

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is a large, bright yellow orb in the upper center, casting a warm glow across the sky. Silhouetted trees are visible against the bright sky. The water in the foreground is dark, with the sun's reflection creating a shimmering path. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Towers

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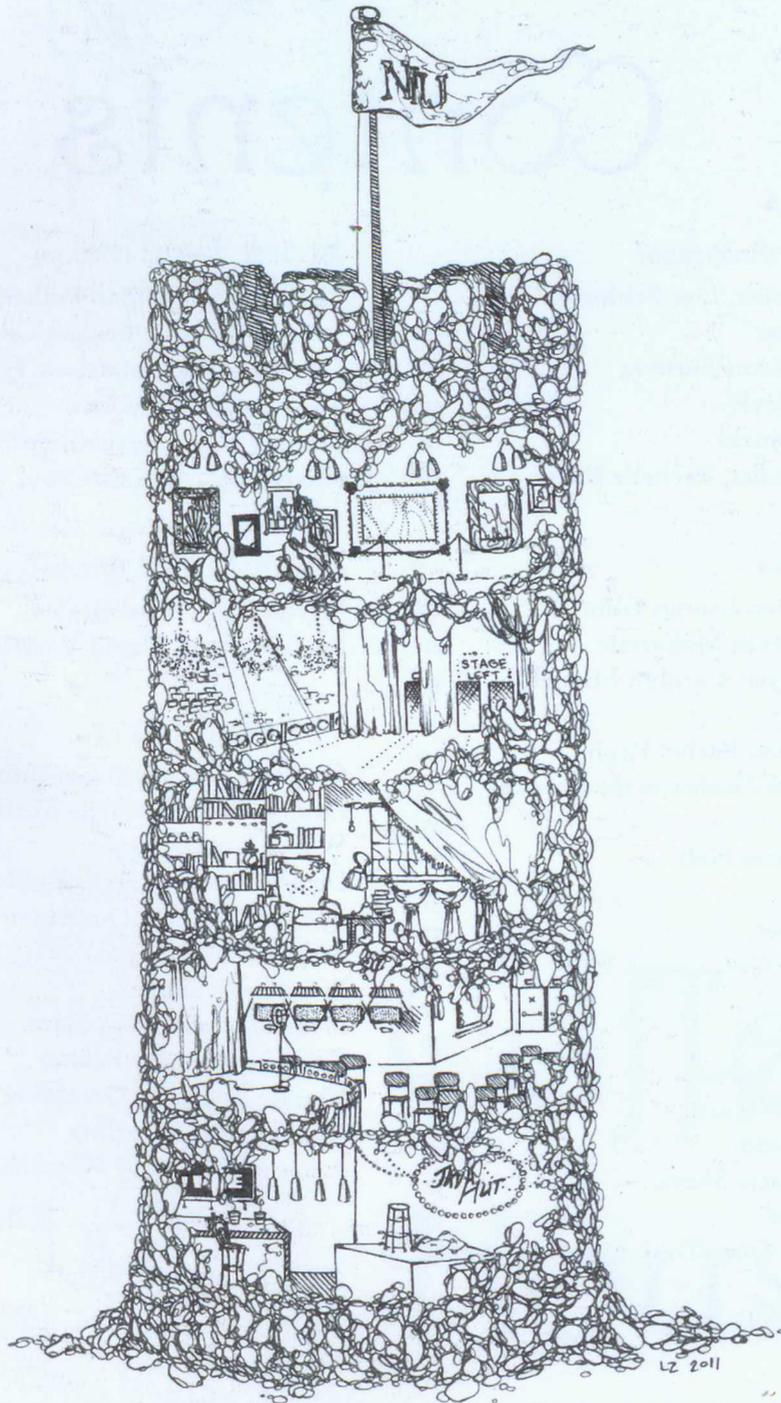
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Towers



Literary and Creative Arts Magazine 2011 number 91



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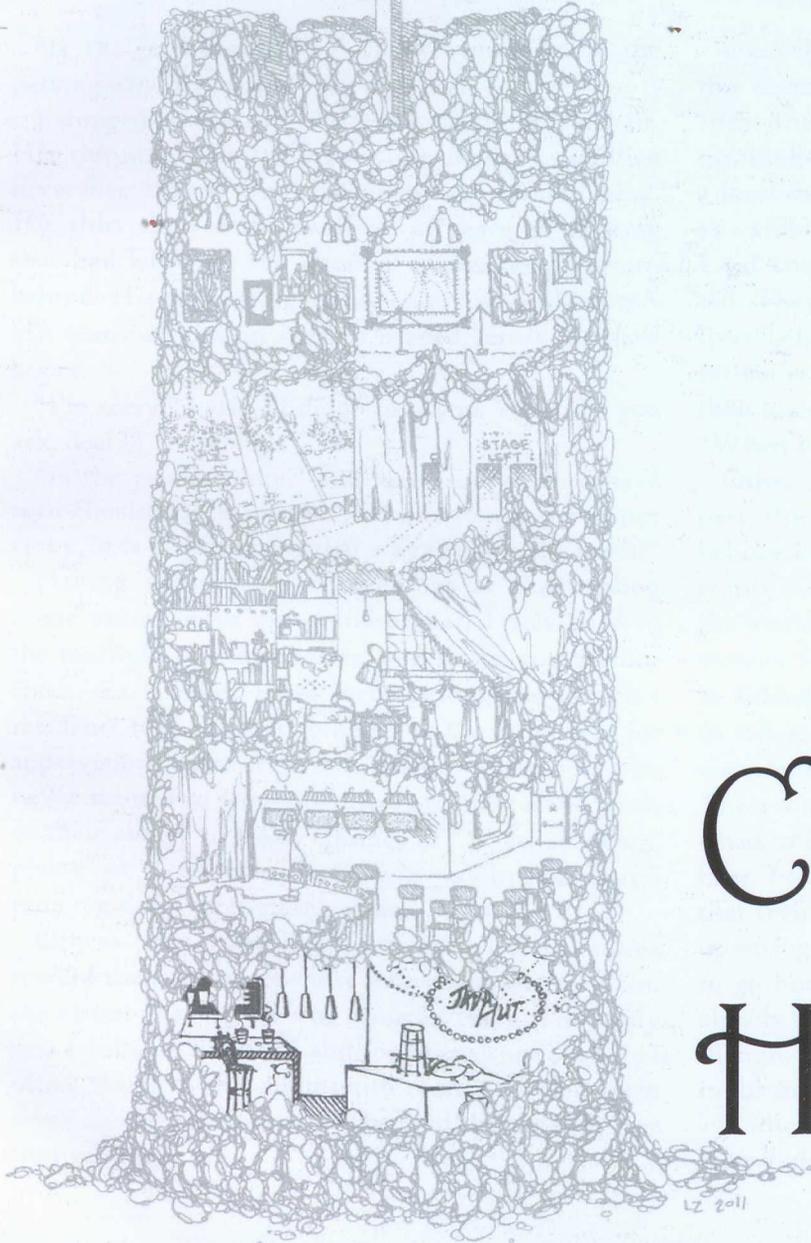
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* indicates Editor's Choice



Coffee House

The Maybe Crazy Prince

Editor's Choice

Lise Schlosser

"Is the prince crazy?" A hand worn soft by the passing of years brushed my arm.

I stopped and turned to the man in the wheelchair. His thinning hair trimmed close made a dignified horseshoe around the back of his age-spotted head. His shirt showed the evidence of years of washing that had left only the ghost of a checkered pattern behind. His smudged glasses rested low on his nose. His translucent skin seemed draped across his tired bones.

"I'm sorry." I said, "I didn't hear you. What did you ask, dear?"

"Is the prince crazy? You were supposed to have read *Hamlet* for this week. So I ask you, is the prince crazy, or is he just acting that way to get to the truth?"

Having spent years of evenings at the nursing home sitting with my grandmother, I was used to the multiple realities that existed in the community room. Each night there were perhaps twenty-five residents who the staff brought to the large area for supervision. Some of these residents were people who never seemed to remember that age had robbed them of their ability to walk. Chimes of "Alice, sit down, please" or "Gertrude, you have to stay in your chair" rang regularly through the room.

Others who sometimes watched TV or stared toward the doors were those who could seldom claim the visitor as someone who came for them. They only saw family on holidays, and sometimes not even that often. Being in the community room provided them some sort of human contact beyond the medical care they received.

Over the years, I saw residents come and go from this room. Some I even recognized; they, like I, had spent their whole lives in the same area. One was my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Miller. Another was a local farmer who I used to see at Sunday services as a child. I didn't know them all, by any means, but I did know that they all had a lifetime of stories to tell. They'd had children and jobs and churches and lives before moving in to what would be the final residence for many of them. Some folks were lively in their lucidity; I never tired of the tales that began with "When I was your age . . ." or "Back in my day . . ."

Other residents, however, were still living in that past; they were thirty years old, or late for work, or behind with the washing. They chose to remain in a reality that they recognized rather than to acknowledge the world they had been forced into. These were the women for whom the staff kept baskets of towels to be folded over and over again. These were the men to whom we misreported the weather. It's raining, we would say, too wet to take the tractor out today. These were the residents that I really had to listen to. I had to listen for clues to learn what they needed to hear. I learned from my own grandmother's decline that trying to correct her perceptions was only more upsetting for her. When she sobbed that she wanted to go home, I had to learn that explaining she was already home was only painful; she could find comfort, though, in hearing me assure her, "We will go home in the morning."

I knew this gentleman staring up at me and asking about the maybe crazy prince was one of my

grandmother's tribe. He was somewhere else; I only needed to learn where.

"Oh. I don't know whether the prince is crazy. I mean, I hadn't really thought about it." I replied, staring into blue eyes that sparkled despite their sunkenness. I hadn't tried to read *Hamlet* since my years as an undergraduate, which, even at the age of only 28, seemed like a past life. Anyway, I'd failed the Shakespeare class I'd taken. When I said I hadn't thought about whether the prince was crazy or not, I meant it. I really hadn't thought about it.

"Well, my dear, I ask you to think about it before class meets again. Go back to the text, bring me the evidence."

"I'll try, sir." I sputtered. "I mean, I will."

"Good. Good. I will see you next class."

I gave him a nod and proceeded down the hall to the dining room where my grandmother was waiting for me almost as anxiously as she waited for the nightly scoop of frozen custard that I brought with me. The shop where I would stop between work and the nursing home is a local institution, Ollie's. When my grandmother could no longer chew the pieces of nuts or chocolate or candies that were mixed into the flavors, the girls at the shop would scoop a dish for me before they'd mixed in the extras. I never seemed to find a flavor she didn't like, though I knew from my childhood that her favorite was butter pecan. Her eyes lit up when she saw the frozen custard. In the beginning, I would use it to bribe her to eat her dinner, but by this time, I was happy to get her to eat anything at all. If all she would eat was the flavor-of-the-day, then at least she had eaten something. She didn't talk much anymore, and she hadn't called me by name in years, but she recognized me when I came into the room, and that was enough for me to keep visiting each night.

As I used the red plastic spoon to indulge her in whatever the flavor-of-the-day had been, I couldn't stop thinking about the question. Was the prince crazy? Why would anyone even ask the question? I thought. Wouldn't it be clear if someone was crazy? Maybe the one who asked me the question was the crazy one. Maybe I would be the crazy one if I kept thinking about it.

"Amanda," I called over one of my favorite nurses' aides. Her youthfulness was stark against the room-full of age. "Who is the new resident? Over there. In the plaid shirt."

"Oh, his name is Ed." She chirped with her usual enthusiasm, "I think he used to be a professor or something." She flashed the smile that explained why everyone in the room seemed to be in love with her and then continued filling coffee cups.

Looking back, I realize that I didn't have to stop at the bookstore on my way home that night. I didn't have to struggle through reading the language that felt so unfamiliar in my mouth. I didn't have to puzzle over the longest of the plays that Shakespeare wrote. I could have just let it go. I could have given the Professor the same answer if he asked me again. In all likelihood, he'd never remember. I could have told him I had dropped the class, or was in the class down the hall. I could have played along without taking the part he cast me in. There was no reason I needed to read the play and question Hamlet's sanity. But I did.

That next night, after I'd helped my grandmother eat the flavor-of-the-day, I looked for the Professor in the community room. I wheeled my grandmother to near the tacky flowered couch where he sat. I slipped my hand in hers as I did each night and she squeezed my fingers. She nodded at me in the way she had that was simultaneously regal and loving.

"I read it," I announced to the Professor with all the eagerness and pride of a first grader having mastered Dr. Seuss.

He turned his blue eyes to me and paused. I worried for a moment that he didn't remember. I worried that the encounter had been as ephemeral for him as it could have been for me. After a moment had passed, he said, "And so I ask you again, is the prince crazy?"

During the next hour he led me through the play from memory. He recited long passages to illustrate his points. He articulated his ideas and his words beautifully. He understood what they meant, so when he spoke them to me, I understood, too. He showed me how comical the blustery Polonius could be. How beautiful Gertrude's report of Ophelia's death could sound. He showed me how the prince could seem crazy at one moment and perfectly in control of his wits the next. I don't even remember anymore whether the prince was crazy or not. I just remember that the possibility that he could be crazy was enough to lead me to read an author who — in a heated undergraduate flush — I'd sworn I would never read again. In that one hour the Professor showed me what my undergraduate professor never could in a semester. By the end of the night, I understood how someone could fall in love with the works of Shakespeare.

Amanda came at eight. "Class over!" she announced all too fittingly. The professor seemed startled for a moment. "Time to get you ready for bed" she chirped at the Professor as she expertly lifted him from the couch back to his wheelchair.

I said a good night filled with gratitude while she leaned over to release the wheelchair brake, and she made playful car revving sounds. As they passed my chair, the professor reached out to touch my arm and said, "For next week, I want you to read the sonnets."

And I did.

I read the sonnets and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear* with the Professor. And I kept on reading even after my grandmother passed away and I no longer visited the nursing home every night. I learned to love the words and characters and stories. I started to go to see the plays.

A few years later, I opened the newsletter from the university where I had chosen to return to graduate school. There, in the corner of the back page, was a photograph of the Professor. "We remember professor emeritus Ed Herbert who passed away in October. Herbert, a long-time member of the faculty taught Renaissance literature."

I stared at his picture for a few moments while I let the memories of our time together return. I remembered the day I memorized Puck's speech to recite to him for *Midsummer's Night*. I recalled his habit of asking me to read him a sonnet only to have him recite it from memory along with me so beautifully that it I went from reader to audience every time.

I picked up the homework I had been working on before I'd taken a break to walk to the mailbox. But rather than finishing the play I'd been reading, I flipped a few pages of my Shakespeare text to the end of *Hamlet* and read Horatio's words at Hamlet's death: "Good night sweet prince: And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!"

The Rose

Allison Mass

I lay the roses in the long cardboard box today. I tightly wind the yarn on the sides to secure the lid and squeeze it into my closet. It's the night before I leave for college, and I don't want to return on Thanksgiving, or probably sooner, to find them sitting on my dresser—a reminder of what I will have forgotten.

He fumbled for words as we stepped out of the theater into the freezing air that night. We waved goodbye to his friends and I said, "Nice to meet you!" He said the same, which was odd because I was pretty sure he had met them before.

When we made it to his car he said, "I've got something for you."

"Oh you do, do you?" I grinned.

He gently pulled the pink rose out of the backseat where it had been resting, so as not to be bent. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

I smiled, "Yes, of course."

We are finally moved in, and my roommate and I are sitting at our desks kicking our feet. Outside our window students are making their way down to the Huskie Bash. Though it doesn't look like the most enticing event ever, we hear they give away free stuff, and we've been told that as college students you must always follow free stuff. So we do.

On my eighteenth birthday he took me to The Cheesecake Factory. We found a spot in the waiting

area, and a few minutes later a couple of rosy ladies walked in. There was barely any room left on the couch, but the most outgoing of the bunch winked and asked, "Mind if we squeeze in?" So we scooted as far over as we could, and sooner or later there we were waiting, kind of staring straight ahead, as that's all personal space would allow. "Nothing wrong with being too close, right?" the lady smiled at us. We lightly laughed back, and out of the corner of my eye I could tell she was still looking at us. Perhaps she was recalling fond memories. That was fine by me. When he got up to return our buzzer she nudged my arm, squinted her eyes, nodded her head, and grinned in his direction. And I agreed. That night he gave me the second rose, and I put it in my vase with the other one, seven months dry by then but I'd never seen anything lovelier.

So here we are at the Huskie Bash, and, yes, there is a lot of free stuff. I'm balancing four t-shirts on one arm and cradling magnets, pencils, flyers, etc. in the other. Luckily, my roommate spots a booth that is handing out their free items in bags. It's the We Care Pregnancy Clinic. Hey, it doesn't even matter we say to each other—they've got bags. Turns out this is also the place where everyone's been getting the roses too. We each grab one, and finally we can pour everything into a bag. The roses stick out the top, and we joke they're from our boyfriends.

It was our one year anniversary, and there we were sitting in my driveway seriously considering spending it apart. It was the untimely culmination of a long few weeks. He had left the headlights on and the car running, and those stupid, squeaky windshield wipers of his were still going back and forth, back and forth. "So am I just going to leave then?" he asked. To be honest that's really what I wanted, and I know that's what he wanted too, and we were within seconds of that actually happening, but it was our anniversary. So he came in. He didn't know that I had saved the roses, and as I ever so softly set them on the table for our centerpiece, the driveway seemed far away.

Her alarm clock sends me shooting straight out of bed—it's the first time I've heard it. Before we know it we've been shuttled over to the Academic Convocation where there is an overwhelmingly large amount of cheering and singing going on for the morning. After the ceremony we shuffle along with the crowd and before we know it, we are smack dab in the middle of Friday Fest. There's booth upon booth of free things; there's flyers swirling overhead, free pens in your face, and pamphlets under your feet. Sure enough, here's the We Care Pregnancy Clinic again. They yell above the noise, "Want some information and a rose!" My roommate and I shrug at each other, why not? Back in our room we sort through what we've accumulated at all of these bashes and fests. We each have two beautiful roses, and we hang them on our still empty bulletin boards. I hope she doesn't notice me staring at them.

Every so often I'd change the water in the dead roses' vase. Standing over our utility sink at home making

sure no one was around, I'd take a warm, damp paper towel and run it down their stems. I'd untangle the petals that had fallen from the twigs and rest them on the beach towel I had folded on top of our dryer. I'd scrub the vase clean and rinse it until I was certain there were no suds left. Then I'd settle the roses back in, arranging the fallen petals into the vase too. I'd put the full vase back on my dresser and turn it just right so the roses would bend over my bed, as they had since when they were still pink.

In the spirit of being social we leave our door held open with a scrap piece of cardboard, and before long our neighbor from a few rooms down walks in. We get to talking, and he asks us how we met. My roommate and I look at each other, by now pretty used to answering this question. Directness has gone over best, "Um, through our ex-boyfriends." We all chuckle, who would have guessed?

I never wanted to be in a relationship that was ended and restarted within the day. That was reserved for the weak, for fake relationships—not for me. But there I was in that freezing room Jewel has for flowers, standing in front of a bushel of pink roses. I picked out the best one, paid for it, and they tied a nice little ribbon around it for me. I knew it would be cheesy, giving it to him, but I hoped he would catch the symbolism. He didn't. And, the worst and hardest realization I've ever had to make was, I didn't care.

I'm remembering when I first met my roommate: double date, Buffalo Wild Wings, sitting across the table from each other, our boyfriends sitting to our right. I'm remembering when she asked me if we wanted to be roommates, and how she may still not

know how I was going to call her with the same question. I'm remembering all of the stories warning against rooming with someone you know, and how glad I am we never paid attention to them. I'm remembering phone calls, concerts, chocolate parties, laundry parties, cleaning parties, runs, late nights, not sleeping, and laughing. I'm also remembering late nights, clinging to the belief that something good will come of this, and I'm realizing that it has.



Bibliophilia

Jane Denison-Furness

In 1903 my hometown, Rice Lake, became the recipient of a Carnegie grant for the construction of a public library. Our town was one of twelve in Wisconsin that were bequeathed a share of Carnegie's \$40,000,000 legacy, used to build more than 1,600 libraries in the early part of the 20th century. Our library stood just off the banks of the Red Cedar River, which ran through downtown. Taller than most of the other buildings, its limestone edifice towered over the landscape. As a child, the enormous wooden front doors flanked by two Corinthian columns made me feel as though I entered the Temple of Athena each time I visited. Down in the basement, the children's library contained the tomes of knowledge and adventure that I eagerly sought, week after week. Slightly dusty and infused with the smells of basement dwelling, these books became my doorway to far-off lands and wild adventures. This is where I first fell in love.

When I was nine years old, my oldest sister, Anna, left for college. At the time, I was busily devouring the first two books in the *Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I adored Laura and became fascinated with all things prairie-related, so my sister Lori sewed me a prairie-style skirt, just like Laura's. I longed for a bonnet to wear and spent hours in my playhouse acting out the stories as I read them. When Indians visited the Ingalls women while Pa was away, they visited my cabin too. I fed them and in order to save my family, relinquished all of the wild "Indian tobacco" drying in the rafters of my cottage, just like Ma Ingalls. Many of Laura's stories came to life for me in my backyard wonderland, where I

acted out the adventures as I encountered them in the books. Each time Anna returned home she brought another volume in the series, which I read and re-read until the pages were worn and creased. For me, the fascination of living through the stories told within books had begun.

I went on to read all of the novels for adolescent girls that I could get my hands on. Judy Blume taught me all about getting my period and the dangers of boys. Nancy Drew inspired me to become a detective for the summer, uncovering my brother's collection of porno magazines hidden in an old metal microscope box in the backyard. Eventually my tastes became a little more refined. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* prompted me to act out my fantasies, inspiring several Christmas plays performed with dramatic flair for my family. I helped Alec win over *The Black Stallion*, even though my fear of horses left me feeling paralyzed. Spending the entire afternoon in my parents' front coat closet with a book and a flashlight was not unusual. I waited with Lucy to enter Narnia and the world of Aslan, the strong and fierce savior. When our dog died, I cried Billy's tears for Dan and Ann over my Pepper, burying her in a grave *Where The Red Fern Grows*. Anne Frank and I spent time together behind a bookcase in my basement, hiding from the Nazis and my mom. These books became my childhood, as much a part of my reality as my own family and friends.

Eventually I experienced the joy of sharing books with my own children. Allowing them access into this secret world that had so influenced my own allowed

my love for the written word to be passed on to them. Reading all of my childhood favorites aloud, we also discovered new stories that filled our afternoons and evenings with pure joy. Acting out all the best parts, using voices to bring life to the characters on the page, we floated down the Mississippi with Tom and Huck, hiding out on the island with Jim. In India, we rescued a Hindu princess from the wicked practice of suttee and took her *Around the World in 80 Days* with us. When Lewis and Clark took Sacajawea on an adventure with Scott O'Dell at the literary helm, we went right along, helping to build the lodge at Fort Clatsop on the Pacific Ocean. Short stories like *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* had us rolling on the floor with laughter as our voices narrated the story, turning the Grand Duke Wilfred's anger into a comical tirade which taught us all a little bit about having our own way. We stormed the gates of Mordor with Frodo and Sam, following the map Tolkien left us in the flyleaf of *The Two Towers*. After reading Norse mythology, my daughter took on the moniker Ginnungagap, a reference to her stream-of-consciousness way of speaking whatever was on her mind, which went on and on like the bottomless abyss in the Nordic tales. Reading became the reward for finishing a task, with books as the prize. Sitting in the backyard on a blanket, we read for hours while the stories came alive once again for my children, just as they had for me.

My love for all things bound and organized led me to start a church library several years ago. After procuring the space and raising the funds to start the library, I set to work learning how to use the software needed to catalogue and organize the books, making friends with both the Dewey Decimal System and the Library of Congress. I attended seminars for librarians and poured over thousands of books, cataloguing and sorting, reading their ISBN's the way

a postman reads an address. If the ISBN began with a 0 or 1, the book was published in an English-speaking country, which made my job much easier. The next six digits identified the publisher, and I soon learned those by heart, memorizing more publisher codes than I care to remember. After hand cataloguing over 4,000 volumes, these digits ran through my mind like a song that you want to forget, but can't. I did learn one very intriguing fact from processing all of those books, however. Libraries often stamp a certain page in their volumes, establishing the book's ownership. All the books belonging to our church library were stamped on page 34, after the last two digits in our phone number. This little bit of information became a secret preoccupation for me. My new favorite pastime involved taking a book and turning to my secret page number where I'd read that page and that page alone.

Still, when an afternoon affords time, I make my way over to the bookstore and randomly choose a stack of books, proceeding to a quiet corner with a comfy chair. Turning to page __, (which is determined by my age that year), I read the entire page and if intrigued, I read more. Then that book is set aside and I pick up another one. Occasionally, this exercise leads to the purchase of a book, but more often than not I find that the book, while educational, served its purpose and is better off left undiscovered. The fact that a book and I cross paths, even briefly, satisfies me. These are the books I only flirt with. For others, the relationship becomes more than mere flirtation as I devour page after page, falling in and out of love with a story that takes me to worlds I've never dreamed of. These books and I have a relationship that transcends a quick fling. I invest in them, and they transform me. Then there are the books that I revisit like an old, long lost friend, lingering over favorite passages, suspending disbelief and allowing myself to experience the story for the first time all over again.

Several years ago, I spent a few months in love with Nathaniel Hawthorne. As ridiculous as it sounds, I've always been enamored by the lives of my favorite authors. Hawthorne, like Hardy, Austen, and others, became a passing fancy that soon faded when I moved on to a new novel. However, the literary circles these authors moved in still makes my mind swirl, and I daydream about conversing with Thoreau and Emerson, Melville and the Brownings, over a cup of stout New England tea. Their hopes, dreams, and disappointments all become part of the stories woven into the fabric of their books where I become a participant. My own personal experiences are small, but I see through their eyes the world beyond past, present, and future. When CS Lewis said, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself," he reached across time and space and found me. His thoughts echo my own, and I have found another kindred spirit. My true self lives beyond the limitations of time and personal geography, wandering through the pages of books before returning to the safety of my home, night after night.

When my mother died ten years ago, my father came to spend some time with us. Adjusting to his new-found solitary existence proved difficult and the controlled chaos of our busy home provided the antidote for loneliness. My dad's oldest sister, Maggie, had recently returned a book to him that he had received as a child. This book accompanied him on his visit and became the amusement for an entire winter's afternoon and evening. Dad's mother, Grandma Rose, gave the book to him when he was a small boy. It was one of the few books he can remember owning as a child, and the memories it stirred were visible on his face as he began to read aloud to my children. "Dorothy lived in the midst of

the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife." Dad spoke slowly with a shaky voice saturated with the memories of childhood and his mother's love. The afternoon unfolded lazily as Dad and my children took turns reading aloud Dorothy's adventures, pausing only to comment on how the movie left out an important scene here and there or to take a quick repast before beginning the next chapter. Dad's copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is an original 1900 first edition, inscribed by his own hand in crayon inside the front cover. As Dickinson so aptly penned, this book was indeed a frigate that took us all to lands far away one cold and snowy winter's afternoon.

Years later, Dad and I discovered our love for Longfellow in a hospital room. After confronting the enemy, we began our third battle with cancer. I spent two weeks helping Dad through surgery and recovery, which afforded many hours for reading and conversation. Accompanying me to the hospital were stacks of homework papers from a children's literary workshop I led at the time. They lay in my satchel awaiting review, vying for my attention. While Dad slept, I plucked away at the mountain of worksheets, trying hard to concentrate on the mundane while fighting the urge to rage against the assassin lurking in the room. When awake, Dad and I read from James Herriot's books or reminisced about favorite hunting stories from days past. Out of boredom, I asked if I could read to him some of the poetry that I'd been using for discussion in my workshop. As I started to read "The Children's Hour" by Longfellow, Dad began to cry and I joined him. Memories of my own childhood and the surprise attacks waged on my father as he rested in his recliner flooded my mind. My siblings and I used to drown my father in kisses and hugs, resting secure in the arms of a father who

loved and protected us. And suddenly these images of my siblings became his grandchildren, whose love and adoration were kept in "the round tower" of his heart. We wept for what had been and the limitations of what would never be. Like all excellent poetry, the words reached through time and space and spoke the unspeakable, expressing our deepest groans of sadness and longing, love and loss. Later on that day, Dad broke out spontaneously reciting "Under a spreading chestnut-tree/The village smithy stands..." He continued on until well into the third stanza before his memory failed. Together we found the words and finished the last few stanzas of "The Village Blacksmith," triumphing over our feeble memories.

Surprised by his recitation of the poem, I asked, "How on earth do you know that poem, Pop?"

"My mother taught it to me, I suppose. She was always reading books and poems to me," he divulged without much thought.

Grandma Rose had been a farmer's wife and former teacher who delayed marriage until the ripe old age of thirty-two, an oddity in her day. Her death when I was only four meant Grandma was an enigma I would come to understand through family stories told at gatherings on the holidays. But here was her indelible mark on my dad. Her love and passion for books and poetry somehow survived the hardships of farm living in the 1940s to be passed down to my father and eventually, to me. My love for reading grew from a legacy of love for books, handed down generation after generation. This legacy, this love, built a bridge of understanding between my father and me. When words failed to express the struggles we faced, the written word spoke for us. Transcending time and space, translating the life experience of those who came before us into our own lives, poetry inspired and related what we could not articulate. It continues to speak for us, when our own words fail.

Although I am mostly an armchair traveler, occasionally I wander into the world and share in the adventure that I otherwise just read about. On a recent trip to Switzerland, my husband and I spent one lazy afternoon on the shores of Lake Geneva just outside the beautiful city of Montreux. Surrounded by terraced hillsides strewn with vineyards that date back to the Romans, the 12th century stronghold of Château de Chillon overlooks the city that inspired Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Over the years, writers journeyed here in search of solitude and leisure, and in return they were granted inspiration. Carved out of the Alpine bedrock, the dungeon of the castle holds Byron's graffiti, carved into the pillar that inspired a poem based on a prisoner held there in the 16th century. On these rare occasions, fiction becomes reality, and I experience the beauty that inspired Dickens and Wordsworth, Conrad and Shelley.

But on most days, I travel from the safety of my home without passport or ticket. Eschewing the time and expense required of great journeys, my odysseys begin and end in my living room. In the past few weeks, I spent a lovely afternoon on the isle of Guernsey with some new friends after battling gender discrimination in Africa and Asia. My recent voyages have brought me in contact with some dear old friends from the antebellum south before spending a lovely couple of days on the Nebraska prairie with a family that I've grown to love and adore over the years. Once again I am transported through time and space to worlds of imagination that come alive through the pages of the books I read. I truly am transformed, moving through the ages, participating in the lives of others who together become as much a part of me as the air I breathe. Transcending the ordinary, books help me discover the parts of myself that lay hidden, waiting to be perceived and woven into the fabric of my own life. Thank you, Andrew Carnegie.

Gifted

Rachel Kowalecyk

“She’s hard to buy for,” my mother says. “She has everything she needs.” When I picture Grandma’s house with its immaculately ordered cupboards and drawers, I see just what Mom means.

We shuffle groggily through the mall. Black Friday bodies ricochet all around us, traveling courses mapped out on their shopping lists. In one of the mirror-plated columns that holds up the ceiling in Marshall Fields, I glimpse our faces, wan and pinched. Our cheeks have lost the feasting flush of last night’s Thanksgiving dinner. I look especially pale, unaccustomed to waking in pending daylight. Numbly I follow my mother’s feet from one department store to the next.

“We’ll get as much done here as we can, then we’ll go eat some lunch,” Mom promises, leading me towards a toy store in search of a TickleMe Elmo for cousin Zoe. I imagine she feels relieved, and perhaps a little sad, that I’ve surpassed the age when a toy store offers too much temptation to handle.

Grandma Alice’s life of minimalist efficiency stands in complete opposition to the orgy of commercialism surrounding us in this suburban shopping center. Originally out of necessity, Grandma adopted the skills of creative economy to feed her family of seven on Grandpa Frank’s working-class income. Across the years, frugal living became for her a source of pride and pleasure. She wastes little and wants even less. Whenever I hear her reciting one of her favorite kernels of Polish Catholic wisdom — “A place for everything and everything in its place” — I feel she commits the sin of redundancy. The simple pattern of her existence says the same thing more powerfully

than any clever maxim. So what can we give her that won’t only create clutter where none is wanted?

“We could get her a dishwasher so she doesn’t have to wash dishes anymore,” I suggest.

“She likes washing dishes.”

“Or a computer so she can type out her letters on it?”

“She loves her typewriter. She doesn’t want to have to learn how to use a computer.”

For the first time, I realize a subtle sensuality underneath what I perceived to be my grandmother’s purely practical tastes. Her wrinkled hands prefer hot soapy water to the push of a button, the hammering rhythm of responsive keys to the luxury of backspacing. Our challenge is to find something that will not impose demands on her time and space, something that does not ask her to change her habits or relax her temperate standards, something that provides the humble enjoyments she treasures.

Fortunately, the rest of the names running down our list belong to children: my cousins, my brothers, myself. We make things so much easier by relentlessly, vocally reiterating the objects of our desire. All the grown-ups have to do is locate, sometimes under the pressures of limited inventories. My mother’s concern that certain toys will sell out is what brings us into this swirling sea of shoppers when we could have been warm in our beds, digesting.

But even if the last TickleMe Elmo disappears from the ToyWorld shelf before Mom has a chance to snatch it up, it won’t be impossible to find something else Zoe might like. We children just want and need

so much. The charms of materialism have not yet faded for us. We focus our longings on dolls and video games because we haven't yet encountered the intangibles that will, in the years ahead, grip us even more ardently.

Up until those elusive wants begin to creep into our childish minds, the adults are spared the task of brainstorming gift ideas for us. In turn, as long as we're still unformed and forming, we never have to fret over our parents' presents. Their sentimentality makes it easy for us, and the other grown-ups we associate with make it even easier by orchestrating Craft Time. In the weeks before Christmas our teachers and Girl Scout leaders set us to work with finger paint, clay, construction paper and glue. The little ornaments we fashion gradually fill in every available patch of untrimmed evergreen on the tree. Each time we offer our best work, overestimating the skill of our craftsmanship and underestimating the value these childhood artifacts hold for our parents watching an age pass by before their eyes. Our otherwise tastefully-decorated home gives way to clumsy child-made articles that my parents seem unwilling to hide away unseen. A lurid green ashtray lingers on my nonsmoking father's bureau, holding grimy quarters, because I made it when I was seven.

On a shelf in the den rests a kindergarten portrait I made of my father, propped up by issues of *National Geographic* and *Scientific American*. Using the viscous paint Miss Zentmeyer placed in the center of our comically low-to-the-ground tables, I depicted him from memory while work and school separated us for the day. Apparently my memory was faulty, as I erroneously colored his eyes green (they are blue), which prompted me to thereafter look at him more closely, and he to spend afternoons teaching me to draw.

Whatever artistic ability I possess traces back to those kindergarten afternoons. He mostly drew horses, at my request. I must have liked the form of the animal, unable at that time to express how marvelous I found the sleek power of rippling quarters and charging necks perched atop lean, branchlike limbs, in contrast to my own softness and smallness. I just asked him to draw a horse, every day for months. He'd sit beside me at the kitchen counter and I'd watch the lines materialize across the blank page. I wonder at how ungrudgingly he obliged me with stallion after unicorn after pony. Maybe he didn't mind the monotony because he was getting so good at his equine renderings.

Once he'd completed the outline he moves around the counter to do the dishes or marinate chicken or something. I slide his drawing over to color it in and copy it on my own sheet of paper. The same way we, in kindergarten, copy endlessly the upper and lowercase alphabet, I copy my father's horses. Eventually I exhaust horses as subject matter, and to my father's relief I ask for trees, cats, houses, people. But it was my Horse Period that forged the link in my brain between images and how to maneuver implements — crayons, pens, markers — so as to depict things seen.

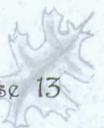
He gave me a tremendous gift then, tremendous in personal significance though admittedly small in its ordinariness. Grandma Alice believes in the small splendors that daily routines can give rise to. Every time she fixes you something to eat, she makes of it a special present. A pocked oatmeal face smiles up at you with an oblong curving slice of banana, twinkling its raisin eyes. Pickle slices, grapes, carrots — whatever's handy, Grandma uses to augment a sandwich on a plate, giving lunch a host of funny features.

She wrote me letters as my pen pal for several years. I'm thankful it wasn't too silly for her to stamp and mail me these epistles, in light of the proximity of our

homes which allowed my family to visit each month or oftener. Her letters were never merely words on paper. They were in themselves works of art. She typed hers out on the sky blue Smith Corona that I saw gleaming in the sunlight on her desk each time I peeked into her bedroom. She always fills the margins of the page with newsprint Family Circus cartoons and little silk ribbons, stickers of Easter lilies and tiny angel pins she receives at church. Whenever her desk supply of postal accoutrements ran dry, she'd doodle flowers and sunbursts around the edges of her writing.

Our letters back and forth to one another formed a special thread between us. It allowed us a private communion that wasn't possible when we came together in the company of my brothers and parents and taciturn Grandpa Frank. Sometimes her small house feels too full and I escape into the attic. It's a refuge from the soporific sitting room, cramped kitchen and cold frontroom. Up here the muffled sounds of my father's laugh and brothers' chatter just barely reach. I explore trunks and racks of musty coats, flooded by the feeling of mystery. Once I discovered in a wooden chest a stack of canvas paintings, encased in plastic. Trees green with flooding forest light. Trees snow-tufted on the edge of a sheeted slope, a patchy winter meadow stretching out below. And in the bottom corner, little paint dabs form "A MAJEWSKI."

This is the way I learned of my grandmother's artistic gifts, of which she never spoke, never alluded to. Remembering them now, in the mall with my mother, I look among hats and scarves and find a little black beret. I want to buy it for Grandma Alice with my own money. Mom just says, "All right, if that's what you want to give her," but the smile on her face tells me she knows why this hat has a place in Grandma's house.



Two Cents

Kim Skibinski

When I walked into the kitchen, I had no idea what to expect. My mother sat at the wooden table, nibbling on a sandwich while reading the first section of the *Chicago Tribune*. That was usual; my mother occupied most of her time with solitary tasks. Communication with her daughters was always the furthest thought from her mind. As I stepped closer to her, I scanned the surrounding rooms and hallways to make sure my little sister, Caroline, was gone. Hearing the door slam upstairs, I assumed it was her and proceeded to slink silently toward my mother.

Arriving at the kitchen table, I pulled out the empty chair adjacent to my mother and her stack of newspapers. I glanced in her direction, attempting to will her into talking to me. No response. I sighed loudly and stared out the back window. She continued to read in silence, save the close-mouthed crunch as she chewed on a pickle. With all hopes of my mother initiating conversation dashed, I dropped my façade and leaned back in the chair.

“Ma, I want to talk to you about something.”

She glanced up from a feature story on potted plants. Noticing my distraught look, she slowly folded up the paper and placed it to her right. “What?” she responded curtly.

“I’ve been working really hard at the paper, and I thought about applying to be an editor,” I began.

“Well, that’s good,” she interrupted.

“Right. So I did. I applied, and I did the interview and everything. I was really nervous.”

I searched my mother’s face for a hint of support. Though she was using her “happy voice,” I wasn’t

entirely sure if she was thinking about my problems or the lawn that needed mowing. She clicked her fingernails against the treated wood in impatience.

“Did you get it?”

“Get what?”

“The job.”

I sensed she was losing interest.

“Oh, right. Well, no. There were a lot of people trying out for it, and I’m only a freshman, and I guess I need more experience,” I stammered.

“That’s too bad.”

“But the new editor-in-chief said some really nice things to me,” I offered.

“Oh?”

“He said with a little more time, he has no doubt I could become an editor, and a high ranking editor at that. All I need is to figure out what I really want to do and go for it.”

Those words excited me. Finally my mother would see that I showed promise; that with a little help, I could have a rewarding future. I closed my eyes and imagined her overwhelming joy. She would hug me, praise me, and tell me that everything would be okay. I opened my eyes and heard a different response.

“You know they have to say those things to everyone they don’t hire,” she said, standing. “I have to mow the grass before it grows into a jungle.”

And with that, my mother walked briskly out of the room and down the hall, leaving me alone with her two cents at the kitchen table.

Comfort Me With Noodles

Rachelle Korth

comfort food. n. 1. The means through which we draw psychological relief and connect with memories associated with them; Comfort foods feed our body and our soul.

I haven't always made my own pasta. Don't tell anyone, but years ago, away from home as an undergraduate student at Illinois State University, when I needed comfort food, pasta came from a can à la Chef Boyardee®. I don't eat the stuff now, but in a pinch, I know I can still find it on any 24-hour convenience store shelf.

At school my freshman year, Eisner's was the grocery store closest to Watterson, my residence hall. I always bought enough cans to keep me sufficiently comforted for a week at a time, if necessary. The dorm served three meals a day except Sunday supper. I made it to most meals—even breakfasts before my eight o'clock classes—but, on my own from time to time, I'd plug in my little red electric hot pot, and curl up with a mug filled with my favorite pasta treat, spaghetti with meatballs. I'd mine for meatballs and enjoy those warm slurpy noodles coated with rich tomato sauce and be comforted and connected to home and family. Ah, the joys of eating a meal for pennies armed only with a can opener and hot pot.

To be clear, "chef in a can" was not what I ate back home. I don't know what most people think of when they recall meals from their past, but my memories include things like: baked Alaska, cheese soufflé, beef stroganoff, chicken curry, German potato salad, beef rouladen, fresh artichokes, and salads with hearts of palm. We weren't rich or anything, but both my

parents worked and placed a certain priority on good food. My family ate other things, too, of course, but I remember these dishes because of the memories they call to mind. My mother knew how to cook and she wasn't afraid of challenges at mealtime.

I'm not sure what motivated my mother; maybe it was my father who was a good eater and generous with his compliments to the cook. Maybe it was a skill of which she was proud. As a young girl, she had cooked for her father and little brother regularly because she had to—her mother had been terminally ill and unable to do it. In any case, my mother developed skills with practice and she passed her knowledge on to me. One of my earliest lessons was Italian-style spaghetti with meat sauce—later I learned that the sauce (or gravy) was called Bolognese.

My first job was to learn how to stir the sauce properly. To be sure, there is a right way to do it without making a mess all over the stove. Eventually I was allowed to use knives and I chopped onions, green peppers, and celery, sliced fresh mushrooms, and minced garlic. I sautéed the vegetables in some oil until they were softened and then added the ground beef. The meat mixture cooked until the beef was broken up and no longer pink. I stirred in cans of tomatoes, tomato paste, and tomato sauce and seasoned the luscious red sauce with salt, pepper, thyme, and oregano and enough sugar to cut the tomato acidity. The pot was covered and the sauce simmered for two hours; I stirred it occasionally to make sure nothing got stuck and burned on the bottom. Just before serving, the spaghetti was cooked, fresh chopped parsley was

added to the sauce, and Parmesan cheese was put on the table.

Years later, as a teenager, I remember coming home occasionally after mealtime was over. My father made a point to sit down at the table with me because he didn't want me to eat alone. It was a special time for us to share conversation. Many times, while we talked, I reached into the refrigerator for the container of leftover spaghetti with meat sauce and ate it cold. It was easy and it was tasty.

My first taste of fresh pasta came years later in a restaurant. Up to that time, it hadn't occurred to me that I could make pasta. It seems silly to say that now, but I remember being surprised when I saw "fresh, handmade pasta" on the menu.

I was working in Chicago at the time, this particular day attending a business luncheon with my boss and co-workers. Everyone had raved about this restaurant called, The Village². Upon our arrival, we climbed up a narrow flight of stairs, bumping into other patrons as we went in and they made their way out. The minute we walked into the dining area, we were greeted with the din of diners talking loudly to be heard over the crashing of white ceramic plates banging and strains of Frank Sinatra's singing. We followed the hostess who navigated her way through several dimly lit rooms filled with square tables topped with red and white checked tablecloths and cozy-looking booths. It looked like an Italian restaurant was supposed to look—right down to the decanters for wine at every table.

Naturally, I had to try the spaghetti with meat sauce. It was an eye-opening experience when the server brought the huge, hot plate filled with enough pasta to feed everyone in my group. I don't think I closed my

eyes when I took the first bite, but I don't remember being aware of anything else going on around me. This simple dish was just about the best thing I ever ate! The sauce was outstanding—surely made with fresh tomatoes—and the spaghetti was far superior in taste and texture to anything I'd ever gotten from a box (or a can). I ate that whole plateful of spaghetti. I was very full and blissfully happy.

That restaurant was, and still is, a rustic eatery on Monroe Street in the middle of the theater district. While I don't remember what the business purpose was that day, or even who else was there, the meal was memorable because I ate something for the first time and felt transformed. The mere mention of The Village restaurant still brings a smile to my face.

Today, my kitchen includes a pasta machine. A cooking class taught me how to make fresh pasta and now I can make it whenever I want. As I said, I don't eat Chef Boyardee from a can anymore; my tastes have changed. The recipe for meat sauce has changed, too. I've taken my mother's spaghetti recipe and made it my own by adding Italian sausage, minced carrot, fresh herbs, chicken broth or cream, and a splash of red wine. And I make fresh pasta.

My love for noodles is not limited to Italian dishes. I have discovered other types of noodles and take comfort in things like Pad Thai, Lo Mein, and Pho (Vietnamese noodle soup), too. Believe me when I say that Asian soul food gives as much comfort as the Italic counterparts.

Spaghetti with meat sauce has become my favorite comfort food because associations with learning to cook, spending special time with family, and eating something that tastes good soothes my soul. Over time, spaghetti with meat sauce has comforted me when I've been depressed or lonely, but more often

than not, it has helped me celebrate, and it has served as a reward. My comfort food is usually for happy times. Eating it now summons fond memories.

Are you hungry? I want to give you my recipe for homemade pasta. The noodles are equally suitable forming a bed for Bolognese gravy or floating in a warm Asian-flavored broth. Enjoy your food.

Master Recipe

Basic Egg Pasta³

Makes 1 pound pasta

Start to finish: 25 minutes

The weather will influence your pasta. You may not need water if the room is warm and humid. A food processor and a pasta machine will help make this recipe easier to complete, but you can always mix the ingredients in a bowl and knead the dough with your hands. There are certain methods for making noodles by hand that I will share in another recipe. You can vary the ingredients to make different flavored pasta, cut the dough into different shapes, or add any number of fillings for variety. These instructions will teach you how to make spaghetti.

- 1¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup semolina flour (Red Mill® brand)
- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 2 large eggs, beaten (can substitute 4 egg whites)
- 1 — 4 tbsp. water

1. Pulse the flour in the food processor a few times to aerate. Add the olive oil and eggs and blend using the metal blade.

2. As needed, add water gradually, just until dough pulls away from the sides of the processor bowl and

forms a rough ball. Feel for the proper texture; it should feel like play dough.

3. When moist, but not sticky, process about 25 rotations to knead. If dough is too moist, add more flour; if too dry, add a splash of water.

4. Break the dough into three balls or pieces.

Note: Keep unused dough pieces moist by wrapping in plastic.

5. Take a piece of dough and flatten it with your hands enough so that the dough can feed into the pasta machine. Repeat the process of feeding the dough into the machine until it is the desired thickness, then dust your clean work surface with flour.

6. Cut the dough into even strands and dry the spaghetti on a rack until the sauce is ready.

7. Cook in boiling, salted water for 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Drain and serve immediately.

Note: Rule of thumb, use 1 tablespoon of table salt for 4 quarts of water.

Yield: 1 lb. pasta

A Word on the Machines and Tools

While there is a certain connection with your food that can only be achieved by putting your hands to the ingredients, still, the convenience and efficiency that machines provide ensures that food such as pasta will be made from scratch more often than not. Here are my recommendations:

Pasta Machine: I use the Atlas 180 by Marcato®. It is available on Overstock.com for \$30.00.

Food Processor: Food processors are useful tools in the kitchen. I use a Cuisinart®, but there are several others on the market that work well, too. For example,

the Hamilton Beach Big Mouth Deluxe® (14-cup) model is reliable and costs about \$100.00.

Beater: A hand-held mixer (like the Cuisinart Power Advantage 7-speed Hand Mixer®) does the job of beating eggs, but a whisk will get the same result for this recipe. The hand-held mixer will cost about \$50.00, but a decent balloon whisk will only set you back about \$10.00.

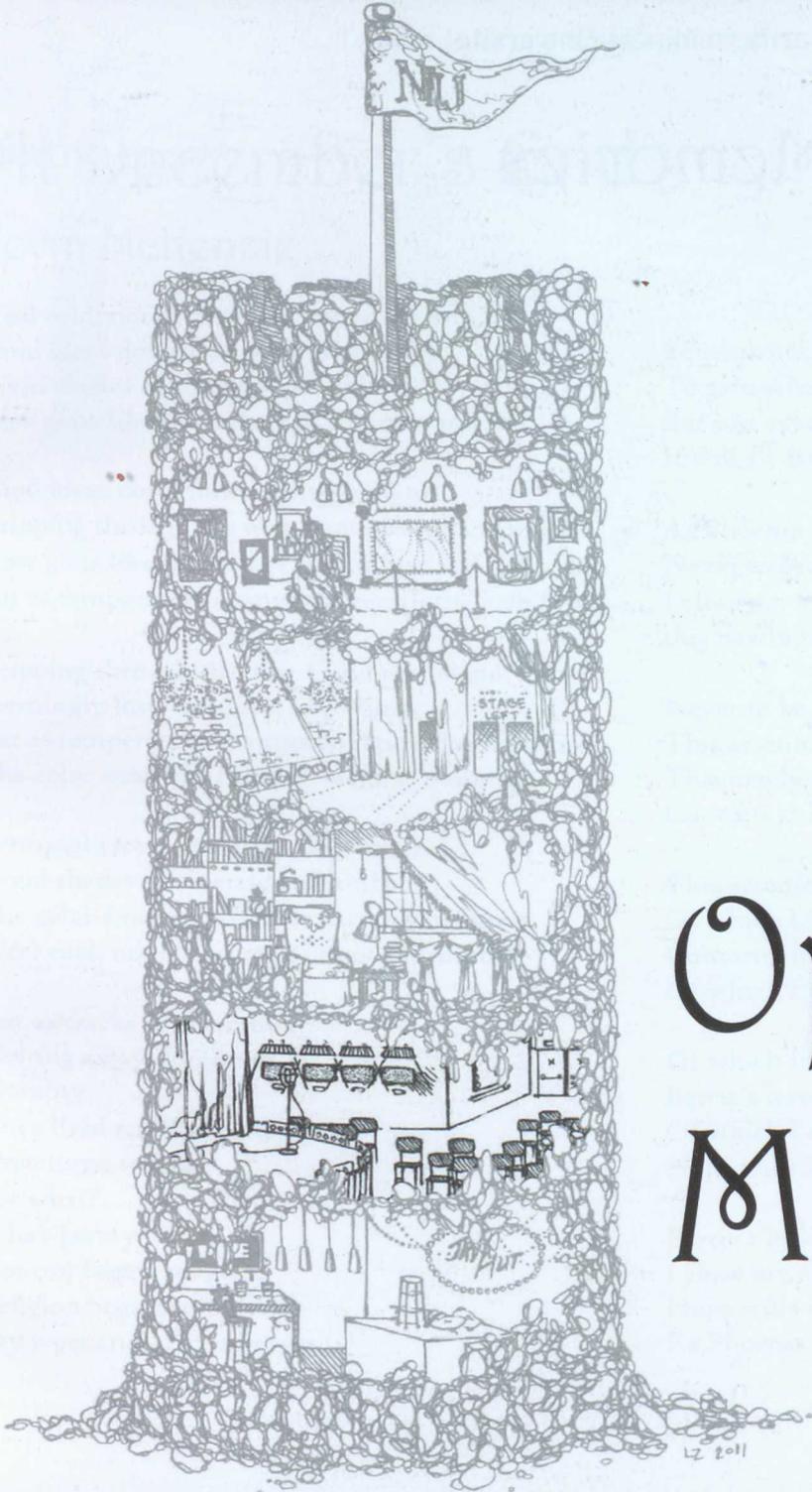
Notes

¹ Electric hot pots were popular small appliances that college students used during the 1970s (before microwaves) to heat beverages or food in dorm rooms.

² <http://www.italianvillage-chicago.com/index.php>

³ Recipe is derived from several sources: Country Garden Cuisine Cooking School, St Charles, Illinois; *The America's Test Kitchen Family Cookbook* (2005); and *The Professional Chef* by The Culinary Institute of America, 7th edition.





Open Mic

The Sound of Memories

Editor's Choice

Lauren Gliot

gentle wave
lay down your hidden jewel
on the coarse shore
cast fatherly eyes
as hapless children
kick and damage
the once smooth shell
laid carefully
upon the grains of glass
thrashed and battered
try to take her
back
into your fatherly embrace
but dear shell has strayed too far

lady waiting
dress frills
once white, now damp and yellowed
sun sheds motherly light
on the glistening shell
dancing on the shore

hold the shell to your ear
hear father's advice
reverberating
in the auspicious noise of spirals
sun shines brighter
as mother smiles
watching her daughter
meet her father

At December's End

Kevin McKenzie

I feel cold, not of the body but of the mind,
I find ideas don't flow as they used to,
Vivid shades of emerald and amber
Now gone like the foliage of summer and fall.

I find ideas don't flow as they used to
Dripping through the now vapid wasteland,
Now gone like the foliage of summer and fall.
But as temperature changes so return the lush forest.

Dripping through the now vapid wasteland,
Seemingly lost, this love, like winter.
But as temperature changes so return the lush forest.
The color emerges. Neither vacuous nor gray,

Seemingly lost, this love, like winter.
Vivid shades of emerald and amber
The color emerges. Neither vacuous nor gray,
I feel cool, not of the body but of the mind.

Just as tracks in the snow,
Melting away, forgotten.
Morality,
Once livid and stalwart,
Now turns to dust.
For what?
A hay penny.
Control begets religion,
Religion begets submission.
Pay a penance. Say a prayer.

Equivalence is a child's dream.
To gain what you give is never the case.
But just as tracks in the snow,
It will all dissolve.

As Phoenix without fire
Never to be reborn.
I close my eyes and shudder,
this newly fallen snow

Never to be reborn.
This arsenic in my brain
This newly fallen snow,
Contorts this ebbing world.

This arsenic in my brain
Of which I feign forgetting,
Contorts this ebbing world
Of which I can't forget.

Of which I feign forgetting,
Barrie's lesson twisted,
Of which I can't forget.
Hope wills it dead and gone.

Barrie's lesson twisted,
I close my eyes and shudder.
Hope wills it dead and gone,
As Phoenix without fire

The Wasp-Child's Prayer

Carolyn Michelle

Waspishly, I thank the God
Who formed me like that small pest:
For, a wasp may sting, and sting again
without knowing punishment.
Where others may be struck down,
like the sweet bees of the hive,
the wasp may go on living.
The wasp, scourge of nature, may sting,
relentless in his action
And undaunted by his sins,
for he is quickly forgiven,
but never once does he learn.
He abuses divine Grace:
Given to him, the unworthy.

But am I not like the wasp?
Through our wrongs we are the same.
Although my stings form no welts,
damage still is done.
Cold words find solace in me:
I use them without thinking.
With sharp jabs, I tear things down.
And, like that stoic insect,
I only grow remorseful
once my pitiful prey dies
of the deeds staining my hands.
Oh! Let me be as the wasp is



Kansas

Lise Schlosser

Walking an ever-widening spiral
where fear and exaltation swirl
as yellow brick and grass once did
for the provincial Dorothy Gale
somewhere
over the rainbow

and I
like she
surrounded by strange
yet vaguely familiar
people
places
and things
wonder which way to Oz
and how do I get back
to the way things were
before the cyclone
before the world
turned upside down

A journey we both sought
in our own ways
and whether folk go this way
or that way
or both ways
she
like I
have only one choice
to keep moving

so the wicked witch
of doubt
will not appear above our heads
launching fires
or apples
or insults
our way
in order to slow our progress
and make us question our journey

And so we proceed
Dorothy and I
not completely sure
of any wizard

But knowing
even if we end
where we began
we will never be the same
again

Insomniac with a Crayon

Rachel Payne

You slept in the carpet
Beside the greasy cardboard,
Parmesan, pizza packaging,
Butt-end of your nose twitching
In stressful sleep. My crayons lay about
Us; me dabbling away in a green aroma of
Creative frenzy, you packing your day away
In soft sighs to tumble into disappearance
In your sugarplum dreams.

Did I bring the plant inside?
Were the doors locked?
Who checked on them last?

Ecstasy of the first rest
Having reached the summit
Of a weary climb up Kilimanjaro:
Cascades of water
From out of my rediscovered glass.
I forgot I had filled it earlier.
Oh well. Heave up the creaky folds
Of exhausted eyelids... I can never sleep
Till 2 anymore.

Is someone coming over?
Why is it such a mess?
I remember; we forgot.

You wanna smoke? Californiaboy
Lurches smoothly back and forth
On back leg and front leg
Trying to keep a Vertical Cool.

He always has a lighter;
Never knows where it came from.
Or he'll never tell you-
Unless it's a story, a lie for laughs.
We will always laugh.
Why not? It's funny.

Hey, do you sell procrastination
At twenty dollars a gram?
C'mon man, gimme a deal.

I groan, toss a crayon. You stumbled off
To bed too many minutes ago.
Man's best friend, technology,
Never lets the noise go away;
Humwhirbeepflashbuzz
Keeps company with Me, Lonely.
I color in the last of my consciousness.
Morning caffeine screams for attention
earlier with each deadline,
Making ticking down the peaceful
Evening a hooked bait for me,
The insomniac with a crayon.

Sometimes I Play for the Shadow in the Doorway

Allison Mass

Sometimes I play for the shadow in the doorway
Many times I play for myself.
One time I played for the man who wandered around
the room looking
at the posters, "Thank you for the music"
One time an energetic young dude came that I could
barely
understand, Chopin and rap
More than once he's come in and sat at the table
eating his lunch,
hiding under his headphones
A few times she was on her break, memories behind
her eyes, I don't
know her name but we smile
Sometimes I played for her dozing off to the side
where the light shone
through, the vibrations under her paws
Sometimes, I'm realizing, I must have played for her,
those times she sat
on her couch and left us at the keys
One day I hope to play for him, for us
One day for them
But today I played for the shadow in the doorway.

Hautz Ecole

Jerene-Elise Hall

on a clear bright morning
their bodies steamed
signals rose in smoke
with the fog of their noses
unbraided tails waved hello
to an unmanned empty sky
and with noble alertness
watchful large heads
turned on strong chestnut
arcs of necks
those muscles tensed
and sensed what i
could never catch

Two

Joe Durling

I wish to stream past in the wind, to race along,
blowing up sand and dust, feeling the earth
beneath my feet and knowing the earth
feels me.

I want the singular sunrise to look on, envious, as
we shine upon one another. At day's end,
the sunset shall photograph us.

I listen to water wherever I may. It tells life's
secrets to any who will listen. I ask how it
knows me so well; it answers, "I am more
you than you. And you are not one but two."

I write the stories I wish to live. How amazing it
would be, together, to live the stories I wish
to write.

Ramble

Rachel Skinner

Coffee is sweet, tea is bitter
Dancing shoes always seem to glitter
Names are always stayin' the same
There's a young child tryin' to be claimed
History is whirling amongst the living
The eyes of the world are always spinning
The future has not begun to be born
But the dark clouds ahead are out to warn
Love is replaced by infatuation
People can't refuse manipulation
The night falls when all is quiet
Until the perplexed people start to riot
You are all welcome to sit at the table
And listen to Mr. Z. tell an old fable
Some people like their words to be sung
While others are cursed with a twisted tongue
Nature likes to take its course
The world is moved by a forlorn force
Tall trees tell tales of tested times
Leaders decide which is yours and which is mine
Thoughts are laid down like heavy bricks
Presidents swear they're playing harmless tricks
Bleached books have pages to be filled
Dreams are always out there bein' killed
What do you do when the one who warns
Turns on you and begins to scorn?
Try to picture something to paint
You just might discover somethin' you ain't
Souls stay young, bodies grow old
With withering age thoughts turn to gold
Nothingness flows out to nowhere
Dwarfs determine the definition of dare

Youngin's tease the old and wise
For not loving with their eyes
French affairs may fail to fetch
The attention of those looking for dreams to catch
It's alright if I never dine with kings
But without a true love, life don't mean a thing
People who die in the midst of passion
Escape a fate of sorrowful fashion
So when your time has come to an end
Hopefully you'll know your truest friend

Lightening Love from a Gun

Lauren Gliot

Love
gun, bullet, powder
no spark
dead, useless, waste
you
does essence float or sink?
permeate or block?
can you taste the wind?
Can you love lightening
as it strikes you down
paralyzed?
is there color in black
as I slip into
the suit of your skin
perfume is
effervescent poison
light, free, deadly
consuming the oxygen
blocking the spark
from the gun that can't kill
the memory lodged in the brain
like a jagged bit of glass
created as lightening struck



After

Lise Schlosser

When they cleaned out her closet
it was hard to know
what to do with some of her things:
the black slacks she wore bowling,
the white blouse with the tiniest wine stain
on the cuff,
the green scarf that never really matched
anything she put it with,
the shoes she always swore
were more comfortable than slippers,
and the coat.
Year in and year out she wore that coat.
It had seen more winters than she could count,
and now it would see one without her.

A Bed

Jerene-Elise Hall

the broadness of your back
expands
beneath sheets thin and
white as ice
to break
to break the
strangeness
i must pull us
close
or you'll
or you'll stretch clothesline tight
to snap in two
to leave me frozen
whole;
alone

Portrait Poems

Allison Mass

In the Aisle

Crouched down to the lowest shelf
Examining the brand new vacuum cleaners
One small hand on the corner of a purple box
Explaining the cool features to his mother
Who was not convinced
But was smiling.

From the bus stop

Kink-your-neck tall
And walking down the drive.
Hair lifts up off his forehead and floats back down
With each short step.
Legs like that could get you places fast
But slow was his style.

Mrs. Vittore

She had big, black, curlicue hair—
How third-graders would like.
She taught long division by dancing—
How third-graders would remember.
She laughed with rosy cheeks—
How third-graders do.

At the Ranch

She's like a sunrise in
Knee-length jeans
Cowgirl boots
Snow white hair
Sometimes they don't realize she's there

MirrorrorriM

Rachel Payne

i feel so shrunken in reflection
(the dining room Mirror
dusted over coated tiny in
significant. elephantine displacement.
heard a whisper?) behind clinking silverware
unfolding napkins and how is aunt March?
the weather is dull. stocks are down?
WHERE AM I HIDING?
upstairs and downstairs and in my nightgown pocket
i startle the skeletal clutching of a memory.
calendar dates annulled (painstakingly);
permanent marker- who did this scribbling all over
the wall?
i'm lone. i'm hidden
(frozen embryo)
.my day is growing on bones

Daytime

Lauren Schmidt

The night beams.
It is so loud, but you refuse to hear it.
You even deny its velvet taste; its satin hug.
Gently and cleanly it washes its romancers in a fresh
new scent.

There is still room for you - care to dance?

...

There was approval in your eyes
The time I spoke to you last.
But that has been replaced
With regret
Of a summer spent
And wasted.

I remember your soft body
Laying wasted on the couch.
I wanted to touch your face gently;
maybe I would have sighed quietly
as my fingers met the warmth of your cheek.
But you were porcelain.
You were petrified bone — perfect, but fragile.

We've crossed since,
It is met with unrest.
My heart jolts at an accidental glimpse.
Ducking away, I pretend to have been innocently
blind,
wondering if I have made myself a successful crook
Or a clumsy villain.

There have been times I swear I've looked up
and felt a burning gaze straight into my soul.
I brush it off like lint from a worn out dryer
And reach my arms out for another.

And he is better than you.

Death Beats Beauty

Ratig Shore

Best asset of all.
Time stood still as I inhaled
The wispy, billowing puffs
Emitted from his sultry lips.
Now cracked and dried,
Decayed far beyond his grimy teeth ever were,
Taking a drag of a fag left near the grave
I taste the morbidity left behind.

Second best.
Clear, crystalloid blue spheres.
The entire universe rested behind;
Between the sight and transitory nerves.
Now possibly shattered,
A gateway for the worm to his psyche.
Feeding on the slim stack of knowledge
Transformed into cerebral tissue.

Finally.
Ah yes, the perfect porcelain that laid
the groundwork for a godly creation
Now lies in a barren, moldering state.
The perfection of the jutting angles,
Piercing blue irises that no longer emit light,
And lips that so perfectly graced mine
Cease to be. Ah, such is a thing of beauty.

Clutter

Megan Szmyd

I am from the attic
The cobwebs and the cracked picture frames
The dust gathering on the memories no one remembers
The lace and the handkerchiefs yellow with age
The books with faded ink whispering their stories to
the darkness

I am from the basement
The steamer trunks full of dreams
The dust gathering on the memories no one remembers
The wardrobe of unfulfilled hope the lock rusted shut
The closets hiding nightmares behind their closed
wooden doors

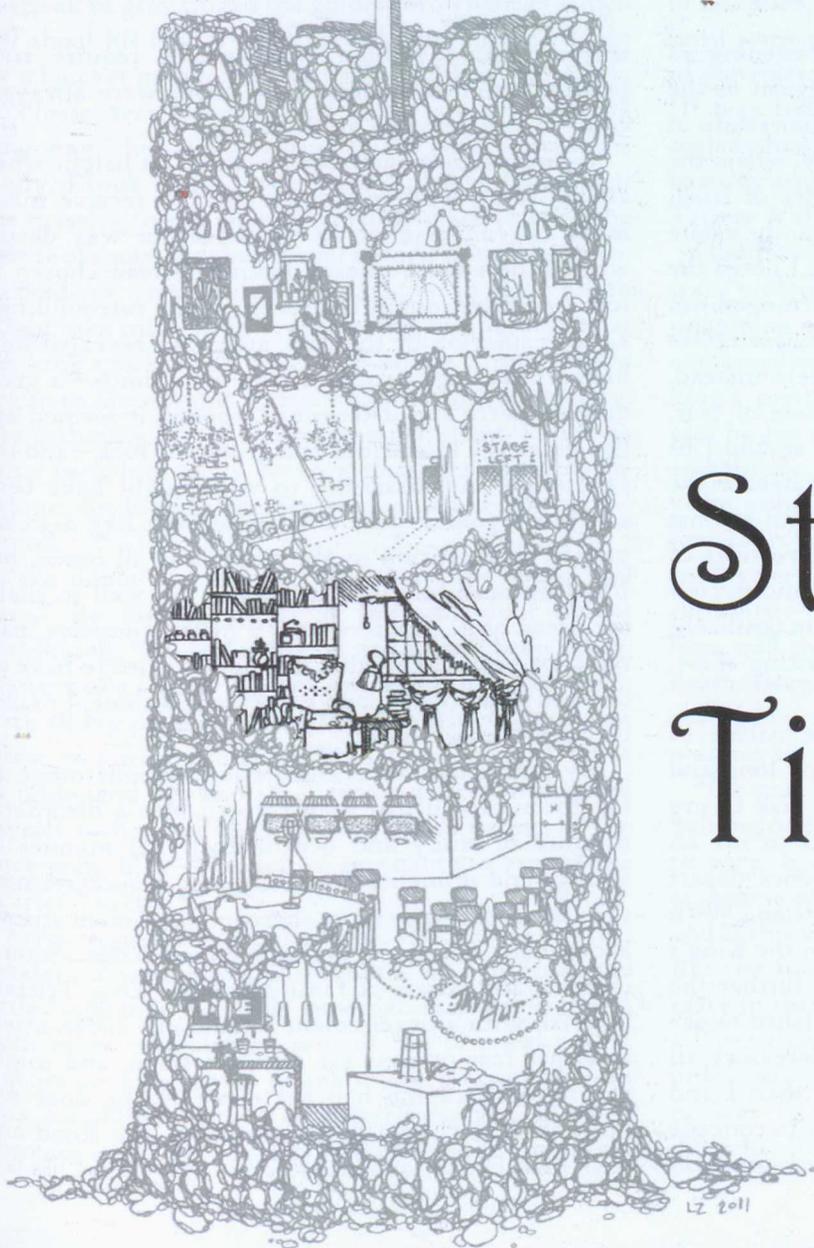
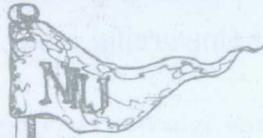
I am from under the bed
The old albums of smiling forgotten faces
The dust gathering on the memories no one remembers
The old shoebox of the past waiting for the future
The questions never answered and the answers never
questioned

I am from
The junk piled up over decades that no one wants to
throw away
The cobwebbed stories in the attic
The unfulfilled dreams in the basement
The frozen smiles under the bed
That no one remembers because we forgot to look
back and see
Where we are from
Lost amidst all the
Clutter

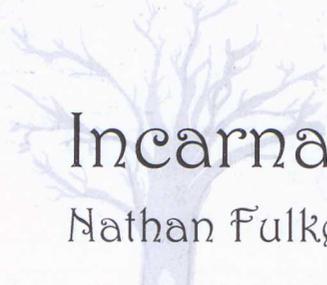
Got High on Company Time

Tony Martin

He
Walked Slowly
Slept Late
Smoked Cigarettes with his hands in his coat pockets
The Product of thirty-four midwestern winters.
When I smoke, if I hold it too close to my lips
My Eyes water and I gag.
We Got high on company time
And He brought me to a party where all the kids
smoked with no hands on a silent porch.
She
Drove Confused
Drew Awful pictures
Drank Cheaply
Died Young
And He wore black to her goodbye party
And Wore black every day since
Even When he married another girl
Years Later.
Sometimes I feel sorry for him
When We take our smoke breaks
And He still smokes with his hands in his pockets
But
Sometimes He gags a little bit



Story Time



Incarnation

Nathan Fulkerson

Editor's Choice

It was at the height of a dismally gray evening, as the last of the dying leaves fell with a groan of the wind, when I at last came upon the peculiar estate of Tristan Valois. Secluded in a barren valley, where the aging grass mingled with the first touches of frost, and surrounded by jagged mountain peaks, the estate sat precariously atop a cliff. At a distance, I noted the familiar shape of the high castle walls, arranged not in a four-sided square—as is typical of other fortresses in the surrounding territories—but a circle instead. I cannot name what rendered in me a state of fear, when I looked upon these walls, for why should I be afraid when I have seen the horrors of cold steel on the battlefield, where no stone wall might stand against the force of greater men? When the last vestiges of orange light left the heavens, I at last found myself standing before the open gates of the once magnificent keep, and having passed beneath its waiting maw, could be received in the great hall.

It would do well to remark upon the nature of my visit, for in truth the journey was one long and arduous, and having come alone, a great risk to my well-being. The past weeks had brought to me an urgent message carrier, who urged I at once depart for the palace of His Majesty, King Tristan. With him he carried a hastily scribbled note—in the King's very hand—which sought to describe no further the circumstances in which he desperately wished to see me. Having followed him and his predecessors all my days (for he, in truth, was younger than I and frequently valued my counsel), I saw it fit to concede to his wishes and go immediately, for my imagination

scarcely could fathom what might require such prompt action. Matters of the realm were always a concern, but never so much as this.

My impatience had nearly reached its height when at last some serving girl was sent to receive me. I made no conversation as we made our way deeper within the citadel's heart, having instead chosen to focus on the unnatural aspect of my surroundings. Keen inspection of the dark archways revealed long banners bearing the sigil of the royal house—a great dragon, fierce and determined, though it seemed age had given it a monstrous and gruesome look—and the candlelight did disservice to what ought have been a delicate golden hue, now something like a sickly yellow. Superstition might mark it an ill omen, but I had no need for such things and did well to shake the dread of it. The servant left me at a massive, pale red door, and told me that the King wished to have no company but myself, and so, being left alone, I passed through the threshold.

My immediate impression was of wonderment, as the throne room had been thrown into a disorderly mixture of study and bedchamber. All manner of strange and immense books lay atop a desk set near the wall, with many more sheets of parchment strewn about there, all covered in tiny, frenzied script, esoteric designs, and charts of family lineage. King Tristan, feverish with an excitement I could not differentiate as either fear or glee, sat amongst them, and might not have heard me had the creak of the door not resounded so clearly in his chambers. He stood and with little hesitation embraced me as if I were his late

father who had passed away under very strange and unsettling circumstances.

Though I had previously remarked of his youth, the man who now stood before me might have me fooled! A streak of gray tinged the golden-brown locks which fell about his face, a mark forced upon him no doubt by whatever manner of study he had taken himself to.

"Please, seat yourself, for I know you have come a long way," he said, gesturing to the chair nearest his study. I took it and, upon second glance, found that the massive tomes all concerned themselves with the nature of souls, and the manner of their transmigration. I could not contemplate why one so in their youth might take interest in lives to come, but in looking at the king's sickly and trembling visage, I might have begun to understand. Tristan had remained standing, and gathering his thoughts, remained silent. When he came back into focus, he took slow steps around the throne, set high in the center upon three concentric circles.

"No doubt you wonder why it is I've asked you here," he said, glancing at the pale door before continuing. "Several years of study have been put to matters of a certain interest to me, as they have been with all my predecessors. Countless records and texts attest to a truth which bestows in me a great sense of pride, and yet also sheer terror. I have discovered myself to be, doubtless, the very incarnation of the once great king—the first of my name to ascend the Scarlet Throne."

Forgive me if I at first took the nature of this revelation with some incredulity, as I myself had little tolerance for the supernatural, having met with more tangible concerns of the physical realm. But no articulation of words might sway him from this possibility that he considered nothing short of absolute truth. He could plainly see the doubt drawn

deeply on my features, and recalled to me for some time the apparently cyclical nature of the kingdom he had inherited, which seemed to mirror the seasons themselves. Once great, it had thrived on an abundance of fine silks, a reputation for the arts, and hearty crops, until some great illness had threatened the livelihood of our ruler, and with him, all the benefits of his rule. (It was frequently whispered that the onset of this malady had begun when the king took it upon himself to study arcane writings, not unlike those His Majesty, Tristan Valois III, had taken himself to now.)

I confessed, quite forwardly, that though the matter was undoubtedly remarkable, I could not feign imagining reasons for the urgency which had been expressed to me. Only then did he speak of the past king's private writings, which conceived a hideous plot by his royal court, hatched to rob him of his life and throne. Unstoppable quaking throttled Tristan's voice, as he went on to say the descendants of that very first court had loyally remained at the kingdom's side to this very day, and he now admitted suspicion—no, certainty—that his own court now conspired against him, and that I was the only shield that might ward death away. I had been only a moment away from giving him a comforting word, to assure him that this was not so, when he abruptly silenced me.

"Do you hear it, their murmuring of words in the hall beyond that door?" he said, immediately ceasing to pace, his body rigid, as if it might increase the acuteness of his senses. "They speak in hushed tones, and at this very moment continue to discuss my death! But the fools do not realize how their voices might carry in these wretched halls!"

True that there were a number of conversations, unless my ear might fool me, but my senses were in no way fit to hear precisely what was being said. I did what little I could to assure him that they would

bring him no harm, though words seldom ring with such conviction as to completely put a man's troubled mind at ease. I fancied that I might play him a song, to drown out those noises which might put him in a nervous and inconsolable state—but upon inspection of the intricately detailed lute which lay nearby, I found more than half of the delicate strings had snapped, and the rest were well worn and rusted.

It was as I thought of other means to distract his weary mind that I noticed the thinness of his form, and it became clear to me that the king had not eaten in a number of days, perhaps a week. I immediately inquired of him his lack of appetite, to which responded, "Eat? And have myself poisoned? A great king does not pass from a coward's fiendish designs—let them come at me, steel in hand." I cannot recall how much time passed before I had finally convinced him to eat a meal (which, I assured him, I had prepared myself in the keep's kitchens), but I knew the hour grew close to midnight.

Having been nourished after what must have been a long and exhausting experience, I urged him to sleep (which given the extent of his frailty, might not be far from that final rest), but he would hear nothing of it. He asked that I stay with him just a bit longer, and so I did. As time slowly crept forward, the king seemed to grow more restless, as if faced with a fate no amount of bargaining could stave off. He had resumed his nervous pacing, round and round the Scarlet Throne, and whatever satisfaction the meal had given him was draining away at alarming speed. "The hour," he said, with that familiar anxiousness of tone, "is drawing near, I know." I once again attempted to give him solace, but he would have none of it. The winter's winds were at last at their height, which through the castle windows, and cracks of the stone, seemed to

howl in an unearthly fashion. Without the warmth of a fire, the wind seemed to chill down to the very bone.

Tristan had ceased his pacing and faced the entrance—overcome with uncontrollable quaking, I might add—when at last a thunderous wind cast the heavy wooden doors open, and he (undoubtedly caused by his unreasonable nervousness) fell to the floor with quickened, gasping breaths. The room echoed with the powerful winds, and a sound like the billowing of robes, when his voice came out shrill. "You see them now, do you not? Their hideous, ghastly forms and claws like daggers! You see? The phantasmal robes of black silk! Hear their murderous laughter!"

True, I tell you, there was nothing in my power that could save the king from the grisly death that seized upon him that night. Pity he that believed his enemies all around him, but was blind to Death at his very threshold!



Something Sweet

Bridget Crase

The man who raped me sat on my parents' couch. They were more nervous than I was—they smiled too widely and laughed too often. They asked me to make coffee and something sweet for him. We never made coffee anymore. Before the war, we used to drink it every day for breakfast, Jovan (before he deserted us), Father, Mother and I. Now we were lucky to get enough coffee rations for Christmas.

"Something sweet, Marta."

I fell back into our little kitchen. Grime and dust turned paper walls to sludge grey. Weren't they once a vibrant yellow? Or maybe the softest blush of pink? No. They were blue. Sky blue. Mother would stand and make breakfast behind the counter while Jovan and I twirled around the kitchen floor, leaning against cool sky blue walls to catch our breath. Our cabinets were filled with brightly colored plates and glasses then. They'd been broken over the years, or more likely, pawned off to pay the hiking electric bills. It was all in vain; the government cut the lights after eight.

I made the coffee, brown and weak as it was. I bent to set the tray in front of him and was nearly overwhelmed by his scent. The heavy, sour stench of beer and sweat was gone. It'd been replaced by something brisk and cutting. He had shaved away the neck-scraping dark shadow that I remember. The same shadow that called my name as I walked home from a delivery—

My body froze and I forced my eyes shut. If I could just stay like that for just a moment the waves of anxiety would pass and I wouldn't falter. I could

feel the blood falling from my face and my stomach churning. My mind spun and twisted inside my head, trying to toss away the thoughts that came charging in.

I never told them.

I never told them it was the colonel. Even after the policeman dropped my body in front of my parents' door, claiming he saw a dark haired soldier leaving the scene, and they too saw the bruises and blood, I never told them. They guessed what happened. There had been another attack in the same area several days before and another down the street. But they never knew who it was.

I never told them it was the colonel. I never said who it was. And they never asked.

"Are you all right?" The colonel's voice snapped me back to life.

I nodded.

My mother never stopped smiling. "Did you find something sweet?"

I couldn't answer.

I dropped the tray on the worn table and sprinted back to the kitchen doorway. I pressed my face against the cool wood and let the feeling slowly returned to my body.

Father sat in his chair with his arms crossed. His steel blue eyes took in the mismatched group before him; his poor, over-smiling wife, his beaten daughter, and the monster responsible for it all.

"Colonel," my father finally said, "you did not come here to discuss flowers."

“No.” The man smiled and my knees gave. I had to grip the doorway again. I hated that self-satisfied smile. “We’re moving out of the city.”

Mother’s smile wavered. “All of you?”

“Most of us. The enemy,” he spit the word out like a curse, “has changed tactics. They’ve stopped attacking the coast and are moving inland.” He shrugged. “It’s only natural that they’ll try to bomb the city.”

Mother gripped the arm of the chair. “No.”

He nodded, as if discussing the weather or the stocks. “It’s classic military procedure. After we blitzed Barlous, we knew it was only a matter of time before they tried it on us. Though,” he added with a smile, “they’ll probably be wiping their asses the entire way.”

Father found his voice. “Will they evacuate the city?”

“At night, perhaps. Take the people into the tunnels. That’s why we’re moving to the south. It will be a slight disadvantage, of course, being so far away from the front lines. But when our leaders know best—”

“—the people know best.” Father stood. His wrinkled hands pressed against his lower back, forcing him to stay standing. He roamed towards the filth-streaked window. Between the dirty brick houses sat our little greenhouse, a little piece of crystalline brightness against the grey skies. If they blitzed the city, the greenhouse would be the first thing to go. The glass would shatter into a thousand pieces and crush the tulips and cornflowers. I followed his gaze to the church down the street with the stained glass windows. The ruby robes of the Virgin bathed the parishioners in a warm red light. Would she survive the bombs?

I knew his pain. This city was his. It was all he knew. He wasn’t from the south, like Mother. He only knew mortar and cement.

I only knew mortar and cement.

“I’m telling you this, Piav, because you have been a good servant to your country. While I don’t care for your flowers, you are good to your government and your leaders. They think highly of the little florist on Armer Street. And I think highly of your daughter.”

My stomach keeled forward. Mother twisted in her chair. “Marta?”

The man stared at me, ripping my breath away from my chest. His dark eyes, those damn black eyes, gripped mine. “Marta.”

“What do you want with her?” Father’s voice sounded far off.

“I’ve found a position for her in the country. Secretary work, some cleaning. Nothing fancy. But Marta doesn’t need fancy.”

Mother shook her head. “But why her?”

“Because we need her,” he snapped. And there was the look. The simmering stare and the flare of nostrils. “Because we have a job that needs to be filled. And when your country knows best—”

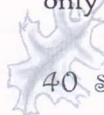
“No.” Father finally turned and looked at me. My father, my hero. “We need Marta for the store. We can’t afford to lose her.”

The colonel leaned back against the couch. He could say anything to Mother and me, but not to Father. The colonel sat for a moment, rubbing his fingers together and running his tongue across his teeth. A new challenge. “How is your son, Piav? How is Jovan?”

Father stiffened. “My son is no concern of mine.”

“Oh, he is definitely a concern of yours. He’s a black mark on your good record.” The colonel smirked. “He joined the enemy, right? Ran away in the middle of the night and deserted to the north?”

I tried to catch my father’s eye, but he gazed at the grimy floor. “I cannot control my son’s actions. He made his own decision.”



"But imagine how it would look if not only your son disobeyed our leaders, but you refused to let your daughter work for them?"

And there was the threat. Give me your daughter, or be killed.

Father's blue eyes hardened. "Let me think about it."

"No!"

"Marta!"

"No!" The heat of the greenhouse pressed down on me and I wiped sweat from forehead. With few flowers crossing the blockades, we'd been reduced to repotting a number of stubborn plants whose roots were so thick and intertwined that we had to take a machete to them.

I lifted the blade high before hiking it down at an arrogant fern. "Mother, I cannot be with that man. I hate him!" Another whack. "He's conceited." Whack. "Disgusting." Whack. "Foul!"

"Marta!" Mother pulled my arm back and pointed to the mess I created. I'd butchered the poor thing. Bits of fern leaves fell over the grated aisles. "I saw how you looked at him before. All lovesick and batting your eyes."

"That was before—" I cast my eyes down towards the gravel floor. "Please don't make me do this."

"I know what has happened." She grabbed a rag and wiped at the dirt on my face. I pushed her hands away. She had no idea what happened. "That is why I want you away from here. You are not safe here. You have a chance of..." She could not say happiness. "If you're with the colonel, you will be safe."

Now. I had to tell her now. She had to understand—I had to tell her. But before I could her eyes widened at a vision beyond my shoulders and her eyebrows crinkled. I turned. The colonel stood in the doorway.

I remember the first time I saw the colonel. He wasn't a young soldier. He wasn't like the men who came strolling in, boasting about the flowers and how little they knew. I didn't mind serving that kind; it was easy to get them to pay for more expensive flowers rather than little domestic weeds. And they always paid more. I often asked them who the flowers were for and they'd beam coyly. His mother, his sister, his platoon leader. Some of them were more honest—their wives, girlfriends, or some girl he'd met on the street. "But you wouldn't know anything about that," they'd say with a wink.

But the colonel was different. I thought him handsome; confident and mysterious. I tried to write off the feelings. Every girl knew the futility in getting involved with soldiers. It was just a foolish crush. Some fancy girls get into their heads after meeting a stranger who catches her eye. But no matter how much reason I fed myself, I couldn't ignore the feelings: the way my heart jerked when he entered the doorway, the way my breath caught, the way my face reddened.

He came in once a week. He never talked to Mother and me, just to Father. He liked Father. Father was a true countryman, the colonel said. Sometimes I would hear them talking while I worked in the greenhouse.

"It was a great city," the colonel would say, "before the foreigners came."

"They are not so bad." Father laughed. "They pay extra for flowers 'just like the ones back home.' Not a bad lot."

The colonel's eyes swept over the golden greenhouse. They fell squarely on Mother, who was washing her hands at a small metal sink. "Your wife's foreign, isn't she?"

It'd always been a point of contention between him and his fellow patriots. "Not so foreign. From a small village in the mountains."

"Foreign, then?"

"A good family. And Marta's a good girl too. I've raised her right, you know. A good patriot."

"I hope so."

"Did you hear me?"

I didn't. Mother shook her head and pushed me towards the back door. "Go upstairs and wash. Put on something nice. Go!"

I slammed the door to the green paradise shut and walked the short distance to the house. It sat empty and quiet. It wasn't often I got to be alone in the house. Mother was convinced bad things happened to women who were alone.

She had no idea.

I trudged up the rickety steps and listened as they creaked beneath my weight. Our house was a small one, comforting and cramping at the same time. You never had to worry about being out of ear's reach. My room was on the second story of our little shack. Father had put it on years ago. He wasn't a good carpenter, he said, but it would at least keep the wind out.

I pushed the door open and glanced around my little haven: four plain walls and a pitched ceiling. The wire wrought bed and thin mattress sat in a little alcove with a window so I could look out and see the bricks of the next building. When I was younger, I imagined I could see all around the city, see the trains rolling in or the ships rolling out.

The only thing of true value was a small letter opener that sat on the windowsill. Jovan gave it to me the night he left. "Take it," he ordered. "I'll write you letters from the north."

Jovan hadn't sent a letter in months.

One day, Father was out of the greenhouse. The colonel searched the area over. "Where is Piav?" His voice was cold and brittle.

"Out," I answered. His eyes narrowed.

"You must be Marta. I suppose you can take a simple order."

He looked at me and my body burned. I had never been stared at like the way he stared. He took every inch of you and measured your worth. He looked over everything—my face, my hair, my hips, my legs—until his eyes finally fell on the center of my chest. "Marta?"

My chest contracted. His eyes had a grip on my heart and lungs, tightening them until I couldn't breathe. I wanted him to touch me so badly, to reach out and place his lips on my skin. I needed to feel his weight against mine. It was an awful feeling, one that I couldn't get enough of. "Ja?"

His face snapped up and his dark eyes turned black. "Don't use that fucking word."

"What?"

He threw cash on the counter and left. As he left, I heard him muttering. "Fucking foreigner."

I could hear them talking before I came down the stairs. It was only when the final step moaned did they notice me. The colonel craned his neck. His eyes flashed with something, something that made my stomach tighten and my knees heavy.

"Marta." Mother stood and led me to her chair. The colonel was on my right now. Father sat in front of me but kept his eyes fixated on the ground.

"It's for your own safety," She gripped the back of the chair. "The city isn't safe anymore. Ja." The colonel bit back a slur.

Father's voice was faint and slow. "It will only be a short while. In a couple of months, after the blitz..." He could say nothing more.

Mother continued. "We'll send for you after awhile. When things calm down."

The colonel didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He had what he wanted.

I can still hear him. Grunting and snarling like a warthog.

I can still smell him. A horrible sour smell that burns through the nose and sears into the brain.

He shoved me against the wall. My head jerked and slammed against the bricks. His hands—thick, painful things—burned me. They weren't hands. They were clubs, pounding against me with every strike. Against my chest. Against my stomach. Crawling and tugging at my skirt.

His lust and anger grew with every passing second. He pulled my face towards his.

I couldn't sleep. It was the night before I would leave with the colonel for the country, and I couldn't sleep. Not that I could sleep any other night. Every dark minute was half spent in near-death exhaustion, while the other half was spent painfully listening to the silence, waiting for the shattering cry of air raid alarms or the drone of an airplane or the enemy's garble speech.

But I could do neither. I spent the night tossing painfully around the brittle bed. Every move sent slivers of pain through my body. My legs cramped continuously, as if at any moment they were going to spring out of bed and run down the streets.

I heard about the girls who went to the country. They were pretty girls. Rich girls. Smart girls. Girls

whose family could afford a country villa near the breath of a mountain. They came back crippled hags with lines of pain and agony on their faces. They didn't talk. They didn't smile.

My family couldn't afford to be near the breath of an ice block. I'd come back dead.

He had warned me to bring only one bag with my name and his written on the side. "Why your name?" He didn't answer. "Why one bag?"

"Why would anyone like you need two?"

So I stood at the train station gripping my one bag until I thought my fingers would disappear. The station buzzed. Hundreds of soldiers strolled past me on the platform. Some milled. Others kissed their girls goodbye. Some of the women wore my father's flowers.

I thought about pushing into the crowd and disappearing. I could hide among them, disappear into the bathroom, and wait until the train pulled away.

"Disgusting." A thick hand fell on my shoulders. The weight of it pushed down my whole body until I couldn't stand it. I yanked it off.

The colonel watched me, slightly amused. "Trying to run away?"

"I know this city better than you." My voice was stronger than my will. "I could disappear and you would never find me again." We both knew it was a lie.

He laughed and shook his head. "Try it."

He snatched my suitcase and pushed me onto the crowded train. People filled every breathable space; I couldn't force myself through them. I looked back to the colonel. He rolled his eyes at my helplessness and shouted a vulgar word. They split like the Red Sea and we moved through them. The colonel, my Moses.

We had our own train car. I wasn't surprised—I saw him pass coins into the porter's hand and whisper something in his ear.

We said nothing and listened to the jumble of voices outside our window. I clutched my suitcase and the colonel stared out the window, his palm underneath his chin. He looked bored. After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, the train screamed and lurched forward. The chugs came faster and faster until we were pulling out of the station, passing hundred of crying women waving their handkerchiefs.

"You will enjoy the country."

"Will I?"

"Yes." He still gazed out the window. "I'm not particularly fond of it myself, but you are simple enough. You'll enjoy it."

"You don't know me."

His body shook with a small laugh. "Marta, I've watched you long enough. You don't care for the people around you. You don't care for the boys who came into the shop. You were too simple to understand their flirting. The country will be much better. The boys there are more your type. Simpletons."

"Says the colonel whose sole job was buying flowers for his superiors?"

"You would rather stay in the city and die?" He sighed and rubbed his temples. For the moment his superior attitude was gone. He looked worn out, as tired of the war and the world as I was of him. "You have no idea what I'm doing for you."

"You don't have to do anything for me. I don't want anything from you. I want to be left alone."

He leaned forward again, elbows resting on his knees. He grasped my hands. Now they were not thick or cumbersome. They were hard and calloused, dry and gentle. "I'm giving you a second chance. In that city," he gestured towards the window, "you

have no life. You are being given a gift. I did not have to do this. Do not make me regret it."

I pulled my hands away. "I hate you. And I hope that whatever happens to you, you die a slow and painful death."

"I deserve that."

"You deserve hell."

"Then what would you have me do?" His voice held no bitterness or arrogance. He was tired. I saw the lines around his eyes and chin. I saw his true age now. His black eyes searched mine. "You are a Catholic," he said softly. "What would you have me do? How should I makeup for my sins?" No sarcasm, no arrogance. Just an honest question.

"I am Catholic. And if I was your Confessor, I would tell you to..." What? Genuflect till his knees bled? Repeat Hail Mary's till his tongue fell out? "I would tell you to pray."

A cheery woman pulled the car door open. "Anything for you, sir? Ma'am? Something sweet? Ja?"

The colonel shook his head. "Fucking foreigners."

He pulled my face towards his. I felt the pressure against my lips, the kiss I had desired for so long. Now it was strangling me. Now he was killing me.

I tore away my face even as he bit my lips and drew blood.

We fought. He moaned and grasped my neck. His grip tightened until my vision blurred.

He spun me around and pressed against me. His rough beard scraped my neck and left the skin raw. I gripped the wall. I heard the rustling of fabric loosening. My fingers dug into the lines of cement. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't—I couldn't feel anything. Just the rhythmic push of his body against mine, my body against the wall.

I heard screaming. Was it me? It was a woman down the street. She saw us—she had to see us. There was the distance whistle of the policeman.

His breath came in my ear. "If you fucking tell anyone, I will find Jovan. And I will kill him. And I will kill you."

The colonel pulled away. A bitter cold replaced his hellish warmth. I released my grip on the wall. I fell onto my knees and stared at the infinite black sky.

I waited until he was sleeping. We ate meat and cheese sandwiches with heavy sauce on either side of the dark bread. He finished it off with a heavy beer that he bought from the dining car. And now with a full stomach and the warmth of the sun beating in, he fell asleep. His head leaned against the window. He didn't look like a monster when he slept. He looked like a man. A tired soldier, perhaps even handsome. His pitch black hair and his tanned skin would make him attractive. His body was somewhat aged and heavier, but no one would deny the strength and power beneath his broad shoulders and legs.

Yes, he could have been quite handsome.

I opened the clasps of my suitcase. Beneath the few dresses and hidden amongst the pages of my Bible was the letter opener I sharpened last night.

I sat on the edge of the chair and held it in my hand. The blade glinted in the sunlight. From where I sat, I could see a faint vein pulsating beneath the skin of his neck.

I sat on the edge of the chair.

I told him to pray.



Chicken Versus Egg

Matthew Fridley

The three rockets skirted over the hilltop, tossing up scorched clumps of dirt and grass in their wake. Faster than most eyes could perceive, the three small cylinders flew purposely towards the large, dull-gray dome. The dome, beset with long metallic laser cannons reacted to the incoming missiles with the ease of experience, slowly twisting itself until its array of weapons were expertly placed. Time seemed to slow, the rockets buzzing past the last remnants of grass to burn the cratered, dirty remains of once beautiful ground. Then the massive battery of lasers fired. Blue, concentrated energy erupted from the well-worn tubes, moving as fast as light towards the intruding projectiles. The spears of light leapt into the ground, issuing loud bursts as clouds of dust and dirt launched into the air. The laser cannons fired, rotated a bit, moving barely a degree in any direction, fired again, and repeated the process, sending innumerable laser bolts at the intruding ordnance.

The rockets danced and spun around the incoming fire, a ballet of destruction. Slowly rotating, the foremost rocket blackened as laser fire skimmed and skirted around it, nearly touching its once smooth surface. As the missiles neared their target, the safe space decreased, and the destructive beams of light seemed to increase in fervor. Leaping with all intensity from its cylindrical home, a blazing hot laser punched the lead rocket's nose. The resulting explosion sent the other two projectiles off-course. The rear missile flung end-over-end into the air, exploding in the sky to rain down fire and debris on the already dead ground below. The last rocket spun and sputtered and injected

itself back-first into the ground, vibrating slowly to a dead stop, fully intact.

The dome was impossibly large and housed an uncounted amount of inhabitants, all sharing the same race and religious ideals, each a perfectly ovoid shape with a crisp white color. In the dome's command center, four of these creatures sat on large cushions in a row that was anything but straight, a board of buttons and blinking lights in front of each. In the back of the room, the large door — the only entrance to the command center — slid open, another Egg, wearing a flowing black cape, rolled into the room, then whipped into an upright position, his cape billowing out. "Reports!" It demanded in an oddly baritone voice.

"The Chickens' hourly missile trios continue, sir," a broad-shouldered Egg answered. He was wearing a large green hat, slightly lopsided. "We responded defensively, as usual. Might I suggest we launch a counter-offensive and end their fanaticism once and for all, Captain?"

"No," the caped oval at the door stated curtly. He rolled to the middle of the room and inspected the console in front of one of the quiet Eggs.

"Engineering assures me that the machine should be finished within the hour, sir," the Egg next to the captain spoke, her voice sounding almost like giggles, her curly blonde hair neatly reaching to her bottom. "At current levels, we'll have plenty of energy to use it upon completion."

"Good," the caped figure said softly, stoically. "Finally, an end to this pointless war." Uneasily, the

Egg in the hat shifted, his cap slowly lolling to the other side.

“Captain,” the next Egg said, continuing the demanded reports. “The strain on the laser systems has been great recently, but we believe they should hold out until after the machine’s use. Energy levels after that are mostly unpredictable.” She wore a thick, brown braid to the middle of her back, a few stray hairs dangling in front of her glistening white shell. Before the fourth Egg, a thin male with a black eye-patch setting on his smooth white shell, could speak, a loud chime issued from nowhere in particular, bouncing off the round walls acoustically. “Captain!” the beautiful blonde continued, “It’s from the Chickens, sir, a communication stream!”

“Open the channel,” he demanded needlessly. Any communiqué from the feathered peoples was always accepted by the Eggs. From each corner of the perfectly round room, thin beams of light streamed forth, creating a life-sized purple hologram of the Chicken Overlord Tyros. The leader of the chickens was over twice the size of Captain Eggers, but no one in the room, solid or otherwise, was intimidated. “Ah. Tyros,” the captain started.

“Chicken Overlord Tyros,” the holographic projection corrected.

“Tyros,” Eggers continued. They were accepted, but not greeted warmly. “It’s over; we’ve won.” He took a deep breath, only a moment’s pause, “Your crazy religious ideals have gotten you nowhere. Science prevails again.”

“What are you ranting about, man?” As Overlord Tyros spoke, his large holy symbol, a circle with feathers forming a triangle on it, which hung from his feathered neck, bounced to-and-fro, “The Church of the Feather is still a major power — you can’t make such outlandish statements without recourse, sir!”

“Your church is just a glorified cult. There’s no reason for Chickens to be the first to exist, science has shown us!” The good Captain wondered if the simpleton bird could read his expressions; it seemed hard for non-Eggs to make them out. He was glowing with pride and confidence, “Evolution is simple: Eggs had to be first.”

“What?!” rumbled the Chicken. If looks could kill, the hologram would be surrounded by scrambled enemies. With cheese, salsa, and a bit of parsley. “You know very well that the great Sky Chicken created Chickens, then as an afterthought added Eggs. You’re nothing but seconds on the plate of existence and you can’t handle it. I’ve better things to do with my time than argue with an uncultured hooligan. Explain yourselves or we’ll fire upon you yet another time.”

Eggers sighed through his shell. “Tyros, you fool, don’t you see? We’ve done it. Science has granted us the greatest gift: Time Travel! Regardless of who came first originally, we’re sending an agent back to the beginning of time. War’s over, you lost. Go pluck your feathers and fry, because we’re done with you foolish birds.”

“You can’t! You’ll upset the balance, ruin history. You’ll be the damnation of us all.” The Chicken squawked and flapped about, but was ignored by the five Eggs watching.

“Goodbye, Tyros. May your few remaining minutes be filled with fear and dread. We win.” The hologram winked out of existence.

“I didn’t want to interrupt you, sir,” The cute girl with the braid spoke up tentatively, “but the machine’s ready.”

“Egg-sellent,” the captain let out the pun, which got no laughter, before rolling out of the room. “As you were, men.”

Down in the control room, four Eggs in lab coats almost as white as they were did their final checks and tests on the time machine. The machine consisted of two large mechanisms, both of which looked like car engines, giant fans and pistons set throughout, attached to a small, Egg-sized platform. Other than the machine and scientists, the room had little else: tools, a workbench, and the test subject sitting comfortably on a large cushion in the corner, nearly shaking out of his shell. With a slight hiss, the room's only door slid open. Captain Eggers rolled in, and then slipped upright, his cape flowing out behind him.

"Ah, Captain Eggers, sir," the coat-wearing Egg with thick black glasses spoke up. "We were just about ready to use the machine. Come now, come over here and watch. You too, Arthur." He added to the nervous ovoid on the cushion. The two beckoned men rolled to the machine, then stood back up. "As you can see, the machine is functional and ready for the first test." Eggers was delighted with the happiness written all over the scientist's shell, bathing in his own. "Now if you'll just roll over here," he was looking at Arthur, not nearly as confident looking. Slowly the young Egg rolled onto the pad. "Excellent. Prepare yourself, Arthur; you're about to make history."

The machines to either side of the pad came to life suddenly. The large fans turned, creating a shocking wind in the room. The pistons pumped in-and-out of sight from the top of the large metal behemoths. After a few loud moments of awkwardness and stunned silence, the young Egg disappeared out of sight, leaving only a soft pop behind. The machine, entirely out of power, slowly ground to a halt, the Eggs all staring in solemn silence. A uniform cheer rose from the white ovals after a short moment. History had been made by their hands, witnessed by their eyes. They'd changed the past, and now they sat there, waiting for

everything around them to change, for their historic meddling to have its effect on the current time. They waited, and nothing happened.

Countless years ago, at the beginning of time, a small green sphere winked into existence. Instantly afterwards, a small white Egg, shaking violently with fear appeared on its surface. Peace. Arthur was washed with peace. The green grass blew and waved like an ocean underneath his rounded bottom. Everything smelled so fresh and new. Not a sound could be heard. And the sky, Arthur looked up into it, was like a giant white Chicken, staring down at him. Or, rather, in the sky was an impossibly large Chicken. Arthur was confused. Chickens should not have evolved yet, Eggs weren't even a thought yet, and they scientifically had to come first.

"Who are you?" The massive bird boomed, his voice shaking the very planet. Arthur wondered if he had scrambled in his shell.

"I- I'm Arthur," he answered, tentatively.

"What manner of thing are you?" The Chicken continued to inquire, confused. "Did I create you?"

"I'm an Egg," The Egg tried to explain. Arthur gulped and then continued. "I came from the future to prove that Eggs came first. Y'know, because of evolution."

"Evolution," the giant Chicken thought out loud. "Maybe I should create that next." A bolt of lightning issued from the eyes of the poultry and struck a blade of grass. The grass changed into a flower, then a pine tree. Arthur smelled the lovely pine for the first time in his life, for a second before it too changed, this time into a bear. The bear looked around quizzically before instantly being transformed into a fish. The fish flopped once, then in the air transformed into an Egg. The Egg crashed to the ground, cracking open

to reveal a Chicken. The Chicken, alive for only a moment morphed into a monkey. The process continued, seemingly random, as the two beings watched. After nearly a thousand "evolutions" the Chicken spoke up again. "Too fast, it's too fast." With that, the constantly changing beast ceased existing.

"Are you God?" Arthur asked.

"Yes, I am." The Chicken answered slowly, thoughtfully.

"How can God exist if no one believes in him?" Arthur thought it was a good question, but feared this possible god's wrath.

"He can't," God stated matter-of-factly. "I exist only because you believe in me."

"Actually, I don't believe in you," the small Egg corrected. And with that, God, too, ceased to exist.

Arthur was alone. The first Egg. Sure, God was first, and a Chicken, but since Arthur didn't believe in him, he never existed. Right?

Pushing the thought out of his mind, Arthur sighed and waited for the grass around him to evolve into flowers.



The Complete Literary Works of Theodore Saurus

Philip Case

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you a man whose unprecedented authorial prowess is the sole pride of his unremarkable generation: the peerlessly talented Mr. Theodore Saurus!”

Theo made his way to the podium and shook hands with James Joyce, the master of ceremonies for the evening. He gave the crowd an obligatory bow of appreciation and used his hands to bring the crescendo of applause to a graceful halt. As the crowd settled back into their lawn chairs and desks, Theo surveyed his surroundings. It seemed only fitting that such a prestigious event was being held in his backyard. Was this his backyard? It felt like it was, but the jungle gyms and desks were distinctive remnants of his memories from elementary school. In fact, his favorite teacher and prepubescent crush, Mrs. Barbury, was in the front row, leading the praise. Thirty years had passed and she didn’t look a day older.

“Thank you, Jim,” said Theo. “Tonight, it is my dear pleasure, nay, honor to humbly accept this award on behalf of my years of dedication and countless contributions to the literary arts; however, I want all of you to know that I do not accept it by my lonesome. I would be remiss if I did not voice my gratitude to all of you.” The audience clapped appreciatively, proud to be a part of the momentous occasion. A footnote in the greatest story ever told.

“Specifically you, Mrs. Barbury.” He stepped back, allowing her to stand and wave to the crowd. “Let it be

known here and forevermore that the adhesion of your rainbow-stickered praise transcended my adolescence and manifests itself daily in each and every one of my pages,” he said with a playful wink.

She blushed unabashedly. Theo noticed the jealous gaze of Ms. Damashek, the insufferable hag of a woman who had taught his creative writing course in high school. The lights dimmed. The backyard scenery suddenly revealed itself as a stage in an auditorium. The podium transformed into a pulpit.

“However, not all of you were steps on the ladder ascending to my literary legacy. Indeed, many of you were mere hurdles in my persistent pursuit of greatness.” Theo paused for dramatic effect and watched the audience turning about in their seats, nervously searching for their Judas. “Is it I?” they wondered aloud.

Theo pointed his finger at Ms. Damashek as she fell to her knees in shame. “You, Ms. Damashek, had the unfortunate gall to deem my handwriting illegible, my poetry irreverent, my prose masturbatory. Your absurd critique of a young Erik Halloway’s short story consisted of two words that opened a wound and left a scab on the entire English language: ‘too wordy.’” The crowd gasped at the thought of anyone having the nerve to reproach such an accomplished author.

“Oh God! It’s true! It’s true!” she wailed.

“I ask you: do you save your senseless scorn for your writing students or is there a chef weeping

somewhere because you complained that your steak was too meaty? Your sauce too saucy?"

"Have mercy! I *BEEP* you!"

"Alas, that very *BEEP* you so heartlessly graded *BEEP* embraced your foolish *BEEP* and adopted the pen name that graces this award."

Theo held the trophy triumphantly, straining his eyes to read the name, but instead found the relentless censor of his condemnation.

His alarm clock.

11:30 a.m.

Theodore forced a yawn, trying to trick his mind into retracing the dream logic that had allowed him such a brief, foolish happiness. It was gone, tucked back into the corners of his subconscious.

It was a typical Wednesday, which meant that it was indistinguishable from a typical Tuesday or any other day of the week for that matter. He would get up. Empty the remains of yesterday's coffee pot. Brew a fresh one. Consider showering, but probably decide against it. Visit Bird. Convince himself to write. Force himself to eat. Fall asleep. Rinse. Wash. Repeat.

Alas.

Theo dragged himself out of bed and into the routine. As always, he first made his way to the coffeemaker. There was a good two to three cups left in the pot from last night that could have been salvaged, but the last thing he needed was a stale start to another stale day. Besides, he found comfort in the percolation. The sound of progress. Like everything else, he saw it as a symbol for his artistic struggles. Whereas brilliance poured out of the Ginsbergs of the world like water from a capsized bucket, he had to remind himself that art could also drip out, colored and tainted by the grounds it had breached. Lately, his writing had felt like an exercise in futility, like he was trying to

empty the proverbial bucket drop by drop with a pair of chopsticks.

As the coffee brewed, he looked around his disheveled house. After having inherited it only three years ago from his late father, he had done little in the way of upkeep. In the bedroom, a twin-sized mattress jutted out like a drowning island, just barely rising above the sea of dirty dishes and laundry that spilled in clumps into the hallway. Down the hall, there was the bathroom. It was covered in facial hair orphaned from the last time he had shaved, which had to have been weeks ago by now. The kitchen was in similar disarray, cluttered with the majority of the dishes that had yet to make their way into his bedroom.

His living room was in shambles. Next to the dysfunctional television set was his makeshift desk, which he had fashioned from an unhinged closet door resting upon two couches. It was littered with rejection letters from literary magazines, which he kept around his computer for motivational purposes. Lately, they were doing little more than depressing him. He imagined the pretentious editors of Harper's congregating in the break room and mercilessly mocking his submissions.

The living room walls were barren, save for a few bad inside jokes that only he was privy to. A few months back, he had bought a box full of picture frames. In honor of all the "blanks" he had been drawing when it came to his writing, he framed white sheets of paper and hung them up around the house. At first, the idea was to stir up some motivation and remind himself that these sheets deserved more; however, after filling page after page with little more than drivel, he had decided that the greatest piece of art that could ever exist is the one that has yet to be attempted. Now, they were conspiring with the rejection letters to flaunt his failures and crush his fragile spirit.

He returned to the kitchen, poured himself a cup of the fresh coffee, and went outside through the backdoor. Much to the chagrin of his neighbors, the backyard of Theo's house resembled its innards. Weeds sprouted triumphantly past the unkempt lawn. A rusted lock protected the empty, dilapidated tool shed. There was a lone oak tree, which autumn was using as a canvas to paint its wild, indignant strokes. Theo had decorated the tree with empty bird cages hanging from the branches. Early last week, a robin flew into the lowest-hanging cage while Theo was watching from the kitchen window. He waited until the bird had returned a few times before he eventually baited the cage with food and locked him in.

He didn't think of him as a prisoner. No, Bird Vonnegut, Jr. was more of a kindred spirit than anything. In fact, he was more attached to the bird than he would like to admit. He had no children, although he had been presented with opportunities in the past. He was part of a generation of men raised by a generation of men who were raised by a war. He wanted nothing to do with fatherhood. It just seemed cruel to invest half of one's DNA into the genetic lottery and hope for the best. Evolution was still ironing out too many of its kinks on humanity. Bird Vonnegut, Jr., on the other hand, was the result of a billion years of experimentation. He approached the cage.

"Morning, Mr. Vonnegut," he said. "Sleep well last night? You look absolutely famished. Let's find you some food, eh?"

Theo whistled optimistically, as if he might stumble across some sort of translation that would bridge the communicative void between them while he used a spade to dig for bugs.

"No neighbors yet? I think they'll start flocking to those cages when they see how well-fed you are. Yes,

sir. Those things'll fill up like Floridian condos. You'll see. Here you go, buddy. Eat up. I've got myself a novel to finish."

His mind filled the conversational gap and made a sad attempt at small talk.

"Hm? Oh no, not Mind-Farmers. No, I think I've given up on science-fiction. The real world is strange enough, don't you think?" He was referring to his latest attempt at a novel: a story in which a brutish, stupid alien species hijacked a space vessel and crash-landed on Earth, being far too dumb to navigate the cosmos on their own. They enslaved the human race and forced them to solve all of their problems. These mind-farmers, as they came to be called, organized their slaves into think tanks and harvested their ideas regularly, threatening torture otherwise. Eventually, the humans convinced them that the thing they were most afraid of in the world was absolute freedom, which was not completely untrue. The story quickly degenerated into a cartoonish game of cat and mouse. A sensible man would have dismissed the idea upon its inception instead of wasting the three months he had dedicated before abandoning it.

Alas.

The bird flew from the floor of the cage to the swing, which, of course, meant "Good luck!"

"Thank you kindly, sir. I will return on the morrow to restock your belly with the finest earthworms this fertile garden has to offer. I bid thee farewell, Bird."

Theo returned to his living room. It was time to write. But write about what, exactly? He had just spent the last twenty minutes talking to a bird.

Theo had always envisioned himself as an idea-generator. He remembered when he had a screening for his avant-garde movie during one of his three semesters at college. He spent weeks convincing people that it would be a life-changing experience,

hanging up posters, and begging acquaintances to bring their friends. He waited for the audience to file in until the room was about half full. Then, with the aid of a repositioned security camera, the “movie” started. It was just a live stream of the audience, watching them watch themselves, some of them still shoveling popcorn into their mouths. Most only stayed for about ten minutes before realizing what was going on and demanding refunds. Theo defended himself by arguing that he was just trying to capture life. He wanted real people to be the stars of the film for once, even if that meant exposing the fact that the roles those particular people had chosen to play were just grown up children paying \$5 a person for two hours of story time. Like most of his projects, it was widely regarded as a failure.

Now, it seemed as if Theo was out of ideas, bereft of creativity. He stared at the blinking cursor on his computer for a good fifteen minutes. How could he transcribe life if he had no part in it? Weren't the best writers in history also some of the best liars? How could he attempt to clear the clutter of his mind and organize its chaos into a cohesive narrative when he couldn't even make his bed? God damn this fucking mess. Weren't geniuses clean? Or was that serial killers? No matter, he was going to clean today. He would shave, shower, and go to the corner store to pick up some cleaning supplies. It was settled. He was going to grant himself a new monotony.

Theo barely recognized the reflections in the tinted windows of the parked cars he passed. He hadn't been out of the house in almost a week, and his hands shook noticeably as he reached up to touch his smooth cheeks just to make sure they were his. He went over his shopping list in his head one more time.

Laundry detergent. Sponges. Dishwashing liquid. Disinfectant. Garbage bags. Pine Sol. Febreze. Bleach.

“Erik? Erik Halloway? Is that you?”

Theo turned around. It was Janet Gerlund, his mother's old friend and fellow church member.

“Hello, Mrs. Gerlund.”

“I barely recognized you!” She hugged him with as much strength as her eighty year-old frame could muster. Theo's eyes watered. It had been a year and a half since he had felt human contact.

“Hm? Oh, well, I did shave today.”

“Good...good. How have things been going? I haven't seen you in ages.”

“Yes, well I've been pretty busy.”

“Oh? Where are you working?”

Theo hated when conversations took these turns. There was not a time in his life when he had wanted to answer that question. To him, the professional world was an endless desert, littered with empty canteens.

“Nowhere. I'm actually working on a novel right now.”

“Is that so? I had no idea you were a writer. What's it about?”

“I'd rather not say.” It came out harsher than he had expected.

“Oh, alright. Well...ignorance is bliss, isn't it?”

Trying to ease her discomfort, Theo smiled at her clumsy misuse of the idiom and the thought that his level of genius was directly proportional to the depths of his despair. Realizing the implications of the smile, he covered it up with a cough.

“Well, I have really got to be going. It was nice seeing you, Mrs. Gerlund.”

“You too, dear. Will we be seeing you at church this Sunday?”

"I'm afraid not. Busy, busy, busy." He hadn't been to church since his mother's funeral six years ago. He had no intentions of going back.

He entered the corner store and found the items on his list, checking them off with an embarrassing sense of accomplishment.

By the time he had gotten back to his house, Theo had decided his order of operations for the daunting task of cleaning. He started with the bedroom, loading all of the laundry into the washer so he could accomplish two things at once. Then he transported the dishes from the bedroom into the kitchen and began washing them. After he was done, he put the clothes in the dryer, got the disinfectant, and headed to the bathroom.

By the time he had finished scrubbing the bathroom and kitchen, he had accumulated two garbage bags worth of filth. He took them to the curb and then returned to the house to fold his freshly dried laundry. He wiped the wooden surfaces clean with the Pine Sol and sprayed the furniture with Febreze. In a matter of hours, he had transformed his depressing hermit hole into a livable space.

Finally, he walked over to the computer and read over some of his past work. He organized his printed works into neat piles divided by genre: novels, poems, and children's books. He placed his favorites at the top: the novel about the clown college valedictorian, the poem about his admiration for the moth who would "incinerate its precious wings, for the fleeting warmth such deaths may bring" and *The Misadventures of Hugh the Manatee*, respectively. He piled the stacks neatly on his desk and scanned the house one last time. Clean, but empty. Livable, but pointless. Nothing had really changed. He had expected as much.

Theo walked outside and stood solemnly next to the cage.

"Look, Bird Vonnegut, Jr., let's keep this short. You're free. Go and die as you please just like the rest of them."

He unlocked the cage and then, without looking back, returned to the house. When he got back to his desk, he heard a thump from the kitchen window.

It was Bird Vonnegut, Jr. In a frenzy of freedom, he had flown headfirst into the window and broken his tiny bird neck.

Theo grabbed the bottle of bleach from the counter and walked back to the desk, contemplating what to type.

Here lies Theodore Saurus: lonely, childless, abandoned, tired, lost, depressed, isolated, tortured, hungry, disheveled, bereft, decrepit, empty, helpless, weak, tormented, deserted, forlorn, alone, neglected, incomplete, ashamed, dejected, somber, broken, poor, forsaken, damned, foolish, pathetic, old, unhappy, aimless, delusional, pretentious, pitiful, unreliable, disgraced, bored, unfortunate, unrepentant, meaningless, inconsequential, thirsty, horny, despicable, enigmatic, disgusting, unprofitable, illogical, drunken, useless, loathsome, and now, utterly birdless.

Theo stopped typing and read it aloud to himself, knowing his voice would appropriately be the last he would ever hear.

Ctrl + A.

Delete.

Alas.

*Here lies Erik Holloway:
too fucking wordy, indeed.*

Ctrl + P.

"Bird Vonnegut, Jr., what a pleasant surprise! Have you met Mrs. Barbury?"



Laundry Day

Elizabeth Pecora

How much dirty laundry could one person have? Had I not been buried beneath a mound of old, fogey-esque sweaters, splotted dreadful colors and patterns like a toddler's finger painting, I may have been able to answer my own question with a frustrated scream. In my arms was a heap of my boss's clothing piled to my nostrils, torturing me with the scent of stale cologne. Why he believed that overpriced liquid made him appealing, I have no idea. All it did was mix with the stench of his aged, wrinkled skin. It was odd how old people smelled, as though their flesh had begun rotting prematurely—a warning, the same milk gives as it spoils.

After reaching the dusty, battered washing machine in the shabby basement of my apartment building—God forbid he let me use the flashy equipment he kept cradled in his mansion—I plopped his laundry onto the floor, taking a moment to catch my breath and wipe the beads of sweat that dripped down my forehead, soaking the strands of hair that had escaped my messy ponytail. When I applied to be the assistant for an established editor of a major publishing company, I thought I was penetrating the industry, that I was about to release my ideas into the canal of creativity, allowing them to finally swim after being trapped in my head since adolescence. Three years later, there I was, doing chores for an infantile slimeball. I certainly did not bust my ass in college, sacrificing nights of drunken shenanigans for studying, only to become a maid; apparently, “maid” is synonymous with “personal assistant,” my official title. No woman should ever have to touch a man's underwear unless

they are bound by marriage or she pushed him out of her vagina within the last twelve years.

The first sweater I placed into the round, gaping mouth of the machine was a faded cream hue with an argyle pattern scribbled across it. Jesus, out of the thousands of publications he has read, did he never have time to pick up a fashion magazine? Next item to be thrown to the beast was a pair of hunter green corduroy pants. It was summer. Who the hell wore corduroy pants in summer? Sighing, I slipped my hands into the pockets to check for forgotten junk. A couple months ago, he failed to remove a piece of gum, some change, and a paperclip from his pants before calling me to pick up his laundry. When the washer broke, I not only had to pay for it because my boss insisted it was due to my own carelessness, but everyone else in the building shot me glares as they passed me in the hallway (probably on their way to the laundromat) for two weeks. Despite his wealth, my boss was a fucking cheapskate.

The edge of a scrap of paper crossed the delicate pad of my finger, creating a stinging cut. “Fuck,” I hissed, yanking it out of the pocket. It appeared to be a business card folded crisply in half. Nosily, I opened the rectangular culprit, hoping it would lead to an anecdote I could tell my coworkers to earn a few laughs and popularity points. On the business card was a small picture of a nude women with a snake wrapped around her shiny, copper frame, failing to cover her obviously fake breasts, photoshopped abdomen, and tuft of curly pubic hair. Beside her, above the address, the text read “The Amazon.”

“Where the dancers are truly exotic,” I read the tag line aloud, my grin stretching with every syllable. Needless to say, the picture on the card certainly was not his hag of a wife. Screw climbing the corporate ladder—this trashy card was my ticket to the extortion elevator. I never realized dirty laundry could be such a beautiful thing.



Paintbrushes

Bonnie Croyl

He reached toward his sister, his hand stopped by the safety glass partition. The wires in the glass seemed to pin her against the stark white bed.

"When was the last time you saw or spoke with your sister?" the policeman asked.

"Saw? Christmas, maybe." God, it was already October. "We've talked two or three times since. Probably a month ago."

"Witnesses said he tossed her out the front door. She mention any problems in the home?"

"No. Elinor's very...we don't talk about..." He gestured vaguely. What had they talked about? Plans for his two-year sobriety date. His job. Her job. What else? Nothing else.

"She never said...no, no mention of problems." If he thought of anything, he was to contact them. He stuck the officer's card in his pocket and leaned against the glass. Tubes climbed up her arms. A concussion, broken ribs. She would wake soon. He pushed his hand against the cold glass, studying the back of his hand. Grease was embedded in his pores. She used to tease him about that. Said his mechanic work had permanently marked him, grease was better than tattoo ink for identification purposes.

"Sir? You can wait with her while we get her a room."

He shook his head, avoided the nurse's eyes, and walked away.

"You the brother? Where have you been? How's Elinor?" An old woman had poked her head out of

a door. A new neighbor? She hadn't lived there two years ago when he had been sleeping on Elinor's couch. He nodded at the woman and murmured something.

"What? Speak up." The woman stepped out of her apartment and tottered toward him. She was about five feet tall; with the short, slightly blue-tinted hair his grandmother had called a "do." She had watery eyes and enough wrinkles to keep a plastic surgeon in collagen heaven.

"I'm Bea," she said, cocking her head. "What you doing here? Getting Elinor some of her things? Good. About time you showed your face here. That shithead coming back? If I ever see him again, I'll rip out his eyeballs." Bea reached out and grabbed the air. "The way he treated her." Bea shook her head then pointed at Elinor's apartment door. "I told her to get rid of him; the shithead never treated her right. You gonna make sure he stays away, aren't you?"

He stared at her.

"Well, you going in? You got a key, right? Go on." She flapped her hands at him. "Go on."

He unlocked and opened the door but did not enter. Everything in the apartment was white. When he'd lived there, the apartment had been cluttered. Books and knickknacks on every horizontal surface, student artwork on the vertical ones, her easel in a corner. Now the apartment looked like an operating room. There were white slipcovers on the couch and chairs. The walls were unadorned. Even the mahogany side table she'd inherited from their grandmother had been

painted white. The clutter was gone. The easel was gone.

"Where is everything?" He asked Bea as she crept around him toward the kitchen.

"Storage. The shithead likes things this way. Idiot. Easel's in my apartment. He didn't like that either. Doc says, since she started painting in my apartment, my blood pressure's gone down ten points. Guess it's good for me, better than broccoli anyway. Come here, boy."

He edged into the white, spotless, kitchen. The coffeemaker was gone. How could Elinor not have coffee? Bea was looking in the refrigerator.

"Restock this before she comes back. You don't want her to come home and starve to death now, do you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, no, ma'am."

She studied him for a moment. He fidgeted.

"Open that." She pointed at a cabinet door. He opened it, revealing white dishes. Her student-created dishes and his mug, a lopsided, garish orange affair, were missing. For some reason, his coffee never tasted quite as good unless it was in that mug.

Bea pointed to a canister on the top shelf. When he handed it to her, she nodded her thanks, and made her way out of the room. He searched the rest of the cabinets, looking for his mug.

It wasn't there. It was gone.

Bea led him out of the apartment and told him to wait in the hallway. She had something for him, she said.

He paced the hallway. He was so damn thirsty.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

For some reason, he couldn't find a place for his hands. They traveled from his front pockets to his back pockets, crossed under his armpits and back again. He squeezed them into fists and stretched them wide. Jazz hands, he remembered. Elinor had called them jazz hands when he stretched them out as far as they would go. It was a dance term. As kids, she had been the one to do all that artsy stuff. Dance, music, all of it. No matter how much he had grumbled as a kid, he'd always loved going to her recitals and art shows. She glowed.

"Here, boy." Bea handed him the canister. It was now filled with a bouquet of artists' paintbrushes. Bits of red and yellow paint were embedded in the bristles. He could smell paint thinner.

"There's a key in there." She pointed to the canister, her finger trembling slightly. "It's for the storage room downstairs. Take her the brushes; she'll like them better than flowers." She studied him again, her liquid eyes searching.

"Do better. Act like a brother," she said, nodding, and then tottered away.

A meeting. He needed a meeting. Now. He called his sponsor. Gripped the steering wheel as he drove.

God, grant me the serenity to...the serenity to...

It took him twenty minutes to get there. He passed two liquor stores, three bars, and a grocery store that sold alcohol. He didn't stop. The thirst got worse.

God, grant me...

Elinor wouldn't want me to, he told himself. She fought so hard for him. She had let him sleep on her couch when he got evicted. Had taken him to the hospital when he'd tried to detox on his own and had seizures. Paid for his rehab. Drove him to meetings until his license was reinstated. She'd believed he could do it. She'd saved his life.



God, grant me...

He turned into the parking lot of a church. His sponsor was already there. He pried his hands off the steering wheel. Grabbed the paintbrushes. Scrambled out of the truck. Silently, his sponsor walked him into the meeting.

He had made it. He was safe.

God, grant me...

He clutched the brushes as he prayed. Fought to clear his thoughts. Listen, he told himself. Focus.

God, grant me...

After the meeting, his sponsor forced him to eat. Reminded him to take care of himself. For Elinor, if not for himself. He nodded, clutching the paintbrushes tighter.

"Why did I do it?" he asked his sponsor.

"Do what?"

"Introduce her to him?"

A year ago, he had invited Elinor to an open meeting. As it was his sobriety date, he had been asked to speak. He'd wanted her there, so she had brought him a boutonniere made of tissue paper. She'd cried. He'd repaid her by introducing her to Jeff. The shithead.

"I knew. I knew...."

"Knew what?"

"His history. His ex-wife had an order of protection. I believed him when he said that was just a part of his drinking. I liked him." He took a sip of coffee. It tasted like cigarettes. "I believed him."

"So did I. We all did."

"Yeah, but I," He pushed the coffee away. "I introduced my sister to him. I encouraged her to date him."

"You couldn't have known this would happen."

"I should've guessed. I should've stopped it. I should've done something."

"Shoulda, coulda. You were doing what you were supposed to do. Staying sober, making amends, rebuilding your life."

"At the expense of hers. She dropped everything when I needed her. I dropped her...." he pushed away from the table. He thought about all the times he had reminded himself to call her, the times he meant to visit, but never had. Something always came up, a meeting, work. He shook his head. "I don't know why. I just...dropped her."

He returned to Elinor's apartment building the next day, paintbrushes in hand, and let himself into her storage space. He searched through the boxes, pulling out books, looking for his mug.

It took three boxes to find the student artwork. A box of colorful, youthful masterpieces: A construction paper Mona Lisa, a crayon Picasso. He found some of Elinor's artwork in the fifth box, each signed and dated. Landscapes and still lifes, her specialty. He went through them slowly, noting dates and reorganizing them in chronological order.

There weren't any pieces from when he lived with her. Had she painted then? He had large holes where memories should be. No, she had been painting. He remembered the easel. Remembered how the smell had made him nauseated. Why wouldn't she have pieces from then?

It took him three hours to go through all the boxes. None of her student-created dishes were there. He made himself go through everything again. Nothing. A third time. Still nothing.

"Come in," Bea said, glancing at the paintbrushes in his hand. There it was. Surrounded by plastic covered furniture and pinpointed in a shaft of afternoon

sunlight, the easel sat covered in cloth. Elinor's paints were strewn across a nearby table.

He went to the easel, reached for the cloth, stopped, then turned. They had played a game whenever Elinor showed him a new painting. He'd pretend to be afraid to see it and would try to guess the subject, each guess more and more absurd until she giggled and unveiled it herself. He opened his mouth, ready to guess, and then remembered that Elinor was still at the hospital. Bea watched as he closed his mouth, blinked and pulled off the cloth.

It was a portrait of a young boy playing a solitary game of baseball. The boy was crossing home plate, his hands raised in triumph, tears running down his face. He glowed.

"It's you, isn't it." It wasn't a question.

"She never paints people." He dropped the cloth and stepped closer.

"Did this time, said she needed to be reminded of something."

He stared at the painting. He remembered that day; it was the day he had decided that he was too old to pretend anymore, too old to ignore reality. It was also the day that Elinor had decided to take up painting. She had said that she would pretend for both of them.

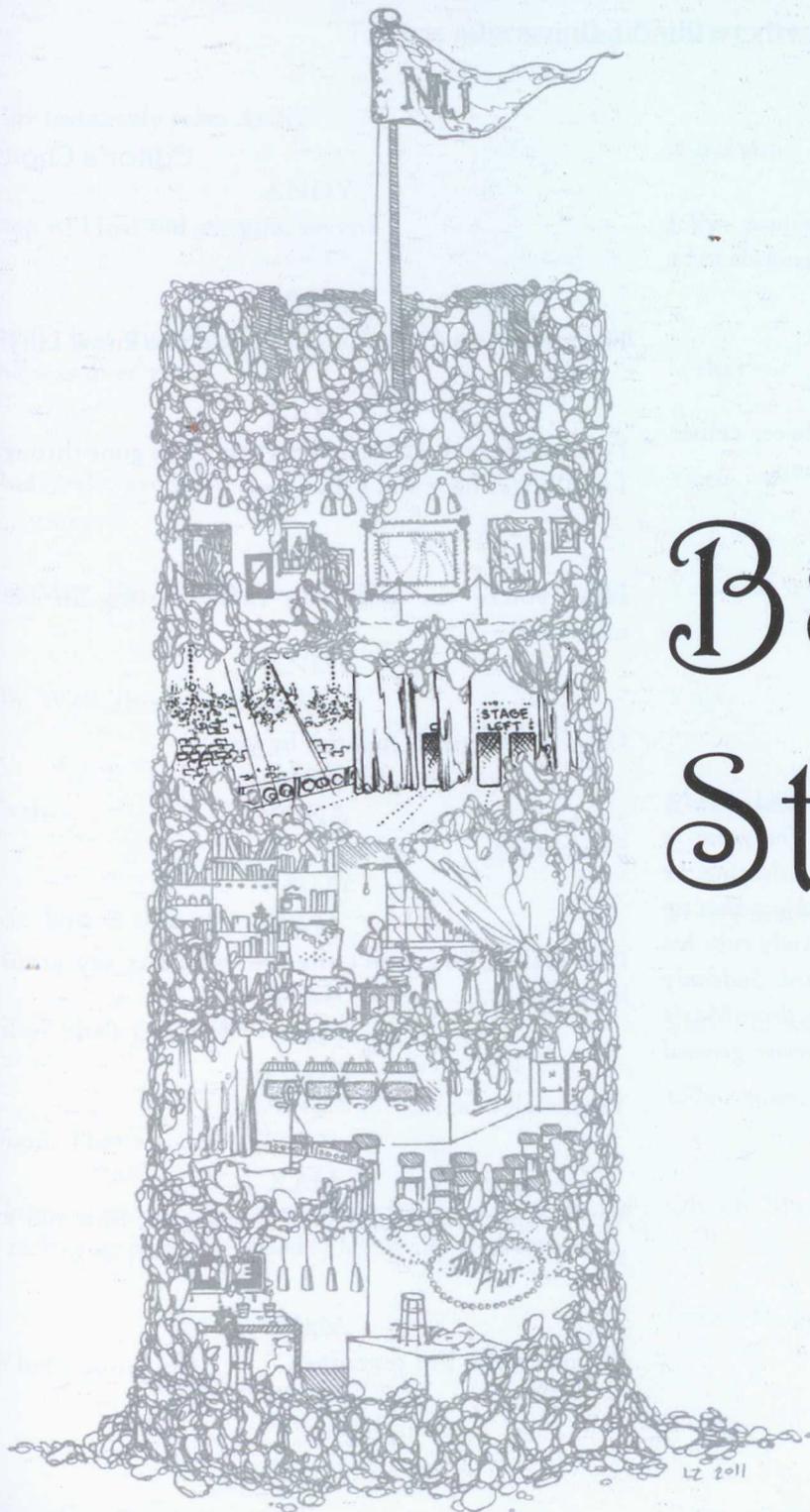
Bea made coffee and told him about his sister. How she had let Jeff into her life. How she had been happy, then sad, then miserable. How Jeff had destroyed some of her artwork and student-created dishes. How she had not wanted to let him know. She hadn't wanted to do anything to harm his sobriety.

"Even when that shithead told her not to, she always made time for me," Bea chuckled. "She'd take me to the doctor, the store, we'd have coffee. Always had to have it in a special mug, though." Bea stood, joints cracking, and went to a cabinet.

"This mug," she said and pulled out a lopsided, garish orange affair.

He tiptoed into Elinor's room. Freed from the tubes, she slept with one arm flung across the white covers, a corner of blue sheet clutched in her hand.

He took a seat next to her bed, turned off his cell phone, and arranged her paintbrushes in his mug. He would wait for her to wake up, as long as it took. He wanted to do better. He wanted to see her glow.



Back Stage

Heart Ache

Editor's Choice

Ariel Begley

Cast of Characters:

Andy: Seventeen.

Max: Twenty-four.

Lilly: (Voice Over) Currently twenty-three, cellist. However, when she is seen, she is seventeen.

Setting:

A room inside Lilly's heart.

Time:

Beginning to fall in love again.

The sound of a heart beat is heard, slow and steady, accompanied by flashing of a warm light. The room is sparsely furnished and is very bare. Andy is sleeping. A woman's laughter is heard deafeningly loud, this wakes up Andy and a cold bright light fills the space. Andy rubs his arms against the cold as another giggle is heard. Suddenly Max is flung into the room, he lands hard on the floor. Max's entrance softens the lights into a slightly warmer general wash.

MAX

Whoa. So this is it?

ANDY

Who the hell are you? Get out!

MAX

Holy shit. You must be Andy.

ANDY

How do you- who are you. How do you know Lilly?

MAX

I can't believe this. After everything I've gone through, I finally get here and I find you.

ANDY

Hey, you're the one who came busting in here, uninvited —

MAX

Oh, I was invited. Just not by you.

ANDY

Same thing.

MAX

Not really. You aren't the one who has say around here. She is.

ANDY

Yeah well ... so?!

MAX

Wow. You're younger than I expected, how old are you kid?

ANDY

I'm not a kid, I'm seventeen.

Max tentatively pokes Andy.

ANDY

Stop it! How old are you, seven?

MAX

Sorry, just thought I'd check. I don't get it, she said she was over you.

ANDY

Dude, who are you?

MAX

I'm Max. I'm - Lilly's boyfriend.

ANDY

Oh. Well, this is awkward.

MAX

Yeah.

ANDY

So... how is she?

MAX

Lilly? She's good. She's happy.

ANDY

Good. That's good.

The sound of Lilly's heart rate comes back into the scene and is picking up pace. The sound of her breath is also heard.

MAX

What's going on?

ANDY

Aww shit.

Lilly's panting turns into moaning and a creaking sound of a bed shaking is heard.

MAX

Is that —

ANDY

Yup.

MAX

You hear it when we —

ANDY

Yup.

MAX

Every time?

ANDY

Pretty much.

MAX

Shit. I'm sorry. I mean, that's embarrassing.

Lilly's moaning gets more pronounced.

LILLY (VO)

Oh, oh, Max. Max! Harder, harder!

MAX

I must be doing a good job.

ANDY

Today.

MAX

What?

LILLY(VO)

Oh, OH! There, there! Oh Andy! Ohhhh!

Andy and Max freeze. A muffled man's voice is heard and the sex sounds stop.

LILLY(VO)

Shit. Max, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it —

Her voice fades out as the argument carries Lilly away from the center of her heart.

ANDY

Well that was new.

MAX

She just said your name? With me? You son of a bitch.

ANDY

Hey, it wasn't me! I was just standing here.

MAX

Get out of Lilly's head man. Leave us alone.

ANDY

I'm not doing anything.

MAX

GET OUT!

ANDY

You have a temper problem. You should get that looked at.

MAX

Shut up!

ANDY

It's not my fault man. Maybe if you were better in bed, she wouldn't be thinking about me.

Max launches himself at Andy. The boys wrestle. Andy is well out matched by Max, but Andy's ferocity makes up the difference to some degree. The following text is interspersed throughout their fight.

MAX

You're always in my way you piece of shit! You screw everything up!

ANDY

You do that yourself.

MAX

Lilly would be perfectly happy if you weren't stuck in her head all the time. Why don't you just leave us alone!

ANDY

Because I don't like you.

MAX

You don't even know me.

ANDY

I know Lilly doesn't trust you. That's enough for me.

MAX

Lilly trusts me fine — she's just scarred from all the shit you put her through.

ANDY

Don't lay your problems on me, pal. Take credit where credit is due. She doesn't trust you because of Carol.
Max breaks away from Andy.

MAX

How do you know about Carol?

ANDY

Anything that affects Lilly strongly I hear. You dumped her to go back to Carol. You used her as your rebound girl and then hung her out to dry.

MAX

She wasn't a rebound.

ANDY

Really? Because it sure looks like she was to me, and that's how she feels.

MAX

That was a long time ago. It's a non-issue now. I mean, Jesus, she was trying to get back with you at the same time!

ANDY

What?

MAX

Oh, so mister know-it-all doesn't know everything.

ANDY

She never came back to me — if she had I would be with her. I would do anything to be back with her.

MAX

Yeah, but you're still seventeen. The Andy out there is twenty three and all grown up. You're even engaged.

ANDY

I'm WHAT? To who?

MAX

Oh, your rebound girl.

ANDY

Shut up.

MAX

See, there's more to this than you know.

ANDY

I'm twenty-three out there? Lilly's twenty-three? (to the incorporeal Lilly) I've been here for five years? Why?

MAX

Why are you still here?

No response.

MAX

Where do you think she is now, I mean how long have we been here?

ANDY

In real-world time?

MAX

Yeah.

ANDY

I don't know. Time isn't really measurable in here. I mean, we're in her heart so we experience time like her heart does, in moments. So, one second can last days or days can last seconds. It just depends.

MAX

Oh. Hey! Do you smell that?

ANDY

What?

MAX

Chocolate. Like ...

ANDY

Brownies! Ahh, I love it when she makes brownies.

MAX

Oh, they're so gooey and delicious. And she wears that cute little apron thing.

ANDY

And she'd add things, like chocolate chips, or cream cheese.

MAX

Oh, the cream cheese brownies! They're so good.

ANDY

She still puts the cream cheese in it? Ah, good. Man, they smell fresh. She must have just taken them out of the oven.

MAX

We can't eat them in here, can we?

ANDY

Nope.

MAX

That sucks.

ANDY

Yup. Smells like apology brownies to me. I bet you get to eat them out there. It's more than I get. Look, I'm sorry I brought all that shit up. You're right, I don't really know what you guys are like. And if it's really been five years, then the last few must have been really good because the time in here flew by.

The sound of a cello is heard playing Bach's "Cello Suite No.4 - Sarabande."

The sound is soft at first but grows.

MAX

What's happening?

ANDY

She's practicing — or performing, could be either one. Every time she plays her cello, it always hits her right here and we get to hear it.

They listen. The music fills the space and continues under the following text. The music infects Max and Andy and their discussion is slow as both characters are caught in the music. The soft sound of her heart beat can be heard underneath the music, it is in time.

MAX

I love it when she plays. The first time I saw her, I was taking an intro to music class, one of those stupid Gen. Eds I didn't want to take, and we had to go to a concert. I went to her solo recital. It captured me.

I went to every one of her shows after that. She's so beautiful when she plays.

ANDY

You really love her don't you.

MAX

I do.

ANDY

And she loves you?

MAX

Yeah.

ANDY

You treat her right?

MAX

Bouquets and boxes of chocolate every day.

The music suddenly stops as though she had been interrupted. Unintelligible muffled voices are heard.

ANDY

Look, if I could just pack up and get out of your way, I would. But that's not how it works, I don't have the control, she does.

MAX

I thought that might be the case. Hey, it was worth a try.

Lilly's heart rate begins to accelerate and the beats get louder. The voices are gradually getting more focused. Max's voice is heard from the "outside" as Lilly's heart beats gets louder and louder.

MAX

Oh shit, not again.

ANDY

No, wait. This is different.

MAX(VO)

Lilly, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

MAX

What was that?

ANDY

Holy shit, I think you're proposing.

MAX

WHAT?

The voices abruptly are loud and clear. Lilly's heart rate is picking up speed.

MAX (VO)

Lilly, will you marry me?

Pause. Lilly's heart beat is pounding very fast and very loud.

LILLY (VO)

I — I...

Suddenly everything freezes. The heart beat stops, Max is frozen and a spotlight comes up on Andy as everything else goes dim.

ANDY

(to Lilly) Do it. If he makes you happy, go. Let me go. Please Lilly, just let me go.

Lilly enters the stage slowly, coming up behind Andy. She's 17 again, and beautiful — the Lilly Andy has always loved. She comes to Andy and taps his shoulder. He turns to her in awe at her presence.

ANDY

Lilly — Oh my god. It's been so long.

Lilly shushes him by putting her finger to his lips. She takes his hand and in it she sets a brownie. She leans up and kisses him, sweetly. He kisses her back. She slowly exits the room. As soon as she's gone the stillness breaks, the lights return to the general wash and the heart beat comes back in full force.

LILLY (VO)

Yes.

The heart beats slow and fade as sounds of cracking ice replace it. Any coldness left in the lighting dissipates to a very warm wash. Andy collapses to the ground.

MAX

Holy shit! Dude, did you hear that! I'm getting married! Ha ha! Andy! Andy? Shit, Andy you okay?

ANDY

Yeah. I mean, no. I think she's killing me, but you know, it's all good.

MAX

Shit, Andy.

ANDY

No, it's okay. I've been here too long anyway — I wonder where I'll go...Take care of her — kay?

MAX

Hey, where'd you get a brownie?

ANDY

(Smiling) Oh yeah.

Andy eats the brownie piece contentedly. He smiles and collapses



A Last Stand

David Jeffrey Vasicsek

Editor's Choice

Characters:

Dan: Male, 35: An unemployed white collar worker.

Joe: Male, 40: An unemployed blue collar worker.

Setting:

The front lawns of two neighbors, near the sidewalk.

Time:

Mid-afternoon.

A table is set on each side of the stage. Both tables have cups scattered across their tops and signs taped to the front of them that read "\$1 Lemonade." Joe is leaning against the stage left table while Dan is crouching in front of the stage right table with a black marker as he puts the finishing touches on his sign.

DAN

I want to ask you something.

Joe looks over for a beat and turns back.

DAN

I said, "I want to ask you a question."

Joe looks over and turns back again.

DAN

(Walking to Joe) Excuse me. I want to ask—

JOE

Then ask it already.

DAN

You don't like me very much, do you?

JOE

Nope.

DAN

I don't see why not. We are neighbors after all. Not to be too preachy, but it's a damn shame that this country has lost its good old fashioned neighborly ways. You probably don't even know my name.

Dan begins to walk back to his table.

JOE

Your name is Dan Harris. You've lived at 334 Pine Street for the last four years with your wife Clara and your two small kids; June and Bradley.

DAN

How do you know all that?

JOE

I'm your God-damn mailman.

DAN

What? No, that's not possi- Oh my god. You are our mailman. *(Beat)* Have you always been our mailman?

JOE

Up until a couple of weeks ago.

Joe looks past Dan to offstage right. A young woman walking her dog crosses just in front of the stage. She is unseen by the audience.

JOE

(Pushing Dan out of the way) Hello ma'am. Good afternoon.

Dan picks up one of the lemonade cups off of his table and with an awkward smile extends the cup out in front of him and continuously nods his head at her.

JOE

(Following her across the stage) Lovely day today, isn't it? Oh! What a cute dog you have! What breed is that? Would you by chance like any lemona-?

She is gone.

JOE

Bitch.

Dan relaxes and returns the cup to his table.

JOE

What kind of a person puts clothes on a dog anyway? It's a dog for Christ's sake. It comes with its own clothes.

DAN

I thought the hat was a nice touch.

JOE

The things people spend their money on these days.

DAN

She would rather accessorize her dog than buy lemonade from you. Either you've got crap lemonade or you are the worst salesman that I have ever seen.

JOE

You didn't even try. You just stood their like a defective Ken doll. First rule in the lemonade biz is "you can't sell it, unless you offer it."

DAN

Did you just say "lemonade biz"? How long have you been doing this?

JOE

Lemonade? About a week.

DAN

Were you selling something different before?

JOE

I started out with brownies. I got a few nibbles here and there, but they weren't cost effective. All this takes is water and powder.

DAN

You don't use real lemons?

JOE

Are you crazy? I'd go belly up before school even gets out.

DAN

What happens when school gets out?

JOE

Shit turns into Wall Street around here. Dozens of thirsty, little, bug-eyed kids with pockets full of loose change and- You have no idea what you're doing here, do you?

DAN

It's just lemonade.

JOE

Just lemonade? Tell that to little Susie McAllister down the block.

DAN

What happened to little Susie?

JOE

Who do you think was the number one seller before I started?

DAN

What did you do to her?

JOE

Nothing really. I may have spread a rumor around the PTA that she was selling lemonade to support her black-tar-heroin addiction.

DAN

She wasn't really on heroin, was she?

JOE

No, but that's not what her parents think after finding a balloon of suspicious powder stitched inside the bowels of her favorite stuffed animal: Cuddles the Bear.

DAN

What is wrong with you?

JOE

Me? It's the Susie McAllisters of the world with the problem.

DAN

Wouldn't the rumor have been enough?

JOE

I play for keeps, Dan.

DAN

Well, I'm not Susie McAllister. I think I'll be fine.

JOE

Oh yeah? Care to make it interesting?

DAN

Like a bet?

JOE

It's not like a bet. It's a bet.

DAN

What's the bet?

JOE

Next person to sell a cup of lemonade gets to keep his stand.

DAN

If I don't sell a cup before you I have to close my stand?

JOE

That's right.

DAN

C'mon, I just put mine up.

JOE

If you're not man enough for the bet, just say so.

DAN

Oh, I'm plenty man enough.

JOE

(Moving center stage) All right then.

DAN

(Meeting Joe) All right.

They shake hands and return to their respected tables.

DAN

Oh, you are so going down.

JOE

I wouldn't be so sure, Danny.

DAN

I would be sure. I was the salesman of the month at my real estate firm.

JOE

This month?

DAN

June, 2001. Never-the-less...

JOE

Obviously, you are still the great salesman! Does your entire firm run from behind that table or should I be on the look-out for more real estate tables in the neighborhood?

DAN

You laugh all you want. You won't be laughing when you pack up your stand and make the slow and painful walk of shame to your garage.

JOE

Uh huh. Can I see your marker, Dan?

DAN

Why?

JOE

I need to fix my sign. Come on, be a good neighbor.

Dan takes the marker off of his table and hands to Joe. Dan starts looking for potential customers while Joe bends over and crosses out "\$1" and in its place he writes "75 Cents."

JOE

Any good prospects?

DAN

A couple of looky-loos.

JOE

(Handing the marker back) Here you go.

Dan takes the marker and notices the change in Joe's sign. The two men exchange a glare.



DAN

(Looking off stage left) Blue hat, ten o'clock.

JOE

I'm on it.

DAN

I saw her first.

JOE

It's not calling shotgun. It's lemonade, this shit's serious.

An elderly woman who is not visible is walking by on the sidewalk from stage left to stage right.

JOE

Hi, ma'am. Would you be interested in any refreshing lemonade on this beautiful day? Ma'am?

DAN

(Stepping in nervously) Hello there. W-What a lovely blue hat you are wearing m-ma'am. *(Louder)* What a lovely hat- on your head.

JOE

WOULD- YOU-LIKE-SOME-LEM-ON-ADE?

Joe and Dan pantomime drinking lemonade.

DAN

NO? *(Shaking his head)* You can't understand a word we're saying can you?

JOE

Ma'am, would you be interested in my friend here? Buy, three cups and he comes with it. He has very soft hands- Ma'am?

Dan sneaks behind Joe's back and takes his marker back. He bends down and changes his sign from "\$1" to "50 cents."

JOE

No? Well, have a nice day, Ma'am.

She is gone.

DAN

Geez, you can't count on other people anymore, can you?

JOE

You must've been able to handle dealing with these types of people if you were some hot shot real estate guy.

DAN

I've actually never been good with people.

JOE

How did you sell any houses?

DAN

It used to be an easy gig. The market was so good for a while, they would practically sell themselves. Over the last couple of years, not so much.

JOE

Well, times are tough.

DAN

I got one last shot to close a sale. Newly-wed couple, supposed to be a sure thing.

JOE

What happened?

DAN

I froze. I just stood there with a stupid grin on my face. Turns out that it's kind of a turn off for people.

JOE

Wow, you really are a huge screw up.

DAN

Little bit.

JOE

Do you want to know something that might make you laugh?

DAN

I could use a laugh.

JOE

You were the reason I got fired.

A young boy is skateboarding on the sidewalk from stage right to stage left.

JOE

I've got lemonade! Get your lemonade here! Lemonade that won't give you Chlamydia and kill you, unlike the competitor!

DAN

What? My lemonade doesn't- Hello young man, would you like to t-taste some of the finest lemons? Real- Lemons- My real big lemons... I mean, would you like to (*freezing up again*)... be refreshed... by this beverage....buy this beverage... please?

Dan completely freezes. Joe's head follows the skate boarder as he accelerates away, then walks over to Dan and pats him on the shoulder.

JOE

Good job, buddy. I think you're starting to get the hang of it.

DAN

What was all that Chlamydia shit about?

JOE

That's not true?

DAN

No. (*beat*) Wait a second, I got you fired? I don't even know you.

JOE

It wasn't you. It was me. I was stupid. You know those brown packages that you get.

DAN

(*Embarrassed*) What packages?

JOE

Yeah, okay. Well, you get so many of those bastards I just had to see what was in one. I just peeked inside. I guess one of the busy-bodies across the street saw



me in my truck when I did it and she called the post office.

DAN

You opened my mail? How long have you been doing that?

JOE

It only happened once... maybe a time before that, but that wasn't yours. It was Mrs. Nezbit's down the street.

DAN

That's a major breach of trust.

JOE

Oh, please, I've delivered your mail for four years, while living next to you and you didn't even bother to introduce yourself. By the way, I don't like to judge, but Jesus... you are into some sick shit.

DAN

That's not my fault.

JOE

Uh huh.

DAN

It's not. I bought one DVD from the website and they keep sending me samples in the mail. I tried to stop them, but some actually aren't too bad.

JOE

I don't need to hear that.

DAN

Sorry. I can fix your problem if you want. I can call your boss and tell them that I asked you to do that for me. We live next to each other. It wouldn't be that much of a stretch.

JOE

You would do all that for me?

Beat.

DAN

If you close down your stand.

JOE

I didn't know it meant that much to you, Dan.

DAN

C'mon, Joe. You don't need the stand if you have your job back, do you?

JOE

Don't get all excited.

DAN

Why not? This could put your life back together. You don't want to—

JOE

It wasn't just a peek.

DAN

What does that mean?

JOE

Let's just say it was my third strike and leave it at that.

DAN

I'm sorry you lost your job.

JOE

I'm sorry you suck at selling.

Dan takes the marker and changes his price from "75 cents" to "25 cents." Joe walks over grabs the marker away from Dan and changes his price from "50 cents to 25 cents."

DAN

I guess we'll see about that.

JOE

I guess so. What time is it?

DAN

(Reading watch) About three.

A school bell rings nearby.

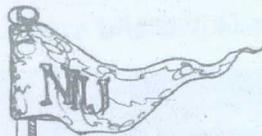
JOE

School's out.

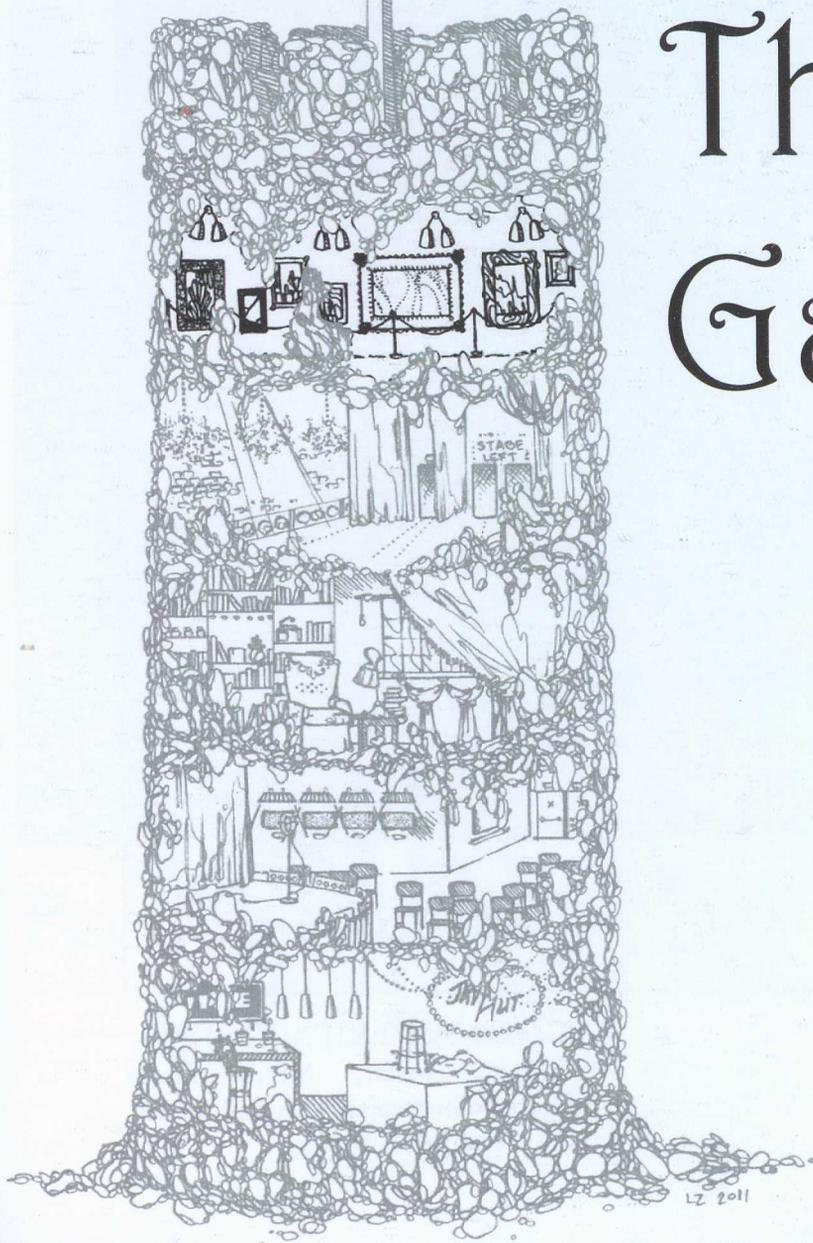
Joe perks up nervous, but ready. Dan begins to freeze up again. A quarter is thrown on stage in-between both stands. The men look at the money and then at each other. Blackout.

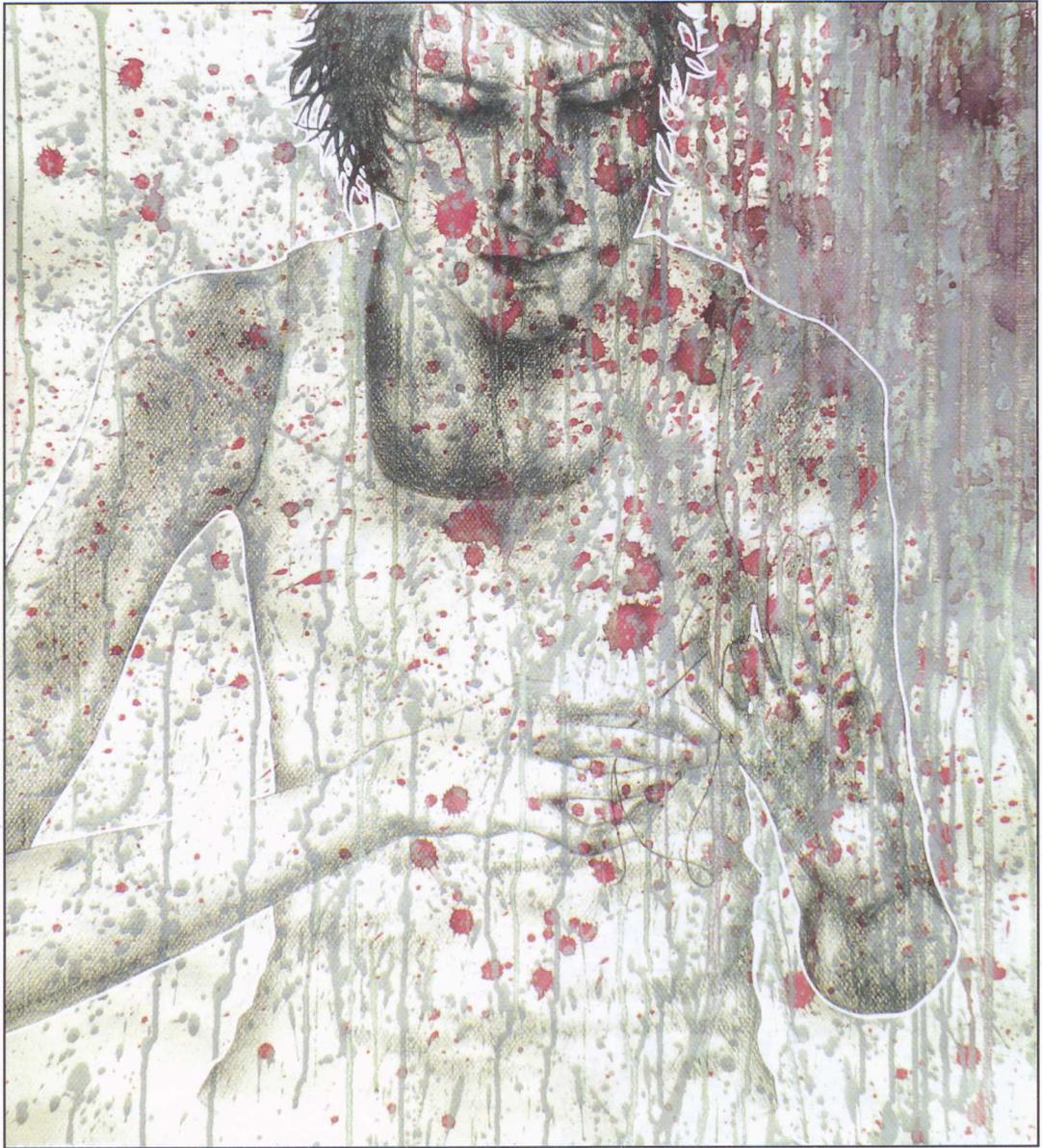
END





The Gallery





Gangrene

Elizabeth Graghling
24"x27", poster; Mixed media
[watercolour, coloured pencil, acrylic
ink] on paper



Feed the Birds

Rachelle Korth
8" x 10"; Digital Photograph



White

Lise Schlosser
Digital Photograph



Double Fantasy

Sergio DeStefanis
18" by 24" pulp paper, ink, pencil
and pen covered in plastic which
is heat-bonded to the paper.





Eye of Diablo

Joe Durling
Macro photograph of a crested
gecko named Diablo



Bruges

Randi Stella
Digital Photograph





Bee

Lise Schlosser
Digital Photograph



Breathing

Siw Lian Liam
Outdoor Sculpture Installation



Cabin #3

ReAnne Palmer
8.5" x 11"; Black and white;
Digital Photograph



Nomad

Elizabeth Graghling

9" x 12" board; Mixed media [watercolour, gouache, acrylic, marker] on prepared birch board



Out of Sea

Joe Durling

Shallow depth of field photograph
of a seashell on a dried out lake
bed during sunset



Restoring Balance by Word II

Siow Lian Liam
Installation Sculpture Variable
Dimensions — each figure 96"
H x 36" W

Towers History

Towers was founded in 1939 when Northern's students felt the need for a publication through which students could find literary expression. Named for the spires of Altgeld, *Towers* was originally sponsored by the Xi Delta Chapter, Sigma Tau Delta, honorary English fraternity, and Nu Ita Pi, the journalistic fraternity.

Its content, creative material such as poems, short stories, and essays, were chosen on a selective basis. Until 1941, the magazine was printed annually, but wartime restrictions rendered publication impossible through 1946. In 1947, the prewar tradition was revived and *Towers* began to receive funding. Many other changes occurred as the teachers' college developed into a university. Student art was added with Volume VIII. By the late sixties, control of the organization shifted from the Honorary fraternity to the whole of the student body. In the past, *Towers* has received an honor from the Associate Collegiate Press rating the magazine All American. Throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties, the magazine grew and changed as the students and the times changed. This year we collaborated with the Theatre department and added drama to the magazine. We are pleased with this addition and hope to continue this collaboration.

We would like to give an extra thank you to the Student Association for their supplemental financial support; NIU Document Services for their enthusiastic support and assistance with printing costs; Dr. John V. Knapp, Editor of *Style*, for his supportive ad, and Sigma Tau Delta for donating the proceeds of a bake sale. Without these groups, and those of you who continue to support our efforts, *Towers Literary and Creative Arts Magazine* could not continue to thrive as it does.

Amber Rzepka and Alisa Smith-Riel
Co-Editors

Style is a proud supporter of Towers

Style is a quarterly journal that publishes articles that address questions of style, stylistics, and poetics. These submissions may include research and theory in discourse analysis, literary and nonliterary genres, narrative, figuration, metrics, and rhetorical analysis. In addition, *Style* also now welcomes contributions employing the new psychologies: cognition, bio-evolutionary psychology, family systems, and human development. Furthermore, the editors will be pleased to consider submissions on pedagogy generally as such relate to the teaching of literature and the humanities. Contributions may draw from such fields as literary criticism, critical theory, linguistics, philosophy of language, rhetoric, narrative, and composition studies as well as the varieties of psychologies and pedagogies.

Style also publishes reviews, review-essays, surveys, interviews, translations, and reports on conferences.

Style is published four times a year by Northern Illinois University.

Information on Subscriptions and Sales

Style is now accepting new subscriptions and renewals to volume 45 (2011):

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