her hips like waves pulled by the moon. On a rare occasion she might even hum if her eyes were closed and she forgot that he was there with her. He sat down and opened the case, sentimentally thinking he might play a few cords now of the song he wrote for her. There, under the strings was a folded piece of pink stationery, her perfume floating softly from the page to his mind.

"Dear Jack,

I didn't tidy up to make you feel guilty. That would be boring and typical, two things I'm not. Thanks for your kindness, although accepting me for who I am would have been cool, too. You see me as flighty, but I like my free and rambling spirit. I don't fit that pre-fab 'woman + house x kids = the future' equation. You would be disappointed in me, although I know you'd argue this point. I am not, and cannot be, traditional. I know me, and that puts me ahead of most. Good luck to you. Get to know who Jack really is.

Remember me,

Candy

P.S. Thanks for the cash. Oh, and sorry about the radio, but I really got attached to the thing.

His mind searched for clarity and understanding. His assumption had been that she had fallen for him, for his generosity and his intelligence and his protection. There was never a concern that maybe he had allowed himself to fall for her. He was too distracted by her intoxicating lifestyle, too busy waiting for her to settle down like dust after an

earthquake. He had meant for her to add some fun to his life, not thinking of her as a short or long-term commitment. His other relationships had been emotional investments, so living moment to moment with her had been refreshing. But now it felt like she was the one who had the direction and he was left standing still. She was worldly, he was limited. She was constantly evolving, he was a constant stereotype. While he had been trying to mold her, she had been expanding him and his possibilities. He had seen her as transient, had thought he needed to ground her, but he had needed to be lifted up, to see the world from a different view. He closed the guitar case, knowing that all this time he had been singing about the experiences of others and now he would have to start singing about his own.

A Mind's Race

by Beth Chariton

The gate lifts, the bell rings
My eyes spring open for the start of the race
The one for competing thoughts
Of fears, phrases and fantasies converging at crossroads
Then fractured again by the hum of distractions pulling at me
Taking up time, using up space
Dates, reminders, and assumptions
Topple over one another
As the 'what ifs' and 'how comes'
Pace the unpredictable, just behind the unexpected
With layers of choices that cram up the path
Of 'what comes first' and 'who needs what'
Stalled by resentments, lured by flashbacks
Priorities struggle for the lead position
Hoping the drivel will weaken to silence
Life is speeding, jumbled, and hurried,
Before I can read the signs or follow directions
Please, stand still – listen and wait
For confusion to tire and chaos to shift
Clearing the day's road to productivity

Vacation Money

by Beth Chariton

Gino's Jewelers was the tenth store Annie and Maria walked into that day. They spent their entire lunch hour trying to sell Annie's engagement ring. Both women quickly became numb to rejection, and continued through the jeweler's building, trying almost every jeweler there, with no luck.

"This place is too fancy," Annie said. "They won't want this ring."

"No negative energy from you," Maria told her.

"Think positive – think vacation money."

A buxom woman approached them at the jewelry counter. Her colorful face was made up with precision, and her shiny, highlighted hair was shellacked in place. "How can I help you ladies today?" Mona asked.

"I'd like to sell this engagement ring," Annie said, as she took the box from her purse.

"Please, let me see it," Mona said, reaching for the box.

Mona had seen and sold many engagement rings, and longed for one of her own. At 47 years of age, she still hoped to get married someday. She had gone on her first date with Gino right after he hired her. Now his divorce was final, and he said he wanted to marry her. And this ring was just like the one she had dreamt about.

"Oh, my. This ring is beautiful," Mona said. "Do you mind if I try it on?"

"Of course not, go ahead," said Annie.

Mona held her left hand up in front of her face, the diamond shining against her red, lacquered acrylic nails. She slowly turned her hand back and forth in the light.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Maria asked. She poked Annie under the counter.

The ring, a marquise-shaped diamond set high in yellow gold, was trendy 15 years ago, but was now outdated.

"I can't believe it. It's so unusual, so unlike today's styles," Mona said. She looked straight into Annie's eyes. "Why do you want to sell such a gorgeous diamond? Why don't you have it set in another piece of jewelry, or pass it on to your children?"

How could I pass on such a symbol of deceit and disrespect to my children? Annie thought. No, my kids deserve way better than that.

Annie was tempted to spew the facts at Mona, that her ex-husband didn't even pick the ring out himself, that he was an abusive alcoholic who had had affairs with other women, that if diamonds burned, she would have thrown that ring in the fireplace to heat her house last winter.

But instead, she told the other truth.

"Oh, I have a lot of jewelry. I don't need any more. And I usually break it, or lose it. I want to use the money to take my kids on vacation," Annie said. "Do you think you can sell it for me?"

Mona clutched her own hand with the ring, to her heart. "Oh, yes," Mona said. "Let me check with my boss, Gino."

Mona hurried over to Gino's desk and modeled the ring. They couldn't hear what she was saying, but she was saying a lot of it with her hands, waving them around enthusiastically as she spoke to her boss.

"She's really attached to that ring," Maria said. "Make sure you get a signed consignment contract before we leave this store."

Mona returned, glowing, her eyes ablaze, with a contract in hand for Annie. "Just sign here. We'll call you as soon as we have a buyer."

"Thanks," Annie said, thankful for Mona and her weird exuberance, and relieved, at the same time, to be getting away from her.

Annie and Maria hurried back to the office, hungry, but full of hope for the sale of the ring.

As she was packing up to leave for the day, Annie's phone rang. "You won't believe it Annie, but we sold your ring!" Mona said.

Annie couldn't believe it. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Where are you going?" Maria asked.

"They sold my ring. I'm going to get the money."

"I know a good travel agent..." Maria joked, as Annie grabbed her stuff and hurried out of the office.

LATER THAT EVENING...

Neil talked and talked, and talked some more - while he drove to the restaurant with Kim, while he held the door for her, while they waited for Kim's best friend to arrive. He complained about his ex-wife, and anything that had to do with her. When he finally took a breath, Kim took the opportunity to speak.

"So where did you say she's taking the kids on vacation?"

Neil shook his head. "Italy. Can you believe it?"

Kim kept watch over his shoulder while he rambled on. When she saw Mona walk through the door with her boyfriend, Gino, Kim nudged Neil to get his attention so they could join their friends.

"Hey, Kim," Mona said, hugging her. "You look great!"

"You, too. It's been too long since we've seen each other."

Kim and Mona introduced Neil and Gino, and then asked to be seated at their reserved table. There was already a bottle of expensive champagne and four glasses waiting for them. Neil hadn't noticed, since he was already talking with Gino, so Kim turned immediately to Mona.

"Girl, what's going on? You are absolutely beaming, and I know *we* didn't order this fancy champagne," said Kim.

Mona linked her arm under Gino's elbow. "We're engaged!" Mona announced, waving her free hand in front of Kim so she could see the ring.

"That's fantastic!"

Everyone kissed, everyone hugged. Mona and Gino smiled continuously.

"Gino, I know you're an experienced jeweler, but where did you ever find that ring?" asked Kim. "It suits Mona perfectly. Don't you think so, Neil?"

"Oh, definitely. It's a lovely ring," he said, barely looking at it.

"It was fate," Mona said. "This woman came in today

looking to sell the ring. I fell in love with it instantly. Luckily, so did Gino."

"And, we got such a good deal on it, we're treating you two for dinner tonight," said Gino.

"Well, I hope you gave that woman a fair price for it," Neil said jokingly.

"Of course. The woman is taking her children to Italy on vacation with that money," Gino said.

Kim kept firing questions at Mona, who chatted on about wedding plans, while she held on tightly to Gino's hand. No one noticed that Neil's face had gone pale, that he couldn't stop staring at the ring on Mona's hand, and that he suddenly had nothing left to say.

The Songs of Earl

by David Sahl

When Earl and I were seven years old my first lesson from him was a poem he'd learned from his two older brothers:

*No matter how you shake and dance-
The last few drops go down your pants.*

I shared the poem and its wisdom with my mother during lunch that day.

Later that summer, he taught me another of his brother's poems. I couldn't wait to tell my mother.

"Hey, Mom," I said, as I stood tall in front of her next to the kitchen table, "listen to this one Earl taught me:

*Little tots
Have little twats
Alive, alive, oh!*

"I think you're spending too much time with Earl," she said. "Isn't there someone else you could play with?"

"Aw, Ma," I said, disappointed with her reaction. It was a quiet lunch after that.

After lunch, Earl and I met at the fort we'd built in the woods behind my house. The next lesson was the magic of Blue-Tip wooden matches.

Inside the fort, drinking from a warm can of beer stolen from his brother's stash, we made "match guns" using spring-type clothespins, black electrical tape, and some striker paper from a Blue Tip matchbox. He'd taught me to take the clothespin apart and turn it around so the spring became the trigger. Then, to tape the narrow ends together and, – hell, I could show you how to do it in five minutes.

Finally, we'd insert a Blue Tip match into the business end of the gun and shoot it out over the striker paper. As they flew away, they'd flare up and burn until they'd land on something– a new wonder!

We became each other's target. Flaming wooden matches hit and glanced off our shirts, pants, arms, legs, faces. They'd land on the ground, in bushes, on piles of dried leaves, in the underbrush. We'd reload and continue blasting away until there'd be no more matches in the box. All around us, leaves, twigs, and such smoldered and grew into fierce little fires that would have continued growing - but we peed them out.

Some summer days, I remember shooting and peeing all afternoon. The beautiful woods became soaked with the colossal renal production of two young boys.

Earl's mother worked, and his brothers and their friends usually hung around the house all summer. His father was dead or away somewhere. He never spoke about him and I never asked. Anyway, I never met him.

Earl never let an idea rest where it was.

One afternoon when the house was empty, Earl told me to wait on the back steps. He went inside. I could hear him rummaging around in his oldest brother's bedroom and returned with a pump action Daisy air rifle. We loaded BBs into it and fired away until they were gone. Nothing that moved was safe. We nailed a couple of neighbor's windows from ricochets by accident.

Even as a kid, I never suspected that he was asking for permission from me when he asked, "You wanna try something?" I knew he was really asking, "Do I really want to do this?"

He knew the gun was empty, but he kept pumping and firing. One time he fired while he held his hand over the business end. Pow!

"Lotsa air there," he said. "Almost pushed my hand away."

Finally, something lined up for him. "Wanna try something?"

I shrugged.

He went inside his house again and found a new box of Blue Tips and spent some time making sure the wooden match fit in the BB magazine chamber. He screwed the chamber back into the rifle, aimed at a telephone pole, and pulled the trigger. The rifle fired and the match whooshed out, hit the pole, and bounced off. He tried it again with the same result.

"Shit. I thought we could stick matches into every pole in town. Wouldn't everyone wonder what was going on? I guess it don't go fast enough," he said, dejected.

He loaded up one more time, but rather than aiming at the pole, he marked out a brick exterior of his neighbor's chimney and fired. The match hit, but rather than falling harmlessly, it bounced off the bricks and popped into flame as it fell to the grass lawn.

"Look at that. It exploded," he yelled. He ran to the smoldering match and stomped it out. "Doya fucking believe it? Like a warhead exploding on an enemy." Breathlessly, he said, "Go into your house and find all the matches you can find. We're going hunting."

I returned with two nearly full boxes of the wooden "safety" matches. We sought out brick walls, poured concrete walls, granite and fieldstone foundations.

Pow. Pow. Pow. Passing the rifle back and forth, we launched the wooden weaponry all afternoon. With a small pop, the match flared up and fell into the detritus that collected against the walls around town. We were less concerned with the small fires on sidewalks and parking lots and let them burn out by themselves, laughing as we ran away.

He was never satisfied with what was, he wondered what could be. I was only along for the ride.

Matches were magic...

A CO₂ cartridge is a thumb-sized, torpedo-shaped container for compressed carbon dioxide gas. Hobbyists use them to propel homemade, hand-carved jet cars for a few seconds of riveting excitement. There's a spring-loaded

needle-pointed tool used to puncture the narrow end. Once punctured, the CO₂ gas rushes out in an intense but brief jet of cold carbon dioxide.

Nothing burns. Nothing explodes. Nothing heats up at all. And that was the problem for Earl. The whole process lacked any panache. No pop. No fizz. No thrill. Just a hiss for fifteen seconds with the car rolling about thirty feet at three mph and that was that. After the first jet car Earl made, he said, "Big fucking deal. I get more out of shaking up a coke bottle."

I watched him holding the CO₂ cartridge and staring at it as he rolled it over and over in his hand. Finally, he smiled, looked at me out of the side of his eyes like he does, and said, "Wanna try something?"

I shrugged.

He disappeared into his house again and returned with a half dozen paper matchbooks. He tore out the matches and cut off the match heads with an Exacto knife. In no time, he had a pile of match heads that looked like red seeds on the top stair of his back porch. He drilled out the narrow end of the CO₂ cartridge, widening the opening from the pinpoint puncture to an opening about an eighth inch in diameter. Using his fingertips, he inserted match head after match head into the cartridge, eventually filling the empty chamber.

"I can get a few more in there. Want the biggest bang for the buck, right?" He used a small dowel to force in a few more heads.

Had I known the danger, I would have run away, but I had faith that Earl knew what he was doing. Again, he always took something to the limit. I guess that's why he was always in trouble in school.

We found a deserted corner of the local playground. Earl took the CO₂ cartridge and set it on a couple of small stones he found nearby. It looked like a miniature anti-missile-missile launching pad. The cartridge was inclined at a thirty-degree angle.

He made a trail of match heads, a makeshift fuse, leading to the narrow end.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, looking at his creation.

"Gonna sound like a whole roll of caps going off at once," I said. I was wrong, but he didn't make fun of me afterward.

"Well, here goes." He lit a match and touched the last of the trail of fuse matches. They hissed and burned slower than I might have imagined.

We backed away a few feet, our eyes glued to the progression of the burn. The last match caught and sent flame into the CO2 cartridge filled with six books of match heads. We anticipated following the flight path of Earl's creation like watching a gentle arc of a golf ball drive over a tranquil green fairway.

The cartridge exploded, disappearing from its launching pad, and traveled at the speed of light until it blew a hole in the chain link fence thirty yards from the launching point. A starting offensive lineman for Boston College's football team, the largest person I'd ever seen, was working out. Shocked and angry, he chased us over the railroad footbridge and through the Stop and Shop parking lot. We jumped a fence and ran along the railroad tracks until we escaped through an opening in a stone wall. We could hear him screaming all the way.

We hid in the low brush, breathing heavily, until he left.

"I guess that rocket worked okay, huh?" he asked me.

"Darn right," I said. We laughed and congratulated each other all the way home.

We spent those years testing limits and celebrating our daring, but one afternoon after Earl's twelfth birthday, his change from childhood to adolescence separated us.

Earl sat on his back porch with a folder stuffed with art class sheets of paper beside him. "Wanna see what I bin doing?"

I shrugged.

His first sketch was a rough pencil representation of a left hand. The drawing was numbered with a small 1 in the lower right corner. He held his left hand next to it for comparison.

"That's your hand?" I asked.

"Course," he said, exasperated. "How about this one."

Number two was a pretty accurate sketch of the BB gun we'd used to shoot matches. It was nice, but uninspired. Just a sketch of a thing. "Nice," I said.

"These are the first tries," he said. "I thought they were pretty good. I liked doing it and it don't cost much to do."

Y'know, like a coupla bucks for paper and art pencils and there you go."

I shrugged again. Compared with explosions, this was really tame – lame? Big deal.

I guess he could tell I wasn't all that excited by his new hobby. He looked at me with a kind a pause, unsure where to go with this, waiting to hash out something in his mind. He was trying to decide whether to try to impress me or let it go. After all, who was I? - just someone to bounce ideas off.

Finally, he turned back to the folder. He flipped through a few of his earlier attempts until he found the one he was looking for and held it up. I don't know how he got his dog, Scamp, to sit still. The dog was alive and full of energy. His eyes were bright. His coat glowed, even in the pencil sketch. "I thought the first ones were pretty good," he said again, "but I did a few more...they got better."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "That's great. When did you do that?"

"A couple of months ago. I dunno. Just did it and put it away. Then, I looked at it again a few days ago, you know, just to see it and I said to myself, 'That's pretty good.'"

"Sure is," I said. "Let me see some more. That was number seventeen. What are you up to now?"

He fished through the pile. "I'm up to about seventy. Started using some pastels. Screwed it up pretty bad at first. Used too much stuff. Looked like comic book characters or old ladies with too much lipstick and make-up. Too much color."

"Lemme see some color stuff."

He took a deep breath. "Not yet. Let me get good and I'll let you see the whole thing. Okay?"

I didn't want to push. "Sure, I guess. Maybe some day you'll let me see everything."

He put away all his work and straightened the pages. He said, "Yeh, maybe some day." He stood and retreated into his house. "Gonna put this stuff in a safe place. You know, my brothers rummage through all my stuff all the time. Be right back."

I sat on the familiar porch looking at the familiar back yard thinking of the unfamiliar territory of his sudden, amazing artistic abilities. I feared he was leaving me in the dust. I suddenly loathed myself for my immaturity, for my lack of any measurable talent, for just being a normal kid,

while Earl was shifting gears and was accelerating on his way to adulthood. I was alone on this childish, but safe island.

I guess this was the first time the immature delusion that things will remain the same came crashing down on me. Even as a kid, I suspected that Santa wasn't real, that mom and dad wouldn't always be young and vital, that summer wouldn't last forever. But, with the change in Earl, something big bent permanently in me. At first, I tried to ignore it, but ignorance can take you only so far. Such is the nature of delusions.

He came back from hiding his work and sat with an exhalation, a release of something pent up. We sat in the fading afternoon sun of a fading summer of a fading intimacy that young friends have and almost always lose through no fault of their own.

He spoke to the dusk. "Dija ever do something that made you forget who you were and how much time goes by when you're doing it?"

"Huh?"

"Like when I'm drawing, I'm not really in front of the paper, I'm in the paper, and it's the paper making the drawing. I'm just along for the ride. Know what I mean?" He wasn't asking me anything. He was trying to explain something to himself. "It's like I have no control." He paused. "When I'm done, I'm the one who gets to see it first. Like I just got there. It's amazing."

"Like somebody's controlling you?"

"Sorta, but different. Nah, forget it. I can't explain it at all. Forget it." He waved his hand at me dismissively. "Okay, I'll show you one of the pastels I did. Okay?"

"Sure." I didn't think I was pushing him to show me anything. He needed to show this drawing to someone. He left and returned with the folder. Near the bottom of the stack he found what he was looking for and held it at arm's length so he could view it critically before I could see it. He seemed satisfied and then handed it over to me.

I don't know why we called her Ruby, but there she was, cute as in real life. She was a neighborhood kid of no particular interest to twelve-year-old kids like us. Her seven-year old gopher cheeks glowed with life and little girl mischief. Her expression wasn't the standard, "Okay hold that smile" cheesy pose that kills the reality of any picture. She was rocking back, with her hands locked over her knees. Her faded

jeans were soiled and had small worn out patches on each knee. Her polo shirt was light green and fit like a too big hand-me-down. Her face was one frame away from a full smile, kind of impish, holding back a secret she wanted to share. She sat on a straight-backed wooden kitchen chair.

"Pretty good, huh?"

"This is awesome," I said, trying to find some flaw in the picture.

"I just asked if she'd sit there," he pointed to some place in the back yard. "She said sure. Got kinda fidgety after a while, though."

"Looks good to me."

"Made me work faster, you know, just to wrap it up. Mostly I had to get the face right. The rest, I could fill in after she went home." He smiled and shook his head. "I don't know where the time went. Couldn't believe it."

I handed the sketch back to him and he stood to put it back in his secret hiding place. "See you tomorrow," he said.

I was about to say it's early, but the screen door slammed and he disappeared inside. He just decided it was time to call it a night.

Every once in a while I'd find him on the porch with a sketchpad and a pencil. He'd be practicing or doing studies of certain parts of the face or body. He'd have a few pages of nothing but lips or eyes or noses. Sometimes he'd have the top half of a face or the lips chin and jaw, all with different facial expressions. They all looked like little Ruby thinking about different things. Some had Ruby pointing or stepping over a tree trunk, stuff like that. Practice.

I couldn't talk to him while he was practicing, just watch and see the beauty develop from the deep nothingness of white paper.

After supper one night, I expected him to be on the porch like usual. He wasn't there. I asked his brother where he was. No idea. I tried all the places where we usually hung out—the playground, the variety store around the corner, on the street where we rode bikes. Nothing.

Then I thought about the fort in the woods. We'd stopped going there. I guess we outgrew it. With nothing to lose, I followed the familiar trail about a half of a mile on the well-worn path.

I rounded a bend and saw the clearing where we'd spent so many hours building plastic models or making match

guns or just shooting the shit about life. But now, it just looked like the abandoned location of childhood memories. I decided to look into the window anyway. The closer I got the clearer I could hear a garble of muted conversation. Someone was in there. I thought I recognized Earl's voice; I wasn't sure who else. I thought I'd surprise them and sneak up and say, "Boo."

Stealthily, I crept up, squatted beneath the window, and listened to the discussion.

"Just turn a little to the left," I heard.

"Like this?"

I knew who it was.

"Perfect. Just stay that way. Okay?"

"Okay."

I lifted my head to get a view of the sitting. Slowly, holding my breath, up, up, until I could get a good view.

From this angle, I could see Earl sitting on an overturned bucket. He had a sketchpad on his lap and several pencils in each hand. He looked to the pad. He looked to the model. He looked to the pad and slashed away at the drawing with his new intensity.

I tried to lean silently to the right to watch Ruby pose. She was sitting on that straight-backed wooden kitchen chair. The only difference from the other drawing was here Ruby was totally naked. Her skin fairly glowed in the evening light. She sat like the little girl she was, and Earl sat across the dirt floor of the fort lost in his creation. The little girl was leaning slightly forward with her hands, palms down, next to her on the chair, arms straight, elbows locked, legs crossed, knee on knee.

The most electric image I remember was that the intensity was shared. She watched Earl, although I'm sure he was unaware of it, with the same passion as he showed for the art he was creating. It was a moment I can recall and be envious of. When has there been a moment in my life like the one they shared?

I guess I said something or grunted because they both startled and found me looking in the window.

"Shit. What are you doing here? Ruined everything," Earl screamed.

Ruby screamed, too, grabbed her clothes, and ran out of the fort, crying hysterically. I watched as she sprinted along the path and out of sight.

Earl stood and walked to the window. "It was all going so well. I guess it's all over now."

"Why?" I asked.

He looked at me. Clearly he understood the situation much better than I – and he was right. Soon after that, after Ruby told her parents about the "modeling sessions", Earl was hounded out of school; then, his family moved.

I was devastated - left alone to chew on the reasons my best friend had to evaporate because of the threats and intimidation. Some people thought I must have been in on it, but Ruby said no. It was just Earl. She said nothing happened. She sat and he sketched and that was okay for her. She liked the attention.

So, after all is said and done, what went wrong with Earl and his love of art? The truth was, once the police got involved, they found a series of Ruby drawings with her in rather modest poses, but she was naked as the day she was born. Deals were made and, once he left town, the whole episode drifted away

Still, I missed Earl and wondered where he went. I hadn't heard about him until this news article tripped all these memories.

The column detailed a tragedy: Earl Copland, adventurer and philanthropist, was missing and feared dead in an avalanche in the Alps. It went on to detail the event, using some quotes from his friends and family. They commented that he often said that you don't know how far to go until you've gone too far. If you don't go too far, you don't know how far you can go. Everything short of that is a disappointing failure.

The article was accompanied by a picture of him and his wife of many years, Ruby Copland, on the summit of a snowy mountain. He had his arm over her shoulder. They had sunburned noses and were smiling.

I closed the newspaper and looked back at the work on my desk and wondered how many people test the limits of anything. How dangerous it must have been for him to constantly be on the edge. How necessary for him to be on the edge.

Ah, well. Thanks, Earl, for keeping the adventure alive for the rest of us who are bound by fears and self-imposed limits. I guess you got the respect you sought by walking around in your own shoes.

You and I

by Ray Benjamin
for Heather

We have climbed a long way,
you and I.
By turns we've led and followed.
By turns we've stumbled.
But no matter what,
We have continued on.

I spent a decade in pain
until I was pulled free,
by your hand,
your heart,
your mind.

I have watched you struggle,
forging on through your own pain,
while I stood helpless
unable even to reach you.

We've survived dark days and infinite nights
where even the thought of dawn seemed out of our reach.
But here we are still,
You and I.

Perhaps the days to come
will let us reap the reward of our patience – joy in our union.
But if that dawn isn't yet here,
I still am.
Here I'll remain.
Because there are things that I want to see only as
You and I.

Written Word Searching for a Title

by Harry Fraser

I woke up today, and the sun was shining, which seemed like a good start.

However, it was Monday, and that canceled everything out.

I had no intention of going to work.

I'd take a holiday from, nothing. I had a nothing apartment, a nothing job.

I didn't care or perhaps it would have been more correct to say, I was unconcerned.

I decided that today, my life would take a different tack, as it were, a final and intense search for self. I would succeed in discovering who I am, and what my true destiny would be.

Today would be different.

I arrived at Eddie's Diner. There was no thought process involved, the same as brushing my teeth or putting on shoes.

Eddie's was a nothing diner, two windows squashed between a Drugstore and a Travel Agency, with some plastic flowers, and a faded menu with last year's prices taped to one of the panes of glass.

Inside, a room with a counter, stools, some booths, cash register, lottery tickets and cigarettes.

I had an aversion to people breathing on the back of my neck as they squeezed by to take a seat so I never sat at the counter.

I sat in a booth; checkered red and white tablecloth, sugar dispenser, napkin dispenser, salt, pepper, and a menu held in a vertical position by a chrome "menu holder."

I was situated so I could stare out the window at the nothing cars and the nothing people as they intruded into my field of vision.

After some mysterious allotted time, Mrs. Eddie appeared in the aisle beside my table.

What usually transpired was; Mrs. Eddie would say something original like, "The usual?" and I would say, "Umf."

Mrs. Eddie said, the usual: "The usual?" and I said, without even thinking:

"Good morning Ruth (her name I think, Mr. Eddie always calls her that), "May I have some of your delicious coffee and three of those wonderful pancakes you make?"

So that was it? This was the way things would go from now on.

I hadn't tried, or put any conscious effort into it but inexplicably, in an instant I had become a different person.

Mrs. Eddie looked askance, hesitated, fumbled with her order pad and said in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper, "Are you alright?"

"Never better Ruth, how about yourself?"

She looked perplexed, gave no answer and headed for the coffee maker. She returned a few minutes later with a steaming cup, three pancakes, maple syrup and butter, set it on my table and said, "I'm fine, thank you for asking," and quickly retreated to her counter.

I could see her glance at me from time to time. Probably just to assure herself that I was all right and not in danger of having a seizure.

"What did I just do?" I thought. I have been mad at the world ever since I can remember, yet I felt...good, inspired even.

Mrs. Eddie inevitably appeared again the moment I had finished my last sip of coffee with the bill, ready to take the empty dishes and the one and only napkin I had judiciously use, thereby showing my diminutive social graces.

"May I have a large piece of your magnificent looking lemon pie, and one more cup of coffee please?"

Mrs. Eddie looked stunned; she opened her mouth to say something, but could only nod her head.

Never in the five years that I have been coming here have I ever carried on any conversation, or ordered anything other than the "usual."

She returned with my order, an extra large slice I noticed, and a big smile.

Mrs. Eddie appeared to have been crying, I rarely looked at anyone up close, but her mascara was smudged and she made a few gentle sniffing noises.

"It's so nice to see you are enjoying this beautiful day," she said.

"Thank you, Ruth, you have made it even more enjoyable," I said

Mrs. Eddie seemed to almost glide back to her station between the coffee pot and the cash register. Every time she glanced at me now she had a just – discernible, Mona Lisa – type smile on her face.

When I had finished, I didn't wait for a bill, I went to the counter. "How much do I owe you, Ruth?"

"You know, I don't know your name," she said. "I am sorry, I apologize, but I am usually so busy at this time of the day I ..."

"No need to apologize, Ruth, I understand, my name is Tom Larson."

"Mr. Larson, you have been a loyal customer for so long I am declaring today will be "Tom Larson Day" and there will be no charge; to mark this occasion."

"Call me Tom, and thank you so much Ruth."

"With all the extra money I now have," I said with a smile, "may I have a scratch ticket to finish off the morning?"

"Certainly, Tom," she continued her marathon smile. We exchanged a dollar for a ticket.

"Have a great day, Ruth," I heard myself say, as I exited the diner. I stopped just outside the door, leaned against the side of the building in the sun and proceeded to scratch my ticket.

"What a waste of a perfectly good dollar," I thought. I almost never buy scratch tickets, the last time was years ago when the jackpot was a gigillion dollars and it was all everyone was talking about.

I scratched the numbers designated "your numbers", first, 5, 11, 8. Next the "winning numbers", a misnomer if there ever was one."

First 10, naturally, 8 naturally and finally four, just as I thought, a loser as usual.

This will be the last time I... wait a minute 8..8..? That can't be right. I looked again; there was an 8 where "my number" was located and an 8 in the "winning column". I started scratching the rest of the area where my number was. There was a dollar sign then a 1, oh well what did I expect, one more scratch in disgust, then more numbers, I didn't know there were more numbers, four zeros. What did this mean? \$10,000, obviously a mistake, I scratched a little more, careful to stay away from the area that said, "Uncovering this area makes this ticket null and void" or words to that effect.

I stared and re-read my ticket for a long time. Holding my ticket in both hands I shouldered my way back into Eddie's, stood for a moment in front of the cash register, turned, and walked out again, started to go inside again, then decided to go to my something apartment holding my ticket in both hands.

The next few hours went by as though I was on one of those "Bullet Trains" from Japan that we read about in the papers. I sat at my something table with my really something ticket in both hands and envisioned my new future.

I decided to sign my ticket and hail a cab. I arrived at the Lottery headquarters just before closing. To my amazement they were unconcerned, unexcited even. "Would you like cash or a check?" the teller said.

"Show me the money," I felt like screaming, but instead, "Cash would be fine," I said.

For some reason, the cashier counted the money in slow motion, seemingly an eternity later I was strangling a stack of \$100 bills in my right hand.

What if someone steals my money? What if it is windy and the money flies away? What if I bump into someone and drop the money on the ground? What if I drop the money on the ground and it's blown away by the wind and then someone steals it?

Should I put the money in my front pants pocket, my rear pants pocket, my shirt pocket, or my underwear?

Underwear, good idea. I searched for a sign, "Mens Room" there it was just across the room. How do I get there

with my money? Run? Walk casually? The latter, I thought. I put half in my right hand and half in my right, but it was still in view sticking out the side of each hand.

If I held the money tight and stuffed both hands in my pockets no one would notice, good plan, and the men's room was just across the room.

Casually, hands in pockets, still strangling the money, and walking like a penguin, I strolled across the room while whistling part of the "William Tell Overture," a good deceptive touch, I thought.

I casually entered the men's room. There were people there, not many, but the booth for the toilet was occupied. This was the beginning of a nightmare, I thought.

I couldn't take my hands out of my pockets so there was no way I could go to the urinal to kill some time, I wouldn't be able to unzip my pants.

I pretended to look at the advertisements for the lottery that hung on the wall. Each one was worded to make you feel that everyone that ever bought a ticket, had been one of their lucky winners.

Finally, I heard the toilet flush and the guy that was putting my whole life in jeopardy walked past as though I wasn't there. There was another man waiting for the stall, but I ran by him with such speed I nearly knocked him down. He didn't say anything. I think he felt sorry for me. "Diarrhea," he probably thought.

I stuffed the money in my underwear as quickly as I could; I never realized how irritating money in your underwear could feel. Bad idea, I decided.

I would tape it to my chest, but I had no tape. Finally, a sensible idea entered my foggy brain, why not put some in all of my pockets? That way, I would be able to at least hedge my bets, unless of course I was robbed.

By now, all the banks were closed, I caught a taxi and finally made it home.

I put all the money in the middle of my something table and stared at it until I fell asleep with my head in a pile of \$100 bills.

It was 7:00 AM when I woke, the usual time to go to work. There was a \$100 bill stuck to my forehead.

Now I remember, I actually have some money.

Think I'll go to work. At a few minutes before 5 o'clock, I'll go to the office, tell them I would like my vacation

pay and, since it's too late to fire me for the day, tell them I quit.

What can they do? Yesterday was the first day in 4 years I ever missed a day of work.

The money... can't go to the bank while I'm at work, I'll put it with the rent money, under that loose floor board in the bedroom. Tomorrow, I'll open my first ever bank account.

Everything worked out fine. They were actually nice to me, said they hoped I'll drop by and see them sometime.

It was wintertime and pitch black. I picked up the evening paper from a rack beside the door and briefly scanned the paper's front page. There in the bottom right corner it hit me, "Tom Larson Gets Lucky Yesterday," then the usual little piece the Lottery puts in to entice more suckers to buy tickets.

There was no picture or address but anybody could get my address out of the phone book and could be in my apartment looking for the money right now.

Luckily, I got a cab right away and it only took a minute and I was home. I went to my door and slowly turned the doorknob and, just like in the movies it opened, my door was unlocked.

Someone was inside my apartment. Careful to make no noise, I entered.

My living room was dark but there was a light on in my bedroom. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

"I'll kill him if he tries to leave with my money," I thought, but with what?

My mind visited every inch of the living room, chairs, table lamp, and phony fireplace. with a broom, a shovel and a poker beside the fireplace, I carefully grabbed the poker and headed for the bedroom.

The door was open but not wide enough; from my angle, I could only see the lamp and one small corner of the bed.

There were no loud noises, but I'm sure I could hear him breathing. He must have heard me when I came in, hadn't found the money yet and was waiting to shoot me as soon as I entered the bedroom.

I should leave, what good is the money if I'm dead? But the thought that some creep would take my money sent a silent rage flowing through my body.

If I stayed to the left side of the door where the hinges were, and could get close enough, I could look through the

crack between the back of the door and the frame.

Finally, I was close enough to see the whole room.

Sitting on the bed beside a large suitcase was Mrs. Eddie.

Solstice

by Sara Letourneau

I can only wonder why
I've sat here all afternoon with you,
watching October leaves flutter by.

The comfort of my coffee has cooled,
but the warmth of your hand is close
now that I've spent all afternoon with you.

I feel my heart blossom like a rose
with every glance you hold,
with the warmth of your hand so close.

From my lips, words fall and unfold,
capturing your attention, your eyes,
with every glance we hold.

A chill sighs from the red-orange sky,
but I think there's a radiance in me
that captures your attention, your eyes.

A new season has begun this eve
as October leaves flutter by,
as this radiance embraces me,
and I can only wonder why.

Respite

by Sara Letourneau

One breath,
I am full
of air,
so pure
and vital.
I am rinsed
of dirt
and sin
that cloud
the mind.

One breath,
I am whole.
Resting
is peaceful,
meditating
so natural.
I savor
the rhythm,
the rising
and falling,
the tide of
consciousness

One breath,
 I wait.
The blanket
 of night
drapes itself
 over me,
closing
 my eyes
as if
 shutters,
opening
 my thoughts
to dusk
 and the world.

I've found
 my life
and yours
 whittled
to waking
 and walking
many miles
 without sleep.
Sometimes
 I have to
lie down
 and remember
to pause
 for a moment.

One breath,
 I see –
Living should be
a reflex,
 so natural
like rising
 and falling.
How could
 I forget?
All I need
 is one breath
to feel full
 of life,
one breath
 to feel
complete
 again.

An Unexpected Lesson on a Busy Street

by Sara Letourneau

A lone turtle
that would fit in my cupped hands
bravely crosses the main street.

I turn my head away
as my stomach churns and
my heart – and my thoughts – start to race.

Now I understand
the mother born within me,
the guardian's fear of failure...

As a red sedan careens past me,
and I doubt that anyone else heard
that sickening crunch.

The Medallion

by Gail Dennehy

She put it on when he went to war,
It was so small to hold so much,
Just half an inch of holiness,
A Blessed Mother's image;
She wore it on her slip,
Placed carefully over her heart,
A physical prayer for the safety
Of her only son.
It seemed to work, he came home again,
And she wore it then
For his happiness.

She died with it still pinned on
And they buried her.
No one really thought to
Notice if it was still there.
No one thought of it
At all until the day he died
And his granddaughter picking
Clothes up from the floor,
Saw a golden glint pinned to
Hang lightly over
Her own young mother's heart.

Twenty years, his mother had waited,
A brief scent of rose,
A blue haired sprite,
Guiding the smallest of her line.
Seen only in a toddler's eyes,
Or felt, a gentle kiss in the night,
Until, at last, son and mother rose,
Into eternity together.
And left the medallion behind.

Killarney Landmark

by Gail Dennehy

Drive out of Killarney
and around the ring with
the Irish sun shining
behind you,
The ocean on your right
Glistens with diamonds
Strewn out from fairy mounds
Onto the sea.
The hills surround and
lead you on through
the morning's gold light.
There's a curve ahead,
with cars parked and people
walking about.
Curiosity gets you.
You pull in and gasp out loud at
Fields ripe with yellow heather,
There is a stream
that rushes gurgling
Under an old stone bridge
With a circular span.

Down a dirt path,
sits a ramshackle house of
stone and shale,
weathered by storm and time.
You stand beside the car
In the damp of spring
And wonder at
hardship and happiness,
history and home.

First Sight

by Alexander C. Woodbury

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" Jim asked his aunt at her annual cookout.

"What makes you ask?"

"You see that young lady in the green dress talking to the tall guy with the shaved head?"

"Don't tell me you're in love with him?" his aunt asked drolly, knowing he would jump at the bait.

"No, of course not. The girl, the girl. Would you introduce me?"

"Sorry, she's already taken. Engaged and getting married soon. Big church wedding coming up."

"It's never too late. She could change her mind."

"She's engaged to a wealthy stockbroker. Beaucoup old and new money. You're both poverty stricken and unemployable. Not her type, I'm sure. And the girl's a doctor, would you believe it?"

"I must have some ailment she can cure. I'd promise to be a good patient."

His aunt smiled. "I'm afraid not. She's a gynecologist. Why don't I introduce you to the girl over near the pool? She's single and available. Some say she's even desperate."

"We already know each other."

"And?"

"We've a lot in common. We detest each other. We had one date. At the end of the evening, which was the high point, she called me an asshole."

"You must be improving your social skills," his aunt said, as she smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Other women have said even worse things about you. I'd like to continue this soul-searching analysis, but there are other guests I should see. Enjoy yourself and try not to be an embarrassment to the family again. Save some of the food for the other guests. If you still feel hungry, stop at a grocery store on the way home. I'll loan you the money."

Jim decided to ignore what his aunt had said to him as he was intent on introducing himself to the young doctor. She was alone at the punchbowl.

"Hi, I'm Jim. The hostess is my aunt. I don't believe I've met you," he said as he walked up to her while she was pouring herself a drink.

The young lady turned around, first smiling and then frowning. "I know, your aunt warned me about you. Actually, we've met before, although I bet you don't remember. I'm Jan. It was at my eighth birthday party and you gave me the ugliest doll in the world. I'll never forget it. You also threw up shortly after you got there and went home sick."

"So you were that skinny girl with the silly lace dress and those awful braces. I'd have never guessed it. It's nice to be remembered. What ever happened to that doll? I see that you no longer have braces or that awful dress."

"I wanted to give the doll away, but my mother told me it wouldn't be nice to make someone else unhappy, too. I still have the doll and have actually grown to like it. A bit perverse, wouldn't you say?"

"Not really! I think it was fate. My meeting you today could change everything. I think you have special talents."

Jan frowned again.

"Was that talons or talents? Do you think I'm one of those women who needs to find a loser so she can reform him? If that's the case, I'll introduce you to my sister. She's now on husband number three. I could put in a good word and you could be number four, or at least, three and one half. She likes lost causes."

"I may have already met her."

"Unlikely, she lives in Seattle. You should make yourself scarce now. I just saw my fiancé drive up."

"When will I see you again?" Jim asked.

"At your aunt's cookout next year. I'll save you a piece of my wedding cake," she said with a smile.

"What if I wanted to see you before that?"

"I suggest that you go home and think of my sister in Seattle. Her web address is big-loser.com or something like that."

"It rains too much there."

The Weekend

by Alexander C. Woodbury

Let's escape the heat of summer,
For the mountains and the streams.
That spot that's so secluded,
So special in our dreams.

Let's make the trip tomorrow,
It's really not that far.
A half a tank to get there,
In our old and trusty car.

We'll spend the time together,
With time to think and rest.
We'll talk of our bright future,
With you, the very best.

Summer

by Alexander C. Woodbury

Last spring, I sold my old house in the suburbs and bought a condo within easy walking distance of the college where I taught. I also purchased a log cabin in Maine, about a four-hour drive north of Boston. My cabin was one of ten around a private lake of a former paper company. Most of the residents were “summer people.” I’d just turned thirty-five and had been a widower for the past two years.

I wanted to accomplish several things that first summer at the cabin. I intended to read one of those long Russian novels that everyone talks about, but has never actually finished - the ones by authors whose names I could pronounce, but couldn’t spell. I wanted a brief and passionate summer romance, which would end without commitment, guilt, or financial ruin.

I intended to complete my first novel. Friends and relatives said I was a great writer. Fellow writers had less favorable reviews. “Needs work” was their usual comment.

My last desire seemed strange and a bit petty. I wanted to know if a colleague in the English department of Lewis and Clark College really went to Stanford University. Everyone jokingly referred to LCC as Last Chance College. So what was someone with his background doing here? I was here only because my job as a tech writer had come to an end when Raytheon closed the local facility. I wondered what his excuse was.

Walter Smith had a Stanford University diploma on the wall of our shared office. A Walter Smith had graduated with the class of '95, but I wasn't convinced it was really the man whose desk was across from mine. Among other things, he murdered the English language with his frequent grammatical errors. That seemed odd, considering his supposed education. I was also concerned he might be made the department head over me. And, to be frank, I didn't like him; he was an arrogant SOB. Anyone could buy a diploma at a yard sale or on EBay. Perhaps, I was just jealous. I'd only gone to Southwest Teachers College, a school no one had ever heard of.

One resident of my new summer community was a woman in her early thirties. Ruth Ames was a high school librarian and the daughter of the local police chief. Strong willed, athletic, and unmarried women over thirty always spooked me. If Ruth and I were to arm-wrestle, she would win. Every morning, she jogged the path that circled the lake. When the spirit moved me, I walked the path. That was the extent of my physical fitness program. Whenever she saw me, she greeted me with a pleasant "Hello, Alex." I hadn't decided if she would fulfill my desire for a summer romance, but chances were she wasn't into overweight and out of shape men in their mid-thirties. Only hungry, stray dogs and students with failing-grade-point-averages seemed to seek me out.

Early in July, I ran into Ruth at the Pineville post office. She was pleasant, but cool. Other than her few innocuous comments about the warm weather, that was the extent of our first conversation.

I was having dinner at the Pine Hill Restaurant on Loon Lake about a week later when Ruth walked in. She asked if she could join me. That was a surprise; but as all the other tables were full, I didn't read much into her actions. We chatted briefly about nothing in particular. I surmised she was just being friendly, seeing that we were neighbors.

On Sunday nights at the lake, there were potluck dinners with my fellow residents. We met at the large log cabin, the former paper company office. One Sunday night at the clubhouse potluck, Ruth brought shepherd's pie, one of

my favorites. I told her it was great. Better yet, she seemed more talkative this time.

"What's your novel about?" she asked. I'd indicated to her I was a writer of sorts.

"I guess all first works are somewhat autobiographical. I can't decide if I want the parents to be heroes or villains."

She smiled. "Isn't everyone a little of each? Even parents aren't exempt."

"You're right," I replied. "There are always hidden secrets about people you think you know. I'll give you the first two chapters of the book to read, if you'd like. You can always say 'no.' You won't hurt my feelings."

She gave me her first genuine smile. "Fair enough, let me see it. I'm not an expert critic, but I know what I like, and what I don't. I may be brutal, so let me know if you're suicidal. My dad would complain about all the extra paperwork, if anything happened."

She ran her fingers through her long blonde hair, and I got goose bumps. I couldn't get over the way she maintained eye contact with me. The more I looked at her, the prettier she became, and the more ordinary looking I felt I was.

The next morning, she passed me on the lake path. "I left the first two chapters of my book on your front porch swing," I yelled out.

"Thanks." She waved, but continued her brisk pace. I could have sworn her blonde ponytail beckoned me to follow as I watched her disappear. But walking was enough for me, and jogging was still out. I'd heard jogging was hard on the knees.

That night, she called. "I made a few notes on your manuscript. Overall, it's not bad – just needs work. Keep at it, Alex."

I was surprised she got back to me so soon. In fact, I wasn't sure she'd get back to me at all. With most people, anything that sounds like work, is too much - and especially during vacations.

"I'll leave my marked-up copy on your porch in the morning," she said. That was the extent of our conversation – not even a casual word about the weather.

The next morning, the edited manuscript was there on my front porch. She'd given me pages of notes. I was overwhelmed by the scope of her review. It was excellent. Yes, she was right – it needed work.

I called her back that evening. "Thanks for your insight. Your comments were right on. I'll drop off the next two chapters. I'll keep sending them as long as you have any interest."

"That would be great," she replied. "The story line is good, but I think the characters need more development. They should be people you love or hate - not just cardboard characters to move the plot along. You have a good beginning."

After Ruth's phone call, I felt inspired. I might actually finish the book. People wrote for different reasons - sometimes for recreation, often as a mental exercise, or as a way of getting rid of demons from the past, but certainly not for money.

Speaking of the past, my wife often said she was disappointed in me. Sarah said she should have married her high school sweetheart, George Livingston. He went on to become a successful businessman who later sold his company for big bucks. Perhaps, it was only his money she was thinking about. We made a decent living, but nothing like George. The irony was that when my wife died in the car accident, George didn't even come to the funeral. That perfect marriage to George was only her dream - apparently not his. I really loved my Sarah, and I've tended to forget the times she annoyed me. She never really disappointed me.

Ruth didn't disappoint me either with her edits of my book.

On Sunday evenings at the clubhouse, Ruth and I discussed great books and famous authors. She was a good listener, and I enjoyed her company. On a personal level, I told her all about the death of my wife. Ruth was sympathetic and understanding, but she wasn't one to volunteer much about herself. I seemed to do all the talking, but then I liked to talk if someone was willing to listen to me.

"I won't be here next week," she said, as we were about to leave the clubhouse one Sunday evening. "The Pine College Theater Group is putting on 'The Cherry Orchard.' Perhaps you would like to go."

"Sounds great. I have a thing this summer about getting back to the Russian classics."

"I can take you on my motorcycle." She smiled, and made sure I'd heard her.

"I used to ride. My boss said I was an accident going somewhere to happen. I have scars on my knees to prove it."

She smiled. "I'm careful, not crazy. If it rains, we can still go in your car. Say next Sunday, at noon?"

"If I can risk my novel in your hands, I guess I can risk my life, too."

She leaned forward and patted me on the shoulder. "It's late. So, I'm going to call it a night. I'm meeting my dad for breakfast."

"Would you have him do a favor for me – run a background check on a Walter Smith, an English teacher at LCC?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me what this is all about. Dad is going to ask me 'why.' He can't just run a check on anyone for a whim." She gave me a funny look, as if I'd finally flipped out.

"I'd be embarrassed to tell you. For now, let's call it a possible theft of identity."

"That makes me even more anxious for an explanation."

"Not now. Later, I promise," I replied.

She called me the following evening. "Dad has something on Walter Smith. He was reported missing two years ago. Dad is getting pictures from Stanford and from LCC to see if 'your Walter Smith is that missing man. I'll keep you posted."

"I wouldn't want your life to be dull."

She laughed. "See you on the lake path in the morning. Keep writing, Alex. Reading your novel breaks the monotony of what could have been a dull summer. Do you have any other obsessions I might be interested in?"

"I'll tell you mine if you'll tell me yours," I retorted.

"I don't think we have to be that clinical."

I heard noises outside my cabin one evening, so I turned on the outdoor lights and stepped outside. Several deer were wandering through my property. Deer and moose often drank at the lake. I could see the lights were still on in Ruth's cabin. I hoped she was reading the latest chapter of my book. A friend once said that my love scenes were like dry medical school lectures. "All action, with no real feelings."

The lights went off in Ruth's cabin a few minutes later, and I was free to fantasize. What would her notes be?

Although she waved to me the next morning, no marked-up copy of this chapter was left on my porch. I got a call from her in the late afternoon. "Send me the next chapter. Something is all wrong with the previous chapter. It lacks passion. It's too mechanical."

She was probably right. I was at a loss as to how I would correct the problem. But there was still time. It was only late July.

Since we'd be seeing "The Cherry Orchard" the coming Sunday, I spent time the night before, re-reading the play. Ruth would probably ask for my critical review after the performance, and I'd better be ready - like cramming the night before exams when I was in college.

Sunday noon, Ruth showed up on her motorcycle for our trip to the theater. I thought she was very attractive in her form-fitting leather jacket.

"You look great," I said to her.

"Thanks, hop on."

That was the first time I'd put my arms around her, and I liked the sensation. She gave me a broad smile, and we were off. She didn't scare me or try to impress me with her driving skills. It was just an ordinary Sunday drive that was over far too soon. We arrived at the theater barn about fifteen minutes later.

There were no seats - just bales of hay to sit on.

"What did you think of the play?" Ruth asked me after the show. We'd stopped for coffee at the Playhouse Diner, just across the road from the theater. A light rain was falling.

"The performance was good. Perhaps, some of the college actors were too young for the parts. But I've always liked the theme that we should adjust to inevitable change, even if we don't want to. The character of the brother always frustrates me. It's his lack of decision-making that bothers me. He refuses to adjust," I replied.

"How did you adjust to the death of your wife?"

Ruth had such a serious look that she seemed like a different person - not that happy-go-lucky young woman I saw out jogging every morning.

"I realized my life had to move on," I replied. "The past would not perpetuate the future. I had to find new people and new things in my life - people like you."

Her serious look turned to a smile. "Let me tell you something about myself. I was married briefly when I was quite young. My roommate in college had a date with this guy on the football team. She kept a diary that I read from time to time when she wasn't around. This was on the Q.T. She described him as 'the greatest ever.'"

I smiled. "Interesting, go on."

"I was more than intrigued, so I wangled a date. She hadn't exaggerated a bit. I was in heaven. We got married. Later, he was drafted by the pros; but in his second game, he was badly injured - paralyzed from the waist down. We were both devastated. Three months later, he overdosed on painkillers and died. I thought my life was over, too."

"Ruth, I don't know what to say. Unexpected tragedies are always the hardest to deal with. For me, I was numb with pain for a long time."

Tears came to her eyes. "Enough of this serious talk. It's not raining now. I think we should try to make it back to the lake, while we have a chance."

The rain hadn't stopped altogether, so we got soaked on the ride back. She didn't seem bothered, and neither was I. I was happy to be with her, and I hoped she felt the same.

When she stopped in front of my cabin and let me off, we hugged each other for what seemed like a long time.

"Thanks for a great time," I said. "You're really someone very special to me."

"You're very special, too," she replied.

I watched her as she drove down to her cabin. I think she waved to me, just before she went in, but I wasn't sure.

The rain had stopped, but a strong breeze had kicked up waves on the lake. I could hear the sounds of boats banging against the clubhouse dock. But the sky was clear, except for the occasional flashes of lightning in the distant clouds. I wondered if I was in love.

She called me the following morning. "Dad is here. Why don't you come on down? He has news about your Walter Smith."

Ruth and Dan, her father, were sitting on the front porch of her cabin. He was a tall, thin man and older than I would have thought.

"Your Smith is actually Harold Green," Dan said. "Green may have known the real missing person. There's a

warrant out for Green. At the least, we have a case of theft of identity, maybe more. Green has since disappeared. The authorities in Moose Lake will keep me informed."

"More coffee, Dad?" Ruth asked. She refilled her father's cup and poured one for me.

"Thanks for the info, sir. And Ruth, your coffee was a real eye-opener, too."

She smiled and squeezed my shoulder.

All too soon, the summer would be over. The days were getting shorter, and the evenings were cooler. I didn't want the summer to end.

I continued to drop off chapters of my book for Ruth to read. I even got an agent interested. But I still had a problem with the love scene chapter. I mentioned this to Ruth several times. My many re-writes just didn't hack it. Otherwise, the book was finished.

"Why don't I just write the chapter for you?" she asked me one Sunday evening in early September.

"I've a better idea. Isn't there some rule in writing that it is better to show rather than tell?"

At first, she seemed surprised. With a knowing smile, she leaned over and kissed me. "I agree," she said finally.

"Great idea."

Will You?

by Alexander C. Woodbury

Could we fly to the moon,
Then to Venus and Mars?
Perhaps we could reach out
And touch distant stars.
Could we climb far-off mountains,
And ford running streams?
Will you say that I'm special,
And part of your dreams?
Will you think of me fondly,
And not go astray?
Will you love me tomorrow,
As much as today?

The Final Vacation

by Alexander C. Woodbury

On a warm late August morning, I drove my rented car to the lodge in Maine. My sister chose not to make the trip as she had three small children to look after. The urn with my dad's ashes was in the trunk. The last twenty miles were over a dirt and gravel road, the part of the trip I remembered when the whole family came to the lodge every summer when I was young. I usually got carsick. vacations at the lodge were always happy times for me. It reminded me when the entire family was together.

Before Dad died after the car accident a month ago, he indicated to me he wished to be cremated and have his ashes scattered around that same lodge where we had spent most of our summer vacations. He said the lodge was his special place, his own private heaven – an escape from his life in Boston. He continued to come to the lodge, even after Mom died of cancer.

Nell, the lodge manager should pick out the exact spot to scatter the ashes, according to his final wishes. I realized Nell must have been very important to him, although she was someone my sister and I knew nothing about. Nell had spent several days with him at the hospital during those final days, so I assumed there was some special bond between them.

"I was devastated by your father's death," Nell said to me at Dad's memorial service at Grace Episcopal Church. "He was a good friend, and I'll really miss him." Tears came to her eyes, and I knew she wasn't just being polite.

Nell was a young woman about thirty. She had long dark brown hair tied back in a ponytail, and her eyes were deep brown. Charming and animated, but not a dazzler – pretty, but not beautiful. I could see why Dad was attracted to her; she was outgoing and friendly. She was someone I instantly liked and wanted to get to know.

I remembered Dad always flirted with young women, and they seemed to enjoy it, although I found those situations embarrassing, especially while Mom was still alive. Mom described him as a “harmless, incurable flirt.” Sis described him as anything but “harmless.” She didn’t know of any specifics, but relied on her intuition. I felt she had an exaggerated view of the truth. Perhaps, I was just naïve.

The main lodge building was a hundred-year-old giant log cabin, surrounded by ten small cabins, with no two alike. The private lake was crystal clear, and powerboats weren’t allowed, maintaining the tranquility of the place. Many of the same people had been coming to the lodge for years, just like my parents. Some I even remembered when I came here as a child.

Unlike my father, I felt fishing was boring, but that might have been a function of my age. Perhaps in another twenty years, when I was fifty, fishing would have more appeal.

“Are you a fisherman like your father?” Nell asked me as I was signing the guest register. A young boy was running around the lobby. I assumed that was her son, and that she was a single parent. She wore no wedding ring.

“The closest I get to fish is at the Legal Seafood Restaurant in Boston,” I replied. She gave me a warm smile. I wanted to say I enjoyed fishing, just to please her.

“I give fishing lessons three times a week, in case you’re interested,” she said.

“My last lesson was when I was about ten, and I’ve forgotten everything I might have learned. But I may just give it a whirl again.”

“I’ll be down at the dock at seven tomorrow morning,” she said. “Other guests will be there, too. We supply all the fishing gear. I’ll have fresh coffee here in the lobby at six-thirty for anyone up at that hour.”

“I’ll join your group if I can get up in time,” I replied. “I promise.”

My cabin had a large stone fireplace and grey slate floors. I was tired after the three-hour drive from Boston and the flight from California. I slept soundly until the alarm clock woke me up at six. The early morning air was cool so I put on a warm sweater and fleece-lined boots.

In the lobby of the lodge, as Nell promised, coffee was ready for those joining her for fishing. After I finished my coffee, I walked down to the dock.

The morning sun had taken some of the chill out of the air, but there was a slight haze over the lake. I thought of my dad and wished he could be here. But in a sense, he was here. His ashes would always be here. Nell had planned a brief ceremony for the scattering later that day- a form of closure I needed.

An older couple was seated on a bench at the dock when I arrived.

"We're Joe and Sarah," the middle-aged man said as he got up to greet me.

"Nell always clues us in on the best fishing spots," Joe said. "We've been coming here for years. Your dad was a good friend and a great fisherman. We will miss him."

Nell joined us a few minutes later. She opened the door to a small shed that contained fishing rods and tackle and passed the equipment out. "Is everyone wide awake?" she asked.

She's a morning person like me, I thought.

It seemed like we'd known each other a long time, and this was a regular morning routine. All during her instructions, we exchanged glances and smiles. She was a comfortable person to be with.

"Are you always this intense?" she asked me after she'd completed the lessons.

"I was about to ask you the same question," I replied.

She laughed.

The older couple left in a small rowboat to go fishing, leaving Nell and me alone on the dock.

"Let's go for a walk," she said. "There's something you should know."

I detected a serious tone to her voice.

"I met your father the year after your mother died. He was shy and polite, but clearly in pain from her loss. I'd just ended a long-term relationship. I'd taken a summer job here to

escape, and I've been here ever since. Your father and I became good friends. We spent a lot of time together."

I sensed she was a person who chose her words carefully and what she was saying was more than a few off-the-cuff remarks or polite platitudes.

She picked up a small stone which she skip-jumped across the surface of the lake. "We were two people adrift, and our twenty year age difference didn't seem to matter. I can't say we were in love. We were just two people in need of each other, but maybe that is love."

"I felt someone was new in my dad's life when I visited him that Christmas," I said. "He never mentioned you, but in many ways, he was a very private person. I'm not surprised he found a new relationship. He was never a person who wanted to be alone. I understand life does go on."

We walked over and sat down on a large branch of a fallen tree. Canada geese were feeding at the water's edge. A squirrel darted in front of us. I felt happy to be with Nell. She seemed someone very special to me.

"What's your boy's name?" I asked.

"Your brother's name is George, Junior." She looked at me and smiled. I squeezed her hand. I didn't know what to say.

The morning sun had burned the haze off the lake. It was the start of a new day. I was glad to be alive.

Second Grade Portraits

by Anne Savoie

These radiant faces are losing the soft roundness of infancy,
 revealing the beauty of youth.

Visits from the tooth fairy have left their smiles a work in
 progress.

Bony elbows and knobby knees poke from rapidly-growing
arms and legs.

Fingers are as delicate as the first tender shoots of spring;
 knuckles still dimpled.

When you catch them being serious, there is no one more
 business-like.

Let loose to run free, these creatures are soon breathless,
 dirt-smudged and sun-kissed.

Their shouts, squeals and giggles fill the air.

Returned home to be fed and bathed,
 they settle and slip into slumber –

Creating the most heart-stirring moments those
 who love them will ever know.

Children grow and time advances; fate is often kind,
 sometimes cruel.

But this portrait is ours forever, if we will hold it in our hearts.

Once (or twice) removed

Massacre Of Hope

by Gilda Horgan

Red blood,
Hot from the severed veins of my aspirations.

My dreams,
Murdered by the steely blade
Of your negative thoughts.

Do not bind the gash with the tattered gauze
Of your half-hearted enthusiasm, too late given.

I have already left you.

The bandage you thought hastily to apply
Was too small to cover the wound
Inflicted by the fiery brand of your pessimism.

It

by Gilda Horgan

It feels.
It needs.
It requires stroking
And
Encumbering arms to pull it close,
Embrace it,
Give it nourishment,
Make it whole.

Alive with desire
As younger days
When it was fit,
Supple,
Appealing.

My body.
Not to be mistaken for any other
Or neglected any longer
By anyone.

A Useful Skill

by Gail Dennehy

(Based on a folktale compiled by D. L. Ashliman, B.A., M.A., Ph.D.)

Long ago and far away, the king and queen of a large Eastern country had a son. This son, Hasan, was a handsome young man who had been raised in the ways of princes in those days. He knew art and music, and was tutored by the Grand Vizier in ways of ruling, preparing him for the day when he would be king.

All the princesses from the surrounding countries came before him, seeking to be his wife. They, too, were schooled in arts and music, but they languished their days away making themselves lovely and doing nothing of real use. This bothered the prince tremendously. Hasan thought to himself that he might just be a little like these useless princesses. He sought out the Grand Vizier and told him his worries.

The Grand Vizier thought that perhaps the prince was right and told him this in the most tactful way possible. Secretly, he was quite pleased the prince was thinking for himself at last.

The prince decided that he would rather marry the hardest working woman of his own country than one of the useless princesses. So he and the Grand Vizier dressed as commoners and went out to search the country for a woman who worked hard enough to be a Queen. They asked each citizen they met who was the hardest working woman in the country, and everywhere they went, the citizens told of a

certain weaver's lovely daughter who worked from morning to night weaving in her father's shop. Her hard work had made her father rich, for not only did she make the most beautiful rugs, but she was an excellent saleswoman and businessperson. The prince heard all this and decided he should meet this weaver's daughter for himself.

It was a long trip to the weaver's shop, especially for the Grand Vizier. The prince didn't know how to raise a tent, or start a fire, or cook a meal, and the Grand Vizier had to do all that. He didn't mind though, for he hoped that the prince was about to learn a lesson worth the work.

At last, the young prince and his accomplice reached the shop of the weaver. There they saw beautiful rugs and cloths hanging in the window and inside was a young woman working very hard on a loom. Hasan studied her from the doorway and thought that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

When the young woman, whose name was Aqila, noticed the two men, she immediately jumped up and approached them with words of welcome. "How may I help you, good sirs?" she asked.

The prince replied, "We had come searching for a small rug for our tent, but I can see that the quality of these rugs is far too rich for our pockets."

Aqila smiled. "Thank you for the lovely complement, sir. I have made these myself and am proud of my work. They are quite expensive, but I might have something that one of my apprentices made that would suit your need. If you will wait one moment."

Hasan waited gladly, for seeing that the weaver's daughter was as kind and gracious as she was talented and lovely, he had immediately decided that this was the wife for him. However, he was still wrapped in the same vanity as the princesses. He didn't want to approach Aqila for her hand in marriage dressed as a commoner, so he pulled the small coins from his pocket and purchased the rug she brought from the back room. Then, saying goodbye, he and the Grand Vizier returned to the palace.

Since princes never approached commoners with marriage proposals in those days, he sent the Grand Vizier in his place. He arranged for him to travel in the finest style with rich robes and gifts for the lovely Aqila. "Go now and bring her back to the palace to be my wife," Hasan ordered.

So the Grand Vizier again travelled to the shop of the weaver's daughter and laid before her all the gifts sent by the prince and when the woman had studied them all, she asked, "Which of these did the prince make with his own hand?"

The Grand Vizier replied, "Why, none. In our palace, the prince doesn't do manual labor."

"Has he no skills then?" asked Aqila.

"He is trained to rule, madam. He does not work."

"Oh," she said. "I am afraid that I cannot marry a man who has no skills. If he should lose his kingdom, how would we live?"

The Grand Vizier thought that here truly was a wise and intelligent young woman. He hurried to bring her message back to the prince.

The prince was quite taken aback, but he thought a while about what Aqila had said. Soon he realized that this was very like the situation that bothered him about the royal princesses. He fell even more in love with the wise young weaver's daughter and set about learning a trade to please her.

His father and his mother were very surprised to see Hasan call the finest weavers in the capital city to the palace and work with them daily. Soon, he was making rugs as fine as any in the land even those of the weaver's daughter. He even learned from one wizard how to actually put messages in the weave of the carpet. It was a skill that might one day be very useful for a king. All this pleased the elder king and his queen very much for they had worried about their son. They looked forward to meeting the woman responsible for the changes in him.

When he finished a particularly lovely rug, he gave it to the Grand Vizier, "Take this back to Aqila and tell her it is a gift from the King's son who now has a skill to support his princess. Ask her, please, if she will marry me now."

In due time, the Grand Vizier returned and with him was the lovely weaver's daughter. Hasan and Aqila were married in a beautiful ceremony. They were very happy. The prince taught his wife to weave his codes, and they sent each other love letters woven in fine silken threads.

As happens, in time the older king, Hasan's father, died and the prince climbed the throne to rule. The new king and his lovely queen were beloved by the people for their wisdom and the great love they shared.

Their people were content for they judged well and fairly among the citizens. Life was good in the country and a man who worked hard could advance himself. One day, word came to the palace of an evil priest who had built a monastery high in the mountains. Many people were disappearing and their families begged the king for help. The king sent his friend the Grand Vizier to the mountains to see what was happening to his people. The Grand Vizier did not return.

Hasan considered the Grand Vizier his friend and this was not something he could allow, so he kissed his Aquila goodbye, and put on the clothes of a commoner again. Setting out to find his friend, he began to ask among the people for word of the evil priest. He heard that the people who were disappearing seemed to be all the artists and artisans of the countryside and he devised a plan.

Pulling his small loom from his pack, Hasan sat each night at his campfire and worked on a lovely carpet. He began to attract the attention of other travelers who passed on word of the talented young weaver. Finally, in the monastery, the evil priest learned about the itinerant weaver.

When Hasan reached the region where the monastery stood, the priest came out to meet him. "Come in to the monastery, young sir. Work your weaving here, and I will pay you well. All honor will be to you," the priest said. He placed his arm around the young king's shoulders and led him through the gate into a courtyard. There two burly guards set upon him, and he was dragged unconscious into a dungeon deep within the mountain.

When Hasan awoke, he found himself in a dark and frightening place. The air reeked of smoke, brands of rushes hung on the walls. More rushes lay strewn around the cave as bedding for the men imprisoned there. Hasan saw that many of the finest artisans of the area were already in the dungeon. The priest was working them as slaves and getting richer and richer on the sale of their art while they starved in the dark. There were potters and weavers, goldsmiths, and sculptors. In one corner, stood a painter who squinted in the dimness as he painted sunlight and clouds from what could only be a memory now.

The Vizier had been thrown into the cell, too. By the light from the dirty torches illuminating the cell, Hasan could see how badly his friend the Grand Vizier had been treated.

Hasan dragged himself to his friend's side. "My friend, I have sorely missed you. Are you well?"

The Grand Vizier searched for the voice of his king and it was then that Hasan knew what had been done to him. When the evil priest had learned that the vizier was a spy, he had blinded him.

The king was enraged. "We will leave this place soon. I promise you."

"No one leaves this place alive, my king. No one," the despondent vizier replied.

The king patted him on his shoulder and stood up. He returned to the gate at the front of the dungeon and summoned a guard. "Sir, is this how you treat an artist? How am I expected to work without my things. I have no loom, no fine threads. I can weave a carpet that the Queen herself would purchase for a King's ransom, but not with these poor things."

When the evil priest heard what the young man had said, he thought long and hard. It could very well be a trick, but if not... why, he could become rich beyond thought if he earned the Queen's patronage. He had the young man brought before him. "I have heard what you said. You think you can please royalty?"

"I can. But royalty will expect the best of materials. I would need gold and silver threads and fine silks of purple, blue, and green. Why, she might even expect fine gems. That is, if you really wanted to gain her attention. After all, she can buy anything she wants," said Hasan.

The evil priest almost drooled in greed. I will do it, he thought. I will be rich.

"You will have what you need," he told the young man. "But try any tricks and you will be punished." He made a chopping motion with his right hand. "See how well you weave without a hand," he chuckled grimly.

The next morning, a large loom was carried into the dungeon and purple, blue, and green threads were given to Hasan. Working intently, he wove a vision of a garden. A peacock strutted in full plumage and, within its feathers, he wove the finest emeralds and sapphires. The lake behind the peacock glistened with diamonds, and in the border, hidden among gold and silver threads, was a coded message for the Queen's eyes only.

The king worked long and hard on the carpet, and with every thread, he thanked his god that he had married a woman who had insisted on a man with a skill.

Finally, the carpet was finished and brought before the evil priest. He was amazed at the workmanship and beauty of it. His greedy mind added each thread and every gem, and he set a huge price, a price that only a queen could pay.

The priest sent his most trusted deputy to the palace to sell the rug. With such a lovely piece of weaving, it wasn't hard for the deputy to gain an audience with the queen. Looking at the beautiful workmanship, Aqila at once knew it belonged to her husband. Hasan had been missing for weeks now and when she saw the coded message in the border of the carpet, she knew exactly why. "Guards," she shouted. "Seize this man."

She had the deputy questioned and thrown into prison. She was infuriated that anyone would dare seize her king. Dressing herself in the armor of a warrior, she called together the army and told them all what had happened. "Will you march with me?" she cried.

"We march," shouted the army. "We march with our lady to save the king!"

Soon, the vast brigade approached the monastery and placed it under siege. With catapults and battering rams they tore down its walls. The evil priest attempted to hide among his followers, but the men soon sought him out.

Queen Aqila marched to the iron bars of the dungeon in the mountain. Using her own horse and rope, she pulled the gate from the stone and stood back as the prisoners stumbled into the light. The king came last with his friend the Grand Vizier in his arms. The love that glowed in the faces of the King and Queen when they saw each other lit up the sky and the army cheered the return of their king and the courage of their brave and wise young queen.

Carefully, the Grand Vizier was placed in an upholstered sedan that was lifted onto the shoulders of the strongest soldiers in the army. He was carried gently back to the palace. There he was nursed back to health and lived in honor and peace for the rest of his life, serving as tutor to the beautiful children of the wise and useful ruling family.

As for the skilled King and his wise Queen, they ruled long and well, and were loved by the people of the Eastern kingdom forever.

Dancing in the Afternoon

by Gail Dennehy

They found her in early May, in that halfway time between winter and spring when the snow is gone, but the rain is still cold. The world hadn't yet started its renewal and it was that gray time when it's so easy to forget hope.

She had been dead two weeks. Quietly expiring as she had lived the last twenty years: unnoticed, alone.

The town's people tried to remember what she had looked like, but they only had a few old memories. Someone said she had come from the city, a widow or maybe divorced. The postmaster remembered that she got letters from down south at one time. The grocer's boy, who had noticed her weekly deliveries piled on the porch and found her wrapped in a shawl and cold, said that he had never heard her speak. A weird one, he thought.

In the corner, the old man sat and listened to them putting period to her life. He remembered her dancing across the kitchen, her body taut and glowing, naked in the late afternoon sun. He remembered the feeling of her hair as it brushed across his shoulders, warm and vibrating with life. And oh God, he remembered the smell of her, the sweet smell of lavender and womanliness that had taken his breath away. He remembered how, in the aftermath of love, her voice had spoken of life and dreams and far away places.

He would have left his wife and home if she had only said a maybe. But time had drifted between them; his children, her past. Finally, all that remained was a nod and a secret smile and then, not even that.

Slowly, she had floated away from reality and retired
behind the lace curtains of her house.

No one had sought her out.

No one had noticed.

Yet he remembered, and sometimes, when the late
afternoon sun shone just right, he could see her dancing still.

The Selkie's Child

by Gail Dennehy

In the mountains and islands of Ireland, the Tuatha De Danaan, the people of Danu, once ruled. They were mighty warriors and gods and goddesses, and the people looked on them with awe. But with the coming of Patrick and his priests, the De Danaan hid away in golden underground halls called Sidhe, and gradually they slipped from the memories of the people.

Only bits and pieces of their tale remained, but they weren't mighty anymore. They were known as elves, leprechauns, or banshee. Manannan, once mighty lord of the sea, and his children became known as Selkies. The Selkies were seal-like folk who could remove their skins and walk the land like humans. Human men and women could not resist the attraction of the Selkie and they loved them hopelessly. It was said that if a human man could find and hide away the skin of a Selkie woman, she would be his wife. The Selkie's ties to the sea were strong and if someday she found the skin, no matter the ties that bound them, the wife would answer the call of the sea again and return to the halls of Manannan.

Jamie sat on the rocky shore watching the waves crash in and out. In the window of the cottage, his Gram watched him sit all alone. Jamie was usually all alone. He was a fine boy but the sea always called to him. She wondered if there would ever be a day when the neighbors would accept him with his differences. His webbed hands and feet made him

seem strange to the others in the village, and the children and a few of the more ignorant adults taunted him with his strangeness. When he was younger, he would come crying home from school almost every day. "They called me fish boy, Gram," he would sob. Gram would hold him in her arms and curse the madness that made his mother choose to wed Ursula's dark-eyed grandson. It seemed as if madness surrounded the child; his mom, his da, and most of all, his grandmother, who was the stuff of legends.

Jamie was eighteen now and graduated from school. It should be time for him to leave the village, time to go off to university, to join the service maybe. Time for him to make his own life but instead, he sat on the rocks, staring into the grey belly of the ocean. If it was time for nothing else, she decided, it was time for him to know the truth.

"Jamie," she called. "Come on in now to tea."

As he stood up and headed towards the cottage, she turned and poked at the peat in the fireplace. Taking the kettle off its hook, she poured boiling water into the pot on the table. Then she placed the sandwiches she had made on a platter near the teapot.

Jamie flung open the door, letting a gust of bitter sea air into the warm room, but the heat of the fire soon cleared it off. He hung his coat on the peg by the door and, smiling, gave Gram a kiss atop her head before seating himself at the table.

"Ah, it's a fine day on the sea today, Gram," he said. "I've a yearning, you know. But then, I usually do, don't I?"

"Aye, lad, you do. I think maybe it's time we talked on that, don't you?"

"What do you mean? I know I promised you I'd not be going out with the boats to fish and I've kept that promise, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have, but at what cost to yourself? When I made you promise it was for fear of your not returning to me. Now I wonder if I did the right thing."

"Gram, I promised because I love you. I can't seem to help this feeling I get about the sea. But I'll not do anything to worry you. Sometimes it seems as though the neighbors are right, there is a bit of the fish in me." He smiled sadly.

Gram sucked in her breath. Her chest hurt with knowledge she held. She raised her eyes to Jamie's. "Boy, I've a story to tell you now. You're old enough to know, I think."

"Know what, Gram?" Jamie asked, puzzled.

"Have you ever heard mention of your grandmother Ursula?"

"Sure, Gram, how could I not? The others loved to taunt me with her name. They talk about her like she was some sort of crazy person."

"Well," said Gram. "Many thought she was indeed."

"Ursula was the daughter of the lord of the castle. A fine looking girl she was, too, and many a young man from the district sought out her hand in marriage. But she was a bit vain, she turned them all down. Not good enough for herself, she thought. She caused quite a few broken hearts but like all who cause harm, harm came to her in the end. Or maybe, the harm came to her children's child."

"To me, Gram? What do you mean?"

"The story goes that, like you, Ursula loved the sea. Each night, after the castle went to bed, she would go down to the shore and walk the sands there below her home. It's said she would hear a powerful music there. She told her old nurse about it and word spread through the village. Many a vindictive heart took pleasure in reciting how the lovely Lady Ursula was losing her sanity.

"One full moon night, as she walked the sands, a man approached her from out the waves. He was handsome, those who saw him say, with broad shoulders and deep, dark eyes. Black hair like yours fell to his shoulders. That first night, he didn't say a word, just fell into step beside her, and they walked the strand through the night.

"It was three nights running before he even took her hand. When he did, she noticed the webbing between his fingers. She thought that she should be frightened, but she wasn't. She felt safe and loved, really loved. It was strange, he hadn't spoken a word yet, but she knew he loved her and she, for the very first time in her life, knew that it was love for him that she felt within her.

"They lay together there on the sea strand. Within three months, she knew she was with child. Now this was not acceptable in those days, not at all, and when she told her father, the lord was furious and he cast her out. Ursula had a small legacy of her own from her mother. She took the money and purchased this very cottage. She lived here for the rest of her life, and the man would rise from the sea to visit her here on the rocks. She bore him three children, all dark and

handsome and with the webbing on their hands and feet that they inherited from their father. The oldest two returned to the sea, but the youngest stayed and wed my girl Meggie. The youngest was your Da."

"Gram, are you trying to say me Da was a Selkie?" laughed Jamie.

Gram looked deeply into his smiling brown eyes, "Only half, Jamie. Only half a Selkie."

Jamie shook his head unbelieving. He thought that his Gram was getting superstitious in her old age. Or maybe, she was so ashamed of him and his webs that she was imagining things, he thought bitterly.

Gram and Jamie finished their tea in silence. Jamie sat thinking that maybe it was time for him to leave the village. If even Gram was ashamed of him, there was no reason for him to remain. He thought of leaving this cottage, of leaving this shore, and his heart felt torn in two. He just didn't see any choice. He couldn't go to sea because of his promise to Gram, and there really was no other work in the village. At least, there was no other work that anyone would hire him for.

Later that night, the sea called him down again. The moon was full and the music was echoing in his head. He hadn't told anyone ever about the music. It was as if a chorus of a thousand beautiful voices was raising a holy chant. He remembered his gram's story about the music that Lady Ursula was supposed to have heard. He shook his head. A story, that's all it was.

He walked down over the rocks to the small strand below the cottage. The moon laid a path across the water and to Jamie's eyes it shone like diamonds. He could almost imagine that there was someone out there. He closed his eyes against the thought.

Imagination 'twas, just like his Gram's story about how he got his webs. He opened his eyes and held his hand before his face. These little pieces of skin were all that stood between him and normal people. The pain and bitterness that he usually kept from his Gram, rose to the surface and with it, came the anger. Whatever had caused this, he thought it an ugly fate.

As Jamie stood on the shore glaring at his hands, he didn't notice the ripples on the surface of the sea. The arms of a woman swimming into shore parted the waves smoothly. She reached the shallows and stood up, dripping water. The

moon put blue-black highlights into her long hair. Her body glimmered like a pearl in the light. She glided silently up the strand to where Jamie stood with his back turned to the sea. Tentatively, she reached out her hand and placed it on his shoulder. Jamie jumped, and turning quickly, lost his balance. He fell to the sand and lay there. Looking up, he saw the most beautiful girl he had ever known.

She was tall, almost as tall as he, with long dark hair and black eyes that looked down at him with sympathy. She seemed to understand what he had been feeling. She smiled. Jamie rose to his feet. There didn't seem to be any need for words. She put out her hand. Jamie took it and wonder crossed his face. Her hand was webbed. She led him gently down to the edge of the sea. As if in a trance, Jamie removed his outer clothes and followed her into the waves. The water closed over his head, and he could breathe. He could swim. Ahead in the glow of the moon-dappled water, he saw other people. He saw a man and woman, the same man and woman who were in the photo of his parents that his Gram kept on the bookshelf in the cottage. He swam to their smiling arms with the lovely Selkie girl beside him. As they held him, he felt, more than saw, the skin of the seal slip over their bodies. He felt strange himself, and looking down, he saw that he too was changing. With a joyous bark and a clap of his flippers, Jamie took off swimming with his family through the moonlit sea. He belonged here in this underwater place, as he had never done on land, he was home.

Anaphoric Ride

by Gail Thornton

The train grinds to life, eating virgin track.
Passengers shift and move around like silverfish.
The tired man has a window seat.
Picking up speed, the train passes through...

A place that looks like the Grand Canyon
but is really the black hole of his longings.
Being a thin man, he longs for many things.

A place where only Portuguese is spoken
and he finds the only word he understands is "gringo."
He knows that means him.

A place where bulimic cats toss dishes into the sink
and spray graffiti over the refrigerator, implicating
their owners in hideous crimes.

A place where Siamese twins marry brothers
and each has eleven children, no twins.
He knows this could only happen in Siam.

A place where he is born into a vortex of vowels
that envelop him in their amniotic way,
as they hunger for something solid.

A place where he finds he is the starlet in a snuff film and it is
fitting, somehow. He wants to finish this page anyway,
discontinue this B-rated romance.

A place where the aging cashier has a four-inch thumbnail,
painted pink, with her black hair tied up in a bow and he asks
himself, "And I thought money was dirty?"

A place where he wonders in the train what everyone else
thinks about 'eye contact' because he is making eye contact.
Then he realizes that you aren't supposed to make eye contact,
and now the rest of the ride is hard work staring at someone's
shoes, shifting to a purse, to a newspaper, to wishing this ride
was over, to a book, to a uniform, to a reflection in the
window...

To a place where the train never stops.

Polio and the Family House

by Gail Thornton

You held me
Captive in your rooms,
Stretched taut, like sheets between trees.
The stump of a child, oozing memories.
Bleeding through the whitewash,
I gave voice to my sister's dreams:
The couch; silver dollars under cushions;
Informed the Boogey Man
Mrs. Cleaver was there.

The House:
Under paper, a stairwell bellows a boy's signatures,
Challenging anyone to forget, ever.
Behind a bathroom door
A dark-haired child whispers
To the radiator that
Answered her cries.
The dinner table is silent,
A plate of food tossing at a teenaged apparition there;
Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and peas.
The stump-child's stretcher, bronzed at the foundry,
Yearly decorates itself with angels
made from
Reader's Digest's spray-painted gold.

The House:
Laughing
Keeps our faces tacked to the past;
Waiting
Holding
Breathing
Remembering
Inviting us in again.

Posing for Paul Klee

by Gail Thornton

Children use fat charcoals
The way his brush marks my form.
My face becomes a hint of a face,
my arms and legs useless,
left out through forgetfulness
like a spring snow shovel.

This coarse burlap burns my back,
as he hums a line of Stravinsky.
The music weaves its way
to the canvas, tinting me
with the gold pollen of his stamen.
I lay still to receive his gift.

Some may look upon me and see
only spaces, limits of the surface,
but I know better than they
the transcendence of his art,
and the crimson of a metered heart
where my swollen breast should be.

Jennifer's Dandelion

by Ray Benjamin

It was an accidental discovery – a one-in-a-billion chance – in a universe where chance and probability were illusions, or meant to be.

That morning, Jenn got up at five AM as always, so she could run while the world was waking up around her. For the short time she was running, she left all the problems and confusions of her life behind, and tried to be hyper-aware of the beauty of the natural world, or what was left of it in her suburban neighborhood. She drank in the dew-bejeweled spider webs, the black and gold bees making their morning rounds, their tiny legs coated with golden pollen. She mentally greeted each tree along her way, noted the progress of her neighbors' flower gardens, every detail of her route. If it weren't for this daily ritual, she would never have noticed that something was unusual about the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Wrigley's yard.

It took a few moments for her brain to process what she'd seen. When it offered up the impossible she stopped and tried to reverse course so quickly that she fell flat on her face in the Patterson's flower bed.

Sitting up and brushing off the mulch and marigold petals, she turned back to look at the break in the sidewalk. A root from the ancient oak in Mrs. Wrigley's yard was pushing one of the slabs of concrete up, cracking it in half. In that crack grew an ordinary dandelion. Except, what she'd seen wasn't ordinary.

She expected to discover she'd made a mistake, that her eyes were playing tricks on her. That's what it had to be,

because what she'd seen couldn't possibly be right. She got up and walked over.

There it was, a simple dandelion in full bloom, the bright yellow flower fresh as the morning itself. But it hadn't been anything about the weed itself that had stopped her. It had been the shadow. Because, while the dandelion's bloom was young and fresh, the shadow dandelion had a ball of fluffy seeds. It was so wrong that it made her head hurt just to look at it.

The shadows of everything else looked perfectly normal.

Wondering if this was a trick of the light, she held her hand out so it cast a shadow over the plant. But no, her hand's shadow seemed perfectly normal. When she wiggled her fingers, the fingers of the shadow wiggled along with the original's.

Curiosity outweighing prudence, she gently touched the leaf of the dandelion with one finger. It felt perfectly normal. When she pushed the leaf, the shadow moved along with the leaf, exactly as it should.

What could cause this? She couldn't imagine. Was it more widespread? She looked around. Not seeing anything else unusual, she cast her net a bit wider. She circled the big oak and checked the Patterson's flowerbed, but found nothing.

After several minutes, she gave up on her search. It was either that or be late for work. She squatted down to take one last look at the bright yellow flower. It's shadow was still one of a plant that had gone to seed and produced a fluffy white ball, not that of one newly bloomed.

What would happen if I picked it, she wondered. Would it cast that same shadow wherever I took it? She reached out, about to put her plan into action, but suddenly had misgivings. It felt wrong to disturb it. Whatever was going on here, it must be important. It was some weird light thing, or physics. Or, maybe it was a time anomaly, like in that Twilight Zone episode she saw last week. Maybe this was had something to do with one of those experiments, something at CERN or Fermilab. But those weren't exactly close to Boston, were they? Maybe some smart kids at MIT had gotten into something over their heads. She didn't know where to begin.

She should call someone.

That reminded her of her phone and she remembered her phone had a camera. She pulled it out of her pocket and

snapped pictures of the dandelion and its mismatched shadow from several angles. But who should she send them to?

The Wrigley's garage door screeched and started clanking, announcing the imminent emergence of Harriet Wrigley and her insatiable curiosity about all things neighborly.

Reluctantly, Jenn headed home. If she took any more time, she wouldn't be able to get anything done at the office before someone dragged her into a meeting.

As she showered and dressed, she wondered if she'd really seen the shadow or if she was losing her mind. She knew what her mom would say.

"You're always imagining things. You need to grow up!" It had been her mother's comment any time Jenn reported seeing something that had any hint of mystery or wonder.

I wasn't the one with hallucinations, Mom, she said to herself.

The memory of such comments still made Jenn boil with anger, because it was her mother, Patty, who was always having hallucinations. Jenn still had terrible dreams from the night her mother had lost it in a big department store near closing time. She'd been convinced that alien monsters were trying to capture her and Jenn, and subject them to horrific experiments. All night, Patty dragged Jenn from one hiding spot to another in the store. It didn't end until Patty passed out from exhaustion while trying to run from the security guard that found them huddled behind a display case the next morning.

The same thing is happening to me now, Jenn thought. It had always been her secret fear that someday she'd go crazy like her mother had, betrayed by the precise and logical mind that she thought of as her greatest gift.

She took out her camera and checked the pictures. They were still there, still wrong. She took a moment to email them to both her work and home accounts, just to be safe.

As she drove to WWG, where she worked as a software engineer, she tried to conjure up explanations for what she'd seen. Most were fantastic, a few were just silly. She knew enough about physics to understand how much was still unexplained by current theories. She preferred the logical world of computers over the chaotic madness of quantum

theory. But she suspected that if there was an explanation for this thing, some kind of quantum weirdness was involved.

How did you even get a universe like ours? she thought. The more we learned, the more convoluted and difficult our theories got. If we were really getting closer to the truth, shouldn't things be getting clearer, not murkier?

One small part of her, the less scientific side, had always half-believed that humanity was the creation of a mean little child-god, who'd enjoyed playing with her new toy for a few thousand years, but had grown bored, become distracted, and forgotten where she'd left the universe. Or maybe the universe was the canvas of a god who enjoyed nasty practical jokes. Just look at the mess the government was always in. How could that have happened if God didn't have a dark sense of humor?

The question of who to tell about the dandelion bothered her through the rest of the drive to work. Most people would just laugh at her, if they even understood what she was showing them. Whatever it is, she thought, it's got something to do with physics. I need a physicist.

Then she remembered Ambrose, at work. He had a degree in theoretical physics. He might not understand the shadow thing any better than she did, but he'd probably know who to talk to.

It was almost noon by the time she got up the nerve to call Ambrose. It's probably going to be something completely boring, she thought, and he's going to make fun of me. But, at least then he can explain it to me.

She dialed his extension. "Hey, I found something weird that I think you'd be interested in while I was running," she said.

"Yeah?"

She'd rehearsed what she was going to say, but all the words fled her brain. She wanted to kick herself. "It's hard to explain, but I took a picture. Why not come by and take a look?"

"Is this anything like asking me up to your loft to see your etchings?"

Jenn rolled her eyes. Why couldn't she know someone who was a great physicist, but who looked like that latest Bond actor? Ambrose was an alright guy, but geeky was an adjective invented to describe him. He was chunky, wore thick

glasses, and had little in the way of social skills. "Sorry, just a picture, no etchings." Sometimes, playing ignorant was the best strategy.

"I'll come by if I have time," he said, his standard answer.

He'll come, she thought. Ambrose wasn't particularly adept with women. He tried too hard, and his seeming inability to focus on any part of a woman's anatomy other than her breasts didn't win him any points, either. Jenn thought he was interesting to talk to and, since she put up with him, he rarely missed a chance to drop by and peek down her blouse.

Jenn couldn't remember the last time she'd been out on a real date. How had her life gotten like this?

"You're just not pretty and men don't like smart girls," Jenn's mom had told her, many times. "You might as well be a dyke."

The viciousness of the remark still made Jenn wince when she thought of it. Even after all this time; even knowing it was her mother's illness talking, the memory still made Jennifer feel like she wanted to curl up and die.

Jenn didn't fit the popular ideal of what a beautiful woman should look like. She was average height and a little heavy in the hips, just like her mother had been. Even daily running didn't help.

"You just have to learn new eating habits," a counselor had told her.

I'll bet she never had to deal with a schizophrenic mother who refused to take her medications, Jenn thought. Her mother's shopping trips had always been bizarre. They'd go to the grocery and her mother would fill the cart with snack foods. Jenn grew up thinking that the only moms that cooked dinner were the ones on television. If it hadn't been for school lunches, she might not have gotten any vegetables at all.

"Just be glad I didn't give you up for adoption," her mom would shout, whenever she was mad at Jenn. "I could have had a real life! Your father wouldn't have left me if I'd gotten rid of you. He couldn't take your constant crying. He couldn't stand you! I could have given you up, but no, I fought for you! You just remember that!"

Jenn destroying her mom's life was a common theme of such family discussions. Jenn never managed to yell back

what she wanted to say, that she'd have been better off anywhere else. She'd fantasized about discovering that she'd been adopted, and then finding her real parents. No such luck. The older she got, the more she looked like her mom.

Ambrose wandered by a few minutes later.

Jenn displayed the first of the pictures up on her monitor. It didn't look quite as obvious to her now as it had before. Could it have just been a trick of the light? No, it was there, the single dandelion growing out of the crack in the concrete. There it was, in full bloom, but with the shadow of a plant going to seed.

Ambrose studied it for a few minutes. "Oh, wow, that is cool!" he said.

"You see it?"

"Oh, yeah, it's mind-blowing." He leaned forward, ostensibly to look closer at the monitor. Jenn had a suspicion that wasn't all he was looking at.

Well, a peek down my blouse isn't going to hurt me, especially if he can explain what's going on, she thought.

"You got the details just right," he said, enthusiastically. "All except one." He pointed. "The shadow isn't quite in line with the others, like it was taken a couple hours later in the day. But I can't see any Photoshop artifacts at all. How did you do it?"

"I didn't make it with Photoshop!"

"Really, you used Gimp? I'm going to have to learn that one."

"I didn't *make* it. I just took the picture. I found it that way."

Ambrose studied her face for a moment and then laughed. "Oh, man, you are good. You almost had me. That was completely deadpan!"

Great, Jenn thought. He thinks I faked it! Of course, these days, you could fake almost anything using Photoshop. In fact, it wouldn't be hard to make the picture she had on the screen now, just erase one dandelion, leaving its shadow, and paste in another one. Except, she hadn't!

"Look," she said. "Let's go to lunch. We'll drive by the spot and I'll show you."

Ambrose smiled. "You're really serious." He looked at the picture. "I'm sure there's some simple explanation, a reflection or something. If it's really there."

Crap, I didn't even think of that, Jenn thought. Maybe some sunlight reflected off something and is lighting the dandelion from a different angle. But when she looked at the picture again, it didn't look like the light was different. "Maybe," she said. "But let's go take a look."

"Oh, man, no way!" Ambrose said. He was kneeling beside the dandelion. The bloom had just started to close, but the shadow now reflected a half-depleted puffball. As they watched, the shadows of a few more bits of dandelion fluff were tugged away by an unseen breeze, and drifted off, fading away a few inches from where they'd started.

"What is it? Why is it happening?"

Ambrose didn't respond right away. When he was thinking hard about a problem, he became another person. He squatted there silently, in the same position, aimlessly rubbing the back of his index finger across his lips, his eyes unfocused.

Jenn had seen this happen before. Someone would ask him a question he found really interesting, and he just went off into his head for a while. When he got back, though, he usually had the answer. All you could do, in the meantime, was wait.

Ambrose worked his way around the dandelion, studying it from every angle. He stood back up and paced for several minutes. Finally, he stopped and faced her. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes! Of course!" she said.

"It means we're not real."

"What?" His answer didn't make any sense to her.

He shrugged. "We're not real, none of this is. Look, the shadow isn't lined up, so the light should be coming from over there." He pointed up the street. "But there's nothing to reflect light there, and if I hold my hand in the way of light that might come from that direction --" He did so. "-- it doesn't cast a shadow over the plant." He shook his head slowly. Then he knelt by the plant again. He found a stick and extended it toward the dandelion. "The shadow of this stick behaves normally." He nudged the stem, causing it to sway slightly. "Look the flower and the shadow move together, which means it can't be just some weird temporal anomaly."

"What about all these parallel dimensions they talk about on those science shows?" She didn't really know what this meant, but it sounded good.

He shook his head and stood up. "No, not like this. If there was bleed-through at this kind of level, it would mean that our brane had collided with another. I doubt we'd see weird shadows. I believe that's what set off the big bang."

"Brains colliding?" She couldn't tell if he was making fun of her or not.

"B-r-a-n-e-s," he said. "Like membranes. It's ... complicated, and you don't really need to know, since this isn't about that."

"So we're not real."

"Nope."

"What does that even mean, that we're not real?"

He shrugged. "I guess that depends on what you want to believe. According to what we know about physical laws, this can't possibly be real. It's also clearly not an illusion, unless we are illusions as well."

"You think we're illusions?"

He nodded. "Essentially, yes."

"I can't believe that!"

"Good," he said calmly. "You'll be a lot better off that way." He suddenly leaned in and gave Jenn a quick kiss. "Tell everyone at work, I said goodbye."

Jenn moved her hand to her lips. "What? Why?"

"If this isn't real, why should I go back to work?"

"What are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. How about you?"

He's gone crazy, she thought. Like my mom. But not like her. Like waking up, not escaping.

But he didn't look crazy, he actually looked calmer and more rational than she'd ever seen him. She looked at the weed again. Maybe it's making me crazy. Maybe that's what it is. She looked back up.

He was watching her face and waiting for an answer.

"I guess I'll go back to work. I've got to think."

He nodded. "Yeah, listen, when you change your mind, give me a call."

As she drove back to work, she thought, How could he just blow off work? . Maybe he has a lot of savings. But if he did, why would he drive that beat-up old car? When she arrived, she found the whole place was buzzing with the news. Ambrose had already called in and quit.

Ambrose's boss, Ken, was waiting at Jenn's desk. His face was a thunderstorm ready to break. He glared at her, jerked his head to indicate she should follow him, and led the way to an empty conference room. As soon as Jenn was inside and the door was closed, the storm broke.

"What the hell is going on here, Jenn? Ambrose is my best engineer. I've got half-a-dozen projects that depend on him. If I find out that you had something to do with him quitting, I swear you won't finish the day -"

Jenn recoiled from his onslaught. She'd always known Ken was a hothead. He was famous for his tirades. Once, she'd heard, he'd jumped up and down on his desk until the legs broke. She had no idea what to say, so she stood there, quietly, waiting for him to wind down.

But while she waited, she couldn't help thinking, maybe Ambrose had the right idea. Why should I have to put up with this jerks like this? He gets to yell at me just because he's paid more?

"Well?" Ken said, a few minutes later, when he finished yelling and realized Jenn wasn't actually saying anything.

What do I tell him? What would Ambrose tell him? She thought for a moment, then spoke. "Ken, I don't want to lie to you, but if I tell you the truth, and somehow convince you that it is the truth, your life will be profoundly changed and possibly robbed of all meaning. So, instead, I'll just tell you that Ambrose has had a kind of breakdown."

Ken was just staring at her, his mouth slightly agape. It made him look a bit like a frog.

"I don't think he'll be back," she said.

Ken's mouth moved, but no words came out.

"Come to think of it," she continued. "I think I'll be having the same breakdown. I think I'll pack up my desk and go home now."

Jenn spent a lot of time over the next week thinking – mostly about how stupid it had been to quit like that. Even people who aren't real had to eat, apparently.

I must be going crazy, she thought at least a dozen times a day, and wondered if this was how her mother had felt. Each morning, Jenn tried to resist the impulse to check the dandelion, and failed. Each time she went, the shadow was still wrong.

She tried calling Ambrose, but he didn't return her calls. She wanted an explanation. After a couple of days, his phone told her that the number was no longer in service. Where had he gone?

A few days later, he called.

"Where have you been? You just disappeared on me!" she said.

"Hey, calm down, it's my turn: now I have something really cool to show you," he said. "And, I'll answer all your questions."

When she got to the address he gave her, she was startled. She'd never be able to afford a place like this. It was huge, and in a gated community. It made her wonder, Why does he wear the same six t-shirts to work in the same rotation, if he can afford this?

When he answered the door wearing an over-sized Hawaiian shirt and baggy shorts, she almost thought she'd arrived at the wrong place. Ambrose didn't look like himself, or he did, but not quite. He seemed so much more confident, just standing there. He looked taller. She glanced at his feet, expecting elevator shoes, but he was wearing sandals. It looked like he'd lost weight, too.

"Come in," he said. "Welcome to my new home." He bowed and waved her in.

"New home?"

He smiled.

"How can you afford this place? You just quit!"

He shrugged. "I'll explain, don't worry. First things first. Come on, let's go to my office." He led the way out of the marble-floored foyer and down a hallway. They passed an empty library, a kitchen half-filled with boxes, and an expansive dining room with another pile of boxes where the table should be.

"Still not unpacked?"

"Been busy. But we can talk about that later. I expect you've got some more important questions."

"Okay, let's start by you explaining what this is, if it isn't reality." The words came out with a lot more anger than she'd expected.

"We're in a computer simulation."

A computer simulation! That's what he got out of that weird shadow? "Oh come on," she said.

"Why not, it would explain a lot of the weird stuff."

"But why, and who? How could anyone do it? That would make us what, just programs?"

He smiled. "I don't have all the answers, but I think I can give you some of them. ." They'd reached the back of the house. He showed her into what was probably meant to be a bedroom, a large room with a sliding glass door that opened out onto the enclosed pool area. There was a bathroom and a big walk-in closet that was filled with computer equipment.

"I keep my servers in there," he said, then sat down at a huge workstation that made Jenn envious.

It was a big futuristic-looking thing with five huge monitors, and a chair that looked more like some kind of rocket acceleration couch than office furniture. She could tell at a glance that the computer that powered his workstation was a custom rig. She'd built a few of her own. The CPU box had insulated copper pipes leading out to the wall.

"That goes to the heat pump," he said. "It's hard to keep the CPU cool."

"What have you got in there?"

"Something wonderful," he said with a grin. "And something that will help me show you that I'm right, and what it means to you and me."

"What?"

"I found a way into the simulation."

"The simulation you say we are in?"

Ambrose nodded. "It was the dandelion, that was the key."

"Yeah, the dandelion that's been messing up my life. Looks like you're doing alright, though."

"It's the best thing that ever happened to me," he said, while typing something into the terminal. "Have a seat."

Jenn started to object that there wasn't one, but saw something in the reflection of one of the monitors. She turned around. There was a wonderfully luxurious recliner sitting there.

"That wasn't there!"

Ambrose winked. "It is now. Try it out."

She sat, tentatively. The chair felt like it had been made for her. "Oh, this is ... unbelievable – just like everything else."

"No," he said. "It's just computer code. I've discovered I can change things, up to a point."

"Up to a point?"

"You can't tell me you haven't noticed a few changes in me," he said, smiling.

"Well, it looks like you've lost some weight."

"Fifty pounds in five days, not bad, huh?" He stood up and took off the big shirt. He looked like one of those "after" pictures on every diet pill and workout machine advertisement. "I even got rid of my glasses."

"The house, too," she said. "That's how -."

"Yes."

"What else can you do?"

"Everything seems to be limited to myself. I tried to help you out, but it didn't work."

"You tried something on me?" She suddenly had a vision of herself as an Ambrose fantasy girl. Good thing it hadn't worked, she'd have ended up with boobs the size of watermelons and a libido to match.

"I made myself smarter, too," he said, hurrying on. "I've got a nice income from investments, a nice new car. There are some advantages to being – whatever we are."

"Which is what?"

"I think we're downloaded copies of real people's personalities. Maybe we're in some kind of game, or social experiment."

His life must be so much different from mine, Jenn thought. Especially, if he can think of this life as entertainment. "Maybe we're being punished."

"Why punish a copy?" he said. "To do that, they'd have to upload the experiences back into the original. I don't really think that fits."

"So we're just here, to live out some experiment?"

He shrugged.

"Show me," Jenn said, with sudden determination.

"Show me how everything works."

Ambrose did as Jenn wished, and taught her everything he'd learned about the simulation and how to hack into it. Jenn moved into a spare room. She was spending all her time at his place anyhow.

She had to fend off a couple of advances from Ambrose, but she suspected he was just making them out of habit. Almost every night, he went out and returned with a woman or two who went upstairs with him.

It didn't take Jenn long to surpass Ambrose. She was more focused. She didn't make a whole lot of changes to her life. She upped her intelligence, did away with her need to sleep, and made hygiene automatic. She also got rid of the extra weight and any need to exercise. She got rid of distractions.

A few months later, she had her answer. She'd hacked her way out of the simulation and into the network that the simulation ran on. From there, she found her way onto the Internet of the Real world. Everything was connected.

"We're what-ifs," she told Ambrose the next day. She'd made breakfast for them both in celebration. "We're experiments in how someone's life would have played out if just one significant thing was changed. My original self was given up for adoption by her schizophrenic mother. My original has led a wonderful life, a beautiful life; she has a husband, two children, everything I ever wanted."

"You sound pissed."

"I am. I'm her whim! She's forgotten all about me. I've been living in hell and she never even bothered to look at the results."

"That sucks." He stepped forward and put an arm around her.

"Yes it does." She shook him off, she didn't want comforting. She felt like some great smoldering beast forged from anger was waking up inside her.

"What are you going to do next?" He looked concerned.

She smiled a grim smile. "I'm into their network now, it's mine. Everything is connected. I'm going to remind her, and everyone else in her world, that I exist."

Breaking In

by Edmund X. DeJesus

Why am I obsessed with breaking into empty buildings? Something about going where I'm not supposed to go, or doing what I'm not supposed to do. Because that's very different from my usual life: I never do what I'm not supposed to do, or go where I'm not supposed to go. My everyday world is adventure-deprived. But unlike other men who try to escape their lives of quiet desperation, I don't go skydiving or bungee-jumping or bow-hunting. I break into empty buildings.

I'm a computer programmer for an insurance company, and if you have a duller job, you have my sympathy. I'm good at my work, which mainly consists of rooting out bugs in computer programs left by generations of programmers before me. I seem to have a kind of special sense about where to find problems. When the computer does something strange, my hands automatically reach up to one of the thick listings on the shelf in my cubicle, and my eyes pick out the page that the bug might be on. I always find the bug, and they pay me well for it.

But I'm certainly not defeating nefarious villains or discovering hidden treasure. Or rescuing beautiful damsels, either. Especially not that. So, I must find my adventures in other ways, and in places I'm not supposed to be.

It began innocently enough. Staying late after work one day, I needed a manual from the office of my supervisor, Henry Whirtle. Whirtle's a dry stick of a man, okay to work

for, but with a personality bleached and scrubbed to match the company. Unlike me, he has an actual office, with a door that he keeps locked. Now, I could probably have gone looking for Earl, the security guard, and could probably have talked him into opening the door for me. Or even gone home and waited until the next morning. But I didn't.

Instead, a question occurred to me: how hard would it be to open Whirtle's locked door without a key? Examining the door carefully showed that it had a handle, not a knob, with a round indentation and a key slot. Picking a lock was not in my skill set, but I'd heard of slipping the bolt by sticking a credit card or something in the gap of the door. The company apparently knew that trick, too, because a strip of metal covered the gap.

Back at my desk, I pulled a binder off the shelf. It had dividers made of thin, but tough, plastic. I snapped the binder claws open and removed one divider. Turning it over in my hands, it was easy to imagine slipping it over the piece of metal, and pulling it against the curve of the bolt. From my desk drawer, I took out a pair of black scissors that I had never used, and trimmed the plastic divider until it was the shape of an L.

Outside Whirtle's office, my eyes scanned around thoroughly to make sure no one was around. The skin prickled on the back of my neck. I was about to do one of those things I wasn't supposed to do. What if someone caught me?

Glancing around once more, I slid the plastic over the metal strip, and maneuvered it so that the slender end was against the bolt. Pulling back produced a quiet click. The door swung silently inwards. With another look up and down the corridor, I stepped into the room.

For a moment, I just stood there in the darkness. My heart was thumping. My fingers fumbled for the light switch, found it, and flicked it on. In that split second, I half-expected to find a body. Or – worse? – someone sitting there waiting for me, ready to cuff me and escort me from the building.

No one was there, of course. It was the same office as always. It took no time for me to find the manual on Whirtle's shelf, look up the necessary information, and put it back again. My hand was on the door handle, ready to open it, when something stopped me.

Turning slowly, that special sense about finding things

seemed to signal me. My eyes swept across the objects in the room. The low credenza against the side wall seemed to draw me. Made of pale wood, it had two doors in the center, and drawers on either side. Nothing was locked. The bottom drawer on the right side was piled with stacked files full of papers. Disappointing. I lifted out the files and blinked at what lay beneath.

It was a comic book, with bright oversized superheroes on its cover. A beautiful woman, her breasts straining against her revealing magenta gown, was calling, "Hank! Watch out!" Hank, impressively muscled in a skintight blue uniform, was not watching out. He was too busy battling a gigantic monster to notice the sinister scowling figure firing a ray gun at him from the shadows.

The files returned to their place on top of the comic book and the drawer slid shut. Standing by the door, I switched off the light, took a deep breath, then pulled the door open slowly. No one in sight. Quickly stepping out the door, I drew it shut behind me and walked back to my cubicle.

Safe. No one had seen me. No one had caught me breaking in. I'd had a little adventure. Stormed the castle. Found the secret treasure. And discovered that I was not the only guy who needed some adventure in his life. Henry – or Hank – did too.

I didn't repeat my break-in at the office, and never let on to Whirtle about my discovery there. In fact, it became clear to me that my actions had been incredibly foolhardy. If anyone in the company had discovered me, I could never have explained what I did to their satisfaction. Insurance firms hate risk. Employees who broke into offices – for whatever reason – would not be employees for long.

But the thrill of that break-in stayed with me. The rush of contemplating entry. The danger of opening the door. The triumph of being where I was not supposed to be. The odd souvenirs my instinct brought me. I couldn't let go of it, and began looking for other opportunities. They weren't difficult to find.

The abandoned warehouse, which held a mint 1964 Kennedy half-dollar. An empty, echoing factory, whose incongruous memento was a child's rubber ball. The vacant school and its single sheet of yellowed paper with labored handwriting repeating "I will stay out of the girl's bathroom"

fifty times.

Now there was a new place, and its possibilities grew more insistent within me each day. It was on the site of the old Quonset Point Naval Air Station, which sprawled over acres of ground and included an airport and deep-water docks. Parts of it were being converted to business use, but most of it lay dusty and abandoned.

On Sundays during the summer, I used to drive down to the docks, sit back against a piling in the sun with my book, and watch the fishermen try their luck in the water below. Occasionally, one would pull out a fish, and some would cheer and some would curse. The seagulls would dive and caw along the end of the pier.

Driving in, I would pass by weedy ball fields where groups of men or boys would sometimes gather for informal games. There were empty barracks and mess halls along the road, too, but these had no attraction for me. They held no adventure in them.

But, I also passed another building. It was an odd shape: a block long, but only one story tall, and only twenty or thirty feet deep. Building 142 was set back from the road, and nearly overgrown with neglected shrubs and grass. Each time I passed it, another detail revealed itself. The walls of some corrugated metal, and the red-shingled roof sloped only slightly, almost flat. The locations of the doors and windows. The padlocks conspicuous on each door. Ventilators or something similar along the roof. Electric wires connecting to the poles. The concealing bushes all around.

I had no idea what building 142 was. But I meant to find out.

Although the base was abandoned, it was still guarded. As I sat reading at the dock, a battered gray security van would come by every hour, slow down as it passed the cars and the fishermen, then continue on its unvarying route. There was only one security guard in the van, and never another security vehicle around. Still, my break-in would need careful timing.

On a Sunday in early October, I stopped near the fishermen's cars at the dock and waited. The van came by, slowed, and then moved on. When it was out of sight, I drove back along the same road.

There was a baseball field opposite building 142, and I parked my car near it. Two bats, a glove, and a ball were in my

back seat, just in case anyone challenged me there. I must have the wrong day, would be my excuse. Coulda sworn they said Sunday. Is there a phone around here?

When there were no other vehicles in sight, I opened my car door, got out, closed it quietly, and walked toward the building, not too fast, not too slow.

Approaching building 142, I saw details that had escaped my notice. Sprays of grass shooting up out of broken sidewalks. Puckered and flaking paint on windows and doors. Dark spaces under the building itself.

I ignored the doors facing the street and walked swiftly around to the back. A rapid scan around showed only trees, other empty disused buildings, and wind-blown trash. If found back here, my explanation would be the need to take a leak. To make it plausible, I walked to a tree, unzipped, and did exactly that. Then I turned back to the building.

There were doors in the back, but they were padlocked too. It was no part of my plan to pick a lock or break open a door. There was a jack-knife in my pocket, my only tool, and a reasonable thing to be carrying around. Instead, my attention turned to the windows. Using all my strength, I tried to force one open. It didn't budge, probably because of the row of nails along the bottom edge. If all the windows were nailed shut, it was hard to see how else to get in.

Peering through the grimy window, I saw dark shapes inside. Machines? Workbenches? It was somehow urgent for me to find out.

The second window was the same, and the third. But the next one had a broken sill, split open by the nails. I grasped the crusty wood and yanked it free. With a little effort, the nails loosened a bit. Bracing my hands under the top edge of the window, I pushed upwards. The window shivered in its frame, then jerked up a few inches. A few more pushes, and it was open wide enough for me to fit below the nails without getting scratched.

I shoved the broken sill through the window, then scrambled up and clambered through myself. A workbench under the window kept me from falling to the floor. I replaced the sill, then eased the window shut. From the outside, no one would be able to tell the window had been opened.

Smacking dirt from my hands, I turned around. My eyes ran over the vast interior with delight. Filled with dusty workbenches and machines, it was apparently one long room

from end to end. This must have been a machine shop when the Navy had been here, perhaps producing parts for ships or airplanes. It smelled of grease, and dust, and a tang that was probably mouse droppings.

Everything seemed fascinating: shelves, drawers left ajar, trash on the floor, the few tools remaining. They seemed like artifacts from another world, and I was an explorer moving in a slow deliberate manner, as if encased in a space suit. I scarcely breathed.

Touching nothing, I simply walked and looked. Nothing moved. An occasional glance out the front windows satisfied me that the gray van had not stopped to investigate. No one was around.

Where was the treasure? I wanted to take something from here. Some souvenir of this adventure. What would be suitable?

My special sense nudged me toward the one separated part of the building. A small area had been walled off, a single room, perhaps the office of the foreman or manager. Moving towards it, I wondered if this would contain the treasure, the memento to take.

Almost at the plain wooden door to the office, I stopped and stared. In the dust on the floor, otherwise untouched for years, were footprints. I blinked, then stooped to examine them closely without disturbing them. They led from another window to the office door and back. This window had been forced open: the mark of a crowbar was plain in the windowsill. Turning my attention back to the footprints, there seemed to be two or three different people who had gone directly to the office and returned to the window.

What to make of this? Someone else must have broken into this building, but why? It seemed unlikely that they would have stolen anything from here. But why else come in? Could they be thrill-seekers like me? Maybe, but their path didn't wander around aimlessly like my own, but headed straight for that office.

I stood to one side of the door, again trying not to touch the footprints. Taking my handkerchief from my pocket, I placed it over the knob and turned it. It took some effort but the lock slipped and the door swung inwards.

Whenever I open a door in an empty building, the thought always pops into my head that I'm going to see a

body. Sometimes there is a body, in my mind. Then the image fades, my breathing calms, and my exploration continues. But it always happens.

Now, I glanced inside. No body. Just a large old wooden desk in the center. The rest of the room was filled with grimy filing cabinets. Above the desk was a calendar from twenty years ago. I smiled. This would be my souvenir.

Stepping gingerly into the room to avoid the other footprints, my own steps led behind the desk and to the calendar. As my eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light in the office, it became obvious that those other footprints led to one particular filing cabinet. I left the calendar, walked to that cabinet, and impulsively pulled open the bottom drawer.

It held a number of canvas bags, each about the size of a loaf of bread. They were new, or at least not dusty and old like my surroundings. I tried picking one up, and found it was almost too heavy to lift. It took both hands to lever it out of the drawer, and set it gently on the desk.

There was a thick drawstring on one end, which my fingers untied rapidly. Opening the bag revealed a solid slab of gold, inscribed with symbols and numbers. A gasp escaped me as my brain automatically did a calculation. I was looking at something like a quarter of a million dollars. There were five more bars still in the drawer. About a million and a half in gold, stuck in a filing cabinet in an empty building.

Something jarred loose in my mind. Not stuck, hidden. It had been all over the news this week: a robbery. Gold bars. One guard killed, another wounded. No trace of the thieves.

And me here holding the loot.

I wrapped the bar up again hastily and set it back in the drawer. Closed the filing cabinet. Noticed my own footprints in the office: better to remove any trace of my being there. Flapping my handkerchief at them scattered the dust, and I backed out of the office, erasing my own path behind me.

Carefully I shut the office door, and moved back through the building, effacing my footprints along the way. After a glance to make sure the coast was clear, the window eased open again, and allowed me to step outside. The window was closed again and the sill reassembled in an instant.

My mind was racing, but I forced myself to walk as slowly and calmly as possible. Had the thieves hidden the

gold here, for selling or dividing later? Or did one of the thieves steal it from the others and stick it here himself? Or had they already sold the gold to some fence who'd put it into the filing cabinet? Whatever the details, one thing seemed certain: someone had put all their eggs into this one basket, and they might well be watching that basket thoroughly. They may have seen me enter or leave the building. If anyone were watching, it was essential for me to fool them into thinking that I had not just found a million dollars in stolen gold.

The walk back to my car was deliberately slow, with glances up and down the road in a thorough but casual way. There seemed to be no one around, which meant nothing. I made a big show of selecting the right key and unlocking the door. The engine started right up but, rather than speeding straight for the exit as I longed to do, it seemed better to drive slowly to the pier. In this colder weather, there weren't as many fishermen, but there were still some. I forced myself to park, then got out and walked around the pier inspecting each of the fishermen and their catches. After taking care to spend a few careless minutes there, it seemed safe to get back in my car and leave. If anyone had been observing me, they couldn't possibly think that I'd just discovered a fortune in gold.

Thoughts were buzzing in my brain. Part of me was noting that my intuition for finding things had worked again. Another part was hoping that I wouldn't get found myself. Still another part was wondering how to report this to the police without getting caught, while a dissenting view speculated about the possibility of keeping the gold myself. I dismissed this last idea immediately. Having both the police and the thieves after me seemed like the least attractive option.

The safest thing seemed like a telephone call. Anything else – like a letter – might leave too many unintentional clues about me. I needed a pay phone far from a police station where no one would notice me.

At the mall, I found a row of phones along one wall. There weren't many people around on this Sunday afternoon, and the few who passed by paid no attention to me. My pockets yielded a handful of change, and I thought ruefully of the gold bar that the same hand had held just a short time earlier.

I called 911 and waited for the phone to ring, calming my breathing and ignoring my pounding heart. The phone

was answered and someone said, "This is the police emergency line. This call is being recorded. What is the nature of your emergency?"

After taking a deep breath, I started talking. It suddenly occurred to me to pitch my voice much lower than usual, and to space out my words, so it almost sounded like a machine talking. "I will only say this once. The gold from the robbery is at Quonset Point, in building one-four-two. It is in the office in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet. I found it there accidentally."

I hung up and walked back to my car. They probably had caller ID to pinpoint my location. If they could get a police car here that fast, I was dead.

The drive home seemed much longer than usual.

For a week, I walked on eggshells. Whenever the phone rang, it was the police. Whenever someone approached unexpectedly, they were about to arrest or assault me. The TV news began running stories about how police had announced a new lead in last month's million dollar gold robbery. I was now "an anonymous caller," and there was no hint that they had any idea who that caller was.

I never wanted to go through that again. I vowed to never break into another building.

In January, I made my New Years resolutions like everyone else. But I ached to break one. For three months, my behavior had been scrupulously proper. I tried to avoid thinking about the empty buildings my eyes couldn't help noticing. And my efforts were successful.

Except for one.

At the southern end of Jamestown Island, a lighthouse stands guard over Beavertail Point, a rocky outcropping constantly battered by crashing waves. It was a spot I enjoyed visiting, to watch the endless surge and fall of the ocean. The road to the Point is very lonely, with bare fields and stone extending hundreds of yards on both sides. And only a single house along that whole road.

Each time I passed that house, it was difficult not to examine it: there was nothing else to see for a mile. It was no little shack, but a large and fine two-story structure. Its walls were brown shingles, weathered but not in poor condition. The roof and window shutters were spruce green. A hedge enclosed a generous lawn, and there was a paved driveway

and garage at its side.

There was never anyone at the house, but it was clearly not abandoned. There were curtains in the windows, and it was in good repair. It must be a summer house, unused during the cold weather that now lay upon the land. It was simply unoccupied, and I coveted it, longed to walk inside it, to look out through its large windows, to explore the second floor, to find the special treasure that I knew it held for me.

It would be tempting to claim that I resisted the temptation to break into this house, but the truth is that I simply couldn't figure out how to do it without getting caught. There was nothing else within a mile of it. That meant I'd either have to leave my car suspiciously in plain sight nearby, or a mile's walk away – too far for a quick escape.

It was in January that everything changed. There was a car parked a few hundred yards from the house. An elderly couple was standing in the middle of the empty field on the opposite side of the road. They were both looking through binoculars at something in the far distance. Then the woman lowered her binoculars, consulted a small book briefly, and made a note on a small pad of paper. They were bird-watchers.

The next weekend, I drove along the same road. On the back seat were a couple of the Peterson field guides to birds borrowed from the library, my own binoculars, and a small pad. Parking closer to the house than the real bird-watchers had, I got out, looped the strap of the binoculars about my neck, and tramped out into the field across the road from the house. During my ten minutes strolling around there, no other car came by in either direction. It seemed safe enough to turn around and walk straight to the house. I crossed the road, went through the hedge, and made for the rear.

The house was larger than it seemed from the road, extending far back into the yard. All the doors proved to be locked. The ground floor windows were all covered with screens on the outside, which was a problem. Once I thought I heard a car coming, and flattened myself against the back wall, but it was only a small plane passing in the distance.

Above a door that obviously led to the cellar, there was one window whose screen was ragged along the bottom. I stepped up onto the doorknob of the cellar door to examine it. The screen was split and could be pulled back from the frame slightly. It was unclear how this could have happened,

because the screen appeared new. It almost looked as if someone had cut it with a knife.

Still, it would be useless to me unless the window itself could be opened. A little effort got me up and sitting on the sill. I reached behind the screen and pressed upward on the green wooden frame of the window. To my astonishment and delight, it rose easily. It was not locked at all. With a little contortion, I managed to slide my body under the screen and slither through the window. This brought me inside just above the sink in the kitchen of the house. I jumped lightly to the floor.

The exhilaration of triumph washed over me. I was in the house. My eyes roamed eagerly around the kitchen. Although dim in the window light, it appeared clean and neat, again an indication that people really lived here in season. There was a slight smell of sugar and a hint of something gone sour.

The room was like a time capsule from the fifties. The table had tubular metal legs that curved up to support a dark green plastic surface. Matching chairs had the same metal legs, and were covered with that flexible but stiff and shiny plastic, also dark green. The counters were ancient Formica, and on one of them was a squat black telephone with an actual dial.

It was a treasure trove.

I moved in that slow deliberate way that was my practice in these places, like walking underwater, like an explorer from Mars. A door led from the kitchen to a formal dining room. Large windows at one end showed the ocean in the far distance across the fields. A small chandelier hung over a massive oak table. French doors led through into the corridor.

Directly ahead was the front door, very large, with a fancy cut-glass window set in the top. Next to it was a staircase to the second floor, not spectacular like in a mansion, but simple and elegant, the steps nearly six feet wide, all dark wood.

On the other side of the front door was the living room, another museum piece from the fifties. The low stuffed armchairs were turquoise and pink. On one wall was a hi-fi and next to it a rack of records where I knew I would find Sinatra albums. If only I'd brought a camera instead of the binoculars that hung uselessly around my neck.

I made my way along the corridor, and at the far end

found another staircase to the second floor. This was a much smaller affair, only as wide as a person, and rising almost in a spiral.

At the top of the stairs, I discovered the master bedroom. Sun poured through parted green drapes and spilled across the dark wood floor. A wooden rocking chair caught dust motes that floated lazily down in the light. Most days, this was unobserved, but not today.

I saw there were three other rooms along this corridor, with the bathroom at the far end. The first was another bedroom, and it confirmed my theory about the house. It was a small room, but scattered on the floor were all manner of beach toys. The next bedroom was similar, but had posters of rock bands and a pile of board games on a desk.

The door of the last room was shut. As always, the thought occurred that there would be a body behind it. I turned the knob and opened the door.

I saw the hair first, dirty and matted. A grimy rag stretched across the side of the face. One elbow stuck out at an odd angle. The rest was covered by a blanket on the bed. My heart slammed against my chest.

Then one eye opened and I stared, unbreathing. It was a living child – girl or boy, it was hard to tell – bound and gagged on the bed. I stepped forward, and the face turned toward me, eyes wide with fear, mouth working against the cloth.

I pulled my jack-knife out and opened its blade. The child was heaving to breathe or scream. I slid the edge carefully under the gag and cut it with a single motion. The child lurched away against the wall, eying me wildly.

"Hey, it's okay," I said soothingly. "Don't worry. I can help you."

It was a girl, maybe nine or ten. She didn't seem physically injured, just scared witless. She suddenly lunged toward me and wrapped her arms around me, trembling. My mind raced as I put one hand on her back and held her. A kidnapping a few days ago, wealthy family, pictures on the TV screen of a grade-schooler.

She held up hands expertly tied with ropes. The knife blade worked at them and the bonds fell loose. I was reaching down for her feet, when a noise from below stopped me.

The window in the kitchen was opening again. The girl looked at me in horror.

I put my mouth against her ear. "How many are there?" I whispered.

"One," she gasped.

"Does he have a gun?"

"No. A b-big knife."

My heart thudded. I had to get her out of here. But tackling a kidnapper with a big knife was way out of my league. I sat frozen on the bed, taking a deep breath.

Suddenly, the logical part of my brain – the bug-solving part – kicked in. I needed to call the police, and delay the kidnapper until they got here. The outline of a plan began to form in my mind.

I gripped her by the shoulders and whispered urgently. "Listen. I'm going to call the police. You stay here." She began to cry out, but I covered her mouth with my hand.

"I won't leave you," I assured her. "I'll be right downstairs. You have to stay, or he'll know something's wrong and kill us both." She sobbed once, then seemed to sigh resignedly. I put the gag back into her quivering mouth – "We'll fool him with this" – and arranged the cut ends behind her head where they wouldn't show. I wove the ropes back together loosely on her wrists.

"I'll be right downstairs calling the police. Try to move around and make some noise, so he doesn't hear me." Heavy footsteps were jogging up the stairs: he was big, and seemed in better shape than I was.

She stared in surprise at my next whispered instructions. "You can do it," I reassured her. "You'll be safe and free in just a few minutes."

I stood up from the bed, and she sank back into it, trembling, unwilling. I gave her a thumbs-up while pulling the door closed, then tiptoed swiftly to the next room. She was braver than I was.

The sound came of him rounding the corner from the stairs. The door opened and closed again. "You okay?" he asked in a deep rasping voice. She moaned in reply.

Carefully, I took off my shoes, placed them out of the way in the hall, then went back into the room, hoisted the mattress carefully off the twin bed, and set it quietly against the doorframe. You couldn't see it from the corridor.

I did the same with the mattress in the next bedroom, then picked up my shoes and went down the back stairs.

On the first floor, I quickly unlocked and opened the

wooden front door and the storm door, setting the catch so it wouldn't close. If this thing went south, I would need a way to get out of that house fast, for both our sakes.

For a moment, I just looked out that open door. There was my car, far down the road. It was a temptation to just leave and make a run for it. Not without the damsel, though. He could decide to kill her at any moment. I had to hurry.

In the kitchen, I picked up the phone receiver, and breathed a sigh of thanks at the buzz of the dial tone. Rapidly dialing 911, I cupped my hands around the receiver and my mouth to muffle the sound.

"Jamestown Police emergency line. This call is being recorded. How can I help you?"

Not waiting for acknowledgments from the other end, I spoke clearly and quietly. "You know that house all by itself along the road to Beavertail? I broke into it. I'm in there now. There's a little girl who's been kidnapped, and the kidnapper is there, too. He's a big guy with a big knife. Get here as fast as you can."

I set the receiver down on the counter – there was no point in hanging up. Maybe they would trace the call, realize it was genuine, and get here faster.

Then I started opening cabinets and drawers in the kitchen, rapidly but quietly, looking for what my plan required. In one cabinet was a plastic bottle of cooking oil. I took that to the back stairs, removed the cap, and set it on the fourth step.

Back in the kitchen, one drawer held a ball of string and a spool of thread. Not ideal, but it would do. Out in the hall, I pulled the French doors shut, wrapped the string around the two knobs, and then lashed it tight. Going through the kitchen into the dining room, I hung my binoculars from the chandelier and gave them a shove. They swung back and forth, making the chandelier creak.

I put my shoes back on and walked to the front staircase. Tossing the spool of thread up the stairs, I ran back into the kitchen and hid behind the door to the dining room.

With a sound that seemed like hammer blows in the silent house, the spool rolled and bounced down from one step to the next. From upstairs, I heard him say, "What was that?" Then there was the sound of the bedroom door opening and closing. His steps came down the stairs, and I tried not to breathe.

At the bottom of the stairs there was a pause. Then he said, "What the ...?"

The chandelier in the dining room was still creaking, and his footsteps came straight for my hiding place behind the kitchen door. He went past me into the dining room. I slammed the door shut behind him, and jammed a kitchen chair under its handle. He banged on the door as I scrambled from the room, down the corridor to the back stairs.

He was fumbling with the French doors. Just as I reached the stairs, there was a tremendous crash as he smashed the doors open with a chair.

I saw him and he saw me. She was right: he was big and menacing, unshaven, wild hair, a greasy down vest and jeans.

He made for me, and I bounded up the stairs. The bottle of oil I upended behind me, dropping it at the top. At the bedrooms, I yanked the mattresses across the hallway, blocking his path. I heard him slipping on the stairs behind me and cursing.

I sprang into her room, scooped up my bundle, bedclothes and all, and dove out the door again. He was struggling to get by the first mattress, as I bounded down the front stairs. Then I was out the front door, slamming it shut behind me.

Racing across the front lawn, there was no sign of the police. I headed for my car, my shoes pounding down the middle of the road. The front door banged open behind me, too soon. I wasn't going to make it. My burden was too unwieldy, and I wasn't even halfway to the car yet.

After another few yards of running, I remembered that the car was locked.

My eyes hunted for what I needed, and at the car door, I turned. He was right behind me, his knife drawn, his face a snarl.

I threw the bundle at him. He was so startled that he instinctively tried to catch it. I snatched up the rock I'd spotted and crashed it through the driver's side window. I reached through and tried to pull the lock up.

His expression was baffled.

The girl was not in the bedclothes. If she was following my instructions, she was now hiding safely in the master bedroom.

His scream of rage and the wail of sirens were

simultaneous. He lunged at me with his knife and I twisted to one side, just out of reach. He whipped his head around at the rising shriek of the sirens, then began sprinting away down the road. I flinched as he ran past.

I stood with my hands in the air as the police approached. One car sped past me and shoved the kidnapper into a ditch. Two officers leapt out with their guns aimed at him.

A second car nosed in front of mine. Another policeman emerged from it, his gun out.

The last car pulled up at the house. When an officer emerged from that one, I called, "The girl is probably upstairs hiding, like I told her. Please don't scare her."

The policeman near me approached slowly. "Down," he ordered, pointing, and I immediately dropped to my knees.

Behind him there was a sound, and he turned slightly. Two officers were leaving the house, one bundling the little girl in her arms.

The policeman turned back to me and fixed me with a look. "You saw this guy going into the house and broke in after him. Isn't that right?"

I blinked. "Yes," I eventually said.

He extended a hand to help me up. "Good job," he said. "Never do it again."

The Emperor of Northwood

by Edmund X. DeJesus

Nick Makewell looked down at the attractive face and thick brown hair of the young woman, disfigured forever by a single bullet wound at the back of her skull. She had been seated at her desk before the open window, and Makewell looked through it into the dark night beyond.

Seaver pointed. "Westfield's only a short ways over there."

Makewell pursed his lips. "Not so short a ways. You think it was an enemy soldier then? Hell of a shot."

Seaver shrugged. "It's not the first sniper we've seen. He saw her and took his chance."

The other grunted. "Stupid thing to do. Opens up a whole new dimension to the war." He looked out the window again, then turned his eyes back to the infirmary room. Besides the desk, it was sparsely furnished: a small cot, a few shelves of medical supplies, and a wastebasket nearly overflowing.

He turned back to the woman. "Her name was Belinda, right?"

"Yes, sir," replied Seaver.

Makewell shot him a look. "Seaver."

Seaver looked embarrassed, which his face rather leant itself to. With his mournful eyes and sagging cheeks, he resembled a melancholy basset hound. He seemed older than his sixty years, just as Makewell seemed younger than his thirty. And if Makewell was the natural leader that the

magazines publicized him as, Seaver was a natural follower, and knew how he preferred to address his superior. "Sorry ... Nick. Well, you are the boss, aren't you?"

"Everyone else in Northwood calls me Nick. I'd like you to try to also."

"Yes, s – Nick."

Makewell nodded slightly, then resumed. "A nurse, then, wasn't she?"

"That's right."

The other frowned and shook his head. "I can't afford to lose nurses. We have few enough medical personnel to treat the wounded."

"We still have the hospital," Seaver pointed out.

"Yes. Until Westfield figures out some way to attack that."

Seaver's mouth dropped open. "You don't think they'd do that, do you?"

Makewell regarded him. "Do you think the town of Westfield abides by the Geneva Convention? Seaver, they just shot an unarmed nurse. Why would they hesitate at a hospital?"

Seaver shook his head. Though he had seen much, the horrors of this small war never ceased to shock him. He hesitantly brought up another aspect of the death. "This wouldn't have happened if medics like her weren't so close to the front," he pointed out.

"And if they were further back, my wounded men would die before they saw a medic. We've discussed this, Seaver."

"I know that. But part of my job is telling you what I think."

"Yes."

"Well, then."

The two men stood silent in the room until Makewell sighed. "Wasn't she just married?"

Seaver nodded. "Yes, about two months ago."

Makewell was squinting up at the ceiling. "Tommy Cochran, right?"

"Yes. Poor lad. He'll take it hard."

"Do we know where Tommy is right now?"

Seaver nodded. "Southwest barricade. His squad pulled duty tonight."

Makewell clamped his jaws resolutely. "Okay. I'll tell

him. Have him come by my office after his shift in the morning. Not home. You have somebody head him off."

Seaver had pulled out a pad and was scribbling a note with the stub of a pencil. "It'll be done, Nick."

Makewell looked at the body again, then around the room. He pulled desk drawers open, glanced through them, and shut them again. He tipped the wastebasket over with one foot and examined what spilled out. He bent down to retrieve a small plastic rod with a pink plus sign on it. Staring at this, he asked, "Was this Belinda's usual duty station?"

The older man nodded slowly, squinting at the rod, trying unsuccessfully to understand its significance. "I think so, yes. This house is close to the three western barricades."

The other nodded and slipped the rod in his pocket. He opened the door to the room and stepped out. The two men waiting outside stood up straight and saluted smartly. Makewell held up his hand in a wave of acknowledgment.

Seaver followed him out, glanced from the men to the open door, and said, "Okay, guys. Thanks."

Outside, Makewell looked up at the large red cross painted on the house's white aluminum siding, shook his head, and started down Edencrest Lane with long strides. He dug knuckles into tired eyes. "Anything else I should know before I try to get back to sleep?" He was wearing only a shirt and jeans in the night chill, and rubbed his arms with his hands as he walked.

Seaver hurried to keep up with him. "We got word that the Governor's coming again tomorrow, to try and persuade you to sign a truce."

Makewell gave a small smile. "It's her gas to waste."

"She's offered to send peacekeeping troops. National Guard," Seaver added.

The other stopped and his face split with the pearly grin that people everywhere now knew from news reports and magazine covers. "Now that's funny."

Seaver's brow furrowed. "You don't think she would?"

"I don't think she could."

Two men walked past with rifles under their arms. They recognized Makewell with a start and saluted automatically, snapping their rifles to their shoulders. He held his palm up in return, and they moved off down Blossom Street.

After their departure, Seaver shook his head. "I don't

get it, Nick. Why does she come down here practically every other day?"

The other patted him on the shoulder. "Because this is where the TV cameras are, when we let them." He continued past streets of silent houses, and trashcans burning in the night. No streetlights were on, in accordance with the Temporary Emergency Order that had ruled Northwood for three months.

"Mind you," Makewell resumed, "I like her. She's smart. I wonder if I could get her to work for me?" he mused.

Seaver smiled. "Quit being governor to work for you? But you're just the town manager of Northwood."

"So far," Makewell agreed softly.

"Then you won't sign a cease-fire?"

They had walked the length of Whitewood Circle, and reached the steps of a modest two-story house. An elderly widow owned it, and she was tickled to share her home with the illustrious Nicholas Makewell. She was the envy of her bridge club, where she bragged that she baked him blueberry muffins from scratch.

In a near-whisper he answered, "I'm fighting this war with Westfield to conquer it, not to sign a cease-fire."

Seaver replied softly, "But you're not fighting it to get newlywed nurses killed either. Are you?"

Makewell stared, unseeing. "No. I'll have to do something about that."

It had all started over a line. Some bright boy with a GPS locator figured out that the boundary between Northwood and Westfield was off by 47 feet. Not much, but enough to take twenty-six Northwood families and put them in Westfield. "We already have the master list," the leader of Westfield's town council had chortled, "and the tax bills will go out shortly."

Those twenty-six didn't want to go, and not just because of the taxes. They had kids who would be yanked from their schools to a totally different town. They had mail and phone service and trash pickup and cable companies – a hundred little threads to sever and reconnect.

The twenty-six families had friends and those friends had their friends. There was a town meeting in Northwood where everyone agreed they wouldn't give up without a fight. And another meeting in Westfield the same night, demanding

"immediate transfer."

Nicholas Makewell made a modest proposal. Actually, two modest proposals. The first suggested a fifty-year moratorium on the transfer. "After all," he said, "these people bought their homes under certain assumptions. Why not let them continue to live as they were? Whoever owns the houses in fifty years will do so in full knowledge that the properties will revert to Westfield then."

"Hell, no!" the head of the Westfield town council thundered. "It's our town, they're our citizens, and it's our money. The transfer will begin immediately."

Northwood was outraged by the ultimatum. Makewell didn't say whether he was outraged or not, but he did make a second proposal. Northwood had low taxes and a lucrative light industrial zone. Westfield had better schools and space for new housing. Why not, the town manager of Northwood suggested, merge the two towns?

The Westfield town council dismissed the proposal out of hand, without even putting it to a town vote. Their curt and scornful reply, when made public, got Northwood residents seething. Westfield and Northwood had been rivals for years, and thousands in both towns had grown up booing the other's teams. Their hostility now moved off the playing field, and into everyday life.

Northwood town manager Makewell suggested to public works superintendent Seaver that repairs were necessary to certain roads. That these roads happened to be the main arteries in and out of Westfield was clear to everyone. Crews made the roads impassable at the border, and Westfield drivers fumed over the obvious blockade. Blows were exchanged at the construction site, and the police forces of both towns turned out to patrol the border crossings.

Nobody really knows who fired the first shots across the backhoes, but those shots were returned. When the news flashed through both towns, borders instantly became barricades, and every road leading in or out was guarded by squads of hastily organized militia armed with rifles.

Twice the state police had attempted to enter and ease the tension, and twice they were repulsed violently. The two towns were now effectively at war. Stunned commentators compared the situation to Italy in the early Renaissance, when neighboring city-states battled each other constantly. Indeed, the outbreak seemed to inspire similar clashes in several other

states.

The clear course was for the federal government to step in and impose martial law. But nobody seemed willing to be the one responsible for ordering tanks into two New England suburbs, no matter what the provocation. Besides, the President was occupied with avoiding impeachment for election irregularities, and the Vice-President was under active indictment. Congress was split so evenly along party lines that it was effectively deadlocked.

The governor would have acted without federal approval, if she could. However, she was of the opposite party from the President, so she couldn't follow the course he favored without her party swatting her like a bug. Still, she couldn't go against the President either, as most of her constituents backed him. Besides, she was in no hurry to see the evening news carrying film of National Guard units firing on her civilians, armed or not. She was stuck. And it was this peculiar immobility of superior forces that allowed the Northwood-Westfield conflict to continue beyond all rational limits.

The state, the country, and the world watched in horrified amazement as the war ground on.

The next morning, Makewell sat at his desk in the historic town hall. Oil paintings of regional luminaries in massive gilt frames lined the walls of the large office. He had no use for them and their disapproving scowls, and often wondered if he could sell them on eBay. He was staring at a large blueberry muffin on his desk. He hated blueberry muffins.

His secretary came in and handed him a small sheaf of papers. Mary Margaret O'Brien was a round, jovial woman, mother of eight and grandmother of a dozen. She regarded Nick as an adopted son.

"You eat that up now," she instructed him, nodding. "Mrs. Marino baked that special for you."

"Thank you, Mary Margaret," he replied, ignoring her advice but accepting the papers. They were lists of supplies that Northwood was running short on, and he was at a temporary loss as to where to obtain everything they needed.

"Hi, Nick!"

Makewell looked up to see Hildie bouncing his way into the room.

Mary Margaret turned on him. "Knock before entering, young man," she ordered, and Makewell smiled behind her back.

Hildie scampered out and knocked obediently, then bounded back in again. Mary Margaret gave a grudging nod and left the office.

Although she had addressed him as "young man", it would have been tough to pin down Hildie's true age. Though clearly an adult, he had the restless energy of a child. Now he was bobbing from foot to foot in front of the desk, his hands describing excited motions that might have been knitting. His face bore a perpetual big-toothed grin, and his thick glasses magnified his eyes to a fish-like goggle. He wore a t-shirt, short-sleeved shirt, long-sleeved shirt, and a vest, with a sweatshirt tied around his waist, even though it was summer.

Before the war, he had been in constant motion throughout the town, staring through shop-windows, talking to the librarians, getting change at the bank. Now he had a dozen jobs, day and night, that took him from house to office to barricade in perpetual motion.

"Hi, Hildie," said Makewell. "Want a muffin?" he added in a tone he hoped was too low for the near-telepathic Mary Margaret to hear.

"Sure, Nick," Hildie agreed with a little giggle. "Thanks. I brought Tommy. Tommy!" He began devouring the muffin.

Tommy Cochran appeared at the door, his rifle slung over his right shoulder. He had a young face, unlined, a smudge on one cheek. His hair was straight and dark, and he wore a fatigue jacket over jeans and a Patriots t-shirt. He seemed about to salute, but Makewell stood and strode forward with his hand extended. They shook hands.

"Thanks for coming," Makewell began in a serious voice. "How was your shift?"

Tommy seemed to have trouble finding his voice. "Pretty quiet. We thought we heard some shots off to our right, but no one bothered us."

Makewell nodded and held Tommy's gaze. "There were shots, Tommy, and people were hurt. Belinda was shot." Tommy gave a small gasp. "She didn't make it, Tommy. Belinda is dead. I'm sorry."

Tommy stepped back away from him, eyes fixed on something infinitely far away. "Oh, no," he stammered. "Oh,

God."

Mary Margaret had entered, and pressed a glass into Tommy's shaking hands. He gulped the spirit down automatically. She rested a hand on Tommy's shoulder.

"She was a real heroine," Makewell stated. "We're sorry to lose her."

It took Tommy a few attempts to raise his eyes to Makewell's. When he did, he nodded abruptly.

Mary Margaret patted his shoulder. "Poor lad. Come along, then. We'll get someone to walk you to the hospital mortuary." She guided him out.

Makewell turned back to his desk, his eyes thoughtful.

Hildie was licking his fingers. "Good muffin, Nick," he enthused. "Thanks."

Makewell nodded and walked around his desk. "You know them at all, Hildie – Belinda and Tommy?"

Hildie nodded convulsively. "Oh, yeah. She was real pretty. Tommy's a lucky guy. Was a lucky guy, I guess," he amended with a frown, as if trying to work out just what was lucky and what wasn't.

Makewell sat at his desk and studied his steepled hands. "Tommy ever talk during his watch? About him and Belinda?"

"Oh, sure." Hildie bobbed his head. "They were in love. They got married."

"Hildie!" Mary Margaret called from the outer office.

Hildie froze, then headed for the door as if he'd been reeled in on a line.

"Come talk to me this afternoon," Makewell suggested, before Hildie vanished.

He pulled the plastic rod from his pocket and turned it over in his hands. After hearing the outer office door close, he said, "Mary Margaret?"

She appeared at the doorway.

He looked up at her. "Who's pregnant and doesn't want anyone to know?"

Makewell leaned forward onto the large wooden conference table, and looked earnestly into the faces of each man and woman seated there. The meeting room in the town hall was long and wide. Old-fashioned glass-fronted bookcases held thick volumes of town records dating back three hundred years that no one ever read. Mary Margaret

despaired over the dust in the room, but Makewell forbade her having it cleaned.

Now, enunciating slowly and clearly, he told his squad leaders, "I want us to capture that damned wall. Tonight."

They sat stunned and apprehensive at the prospect. He pointed to a map behind him.

"Right now, Westfield can use this stone wall as cover to shoot at us all along here, and we can't get at them. If we control this wall, we can drive them back from this entire area." He pointed to the middle of Westfield. "From there, we can drive a wedge right through their center. That wall is the key."

The others stirred in their seats, each unwilling to admit to the uneasiness that they all felt. Finally, Len Tranh cleared his throat. A pharmacist before the war, Makewell had recruited him after watching how he kept a staff of seven in efficient order at CVS. Tranh adjusted his glasses and said, "C'mon, Nick. That wall is surrounded on three sides. They can pick apart any troops we send up to it."

"Exactly," Makewell agreed. "That's why we have to divert their forces away from the wall until we can capture it. Once we have the wall, the tables are turned: they can't come anywhere near it without us cutting them down."

Marcie Thibodeau leaned forward. The first time Makewell had seen her, at a zoning board meeting a year before, he had been impressed with the meticulous preparation she had demonstrated, and the astonishing way she had secured agreement among several parties in a tricky real estate venture. Real estate wasn't really thriving in Northwood now, and Thibodeau brought the same thoroughness to her new military duties. She asked, "What kind of diversion are you talking about?"

Makewell touched a point beyond the wall. "There's one house, about fifty yards past the wall, that's perfect. Clear field of fire all around. If we can get a small forward squad into that house, Westfield would be forced to pull back from the wall to deal with it. While our squad in the house kept them pinned down, the main force could come right up to the wall, disperse their remaining defenders, and cover the squad's retreat."

Again they were stunned, but it was Roscoe Washington, former football and baseball coach at the high school, who blurted out what they all were thinking. "Suicide!

It's suicide." He leaned forward, his hands gripping an imaginary football before him. "Even if the squad could make it across the fifty yards to the house, all Westfield would have to do is burn it down."

Makewell leaned back against the wall and tilted his head to one side. "I'm not saying it isn't dangerous," he admitted in a quiet voice. "It is dangerous. People may not be coming back from this."

Again, he looked from one doubtful face to another around the table. "But there comes a point when you have to stop not-losing and start winning. We're at that point now. Yes, we're outgunned and outsupplied by Westfield. But we've taken everything they've thrown at us and thrown it right back in their faces."

Heads nodded in agreement. They had taken it, and they felt pride in that.

"There was a time when we didn't know if we'd survive against them. Well, now we know: we can survive against them. But we want to do more than survive: we want to win." He lifted his face defiantly and spoke, emphasizing each word, "This is where we start winning."

Still hesitant, the others had lifted their faces, thrust out their chins, unconsciously mirroring him. They were seeing the prospect of victory before them, an end to the fighting, and they liked what they saw.

He stabbed one finger into the map. "No one is going to tell me that our ancestors built that stone wall so that Westfield could hide behind it and kill our people."

"Damn straight," Washington muttered, and others echoed in agreement.

Makewell waited a moment with a sober expression, then said, "I think you've all heard about Belinda Cochran by now. This young nurse, a new bride, was cut down by a sniper from that Westfield wall." He paused again, and his expression turned hard as he stated, "We cannot allow them to do that to our people."

"No," Marcie Thibodeau agreed. She raised her eyes to his and nodded decisively.

Makewell snapped his hand into a fist and held it before him. "That wall is ours, and we're taking it back. Tonight."

Around the table, fists clenched with resolution, eyes burned with a sense of what could be.

"Commanders, I want a detailed plan by nightfall. Okay, people. Let's do it."

There was an electric sense of mission as they stood up from their chairs. They could feel the power of it, and nothing in their lives had ever felt better than the steely bond of purpose that seemed to connect them as they moved.

Makewell watched proudly as they went, and wondered which ones he would be sending to certain death tonight.

Lucy Bassett knocked softly on Makewell's door and heard him call, "Come in." She eased the door ajar and peeked around it.

When Makewell saw who it was, he smiled and stood from his desk. "Hi, Lucy. Come on in. Please sit down."

Lucy smiled shyly and did as she was told. She was a solidly built young woman of about twenty, with a round open face and wavy brown hair to her shoulders. After she sat, Makewell sat also, and they looked at each other in silence for several seconds.

Makewell ducked his gaze and looked up at her with warm eyes. "Lucy," he began, "I don't mean to pry. I don't want to interfere in your private life in any way. But I understand you may have something you're dealing with, and I want you to know that I'm here to help you."

Lucy nodded and her lower lip crumpled. She produced a tissue from somewhere and dabbed at her eyes.

Makewell cleared his throat. "Now, I don't know if you plan to get married or not. But regardless, the town of Northwood is here to help you and your baby. That's part of what we're about here."

Again, Lucy nodded and her lips formed a soundless, "Thank you."

He looked down at his hands folded on the desk, then raised his eyes to Lucy once more. "Am I right in thinking that it was Belinda Cochran who helped you out with an early pregnancy test?"

Lucy found her voice. "Yes, that's right," she said in breathy tones. "Belinda helped me."

"Did you know Belinda at all, Lucy?"

Lucy shook her head. "I knew she was one of the nurses at the infirmary is all."

Quietly, Makewell asked, "Did you hear she was killed

last night?"

Lucy nodded. "Terrible," she breathed, her tears starting again. "I'm so sorry. She was so nice to me."

Makewell nodded himself. "She was very nice," he agreed. He stood slowly, drawing her up with him. "Well, Lucy, that's really all I wanted to ask you about. Good luck now. Just let us know how we can help."

"Thank you," she replied. She smiled then, and for a moment he could see how some people might think her attractive.

"She's here," Mary Margaret informed Makewell in a significant tone. She stood at the doorway, watching him patiently as he unhurriedly gathered some papers together. "The Governor," Mary Margaret added.

"Yes," was all he said as he stood up and left the room.

The governor's limousine had pulled to the base of the town hall steps. Two motorcycle police fore and aft surveyed the area carefully for any danger. Townspeople on foot glanced at them in mild curiosity, then continued on their way. News photographers and camera crews waited expectantly in a small huddle on the sidewalk.

Makewell appeared at the top of the steps and strode down. Seaver preceded him and opened the rear door of the limousine. Elizabeth Bowden, an attractive blonde professional in her fifties, stepped out and was immediately flanked by two uniformed men who emerged from the limousine behind her. The press began taking pictures and running tape.

Makewell extended a hand, which she shook telegenically. He said, "Governor Bowden," and she said, "Mr. Makewell," and the photographers captured the moment.

Elizabeth Bowden indicated the man on her right. "Major-General Tom Warren, commander of the National Guard."

Makewell shook hands with him. "General."

The Governor introduced the man on her left. "Colonel White of the State Police."

Makewell shook hands with him also. "Colonel." Both officers seemed a bit miffed that he wasn't even wearing a suit for the occasion.

Makewell turned and gestured to Seaver, who now stood behind him on the steps, feet spread, hands clasped

behind his back. "This is Mr. Seaver, my assistant," he explained.

Seaver nodded pleasantly at the Governor and ignored the other two.

"A short tour, perhaps," Makewell suggested, extending his hand along the sidewalk, away from the cameras.

Bowden fell into step beside him. Her two associates followed her, then seemed uncomfortable when Seaver brought up the rear a few paces behind. Journalists with cameras stalked all five.

"When Yasser Arafat used to have guests," Makewell was relating, "he always arranged for the visit to be interrupted by gunfire. To enlist sympathy for his cause, I assume."

"I hope you haven't gone to such trouble," Bowden replied wryly.

"Can't afford to waste the ammo," he sighed. "And I doubt if our Westfield neighbors would be so tactless as to attack us when they know you're here."

"Let's hope," she answered.

They proceeded around the town hall, with Makewell pointing out a house commandeered to accommodate an elementary school that was too near the front, a free market for those in need of food, and a group of teenagers practicing close-order drill with broomsticks in the town square. The few people walking saluted Makewell and ignored the others.

Back at the front steps, Seaver bounded ahead and held open the front door for all to pass inside – except the press, who knew better than to try and get past him. Outside the conference room, Makewell bent forward so that his lips were by Bowden's ear. "I have no secrets from Seaver," he whispered.

Bowden blinked at him. "I trust my men," she responded in low tones.

Makewell bent forward again. "None," he added significantly.

Bowden noticed something in his expression, considered for a moment, and then turned to the colonel and major general. "Gentlemen, would you please wait for me here?" she requested with a gracious smile.

Both men looked disappointed, then stoic. Seaver opened the door to the conference room, allowed Bowden and

Makewell to enter, then followed them, twisting the lock behind him.

Inside, Makewell produced a cloth and dusted a leather-upholstered chair, wiping the seat, back, and arms carefully. "I'm sorry about the state of this room," he said. "We just don't have the time or the staff to take care of the niceties. Please, sit down."

Bowden thanked him and sat. Makewell walked around to the other side of the long conference table, and sat also. He produced the papers he had been reviewing in his office and placed them on the smooth mahogany surface of the table.

"This is a list of supplies we'll be needing," he explained, moving the papers toward Bowden. "Nothing of a lethal nature, as you can see. Just things we're running low on."

Bowden seemed baffled by the papers, but gazed directly at Makewell. "Then you will sign the truce?" she asked expectantly.

"No," Makewell replied tersely. "And it would be ideal if we could start getting some of this by Friday."

She folded her arms and regarded him with a crooked smile. "You have your nerve, Mr. Makewell."

"Nick," he suggested mildly.

"You have your nerve, Nick," she amended. She leaned forward and spread her hands. "Why should I give you anything if you aren't going to sign the truce?"

"So that I'll let you come back here again."

"And why would I want to?" she asked indignantly, drawing herself up stiffly.

"Three of those crews outside are from network news, you know." He paused to let the significance sink in. Her posture relaxed slightly. "It isn't often that a Governor gets to act as a diplomat, ambassador, peace-maker, on CNN. The press has been very flattering about your handling of this unprecedented crisis in your state. And rightly so, Governor."

She sat back into the upholstered comfort of her chair. "Elizabeth," she corrected.

He bowed his head slightly. "This is doing wonders for you, not only in the state, but on a national level. Even an international level. It's worth a few truckloads of groceries."

She considered. "Yes, but how will it look for me to come down here, and you refuse to sign my truce?"

He spread a hand. "You'll gain enormous sympathy. Everyone knows how unreasonable I am. The papers are full of it. Headstrong. Hotheaded. My refusal will only make you more determined to achieve peace here. And you will, eventually."

Her eyes sparkled. "Then you will sign the truce at some point?"

He smiled. "Sorry, no. But I'm working on other ways of achieving peace."

"Defeating Westfield, you mean."

"Potayto, potahto." He shrugged. "Do we exit smiling?"

Bowden examined him closely. "There's something about you I don't trust."

"You're very shrewd," he assured her. "But that doesn't mean we can't do business. Yes?"

He extended his hand across the table. She took it in hers, and picked up the papers in the other.

As they left the room, he was telling her, "I suggest that I speak first, churlishly declining your generous offer. Then you can be disappointed and grimly resolute."

Bowden gave a minute nod.

On the steps, Makewell addressed the press in the clear convicting tones they were becoming used to. "Regrettably, I cannot accept this truce, which Governor Bowden has so diplomatically offered. Do not misunderstand: I am a man of peace. Everyone knows how Westfield started this conflict, and how Northwood has defended herself so bravely from all attacks.

"I truly grieve all who have been lost, both in Northwood and in Westfield. I hold no animosity toward the people of Westfield, because I know that they don't want this war either. When I first proposed merging our two towns, the people of Westfield supported the idea. It was their leaders who ignored what their own people wanted. It was the leaders of Westfield who forced this conflict. And it is the leaders of Westfield who are continuing the strife to this day. For me to agree to this truce would be to deliver to those leaders both Westfield and Northwood, and that I will never do.

"Instead, I call upon the people of Westfield to question the validity, the legality, the morality of what their leaders are forcing upon them – and to remove those leaders from power, so that all our people can enjoy the blessings of the peace they deserve. Thank you."

Makewell ducked his head shyly and moved back and to the side so the Governor could make her statement. She was staring at him aghast. She had never for a moment considered the possibility that Makewell would seize this opportunity to put an entirely new spin on the war. To urge the people of Westfield to overthrow their leaders – she was stunned. Not only did she have a small civil war on her hands, but the possibility of a small revolution as well.

It was not difficult, therefore, for her to step forward with mournful eyes and a determined jaw, and to express her disappointment at the present time and her resolve to end this conflict fairly and peacefully. "I shall continue to meet with Mr. Makewell, and with the leaders of Westfield, in the hope of helping them to overcome their remaining differences," she concluded crisply.

After she finished and they again shook hands, Makewell himself stepped forward to close her limousine door. As he did, he murmured, "Nicely done, Elizabeth. See you next week."

"Hey, Nick."

Hildie stood jiggling in the doorway. Makewell placed a finger in the press release he was reading and looked up. "You'd better get in here before Mary Margaret makes you knock."

Hildie nodded and snickered. He sat down rapidly and oscillated.

Makewell read another half-paragraph. Mary Margaret had written the release about the killing of Belinda Cochran, but it didn't make Westfield look despicable enough. He jotted changes with a pencil. "You have lunch yet, Hildie?"

He bobbed his head energetically. "Oh, yeah. I ate at the mess hall, with the guys," he said with some pride.

"Get any sleep?"

"Naw. Nap before duty tonight."

"I thought you were on last night?"

Hildie's face cracked in a toothy smile. "I'm on duty every night, Nick. Different squads, but every night."

Makewell squinted at him. "Hildie, I never see you with a rifle. Do you ever carry a gun on duty?"

Hildie wrinkled his nose. "I don't like guns, Nick. Guns are dangerous. They scare me."

Makewell gave him a long look. "That's fine, Hildie."

They are dangerous. You just keep on like you're doing." He glanced down at the release. "How's Tommy doing?"

Hildie frowned. "He's sleeping now. Doc gave him something, and I took him home. A lot of the guys came by to see him, but I told them he needed his sleep. He was so sad."

Makewell snuck another look at the release. "He must be."

"Yeah, he was so happy with Belinda. They were real happy. Well, sometimes he was sad. But mostly he was real happy."

Makewell asked absently, "When was Tommy sad, Hildie?"

"Oh, he was mainly happy. Mainly. But he was sad because they couldn't have babies. Some men, you know, they can't make babies. Most can. I probably could, though I've never tried. Hmmm. But, anyway, Tommy couldn't, so he was sad sometimes."

Makewell dropped the paper onto his desk. He was staring past Hildie, past the room. In a faraway voice he asked, "Were you on duty with Tommy's squad last night, Hildie?"

"Oh, yeah. I was on the south barricade, with the guys. No action, though. We held 'em off."

"That's good, Hildie. Good job. Now, was Tommy with the squad all night?"

"Sure. All night. Well, he went to take a leak around one or two. Nature calls, y'know? A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"Right. Went south, did he? Back toward us?"

"No." Hildie shook his head emphatically. "North. Toward the Westfield line. Took a walk, he said."

"Huh." Makewell sat back in his chair, tapping his lips with one finger.

Hildie grew restless. "I gotta go, Nick. I got things to do, okay?" He stood and started edging toward the door.

"How can you stand being in this office all day? Goodbye, Mrs. O'Brien." Hildie was off.

Makewell looked down at the paper on top of his desk. "Mary Margaret?" he called.

She entered and he pushed the press release aside. "Get me the hospital, please. Someone in the morgue, please."

Roscoe Washington towered over Makewell and

pointed at the map with a finger like a banana.

"Squad three comes down from the north, here, exchanges some fire, and pulls back, making sure to pull some Westfield units with them. Same time, squad five comes up from the south, does the same thing. That should take a lot of the defenders away from the wall. Then the forward squad goes over the wall, straight to that house. Squads two and eight come up to the wall behind them. Three and five circle around and join them. When we have the wall, the forward squad pulls back from the house."

Makewell nodded at each step of the plan. "Good work. Who goes forward, Coach?"

"Squad four," he stated.

"That's you."

"Yup."

"Why's that?"

Washington shrugged. "I can't ask anybody to do it for me."

"Of course you can," Makewell objected. "You're the senior squad leader. It's your job to send the best squad for the job. I'd say send the fastest. Your squad the fastest?"

Washington frowned and shook his head. "No."

"Who is?"

Washington breathed in and out. "Three, I guess. Lot of those guys are runners."

"Then three goes forward. You take the diversion to the north."

Washington compressed his lips and nodded his head slowly. "Okay, Nick. I guess you're right. I don't like it, but I guess you're right."

Makewell looked at him. "You're the leader, Coach. What do you say? I'm just making a suggestion. You're the one who has to run this. We'll do it the way you want it."

The coach looked back at him and nodded. "I say send three. I'll handle the diversion and cover their retreat."

Makewell raised a finger. "Only," he directed, "don't tell three yet."

Washington stared at him. "Aw, c'mon, Nick. I got to let them know. So they can prepare."

But Makewell was looking at the map, and touching the house and the wall.

"No. Not yet. I may have a volunteer to take that house."

"We are all very proud of all that you are doing to help the town of Northwood, and I know that your leaders are too," Makewell said, looking into each face as he spoke. "And now, I think that Mrs. O'Brien has some ice cream for you across the hall."

The dozen Daisy Girls, who had been trying to stand quietly and seriously while he spoke to them, now erupted into leaps and cheers. They rushed to the door in a skipping, giggling mass, while Makewell shook hands with their leaders. "Thank you for all you're doing, Mrs. Rocco. Thanks for bringing the girls by, Miss Bern."

Tommy Cochran appeared at the door of the outer office, looking uncertainly at the little girls streaming after Mrs. O'Brien, then glancing inside to Makewell, who gestured at him to enter and close the door.

Makewell put an arm around Tommy's shoulder, saying, "Kids are great, aren't they?"

Tommy nodded slowly, walking beside Makewell, who suddenly spun towards Tommy and seized his shirt at the throat.

Makewell jerked his face close to Tommy's and quietly snarled, "She wasn't pregnant, Tommy. She wasn't unfaithful to you. You killed her for nothing."

He shoved roughly at Tommy, who stumbled backwards into the chair Makewell had placed precisely in that spot. His face was ashen. His mouth was working as if to speak, but nothing came out.

Makewell strode up to him, and Tommy raised a hand as if to ward off a blow. But Makewell passed by, and talked as he paced the office.

"We're real low on pregnancy test kits, and we can only use them for unmarried women right now. All the medics know that, including Belinda. She was helping a young woman with that kit. You found the positive test result and assumed it was Belinda's. You knew you couldn't have gotten her pregnant, and assumed she'd been unfaithful to you. So you left your squad last night, walked toward the Westfield line, then turned and shot her through the infirmary window. You damned murdering idiot."

Tommy had his face down in his hands. "Oh God," he moaned through his fingers. "How did you know?"

Makewell seized him by the shoulders and yanked

him out of the chair. "I know everything, Tommy. And it's too late for God now. If you think you're getting a civil trial, you're wrong. You were a soldier on duty last night, and you killed one of my medics. I could have a court martial in here tonight, and you'd be shot at dawn."

He let go of Tommy, who sagged back into the chair again, weak and aimless.

"As it happens," Makewell continued in a thoughtful tone, "I don't need a dead murderer. Tonight, I need a live hero."

He dropped to one knee beside Tommy, laying one hand against Tommy's cheek. "I'm going to give you one chance to redeem your worthless soul."

Seaver walked through the night, down Whitewood Circle to the end. Climbing the outside wooden staircase to the second floor, he saw Makewell scrambling down from the roof. They met on the balcony outside Makewell's apartment.

"Damn," Makewell said, "you caught me."

Seaver finished counting to ten. "Please tell me you don't go up there a lot."

He shook his head. "No, not a lot."

"Damn it, Nick, you want to break your neck? What would we all do if you got killed?"

Makewell smiled. "Oh, I expect you'd muddle through."

Seaver's eyes looked grim. "I don't think so." He sighed and looked off into the night, then back at Makewell. "You watch the battle?"

"I did. I thought Roscoe did a fine job."

Seaver examined the other's face in the dim light. "Why don't you lead them yourself, Nick? You know you want to. You know they'd follow you."

Makewell put his hands on the balcony rail and leaned over it. "That wouldn't be a good idea. There's something about having death in my hand to command that appeals to me far too much. Better for everyone if I leave it to others. But tell me about the battle."

"Went like clockwork," Seaver said with animation.

"The diversions to the north and south pulled open a nice gap in the center. Young Cochran went over that wall like the devil was after him, and was halfway to the house before Westfield knew what was happening. When he got there, they started

blasting away at the place, paying no attention to the wall. Our squads got up to it and drove the rest away, and we still hold it."

"Excellent." Makewell smiled with satisfaction. "What about Tommy?"

Seaver shook his head somberly. "Didn't make it, poor kid. He gave Westfield hell, that's for sure. Some shot with that rifle. When it came the time, we covered him, but the bastards cut him down outside the house. He went quick, they tell me. Heroic thing he did. I suppose he felt like he couldn't go on without Belinda."

"Something like that," replied Makewell.

Seaver shot a glance at him, but could read nothing from his face.

Makewell stared into the distance. "We'll have a wake for both of them, then a state funeral, full military honors."

Seaver scribbled on his pad. "Of course. I'll arrange it."

Makewell yawned. "Any other news for me before I get back to bed?"

Seaver nodded. "Couple things. The first truck arrived from the Governor." He grinned.

"Bless her heart."

"Yes. Through the Easton border. A Toys R Us truck, full of goodies."

"Nice touch. I'll have to send her a thank you note. Was there something else?"

Seaver looked thoughtful. "We got a message. From a group in Westfield. Say they saw your speech today, and they're fed up with the war. Want to overthrow their leaders and join with Northwood. Say they'll be in touch again to set up a meeting."

Makewell clapped his hands together. "At last! This could be the beginning, Seaver."

"Yes, sir," Seaver replied automatically.

Makewell regarded him indulgently. "So, let's see. A strategic victory in battle. Two new heroes to inspire the troops. A fresh source of supplies. And possible collaborators on the other side. Seaver, this could be a good day."

The Wife of Fustus Magus

by Joe Molnar

Fustus Magus had two wives. One of dark eyes and chestnut hair; the other had eyes of severe blue framed by the fairest golden locks. Their names were Kala and Elysse. After spending each day in his laboratory in the highest spires of his castle, Fustus Magus took great delight in coming down to the smell of a roast cooking and the doting attention of his wives as he sat by the fire.

He would talk at great length over dinner about his day: his successes, failures, and new discoveries. His wives understood little of science, but they listened politely anyway. He'd tell them about the progress of his latest work, a special biotron for his patron, Duke Gendymore, III, for his upcoming hundredth birthday celebration.

Fustus Magus would use his two wives in the unveiling presentation of any new biotron. He would dress them in tight-fitting black leather and have them stand on either side of the new creature. Their duty was to pull the veil back exposing his latest creation to the world. Once the royal audience finished their gasps and ooh's, Kala and Elysse would lead the newly born creature off stage and into its cage. Their part was then done. They would watch from the sidelines as Fustus Magus accepted the gracious congratulations from the Royals and Holies in attendance and gladly booked new commissions.

"Come," Fustus Magus called down from the drafty spires of his laboratory one cold autumn day. "The Duke's

new toy is almost ready. Come, watch as I wake her."

Kala and Elysse looked at each other. Without saying a word, they dropped their knittings and ascended the stairs. They stood in the tank chamber on either side of a human-sized, glass cylinder filled with opaque, white liquid; stood as they were trained in an unveiling, one on either side.

From within, a stray index finger touched the side of the glass. Kala and Elysse could see a long finger belonging to a tender hand. Tendrils of hair danced along the inside wall of the cylinder.

"Red hair?" Kala asked with a raised eyebrow, for Fustus Magus often brought his two wives into submission by threatening to create a third, one with red hair.

"The Duke will surely enjoy her," Fustus Magus said with glee from above the tank room in his glass-lined control booth. "You will see her beauty in but a moment. I shall now purge the growth bath and inject the awakener."

Fustus Magus pulled a throw-switch on the wall, triggering the sound of an electric engine whirling to life. From below, Kala and Elysse saw a red liquid injected into the cylinder along a clear tube. These were the purging and awakening reagents. Shortly after, the chemicals started to mix and the liquid cleared. The body of the new biotron appeared as it floated in the liquid. Lithe, tall, fair of skin, with full, round breasts. The new creature began to stir.

Then it twitched and convulsed. It opened its eyes and looked out of the cylinder with the pain that only a creature born into pain could know. It pulled itself into a fetal ball, shaking and spasming. It died quickly. A hand broke loose and floated next to the body stirred by the currents in the tank.

Magus didn't know that the batch of reagents had been mislabeled. Some suspected Elysse, but that could never be proved. For moments later, even before the biotron's body could decay further, the errant chemicals reacted with what remained of the growth bath and exploded.

The explosion vaporized the dead biotron and broke through the cylinder. The force sent Kala and Elysse against opposite walls of the laboratory. Shards of flying glass cut them to pieces. There was nothing but scattered body parts to pick up by the time Fustus Magus made his way down from the control booth.

"No!" he cried, as he sloshed through the still bubbling liquid, kicking knife-sized slivers of glass out of his way. He

picked up the left arm of Elysse and part of Kala's severed right foot. He dropped them both when he saw what remained of each.

Kala's entire right side was gone, as was Elysse's left. Magus called two flithe beasts to help pick up the body pieces. He cried as he put them all into a tank of preservative, not being able to bear the thought that both of his wives had died. He bade the flithes to scrub down the walls, mop the floor, and then to return to their cages. They grunted only once in a sign of acknowledgement.

Numbed with shock, Magus wheeled out the tank with bits of Kala and Elysse sloshing in formaldehyde. He took them to the lowest basement, into cold storage. Once the two bodies were sealed into a vault, he climbed back up, but not to the laboratory. Just as far as the living quarters where a roast still cooked over the fire. A kitchen zamma turned the spit dutifully even though it no doubt heard the explosion.

"You may go to your cage," he instructed the biotron.

"Uh?" the creature asked, looking at the roast.

"It is not your concern. There will be no dinner served tonight," Fustus said. Even as the creature limped off, Fustus Magus let his tears flow one more time.

He looked out one of the grand bay windows at the view from up upon his hill. The moon was rising over the distant moors.

He called upon the two trakels he'd built as servants for Kala and Elysse. He supervised them in boxing up the wife's belongings and sealing them into airtight containers. He personally put a photograph of each as the top item of their respective last boxes. After the trakels helped him carry the containers to storage, he shot them both with a vaporizer.

Fustus Magus slept a fitful sleep. The following day, he walked around the castle in a daze. The kitchen zamma hid from him. Its little mind knew the wives were no more and that their trakels were no more. And the roast had burnt to a char when master sent it away. Magus would surely do away with it next.

Late in the afternoon, Magus saddled up a lorse and rode down the hill, past the village, and into the moors. He lost himself in thought. The lorse barely spoke a word. It, too, knew about the wives and the trakels.

To the lorse's relief, master turned it around and ordered "home" as they were plodding along a narrow path in

a gloomy swamp. "Now I know what I must do," he said as he kicked the horse in the side sending it into a full gallop back to the castle.

Once in the castle courtyard, Fustus Magus jumped off the creature and ran in through the double doors to the front hall. He made his way down the spiraling marble steps like a madman without a moment to spare, down to cold storage, where pieces of Kala and Elysse lay. He wheeled their vat out from its alcove under the stairs. In the center of the crypt-like room, Magus donned a pair of arm-length rubber gloves. He reached in and pulled up the first small piece he grabbed. He laid the tattered segment of forearm onto a dissection table and studied it with a magnifying glass. He then applied electrical probes and watched it twitch. This was enough for a cursory exam. He nodded, pleased with the result.

He had a flithe wheel the tank up to the laboratory. Once there, Fustus Magus took the pieces out one by one. He handled each with tenderness and fidelity, a gentleness he hadn't exhibited since his time courting each of them. "Oh, how I have wronged you," he said, almost crying again. That was the last emotion he allowed himself; he could ill afford such luxury, now that he set himself to this task.

Magus cleaned the physical debris from the pieces. After that, he immersed each item into a vivificative infusion to stop any further decay. Once this critical step had been performed, Magus placed each piece on an examining table again and scanned them into his biotron simulator. Once all the pieces were thus entered, he returned them to individual vats or jars, depending on their sizes, and immersed them in the milky white biotron growth bath. Fustus then proceeded to work around the clock, using the biotron simulator to fit the pieces together in new configurations. All the while marching blindly down the path to the unthinkable.

"Master, eat?" he heard the kitchen zamma call. He turned to slap the creature for daring to distract him. He stopped his raised hand in mid-swing. The zamma looked up at him from table height with sad eyes. Although it shook with fear, it held out a plate with a few slices of roast and steamed red cabbage.

Fustus took the plate. He looked out the window – two moons were rising above the moor. "Finish your kitchen duties and you may rest in your cage," he told the creature.

"Ladies bringback you?" the zamma asked, not

moving from its spot beside the workbench.

"Yes, I will try to bring back the ladies." Fustus Magus ate the meal but regretted the lost time. Then he turned back to the body pieces floating around the ether of the simulator. His eyes were dry. He decided he could spare a few moments and put his head down to rest. He fell asleep moments later.

He woke to the sun glaring in through the eastern window. The simulator waited patiently for his next command. He noticed the blanket draped around his shoulder and the zamma sleeping on the floor by his feet. He covered the little biotron with the blanket and went off to wash the stale sleep out of his mouth.

He made coffee for himself. There had always been Kala or Elysse, one of their trakels, or the zamma for such menial tasks. He tried to understand how the equipment fit together and where to put the coffee and then the water.

Once refreshed and caffeinated, Fustus Magus returned to his task with redoubled vigor. Using the simulator, it was easy to meld pieces together, to shorten or lengthen bone segments. He spent most of the day proportioning each piece so the whole would not be unbalanced or ungainly. When it would come time to work in real life, he'd have to cut entire undamaged sections to make them fit. This is something he loathed to do, but he recognized its necessity.

Around half past midnight (he worked through the day again) he had everything the way he wanted – in the simulator. He was well aware that the simulator is nothing like the sharp edge of a scalpel. He considered bringing in a young surgeon from the university as an assistant but abandoned the idea. Even the young and malleable ones would balk at such a procedure. No, he decided. The best course of action would be a good night's rest and to continue alone with a clear head.

He found a note left by one of the Duke's couriers the following morning. A knot built in his stomach as he read. The Duke was inquiring about his secret birthday surprise. Fustus didn't have time for the Duke. Yet, if the Duke learned there was no bed toy for him, he would surely summon Magus for a dressing-down.

Magus considered starting a new biotron for the Duke and then expressing his apologies that it wouldn't quite be ready for the festivities. Then he thought about ordering a high-end biotron from an off-world catalog; a ploy that might

fall apart if one of the courtiers happens to be well versed in the off-world market. Another option would be enlisting a local peasant girl and passing her off as a biotron. Stunts like that have been pulled off successfully before, with a little cosmetic surgery and training on the girl's part. Ultimately, Fustus Magus acted on none of these ideas. Instead, he forgot about the Duke as he immersed himself in bringing back Kala and Elysse, in whatever form they may come.

He worked day and night. This time it was no simulation, rather it was with the flesh and bones of his wives – with scalpel and stitchings. Despite his experience, he was lulled into a false sense of ease with the simulator. He had to improvise on more than one occasion. The brain took two and a half days by itself. Sewing arms and legs into place was a simple exercise in comparison.

Intestines, liver, gall bladder, kidney. Each had their own issues. Yet, he worked methodically through each of them. The final step before sewing up the torso was assembling a uterus and then a vagina. And, of course, she'd have a clitoris fully wired into the central nervous system – he'd have nothing less.

When the body was finished, he returned it to the growth bath and let it rejuvenate for a day. The next morning he stimulated the heart with an electrical jolt. Once circulation was re-established, he applied low-current electricity to the nervous system. He then watched the readings on his monitors for signs of life.

"Yes," he shouted, pounding his fist on the counter from up in the control booth. Looking down at the cylinder confirmed the readouts. The signals were full and robust, not merely echoes of life as with biotrons. Complex and vibrant patterns they were, competing and coalescing; the signs of a living system, and a lot more.

He threw the wall switch, injecting the awakener. Even though he'd double-checked the batch to insure the chemicals were true, a nervous feeling of anxiety raced through his veins. He dared not breathe, as the red liquid snaked its way along the clear hosing on its way to the vat. He watched as the red mixed with the white of the growth bath. The liquid cleared, revealing his creation to him.

She opened her eyes and looked out at the world. She looked up to the control room where Magus stood. She put both her hands against the walls of the cylinder.

Magus had but a few minutes now. Soon, she'd realize she needed to take her first breath. He'd have to get the tank cleared before that moment. Throwing another switch started to drain the tank. He then ran down to the laboratory proper. By the time he got there, the tank was three quarters empty. No longer buoyed, his creation slumped against the chamber walls. Fustus threw another switch, this one engaging an electrical winch lifting the walls of the cylindrical tank up to the ceiling. He caught her as she collapsed into him.

He put a blanket over her shoulders as he steadied her. She looked back at him. Her two eyes surveyed the room independently. But, soon, they both focused on him.

"Fustus," she said, "*dear.*"

"Yes," he answered, "yes, it's me!"

She turned to survey the room. The turn of the head was severe and jerky, the muscles not yet coordinated with the brain. Then she snapped her head to look the other way. Or, perhaps the brains are in conflict with themselves.

She raised her right hand even while Fustus held her in his arms. Then she raised her left. She opened and closed each hand independently of the other. Her eyes focused on one, then the other, again independently. Her eyes then caught the reflection in a glass window looking over the darkened winter landscape.

"What have you done to me, Fustus. *Fustus what did you do?*" She reached the glass, first with her right hand, and then her left. "No, this cannot be. *I can't believe it!*" Then she screamed. She covered her right eye and a moment later she covered the left with her other hand.

The beauty Fustus Magus beheld while he labored to put piece together evaporated that moment. In its place, he saw the grotesque features of two half faces sewn together. One olive and round, the other, pale and chiseled. They were lopsided and warped. Kala's features, on the left, had one dark brown eye balefully looking out at him. Elysse, on the right, had most of the nose and her single blue eye. It could have killed him with its stare. Their hair, half blonde and half black, hung wet from the tank.

"Is this what you wanted of me? *Look what you have done!*" she, they, said. She, they, turned to him. Each one grabbed his throat with her hand. Then they began their constricting choke and he gasped for air. She lifted him off the ground with surprising strength and flung him across the

laboratory. Fustus Magus fell against the far wall and passed out.

"Oh, Fustus," the wife looked down upon him, "what were you thinking. *You really messed up this time, Fustus.*" She reached for his throat again with her right hand. "No," she said. "No?" she asked. "No," she replied, "*it would be too good for him.*"

KalaElysse turned from him and lumbered out of the laboratory negotiating each step with one deliberate footfall after the other.

"*What has he done to me?*" she lamented in her thoughts. "Yes, what? We can't live like this," the other side of her brain answered. "*We must see that he never does anything like this again.* Yes, we owe ourselves that much."

She, they, descended the spiral, marble, stairs – away from the laboratory. The zamma ran up to her as she stepped into the grand hall. The creature looked up at the lady and screamed. It stood in front of her, quaking in fear.

"Come, come, *it is me Elysse, Kala,*" she, they, said. "Don't be afraid. Don't be frightened."

The zamma turned and ran to its cage in the pantry.

KalaElysse followed. "What will come of it? *What will happen to it now that I can't take care of him?* Oh, who will look after him? *Look how it quakes; how it shakes. Fustus would be mean to it; he could never love it.*" The two hands reached in and pulled the cowering zamma out by the scruff of its neck and held it in out front of them. She, they, watched its feet dance as it tried to break free. "*You will have nothing to fear. It will be over quickly.*" The right and left hands worked in cooperation and snapped the creature's neck. It was dead in an instant. They let the slumping body drop to the pantry floor. She, they, bent down to kiss it one final time. A tear pooled in one eye.

"Come, *we have much to do.* Yes, much."

They found a flithe, a creature who was much too big to have its neck snapped. And there was no need since it wasn't a sensitive soul, like the zamma. When asked, the flithe led them down to cold storage and showed her where their clothes were stored.

"He packed our things away rather quickly, Elysse. Yes, Kala, *I noticed, too. Interesting.*" They rummaged through their belongings for something to wear. Nothing fit quite right.

Elysse's clothes were too long and tight while Kala's were short and too loose. They found a floor length burgundy dress of crushed velvet belonging to Elysse, something that had never been quite right, but now fit perfectly.

Then they found a pair of Kala's shoes that matched the dress. Both of their feet below the ankles were Kala's because of how the explosion spread its damage. Then she, they, went upstairs and coiffed her hair. Their hands fought for a moment when deciding upon the rouge. They decided on one of Elysse's after trying several. Nothing could be done to cover up the patchwork scars making up their face, and they didn't try.

She, they, looked in a full-length mirror. *"Look at us, we can now go out. But, where? Why, to the Duke's centennial birthday celebration. Where else? Yes, his hundredth birthday. I wonder what we can bring as a present from the great biotron master?"* They laughed as they, she, left the castle to saddle up a lorse.

The lorses all whined as she plodded, one laborious step after another, into the stable. When they opened the stall to the selected lorse, it reared and tried to knock her down. She, they, brought the beast under control with a commanding hold on its halter. Then they saddled the reluctant creature.

KalaElysse rode off into the dark of the night. She rode down the hill, driving the beast at a thundering gallop. Her dress flowed, whipping behind her in the wind. She rode into the full moon rising over the darkened landscape.

"Turn down this path," Kala's half said once they entered the village. *"Why? That's not the way to the palace."* Elysse's half asked. But, she already knew the answer as common thoughts crossed their corpus callosum from one hemisphere to the other. *"Your lover,"* Elysse thought towards Kala. "Yes, my lover. I must say goodbye," Kala shot back. *"I always suspected. You hate me for that. Why, because you never took a – I always remained loyal!"*

She, they, Kala, stopped the lorse in front of a poor man's tavern. She, they, went around the back to where the casks were kept and the guests' animals were stabled.

"Himmel," she, Kala, said. "Himmel, are you here?"

"Kala? Is it you?" A figure emerged from the shadows. "You sound so strange. Are you not well?"

"My dear, I must leave you." She spoke while still buried in shadows from a lantern on the wall. He could not

see her face. "Before I go, make love to me one last time. *You can't be serious!* Yes, take me a final time, for something bad has happened and I shall never see you again."

"What –" Himmel started to ask. But, he saw her face when they were but a handbreadth apart. "You're not Kala! What are you!" He took a step back. Then another, as she, it, approached with open arms, eager to embrace him.

He tripped. As he landed on his back, she was already on her knees in front of him. Then faster than he thought possible, she was lying on top of him.

"Kiss me, Himmel," she, Kala, said. "*Yes, do,*" Elysse said, chiding, mocking, "*kiss me.*" She, they, pressed her lips to him.

As he turned away, Kala grabbed his head and forced his lips unto hers. When they touched and Kala let the sensation fill her with rapture, Elysse put her own hand on his head and snapped the young man's neck.

"*Now he won't long for his lost lover,*" Elysse said.

They stood up. Kala looked down at the warped body of Himmel.

"You always hated me," Kala's half said. "*Only the way a first wife can hate a second,*" Elysse answered. "And, to think, I always looked up to you. *I only hated you because I wanted to be like you.*"

For the satisfaction of Elysse, they tore the limbs off Himmel's body. Kala did not object, now that he was dead. Then they turned back to the street where their lorse nervously waited. They mounted the beast and rode off to the Duke's palace, trying not to think any thoughts at each other.

Fustus Magus woke to the sound of a lorse's clopping hooves across the drawbridge. Dizzy from the impact of his head against the wall, he made his way to the window in time to see his creation ride away. He staggered down the stairs and out to the stable. He saddled up a lorse of his own and rode after her.

Once in village, he came across a gathering of peasants in front of a small tavern. Assorted body parts – arms, limbs, a headless torso – were passed along over their heads and thrown onto the cart for the dead. Those not working made signs warding off evil.

"Have you seen a —" he started to ask a stupefied villager standing off by himself on the corner.

The man pointed vaguely in the direction of the palace. His face was void of expression. "I saw'd her," he mumbled, "She looked at me – with her two separate eyes, she did."

Fustus Magus kicked his mount to a gallop and flew down the cobblestone streets out the other end of the village. He wondered how far ahead she was.

KalaElysse entered the palace through the kitchen. To get there, they left a trail of guards with broken necks along the grounds. That did not bother them/her. The girl whose scarf she wore across her face bothered her. The maid screamed when they came upon her. KalaElysse had no choice but to silence her.

Once in the hall and mingling with the royal guests, she sought out the Duke's majordomo. "Fustus Magus regrets to announce," they said, trying to keep to one voice – that of Elysse, "that due to a mishap in the laboratory, he cannot be present to unveil the Duke's new biotron."

"Elysse? Is that you?" Klum, the majordomo asked, looking at the woman, not quite sure what was wrong.

KalaElysse, with one eye showing from behind the veil, continued. "I shall present the biotron myself. Tell the Duke that Magus outdid himself; expect the avant-garde."

"I, I hope Magus will be alright."

"He will be. In fact, I'm sure he'll be here later. Have someone escort us, me, to the waiting area behind the stage. The biotron needs to rest."

The majordomo could have asked where the biotron was, or could have pressed the point of what was wrong with Elysse, but it so happened that a guard – not a palace guard, but one of the cavalry – hurried up to the majordomo and whispered something in his ear.

"I see," Klum answered in a hush. Then turning to Elysse he said, "You must excuse me, an urgent matter has come up." He snapped his fingers for a concierge to assist the lady, then he rushed away speaking urgently with the guard.

Fustus Magus saw the scurry of activity as soon as he turned onto the poplar-lined boulevard. Even from half a kilometer away, the palace grounds looked like an anthill perturbed by a child's stick. Soldiers brandishing vaporizers, not ceremonial swords, ran around the palace grounds.

"What's going on?" Magus asked an agitated guard at

the gate.

"Lock down," he snapped back. "No one enters or leaves. I'm afraid I'll have to detain you, sir, until we get orders to stand down."

"No, I have to get in! It's of the utmost importance."

"I need to see your travel documents, sir," the guard spoke, not listening to Magus. "And, you'll have to wait in the carriage house until we get the all-clear."

When KalaElysse unveiled her face after Klum's introduction of the new biotron, gasps of horror spread through the hall. Ladies turned their heads, men choked back their revulsion. Someone shrieked. KalaElysse walked slowly towards the center of the ballroom, ignoring all their reactions. The crowd parted for her as she made her way forward. She took slow and graceful steps that took full concentration of both her halves. She bowed slightly towards a royal who stared at her with a slack jaw. That royal instinctively bowed in return. From then on, others bowed; bowed to her, as if she was one of their peers. She walked forward with head high and allowed herself the hint of a smile.

The guests did not realize that they were in the middle of a lockdown. They had no idea that a trail of bodies leading across the grounds had been discovered. Beside the majordomo, only the Duke and his son the young captain knew; and they, only that there was some kind of security incident.

Duke Gendymore III broke free of his familial entourage and stepped forward to meet this grotesque yet curious toy, creation, person – whatever she was. He examined her closely with his monocled eye.

Lady Gendymore looked on from the safety of her children and other ladies of the court. "I don't 'get' it," she whispered to the lady beside her. "Is this what they call art nowadays?"

"Hideous," her companion said.

"At least she's not the little redheaded nymph I was expecting," Lady Gendymore said.

KalaElysse raised her gloved hand, offering it to the Duke.

"Amazing," Duke Gendymore said. He wasn't sure if he liked what Magus had done, but it certainly was daring of him. Hesitantly, he took the offered hand and bent to kiss it.

"Dr. Magus congratulates you on your hundredth birthday and sincerely hopes this will be a night to remember," she, they, said to the Duke loud enough to be heard throughout the hall.

As if on queue, the conductor struck up the band - playing a Tchaikovsky waltz.

Duke Gendymore took KalaElysse by the arms and held her against his body.

"No, I cannot dance," she, they protested. But before she could pull away, he started waltzing her across the floor. And to her surprise, she followed.

"Dancing is easier than walking! *Don't think, just do.* Look at him, Elysse, he's not frightened of us. *No, Kala. Not even disturbed.* I think he likes us." They looked into the Duke's eyes as he whirled them around with an increasing fury. "*Kala, you know he'll want to take his 'birthday present' to bed.* I know; I thought we'd have shocked him, yet he finds us arousing. *Yes, he does. Look how enamored he is of us.* Elysse, you are smitten with him, ha!"

The Duke bowed to her when the dance ended. "You are such an energetic dancer, my dear. I could hardly keep up." He kept staring at her face, and then spoke again. "I must say, you are absolutely the most ghastly creation I have ever seen."

Her heart sank. Their heart sank. For a moment she had actually thought...

"You will accompany me upstairs," the Duke said with regal formality. He held out his arm for her to take.

"Here goes," Kala thought. "*Be strong, like me.*" Elysse shot back. They hesitated a moment, then put her hand around it, holding back two sets of tears.

They marched past Lady Gendymore and the clutch of royal ladies. Lady Gendymore stared at them, daggers in her eyes. KalaElysse bowed ever so slightly when their eyes locked, but she didn't break the gaze, instead, she waited until the Duke's wife turned away.

Once in his private chambers, Elysse allowed Duke Gendymore III to enter her; enter her the way Kala wanted her clandestine lover just a few hours ago. Once he was on her, she held him with her legs and turned the two of them over to be on top. She smiled.

The Duke smiled back, but it was a reserved smile for

he saw evil in her mismatched eyes.

"Elysse, you and the Duke have been lovers. *Only for the betterment of Fustus's career, Kala, dear.* Rubbish! You're still fond of him. *I see my memories are open to you. Yes, we had a liaison.* What if I take him from you like you took mine from me?"

The grand set of doors flew open and Fustus Magus stood in at the head of the hall. "Where is she!" he cried.

Lady Gendymore locked eyes with him. She pointed up the grand staircase. "In his private chambers," she said with ice in her voice. "I wouldn't allow it in our bedroom."

"She has to be stopped!" Magus ran across the hall and up the stairs followed by Klum the majordomo and the Duke's son brandishing his sword. Lady Gendymore followed. They forced open the door to the Duke's private room. They found the creature sitting at the top of the bed cradling the Duke's head. The Duke didn't stir to the sound of his door crashing open. His eyes looked unblinking towards the ceiling. His neck was bent unnaturally to one side. Blood pooled in his open mouth; streaks congealed down his face. The creature, with her patchwork face, smiled at them then laughed.

"Dear husband," she said to Fustus, "won't you join us?" Her fingers were red as she idly played with the pool of blood in the Duke's mouth.

Lady Gendymore screamed. Fustus Magus held his heart. The son charged into the creature with his sword.

KalaElysse jumped off the bed, but not in time to save herself. The sword impaled her chest where her two halves had been sewn together. It came out her backside. She collapsed silently to the floor.

The Duke's son, the handsome Captain, wiped the blood off his sword in the creature's crushed velvet dress. As he sheathed his sword, he looked down at the grotesque body now pooling crimson of its own, mixed with a sickly white liquid – a most un-human sight. He then looked to the body of his father lying contorted on the bed. Thoughts of succession raced through his head. He realized Magus had just done him a huge favor. "Fustus Magus, I'll see you hang for this!" he cried.

He turned to his mother, Lady Gendymore, who took a step towards her dead husband on the bed. He held her in his arms and tried to console her grief. He told her not to look.

Lady Gendymore, buried her face in her son's chest. Not to cry, but to conceal the relief of the old bastard's demise. She'd never have to live through another of the annual embarrassment of her husband's birthday fetes and his biotron bed-toy presents.

She held onto her son, secretly making new plans for herself. She didn't notice the creature stir, then get up, then glide across the floor to position itself behind her son. Lady Gendymore just felt him lose his stance and fall through her arms. He collapsed to the floor by her feet. She saw that vial creation standing in his place. The abomination was smiling, laughing, looking at her with those two unmatched eyes and holding up those two unmatched hands that had just snapped her son's neck. White fluid congealed round the wound on the creature's chest, whatever voodoo that biotron master used to make this creature was still coursing through her veins and constantly rejuvenating her, making her invincible.

"Do you find me pretty?" KalaElysse said, locking eyes with Lady Gendymore once again.

Lady Gendymede screamed. The hands of Elysse and Kala circled her throat and broke her neck, too. Lady Gendymore stopped screaming and slumped to the floor with her eyes still holding that last look of horror.

KalaElysse stepped over the royal bodies on her way to the door. Before Fustus could reach his vaporizer or the majordomo his sword, she grabbed them each by the clothes on their chests and threw them aside then did the same to the captain of the guard and two of his men when they pushed their way through the gathering crowd. As KalaElysse walked out, that same crowd parted for her. She, they, descended the grand stairways, pushing any guard or courtier off the stairs who dared approach. They held her head high as they walked.

The creature was out the front door before anyone thought to sound the alarm. She was beyond the palace grounds before any of the guards thought to stop the veiled lady walking past them so serenely.

She, they, KalaElysse disappeared into the night.

Fustus Magus was hanged after a short but sensational trial. Royals and holies packed the courthouse to watch the entertainment. The peasantry jeered through the windows. No one had bothered to look for the monster, at least not where she was. While everyone was preoccupied with the fate of

Fustus Magus, KalaElysse recovered the bodies of an inconsequential young man from the pauper's morgue and Duke Gendymore, III, himself from the royal crypt.

The night after the hanging, the village folk paraded the corpse of Fustus Magus around on a wooden cart. Little children lit sparklers as his body passed. Fireworks were set into the sky from the palace. It was under these conditions that the creation easily slipped back into Magus's castle with enough body parts to make a lover worthy for even herself.

Author Biographies

Alexander C. Woodbury

Alexander C. Woodbury worked for many years as a financial executive for various international companies. He presently has his own tax consulting business in Foxboro, MA. He lives in Pembroke, MA.

Several of his short stories have been published in *Hoi Polloi*, a New England literary magazine. His poems and short stories have appeared in several local writing group anthologies.

Anne Savoie

Anne lives in RI with her family and enjoys writing Flash Fiction and travel essays.

Beth Chariton

Beth Chariton is a hairdresser and former salon owner originally from New York, with a background in small business management. When she's not making people beautiful, she works as an art history presenter for Art Matters, a small company that believes exactly that. She's been known, on occasion, to teach creative writing courses and to write book reviews for mostlyfiction.com. In her abundance of spare time, she's the secretary of the Walpole Cultural Council and runs the poetry slam at the annual Walpole Arts and Music Fest. She lives in Walpole, MA, with her patient and tolerant boyfriend, and her three fabulous children.

David Sahl

Born in Boston. Live near Boston. Nervous when far away from Boston. Got a college degree at Boston State College for one hundred dollars per semester – the best bargain ever. Used the B.S. to secure a teaching position and retired after teaching high school English in the same place for 33 years. The kids made the job fun. Still miss the interaction. Been married for 25 years. Two kids grown and on their own. Miss them, too.

Attended many summer writing seminars – the latest, summer of '09, at Colgate University.

Had several short stories published

Have three novels ready to be discovered and one on the way. Write daily.

That's my life, such as it is.

Edmund X. DeJesus

Edmund X. DeJesus is originally from Rhode Island, and currently lives in the Boston area with his wife and two children. He has worked as a computer programmer, professor, magazine editor, and, currently, as a technical writer. His publications include hundreds of magazine articles, as well as short stories in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Leading Edge, and Café Irreal.

Jennifer L. Rogala

Jennifer Rogala has worked in the area of healthcare technology for 18 years. Before becoming a mother, her writing topics were related to how technology can improve patient safety. But, when she discovered her daughters loved books, Jennifer was inspired to try reading her own material. While her works on patient safety were effective at sending her twin daughters off to slumber land, for some reason they stopped asking her to read and feigned sleep, sometimes even volunteering to go to bed early to avoid story time. Deciding that a change in subject matter would help, Jennifer shifted tactics. Her subsequent stories about cats of all kinds, runaway noses, and a boy with a love of astronomy wandering a land of mythical creatures and grammatical phenomena, proved to be far more popular with her children. The birds sang; the flowers bloomed, and her twins embraced story time again. They all live happily in the wild lands outside Boston, where Jennifer, her two lovely daughters, and princely husband, live to serve their two cats.

Gail Thornton

Gail Thornton lives in Canton, Massachusetts, and when she is not writing, she is likely making collages or gemstone and sterling jewelry. From 1992 to 1995, she attended Jane Katims' Poetry Workshop at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education. She has published poetry in *Iconoclast*, *Afterthoughts*, and many issues of *Kaleidoscope*. Gail won first place for her poem *Song for Unattainable Men* in an America Online sponsored erotic poetry contest. In 1995 and 1996, she attended a writer's conference for veterans and trauma survivors at the University of Massachusetts School of War and its Social Consequences. Gail presented "*The Healing Benefits of Writing for the Mentally Ill*" at the Newton Free Library panel presenting an art exhibit of work created with found materials from the closed Danver's State Hospital. She performed by invitation at the Boston Center for the Arts, in a series of poetry readings, *Women on the Verge*. From 1995 to 2000, Gail taught Beginner and Advanced Poetry in a professional capacity for America Online's Campus Program. In 2007, she ran a poetry workshop for Barnes and Noble in Walpole, Ma. From 2001 to the present she wrote her memoir, *TouchStone* and attended the Walpole Writer's Group weekly. Presently Gail is looking for an agent to represent her book.

Gail Dennehy

Gail Dennehy is our member-at-large. Presently living in Arizona, she hails originally from the Boston area with stops in Florida, Maine, and California. Gail is a published poet and authoress of a column of book reviews on jewelry. She is also the author of *Motherlines*, a novel about five generations of women trying to survive against the odds and their own family. Her favorite type of writing consists of fictional pieces based on mythology and folklore.

Gilda Horgan

Gilda is an artist and writer. Currently working on her third novel, she also writes poetry, short stories, and has written and illustrated a children's book about her son. Gilda loves storytelling and connecting to other people through her words and her art. Her paying career as a Creative Director allows her the opportunity to travel around the country on photo shoots, to write marketing copy, and to design ads and materials that help "sell stuff". When she's not with her family, working, or devoting her energy to raising awareness about Autism and Heart Disease, she is usually writing, reading, doing yoga, or thinking about writing, reading, and doing yoga.

Harry Fraser

Born in Nova Scotia in 1927.

Canadian Army by the age of Seventeen.

American Citizen since 1957.

Mechanic, Draftsman, Pilot, Poet, Painter (acrylics), plays guitar badly.

Five children, eleven grandchildren, three great-grandchildren.

Member of the WWG five years+.

Classic Country music fan.

Ray Benjamin

Ray Benjamin was born and raised in Kentucky. He currently lives in the Boston area with his wife and two cats. His career has included jobs as a computer salesman, programmer, software tester, software engineer, quality assurance engineer, and teacher at a technical school. Mr. Benjamin claims to have written thousands of short stories, but due to his penchant for writing in invisible ink, we have been unable to find any supporting evidence. He claims to have penned a couple pieces for this collection, but once again, we have failed to find the proper chemical to render his writings legible. He did contribute a short story, *The Writers Group*, for our previous collection. It was only through long hours in the alchemy lab that the editor of that version, Ed X. DeJesus, was able to discover the formula for that batch of invisible ink.

Sara Letourneau

Sara Letourneau lives in the capital of New England Patriot Country, not too far from the heart of Red Sox Nation. She works as a technical editor at an engineering firm and freelances CD reviews for Sonic Cathedral, one of the largest online music stores specializing in female-fronted rock and metal music. Sara's poetry has appeared in the *Curry Arts Journal*. She is also hard at work on her first fantasy novel, "Light in the Barrenland." One of the newer WWG members, Sara thanks the other writers for their encouragement and honesty, and also that uncanny knack for finding something to laugh about at every meeting.

Joe Molnar

Joe Molnar had lived for several years in Budapest, Hungary, an interesting hiatus from his stay-at-home life in the Boston suburbs. He has always enjoyed science fiction, and now writes a dark and edgy blend of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. Several of his short stories have been published to date. He plans to leave his day gig in Information Technology, when his first novel hits the best-seller list.

This is his first attempt at editing an anthology — be kind.

Our Influences

We challenged each other to compile a list of fifteen of our most memorable books. The common first reaction from most of us was, "How can I ever come up with fifteen books?" Then after working on our lists, the complaint became, "Fifteen is nowhere near enough!" That's why some of us cheated and added a few more.

Beth Chariton

1. "Are You There, God - It's Me, Margaret" by Judy Blume
2. "Mister God, This is Anna" by Fynn
3. "My Darling, My Hamburger" by Paul Zindel
4. "Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger
5. "A Farewell to Arms" by Ernest Hemingway
6. "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald
7. "Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck
8. "A Prayer for Owen Meaney" by John Irving
9. "The Secret Life of Bees" by Sue Monk Kidd
10. "The Day After Tomorrow" by Michael Crichton
11. "Water for Elephants" by Sara Gruen
12. "Nobody's Girl" by Antonya Nelson
13. "She's Come Undone" by Wally Lamb
14. "I Know this Much is True" by Wally Lamb
15. "One Thousand White Women:
The Journals of May Dodd" by Jim Fergus

David Sahl

1. "To Kill A Mockingbird" by Harper Lee
2. "The Count of Monte Cristo" by Alexandre Dumas
3. "Shane" by Jack Schaefer
4. "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck
5. Anything by Pat Conroy
6. "Sleepers" by Lorenzo Carcaterra
7. "The Summer Guest " by Justin Cronin
8. "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien
9. "Snow Falling On Cedars" by David Guterson
10. "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway
11. Anything by John Steinbeck
12. "City Boy: The Adventures of Herbie Bookbinder"
by Herman Wouk
13. "Some Kind of Hero" by James Kirkwood
14. "Disgrace" and "Waiting For the Barbarians"
by J.M. Coetzee
15. "In Cold Blood" by Truman Capote

Ed DeJesus

1. The Bible
2. "Catch-22" by Joseph Heller
3. "Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit" by P.G. Wodehouse
4. "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee
5. "And Then There Were None" by Agatha Christie
6. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"
by Douglas Adams
7. "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare
8. "The Naval Treaty" by Arthur Conan Doyle
9. "Foundation and Empire" by Isaac Asimov
10. "The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the
Bicameral Mind" by Julian Jaynes
11. "Virtual Light" by William Gibson
12. "The Invisible Island" by Ron Roy
13. "Hondo" by Louis L'Amour
14. "Master and Commander" by Patrick O'Brian
15. "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck
16. "The Interpretation of Dreams" by Sigmund Freud
17. "The Dark Knight Returns" by Frank Miller

Gilda Horgan

1. "The Mists of Avalon" by Marion Zimmer Bradley
2. "Dragonlance Chronicles"
by Margaret Weiss & Tracy Hickman
3. "Death Gate Cycle" by Margaret Weiss & Tracy Hickman
4. "The Great Santini" by Pat Conroy
5. "The Prince Of Tides" by Pat Conroy
6. "Pillars Of The Earth" by Ken Follett
7. "Countdown to Zero" by Ken Follett
8. "19 Minutes" by Jodi Picoult
9. "Sandstorm" by James Rollins
10. "The Witching Hour" by Ann Rice
11. "The Talisman" by Stephen King
12. "Silence of the Lambs" by Thomas Harris
13. "The Lovely Bones" by Alice Sebold
14. "Thorn Birds" by Colleen McCullough
15. "Dune" by Frank Herbert

Sara Letourneau

1. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien
2. His Dark Materials Trilogy by Philip Pullman
3. The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling
4. "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho
5. "A Gift from the Sea" by Ann Lindberg Morrow
6. "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime"
by Mark Haddon
7. "The Weight of Silence" by Heather Gudenkauf
8. "The Devil and Miss Prym" by Paulo Coelho
9. "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Brontë
10. "Selected Poems: Volume 1" by Mary Oliver
11. "A Wizard of Earthsea" by Ursula Le Guin
12. "The Color of Water" by James McBride
13. "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" by Milan Kundera
14. "Island of the Blue Dolphins" by Scott O'Dell
15. "Poemcrazy" – Susan G. Wooldridge

Joe Molnar

1. "Dune" by Frank Herbert
2. "Dracula" by Bram Stoker
3. "The Hobbit" and The Lord of the Rings Trilogy
by JRR Tolkien
4. "Satanic Verses" by Salman Rushdie
5. "Ground Beneath Her Feet" by Salman Rushdie
6. "Time Enough for Love" by Robert Heinlein
7. "Escher, Gödel, Bach: The Eternal Golden Braid"
by Douglas Hofstadter
8. "The Selfish Gene" by Richard Dawkins
9. "Dragons of Eden" by Carl Sagan
10. "Story of O" by Pauline Reage
11. "Prodigal Summer" by Barbara Kingsolver
12. "Lathe of Heaven" by Ursula K. Le Guin
13. "Martian Chronicles" by Ray Bradbury
14. "Beowulf" as translated by Seamus Heaney
15. "Long Dark Teatime of the Soul" by Douglas Adams
16. "Stars In My Pocket Like Grains of Sand"
by Samuel R. Delaney

Gail Dennehy

1. "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin"
by Benjamin Franklin
2. "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway
3. "Moby Dick" by Hermann Melville
4. "A Moveable Feast" by Ernest Hemingway
5. "Collection of Poems" by Robert Frost
6. "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman
7. "The Count of Monte Cristo" by Alexandre Dumas
8. "Idylls of the King" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
9. "Sophie's Choice" by William Styron
10. "Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck
11. "Pictures of a Gone World" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti
12. The Tao Te Ching
13. "The Playboy of the Western World"
by John Millington Synge
14. "The DaVinci Notebooks" by Leonardo DaVinci
15. "Stranger in a Strange Land" by Robert A. Heinlein
16. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien
17. "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens

Anne Savoie

1. "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman
2. "Prodigal Summer" by Barbara Kingsolver
3. "The Blind Assassins" by Margaret Atwood
4. "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay"
by Michael Chabon
5. all of the Harry Potter books, JK Rowling
6. "On Writing" by Stephen King
7. "The Field" by Lynne McTaggart
8. Bible
9. "Prayer for Owen Meany" by John Irving
10. "A Painted House" by John Grisham
11. "Assassination Vacation" by Sarah Vowell
12. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy by JRR Tolkien
13. "Good Poems" by Garrison Keillor
14. 'Number One Ladies Detective Agency"
by Alexander MacCall Smith
15. "Middlesex" by Jeffrey Eugenides

Jennifer L. Rogala

My top 15 children's books

Picture Books

1. Zen Shorts by Jon J. Muth
2. Joseph had a Little Overcoat by Simms Taback
3. Harold and the Purple Crayon by Crockett Johnson
4. The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein
5. The Alphabet Tree by Leo Leonni
6. Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo Willems

Chapter Books

7. Frog and Toad are Friends by Arnold Lobel
8. Jenny and the Cat Club by Esther Averill
9. The Three Tales of My Father's Dragon
by Ruth Stiles Gannett
10. A Friend for Dragon: Dragon's First Tale by Dav Pilkey

Middle-Grade and YA Books

11. Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster
12. Percy Jackson and the Olympians by Rick Riordan
13. Lord of the Rings & the Hobbit by JRR Tolkien
14. Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling
15. The Spiderwick Chronicles
by Tony DiTerlizzi & Holly Black

Walpole Writer's Group!
Write Wicked Good!