

Red Savina Review

fall 2013



Red Savina Review

The Online Literary Magazine in the Southwest

Volume 1 Issue 2

Fall 2013

ISSN 2169-3161

EDITOR in CHIEF John M. Gist

MANAGING EDITOR Wendy Sue Gist

POETRY EDITOR Richard Stansberger

Cover Art: Sitting Woman by Hiram Lewis

Red Savina Review (RSR) is an independent, bi-annual e-zine publishing short films, creative nonfiction, fiction and poetry in March and September. RSR is a nonprofit literary review headquartered in southwestern New Mexico. For submission guidelines visit our website redsavinareview.org/submit-2/.

Copyright © 2013. *Red Savina Review* contains copyrighted materials, including but not limited to photographs, text and graphics. You may not use, publish, copy, download, upload, post to a bulletin board or otherwise transmit, distribute, or modify any contents in any way. You may download one copy of such contents on any single computer for your own personal, non-commercial use, provided you do not alter or remove any copyright, author attribution, or other notices.

A Letter from the Editor

“We live in desperate times; the old gods have flown and the new gods have not yet arrived.”

-Hölderlin

Greetings, Dear Readers!

It is with great pleasure (dare I say, “Pride,” or is that deemed too boastful in the world of the Politically Correct?) to announce the launch of RSR 1.2.

When we began this venture a little over a year ago, we all had fairly low expectations, being one of the newest kids on a block of new kids at the edge of town. As noted in RSR 1.1, “The cynic inside me whispered sweet nothings like, ‘What’s the point? More people write than read these days. The illusion of fame, fleeting indeed, there and gone, wisps of grandeur, infect the Internet like a grand pandemic, a festering virus of human vanity, a killing joke. Best to crave silence. Leave it alone.’” And the voice was tempting. I, like so many, have too much on my plate as it is. Why pile on more when one’s platter overfloweth?

But there was something else too, an intuition that beckoned from the craving silence to be heard. Difficult to articulate, this ‘something’ overpowered the cynic, not by contending but by yielding. In other words, whatever it is that resides in the deepest silence—but is not silence itself—won out. The result: RSR 1.1, an issue that will always be dear to me. Due to the success of RSR 1.1, looking forward to RSR 1.2 was, for me, practically anxiety free.

The theme that emerged as RSR 1.2 took shape is, “Faith or the Lack Thereof.” Let it be clear that we do not designate themes at RSR, at least not yet (we may in the future); instead they tend to present themselves organically. “Faith or the Lack Thereof,” of course, is quite broad a scope and could be interpreted in a variety of ways. This does not mean, however, that all interpretations are equal (I must take a jab at abject relativism whenever the opportunity arises), nor should they be. Here at RSR we are not looking for or trying to establish equality as it relates to the human experience, rather we seek to showcase authenticity, which is a kind of strength, even when it manifests as weakness.

In 1.2 you will experience a diversity of human ways of being: irony, longing, fear, despair, sarcasm, angst, and wisdom. The experience of working with the writers of 1.2 has served to burgeon my own faith in people and the literary arts. The editing process flowed seamlessly and professionally and, I can assure you, there are plenty of talented writers out there

who are a testament to the potential in humanity waiting to be unfolded. Though there is no monetary gain associated with this venture, working with these writers has given our staff something that money can never buy: human dignity. I am humbled by the experience.

We received many very strong submissions for RSR 1.2 and for that I would like to extend a warm ESKERRIK ASKO (Basque for MANY THANKS) to everyone who submitted. In fact, virtually all of the submissions were of quality. We have had to pass on some strong writing this go-round, but I trust all those who have submitted will find proper homes for their work.

I closed the Editor's Letter for RSR 1.1 with:

“How does one judge authenticity in the literary arts? Intuition. And, if Heidegger was correct in his assumption that language is the house of Being, intuition, not logic, is the impetus of art and authenticity. Before we can come to either, it seems, we must purge those definitions attached to us like artificial appendages in public school, through mass media, in the university. The purpose of *Red Savina Review* is to record the writer's struggle to wrest themselves from the bizarre marketplace of modernity in the quest to claim authenticity and thereby take a stand on Being. The work featured in the inaugural release, in my mind, is the beginning of what I hope to be a lengthy adventure.”

We at RSR stand by those words and would only add, “The adventure continues!” Thank you, dear reader. Enjoy! Without readers what is the point of a literary journal?! Kindly do your part and please help us spread the word.

–JMG

P.S. As always, I tip my hat to the [staff](#) for all of the hours of slavery involved in this process. Without them and our [contributors](#), there would be no *Red Savina Review*.

Contents

Creative Nonfiction

<i>There Are Still Empty Places in California</i>	<i>Jim Brega</i>
<i>Praying in Earnest on Chicago's North Shore</i>	<i>Anthony Martin</i>
<i>Buying What They're Selling</i>	<i>Jeannette Ronson</i>
<i>from Country</i>	<i>Shelby Stephenson</i>

Poetry

<i>Elegy for Piano</i>	<i>Paige Cerulli</i>
<i>Misplaced</i>	<i>Paige Cerulli</i>
<i>The Economics of Delight</i>	<i>Mike Cole</i>
<i>To my former yoga instructor</i>	<i>Michael Collins</i>
<i>Manatee</i>	<i>Roy Guzmán</i>
<i>self worth</i>	<i>Tiko Lewis</i>
<i>GODS</i>	<i>Claire Scott Rubin</i>
<i>WHAT IF</i>	<i>Claire Scott Rubin</i>
<i>Burnt Offering</i>	<i>Claire Scott Rubin</i>
<i>Martha</i>	<i>Charles Thielman</i>

Fiction

<i>Hunting</i>	<i>Tim Falkenberg</i>
<i>Another Will Take Your Place</i>	<i>James Hanna</i>
<i>Planting Fake Flowers</i>	<i>Jessica Kluthe</i>
<i>Clear Lake Miracle</i>	<i>Al Kratz</i>
<i>Abortos</i>	<i>Gleah Powers</i>
<i>Pink Flamingos</i>	<i>Gleah Powers</i>
<i>Hunters and the Hunted</i>	<i>Frank Scozzari</i>
<i>The End of a Thousand Weekends</i>	<i>Mary McLaughlin Slechta</i>

Art

<i>Sitting Woman</i>	<i>Hiram Lewis</i>
----------------------	--------------------

Jim Brega

There Are Still Empty Places in California

Drive east out of San Diego on Interstate 8, the main route over the Cuyamacas, and into the vast, vacant desert, past sun-bleached signs that say “12% grade ahead” and “next services 51 miles.” Nowadays we ignore these warnings, cocky, air-conditioned travellers that we are, confident in our fuel-efficient engines, sealed radiators, and smart phones. It used to take brains or dumb luck to make it safely across the desert. You had to pay attention back then, check your fuel gauges, test your overheated brakes. The alternative was to end up on the road’s shoulder among the other victims of heat and poor timing—slow lizards, lazy rabbits, an occasional aged coyote—that, even today, provide a steady if grisly diet for the ever-vigilant buzzards and carrion crows circling overhead.

The desert has a terrible beauty but is a hard place to love. Still, if you slow down to search for it, you’ll find life even in the driest, hottest fix, underground or in shadows, thriving—against all odds—on the blade-sharp edge of survival. But once on the 8, once you cross the Tecate Divide and plunge over Horsethief Ridge—at 2800 feet, not even a mountain by some folks’ reckoning—there’s nothing to distract you until, blowing like a hot wind past Plaster City doing ninety in a seventy-five mile zone, the desert floor sinks fifty feet below sea level and you start to catch whiffs of the stock yards in El Centro, still twenty miles away.

Maybe, like me, you prefer a more conventionally scenic route. If so, you’ll avoid the 8; head north instead on Interstate 5, passing the strip of beach communities—La Jolla, Del Mar, Solana Beach, Encinitas—until, speeding out of Oceanside into the barren expanse of Camp Pendleton, the GPS screen goes white save for the tiny, pale blue avatar of your car on an endless purple ribbon beside the ragged cobalt profile of the Pacific coast.

Freedom! Gone are the dense rectangles of cities and towns with their stoplights and double-wide strollers in cross walks. Now it’s just the occasional on- or off-ramp, you and your car, and you’re yearning for wasteland, for emptiness, falling in love again with the open road, mainlining RPMs like there’s no tomorrow, pressing the accelerator toward the floor but hoping you’ll never get “there,” never get to the end of it!

Through the rolled-down windows, gulping sea-fresh air, tasting the salt, you see the same limitless possibilities the conquistadores had imagined two hundred years ago as they trekked north from Mexico on foot and horseback, taking days to cover what you can in an hour. The next seventeen miles cross the last piece of undeveloped southern California coastline, but the pristine view is an illusion. The camp is not really empty any more than it was when the Spaniards arrived to displace the native Kumeyaay. Now the low summer-brown hills to the east conceal five thousand Marines with their tanks, artillery, amphibious vehicles, and movie-set Afghan villages, perpetually practicing war on the shores of an ocean named “peaceful.”

All too soon you can make out the limits of San Clemente ahead, just past the dragons at its gate: the twin domes of the San Onofre nuclear power station, exhaling clouds of vaporized seawater from the hellfire in their bellies. Now your lark becomes a slog; your foot spends more time on the brake than the gas as you shuffle through town after town, approaching LA, the very antithesis of the open road. You’re only two and a half hours into it, and already your adventure seems destined to founder on traffic jams in the foothills of Anaheim’s papier-mâché Matterhorn.

You’re smarter than that. You don’t stay on I-5 as it lumbers dutifully toward the city’s indeterminate center. You switch to the 405, which isn’t pretty either but at least skirts the densest areas and follows the coastline you can no longer see from the road. Then on to 101, and you’re headed for the open highway again; if you can only make it past Ventura, another fifty miles, it’s a straight shot to Santa Barbara along an asphalt strip that embraces the shore with such abandon that you seem to skim along just inches above the high tide mark.

You’ll travel through other cities, staying along the coast, but none that equal LA’s smoke-choked spread of endless-seeming urban metamorphosis. They’re more like pastoral villages nestled among hills that have turned mustard-green, their domes topped with waving fields of wheat grass; hills whose silhouettes rise up out of the coastal plain like those of sleeping buffalo. This is the quintessential California geography I fell in love with as a child, an affair nourished during long vacations with my father at the wheel and my mother dozing in the car’s front passenger seat, while my brothers and sister and I, in the back, played an alphabet game by spotting our fellow explorers’ license plates. Back then, the only things interrupting the landscape’s bovine beauty were small stands of dark green live oak. Now, long, sinuous rows of grape vines are everywhere, flowing up, down, and around the hillsides, supplying fruit for the wineries a few miles away.

At San Luis Obispo you’ll have to make a choice: will you stay near the water and then, forty minutes ahead, launch yourself onto the fifty-mile rollercoaster of uninterrupted gut-clenching twists and turns on Highway 1, holding your breath as you swing around another curve to find

yet another panorama (and another, and another!)—each more spectacular than the last—of cliffs, coast, spray, and sky? Or will you follow the route of the more practical Spanish padres, turning inland at this point, staying on 101, rocketing along two-lane roads past endless tidy rows of lettuce of every hue except orange?

This is what it was all about, you think, that famous exhortation to “go West” when “West” meant Illinois or Missouri: the inexorable (some would say inevitable) migration from the crowded eastern cities toward the territory beyond the setting sun, the search for “land, lots of land under starry skies above.” But you’d be wrong; Cole Porter didn’t write that “cowboy song” until 1934, when the western frontier of our imagination was long gone and Americans were already dealing with the psychic angst of having bumped up against the continent’s limits.

You, too, feel it keenly: the pinch of limitations, the cramp of having nowhere new to go any more, the itch of fences that, like choke chains, encircle those few open stretches where you can really get a sense of what it used to be like. What is a twenty-first century boy, raised on the romance of the road and the uniquely American idea of “no limits,” to do?

There are still empty places in California, even if none are undiscovered. You gas up and turn the car for home, nursing a love that the land, a mother in her dotage, no longer returns. Maybe you’ll take the route down the central valley this time, dueling it out with the long-haul trucks that clog the straight, dusty interstate. Maybe you’ll find another way.

You press the accelerator to the floor, gathering speed, searching, searching.

Anthony Martin

Praying in Earnest on Chicago's North Shore

The first time I saw a Jewish man praying in earnest was inside a Synagogue on the North Shore of Chicago. It was a Saturday, midmorning, and I was attending the Bat Mitzvah of a middle school classmate. It wasn't that this was my first encounter with the Jewish faith, or that I wasn't familiar with its traditions. In fact it wasn't even my first Mitzvah. I was fourteen when I saw the praying man at Jaclyn's Bat Mitzvah, and hers was the most recent of thirty or so invitations that I had already collected that year. They were immaculate things, perhaps better suited for a wedding than for an adolescent's religious rite of passage:

With great pride do we invite you to celebrate the Bat Mitzvah of our daughter, Jaclyn Rosenfeld, at Banai Tikvah Synagogue at noon on Saturday, the 9th of September, Nineteen Ninety-Nine. The celebration will continue afterward at the Drake Hotel beginning at six o'clock in the evening.

No, the praying man intrigued me because up until that point most of the Jews I had known from school or camp or travel baseball didn't pray like the man I saw at the Synagogue that day in Highland Park, Illinois. As far as I could tell, most of the Jews I knew didn't pray at all. And when I had seen my Jewish friends praying on Passover and Yom Kippur and Shabbat dinner on Friday nights, they usually had to print phonetic readings of the appropriate Hebrew prayers from the Internet. Reform Judaism, I think they call it.

I remember that, while the attendees remained respectfully focused on the *bimah* where Jaclyn stood next to the rabbi, listening intently to his pious cadences, I kept turning to the back of the room and the figure of the praying man. He was facing a nondescript corner, his muted figure and black *yarmulke* brought into distinct relief by the blue light that shone in through the single skylight above. He held a small, leather-bound book open in his palms as he rocked back and forth rhythmically, his shoulders swinging forward each time his hips swung back. A faint hum was emanating from his corner of the sanctuary, gently pronouncing itself on the service before fading into the higher cause of the Rabbi's voice.

To avoid impropriety I turned forward to watch the rabbi administer the initiation rites for Jaclyn. In a few moments, she would take the sacred scrolls of the Torah into her hands and read from them a prayer that she had spent months poring over, all for this day. In a few moments, she would be initiated into the Jewish faith and ushered into adulthood.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam . . .

The North Shore of Chicago, as it is commonly referred to, is the quintessential example of new-age American suburbia. It's the place where the carbon copy three-bedroom houses of yesteryear are replaced by *McMansions*, their equally antiseptic successors. It's the place where a relatively homogeneous, well-educated youth is plagued with the consequences of a prolonged, ever-bankrolled teenage boredom. And it's the place where religious affiliation isn't all that it seems to be.

That's not to say there isn't diversity: Jews and Christians coexist and intermix in relative peace, both making room for Muslims and agnostics and other minorities with little protest. Any commentary you do hear usually occurs within exclusive social constructs like exclusively Christian golf clubs in Lake Forest and their Jewish counterparts in neighboring suburbs like Deerfield and Highland Park. And as any former golf caddie who made their bones on those courses will tell you, these conversations more often detail stock trading on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange or messy divorce proceedings than they do any perceived external threat to the Diaspora living on the southwestern shores of Lake Michigan.

Yet if you grew up in one of these communities like I did (and caddied at a private golf club, for that matter), it's likely you attended at least one Bar or Bat Mitzvah, regardless of the god you and your family prayed to on the home front. The Mitzvah is the quintessential rite of passage for young members of the Jewish faith, a watershed ceremony akin to the *Quinceañera* or the Catholic Sacrament of Confirmation. For months in advance, young Jews study the Torah in Hebrew school and memorize the syntax and pronunciation of a passage that they will soon recite to friends, family and congregation, all in the native tongue of their oppressed ancestors.

The parents of the young north suburban Jew, for their part, make preparations too—for Bizarre Entertainment, the resident DJ on the North Shore who requires booking months in advance if you expect him to lead the kids in the likes of the "Cotton-Eyed Joe" and "Electric Slide"; for the

party favors, from lava lamps and plastic hats to fold-out camping chairs and inflatable saxophones; for catering, with careful attention paid to mozzarella sticks and chicken fingers and an open bar for the adults; for the montage, an emotional piece meant to depict the child's coming of age, from birth (once quite literally) to the eighth grade spelling bee; and for two hundred pairs of monogrammed sweatpants (*Joshin' with Josh in 1999!*) to be distributed at the end of the night—without ever losing sight of the cost and scope of the parties thrown by the Sheinbeins and the Goldsteins and the Perlman in the weeks preceding.

After the ceremony, Jaclyn's friends and family milled about the Synagogue's social hall. Her classmates waited anxiously for the buses to arrive while the adults took coffee and caught up on news from the community, their voices permeating the superficial prattle typical of young kids about to enter high school. Corporate litigation and finance and high school football comprised the discourse, I imagine, though I certainly wasn't listening back then. I was probably focused inward on my own self-consciousness, which was every weekend piqued by the boys dressed in dapper, two-piece numbers they would soon outgrow and the girls in expensive dresses they would wear only once. I was far from foppish at that age, resigned to the realm of awkward thanks to personal ignorance and parental oversight. My scuffed leather shoes, ill-fitting khaki trousers and baggy, white, button-down shirt garnered little comment from my father; and it wasn't until my mother noticed my white socks and mismatched brown leather belt that she sent me upstairs for a change.

"Belt to match the shoes, Anthony," she said. "Dress socks with dress shoes, for Christ's sake." And when we finally reached the Synagogue she was careful to remind me of the Hallmark congratulations tucked into my left breast pocket and the eighteen-dollar check that she and my father had been so reluctant to cut.

"I'll never understand the eighteen dollars," she lamented as she put the car into neutral and pulled the parking brake. "I mean how many of these things have you been to now? Fifty? And those invitations! God! Isn't this supposed to be a sacred day?" She exhaled through her nose dramatically and then leaned over to straighten my collar. "And why eighteen? Where did they come up with that number?"

"I don't know," I replied quietly. "I think it's for good luck. You know, to send the kids into adulthood well prepared and all."

“Yeah, well let me know how many more of your classmates are waiting to become adults so I can start rationing our meals ahead of time, my love. I’ll see you tonight after the party.”

When the buses finally arrived, my classmates quickly polarized into the various sets and subsets that made up our middle school social order. The outliers and group-hoppers milled about on the periphery as we all filed out of the temple, each strategizing for positions that wouldn’t strand them next to a no-name. The opportunists found places next to the likes of Cari and Ellen, Joey and Levi; the wait-and-sees were subject to the bitter realities of social Darwinism.

Just as my part of the slow-moving mass of juveniles was about reach the buses, I realized I had left my jacket in the temple where the ceremony had taken place. I hurried back into the sanctuary and found my coat wrapped around the back of a chair, all alone in the same bright daylight that had illuminated the praying man not long before. As I put on my coat I looked around the hall once more before running off to catch the bus. It was quiet. The praying man was gone. And the mystery of his earlier murmurs was lost now with the echo of my quickening step.

Middle schoolers do stupid, dangerous things when left to their own devices on a school bus, especially when the driver isn’t answering to the principal of a middle school or the counselor of a summer day camp. And like any ravenous mob, this one grows more vociferous with each minor act of violence or verbal abuse it commits. Behind the false façade of a dimly lit school bus, middle schoolers have been known to exhibit the following behavior:

- Shouting pejoratives and slurs and the latest variations of common toilet language at random
- Opening windows and aiming projectiles at other vehicles (and waiting until the bus is on the highway to start doing it)
- Making obscene hand gestures at anyone and anything that moves
- Amplifying bodily sounds

And the list goes on. I kept to myself on the ride down to Jaclyn’s party, though, with the hope that the attention of the mob wouldn’t shine its vicious light on my corner of the bus. There was no Cari or Ellen sitting next to me, no biology classmate to bug for a play on his Gameboy. There was only the view out the window to the approaching metropolis.

It's mesmerizing, sometimes, the way Chicago's skyscrapers meet you on the expressway as you make your way in from the North Shore. It was overcast that particular evening, and I remember the way the noise on the bus diminished precipitously when the Sears Tower and the John Hancock asserted themselves on the horizon, two jet black monoliths extending infinitely into the lake-effect cloud cover. Soon we'd be down at the lakeshore and lost in a city where thirty stories are as good as a hundred to a group of rambunctious fourteen-year-olds. Soon we'd be filing off a school bus and into the main ballroom of the Drake Hotel.

Of the friends I still keep contact with, few have trouble recalling the staples that characterized all the countless Mitzvah celebrations we attended (or hosted) on the North Shore of Chicago during the late nineties, that exciting time when our parents were writing \$18 personal checks nearly every week. Some friends remember the syrupy montages and the melodramatic speeches made by emotional best friends; some recall the repetitive pop music and the youthful excitement of snowball slow dances; and some even remember cutting the challah and dancing the *Hava Nagila* at the end of the night. Few, if any, reminisce on these experiences without a nod to the main ballrooms of the Drake Hotel or the Hyatt Downtown, the tall sums of money dispensed toward transportation, venue, entertainment and food on behalf of an adolescent just stepping into the icy waters surrounding the very tip of life's proverbial iceberg.

Yet there's never any mention of the praying man, the man on which so much seems to depend. I wish he could be present for all those conversations with my friends about the Mitzvah and its important place in our upbringing, both as a religious and cultural rite of passage for the young people of Chicago's North Shore. I wish he could be there to put our distinct experiences into the perspective that, then and now, we seem to so desperately need, a perspective that I, in my secular ignorance, still have yet realize. And I wish he could be there to remind me that he is not alone, even if I grew up in a place where he is sometimes difficult to see. Yes, so much depends on the man praying in earnest on Chicago's North Shore.

Jeannette Ronson

Buying What They're Selling

My understanding of life started in Japan with my American military dad going off to work at a U.S. base, and my Japanese mother in her black stretch pants and red frilly apron lifting her legs with Jack La Lane on TV as she washed the breakfast dishes. At five years old in 1963, I did not see the irony of my Japanese mother following the instructions for how to be a good American housekeeper and wife in an American book complete with step-by-step illustrations. My mother worked hard to be an American wife. She kept herself trim with Jack La Lane, took an hour applying her makeup, fixing her hair, and dressing before my dad came home from work, and spent most of the day planning and shopping for the perfect dinner. Since I was only in kindergarten, I didn't comprehend the absurdity of Japanese women aping June Cleaver.

My mother grew up in the Tokyo between the two World Wars in the 1920s and 1930s when Hollywood pumped out movies, and the Japanese, intent on becoming a modern society, hurried to include subtitles. Her fondest memories include skipping school to stand in long lines for American films. So it's not a surprise that she married a man that she thought looked like Humphrey Bogart and that she cut her hair to look like Elizabeth Taylor. To this day at eighty-seven years old, she buys things like the Insanity Workout DVD, the Jack La Lane juice machine, and Scotts Lawn Fertilizer even though she walks with a cane in her assisted living facility. She has been assimilated and conditioned to buy.

Spending my adolescence during the 1970s prohibited my assimilation. My wonderful women schoolteachers exposed me to the works of Betty Freidan and Gloria Steinham. At fourteen with my long hair and bell-bottom jeans, I was ready to burn my bra for women's rights even though I didn't really need to wear one. At eighteen I left home after graduating high school with \$200 in my pocket and a beat-up 1975 Maverick rather than look for a husband like my parents asked me to do. In the 1970s, it was cool to do more with less.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, during the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, I fell into the semi-comatose state of college, marriage, children, and various full-time, all-consuming jobs in rapid succession. Whether because I didn't know any better or because I was trying to do the right thing for my kids, I followed along with the script of the American Dream just like my mother. If you don't have any children right now and scoff at how they might take over your life, wait. If you do have children, don't worry it'll be over eventually, and, yes, you'll have a life again after you're physically, financially, and mentally exhausted. One day you'll come out of your coma and realize that you have a life again.

So now I'm waking up like Rip Van Winkle in 2013, asking the passerby, "What's going on? What did I miss?" Now I have time to read and analyze a variety of media. As I sit now at my kitchen table looking at print, TV, and online media, what I want to know is, "What the hell happened with you women? I turn my back for one minute (read: 30 years), and you've done what?"

TV news shows have turned into peep shows. So-called women newscasters wear heavily padded, push-up bras showing deep cleavage and sit on high stools with their legs crossed à la Sharon Stone of *Basic Instinct*. Are we watching the news or waiting for a wardrobe malfunction?

A recent survey in Britain revealed that 45% of young girls ages 18-25 care more about their looks than about their career. I would bet the same would be true in the U.S. based on the increasing number of young women getting boob jobs, not to mention wearing five-inch heels and carrying designer handbags. Chick Lit is the genre of literature, film, and TV popular amongst teenage girls to thirty-year-old women who can't get enough of works like *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Sex and the City*, and the *Gossip Girls* series. In 2002, this genre in books alone took in \$71 million. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young in their anthology of essays examining the genre state, "chick fiction tends to present work as a background and means to the more important concern of shopping." Thus, the Hollywood machine along with popular literature and PR firms have been hard at work pushing the notion that appearance and consumption are a woman's goals in life while I was busy driving my kids to soccer practice in my sweatpants.

Have the salacious and frivolous images of women and girls in TV, film, and literature affected today's teenage girls? Let's see. Recently at New Jersey's Ridgewood High School, girls sent naked photos of themselves to their boyfriends who then shared them with other guys. Funny, but before smartphones, heck, before even Polaroids, we girls would never have sent naked pictures of ourselves. It would have been too humiliating and never mind how it might permanently damage your career. Now stories like this seem to pop up every few months.

And don't assume teens and young women get all their ideas from *Facebook* either. In *Good Housekeeping's* articles on "Family & Relationships," I was startled to see an article that advised dressing up as a French maid in the bedroom and sending racy text messages to your husband as ways to spice up a marriage. First, if your marriage is going through a rocky period, wearing costumes or sending pornographic messages probably isn't going to help. Second, anything sent electronically can never be erased and has the odd tendency to be shared. But who am I to go against the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval? Whoever this young woman writer is that submitted this fact-based, heavily researched article probably knows more about keeping marriages together than I do. Geez, she must, because she's actually published in *GH*. I've only been married to the same guy for thirty years.

From my observations, Hollywood, the American media, publishers, and PR firms have been doing a hell of a job over the past thirty years while I moved robotically in a semi-comatose state. They sold it, and you young women bought it, hook, line and sinker. It's no different than my Japanese mother aping Elizabeth Taylor back in 1963.

But I'm not going to just sit here and gripe like old Rip Van Winkle. I'm not going to find my old pals and hide out at some tavern pining for the old days. Mom is mad, and you're in big trouble now. I told you not to make me come in your room, but you've asked for it.

Shelby Stephenson

from Country

Out of Deep Gap, North Carolina, Doc Watson:

Arthel Watson: Goodness discovered itself in

him and he kept the Good and let Commerce

go, of course: Doc Watson, himself, ordinary, wanting to



be, is, just Doc, on or off the stage – Gerde’s Folk

City, New York, 1962, not making Doc – the Newport, ’63, not

setting apart Doc – Doc composing Doc out of the seer-seeing

All of storms and calm: I think I’ll stop here

for 31 December 2010, The Weavers coming up, the

whole fabric of otherness, names and songs

overwhelming, if I stay too long. Surfeit fills in; like all singers

I feel I’m provided with blindages and can’t see anything, All,

off course, the words eclipsed in thickets no tickets punched can
cause us to pause, maybe those for a prayerwheel, when

we feel a little fire is burning us up out from a grave. Why
not call out the way and follow the puppies, giving

heart to a throb, second grade, and, wail, wing, as if
you're in the mood for love, a heaven, not out

there in the cumulus or stratus or mackerel, but in your
eyes, my love; why stop to think about the tether, you in

your world, me in mine, my eyes on the wheelbarrow
beside the buff orpingtons near the backhouse, not

wanting cloud or rain to stop a trenching: that's
what I think it takes to let my tank fill up with you: in

querulous times the sax's my favorite instrument, better



any day than the family doctor saying

stick your tongue out and say *ahhhhg*: bring on
Sam Butera and the Witnesses, I say, and sing

the blues, never forgetting the butcher-chopper
father in New Orleans, you've got the right: let

The Weavers drag their hit charts around through
the 60's into the sit-ins and sit-ups and down

times pulsing red where videos dull images
for the imaginative viewer, the best already in

Nostalgia's Fair City, where girls are so pretty: Weavers
played in '49 the Village Vanguard, NYC, a sign that

Pete Seeger and the gang would do unto others musically
what they would do for themselves: "So Long, It's Been

Good to Know You." Entertainment's on top of an
upside-down world, as the Statler song says, "Having its

Kate and Edith Too," tutti-frutti, onetwothreefour, just like
that, Decca & Folkways, decks, porches, the paths

all leading to waves of congressional hearings about
political views, a Weaver or two blacklisted from

radio and TV and a Public Farewell to the hey-day of the
Weavers: funny what the aim across a shotgun-barrel

yields when Authority's derisiveness scrapes Vanity: Eric Weissberg's

“Deliverance” originally was recorded by Arthur Smith and

Don Reno: “Feuding Banjos,” Arthur Smith’s composition: Kitty Wells’s
human wishes never vented any ruffles in D.C. That senator

who chaired the House Unamerican Activities Committee didn’t
care where she got her name: she was side-woman

first who wore like a charm, eventually, the title
“Queen of Country Music” for lovers and for

women everywhere, her real name, Muriel Deason, marrying
Johnny Wright in ’38, my birth year: as part of the show

Johnny and Jack & the Tennessee Mountain Boys, she
knew who she was and knew she could be The

One, Herself Defined: Johnny gave her the name
Kitty Wells, probably for a Carter-family song the

Pickford Family and the Vagabonds sang: Kitty Wells’s
biggest came out in 1952, “It Wasn’t God Who

Made Honky Tonk Angels,” an answer to
Hank Thompson’s “The Wild Side of Life,” Kitty’s

song’s distinct woman’s point of view setting the
pace for boys and girls all the way back to Eve’s

out-of-the-garden Story of Bottom Lines, hoeing the
long, short rows and the roads travelled, gravelly, paved, run

off, or puddle: Kitty Wells got on the Opry on her own account. Men felt that presence and applauded

“One by One,” “As Long as I Live,” “Dust on the Bible,” and “Making Believe”: Dottie West rose out of the smoke-ropes-fire

of Muriel’s musical seasons, for West was raised on country sunshine, healed by its alleviation of

sorrow, her feet in corn and cane, hot middles almost winning out over the never-ending song of pain.

Stardom never let her forget her attraction for fancy clothes and things money could buy to try to better the image of

Dottie West, Entertainer, saving money to go to college, graduating in music, marrying Bill West, her

classmate at Tennessee Technological University, their composition, “Here Comes My Baby Back Again,” a top

ten, Perry Como recording that one: “Country Girl” came out in 1968, the year Nin and I moved from Pittsburgh to

Madison: “I was raised on country sunshine, green grass around my feet”: I love her duets with



Don Gibson: when the car wreck took her life, it kept her offstage, as she was on her way to the

Opry – downhill: divorces: from West and from her drummer: bankruptcy, poor

management, death: Dottie West: 1932-1991: Speedy West could take the world with his steel guitar: my childhood

friend John Wall, a lap-steel player of the 50's, nickname "Speedy," lent me a Webcor reel-to-reel recorder to

practice saying "mil-es" for "miles," wanting me to sound like Frank Gallop, popular announcer of the

time, locked in a closet, a hand cupped over an ear to hear, "Help!": I was preparing for a career as an

announcer in radio and television and I was thinking how could I be on TV with a

nickname like "Red." John Wall introduced me to Speedy West's swoops, sweeps, knob-turning

wows, and West's duos with guitarist Jimmy Byrant: Wall also introduced me to some pickers and players of

the 50's, those within journeying, particularly

Jimmy Capps, Benson resident, sessions-player, Nashville, Tennessee,

longtime friend of Clyde Mattocks, steel-player: Capps played guitar with Jim Thornton and Hayden Ivey on "Saturday Night Country Style,"

WTVD, Durham, North Carolina: Jimmy Capps: some groups he played guitar for: Slim Short, Slim Mims, and



Charlie and Ira Louvin, his big break to play at the Opry even before he became a staff-musician on WSM's

Opry: he also played guitar with Ferlin Husky and the Hush Puppies: back to Wall, the steel-player, radio-announcer

at WMPM ("World's Most Progressive Market"), where I met him: John Wall and I played music

often with Jimmy: John gave me a little black

book (R-508, Vernon Royal, U.S.A.) and I

typed some songs to put in it, though the heart of the book's made of songs I cut out of *Country Song*

Roundup. That notebook's probably the "germ," the stablign start and pulse of *Country*. Rather

than include R-508 as overview in an Appendix, I shall let contents operate at will: "The Air Mail

Special" I typed, probably, 1954, learning the song (Malcolm Leon Rush wrote it) from

Jim and Jesse McReynolds's King recording. Rush recorded for King after World War II.

He also co-wrote with Merle Travis "A Petal from a Faded Rose." I put the little book together in '54, my sophomore year at

Cleveland High (I enrolled in Miss Galloway's typing class that year): "Almost," writers Vic McAlpin, Jack Toombs,

"Copyright 1951 by Acuff-Rose Publications": I learned "Almost" from George Morgan; "At the End of a Long Lonely Day,"

Marty Robbins, song written in ink, my hand; "Beyond the Sunset," I typed: Got the song, with recitation, from Hank Williams, as Luke the Drifter;

Virgil P. Brock, inspired by his cousin, Horace Burr, wrote

“Beyond the Sunset.” I picture them in a restaurant in Indiana,

the sun setting, Brock saying something like “Oh, what a pretty sunset,” Burr responding, “How magnificent,”

Brock asking him how he could see it. I imagine Burr saying, “I can see beyond the sunset.”

“Blue Letter” I wrote out in ink, put Red Foley’s name on it because I learned it from his recording;

a note on back in my mother’s hand: “We are over at Paul’s, eating, Shelby, if you come, come over, Mom”: She’s

referring to Stephenson’s Barbecue House, brother Paul started, 1958; I was a sophomore at UNC-Chapel Hill: I worked at WMPM, Smithfield,

weekends, always bringing my clothes home for “Mama to wash.”

“Bumming Around” I sing often, learned it

from Jimmy Dean. Pete Graves wrote it and recorded it on 4-Star; Jimmy Dean did too, and others, including

the West Coast player, Billy Strange. Dean made the hit. I learned “My Cabin in Caroline” from Lester Flatt: I

sang it often in the early 50’s and brother Brown played it on his banjo. The Flatt-Scruggs original has that wonderful kickoff by fiddler Jim Shumate.

Rod Morris wrote “Change,” a kind of poem: “You’re just like the

weather, you're changing all the time." I learned it probably because



it "spoke" to me in what I thought then was "deep"; unlike the lit classes I was taking in school, presented as exercises (I thought).

Sorry. I realize now: my loss: I felt like my teachers always wanted to tell me to "put that Thinking Cap on!"

Rod Morris and the Missourians played real "honky-tonk" music. Morris also wrote "Bimbo." "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy" –

learned it from Red Foley, love it for Foley's singing and Hank Garland's electric guitar-playing: Jack Stapp,

country music exec, bought Tree Publishing and Pamper Music, entered Country Music Hall of Fame, 1989.

Harry Stone, a business exec at WSM, took over after George D. Hay's health went in the 30's. Stone's credited with scheduling the Opry

in fifteen-minute segments. Stone and Stapp wrote "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy." "Christmas Island," my pen, ink, with "Andrew Sisters" written in

righthand corner: Lyle Moraine composed "Christmas Island," 1946.
Nin and I sing it every Christmas season: "How'd you like to hang

your stocking on a great big coconut tree?" "Cold, Cold Heart,"
Hank Williams, writer, 1951: Hank Williams did as much to bring

me to poetry as the hymns at Rehobeth Primitive Baptist Church.
"Cold Shoulder," Helen Hudgins, writer. Ray Price recorded it

with Hank's Drifting Cowboys. "Easy Pickens" I learned from Wade Ray.
Kay Twomey, Fred Wise, Ben Weisman: Wise helped write many,

including "A-You're Adorable": Twomey: "Wooden Heart": Weisman,
a pianist, composer, wrote scores of songs for Elvis Presley. Ben Weisman,

songwriter: "Let Me Go, Lover." "Going Steady" Faron Young wrote.
During this time, particularly, 1954, when I was sixteen and

aching with glandular oppression and desire to sing and write songs, I
wrote a few, imitations of Hank Williams – one – "Why Pretend?":

"This is the parting; so why pretend? You want me to call you just a
friend, but it's too late now, why pretend?" What heights and depths

we take to believe what follows us home is a keeper and won't wiggle for water
and wave to separate Chaff from Refrain. "Guilty Conscience": written by

Carl Butler: I got a 78-record, Carl Smith, on the way home from



Rex Hospital, after a bout with spinal meningitis when I was fourteen, '52.

My mother bought the record for me. Upon returning home she played "I Couldn't Keep from Crying," Marty Robbins.

Jimmie Crane and Al Jacobs wrote "If I Ever Needed You."

I wrote that one out in ink, too, topping the page, "Eddie Fisher."

March, 2011, Elizabeth Taylor died. Her eyes, smile – Courage – I need you now.

Paige Cerulli

Elegy for Piano

In November of 2008, a Baldwin upright piano was discovered in the Bells Neck Conservation Area in Harwich, Massachusetts. The piano was intact, with matching bench, still functioning, and left in a clearing surrounded by trees, set up as if it were to be played.

Let this be the soft place where we part.
This, the giving back
of what was never mine.
But I fancied it so.
We had found a balance:
You sang me sonatas and I
pressed life into your felt hammers.
With metronomed rocking and finessed
touch, I believed I could will your keys
to soften.
Such dreaming makes musicians.
You lulled me with triplets,
captivated me with counterpoint,
and I, still young, cast myself
to each challenge, let flood the imperfections
so as to arrive, one day, at a performance
worth elation.
You, the ally-turned-enemy.
You, the art I'll never master.
Let this be "so long" to concert halls, the resonance
of your soundboard left to float between
ornamented spruce and oak.
I turn you free of etudes, scale studies,
and all patterns of repetition.
This, the most I can do for you.

Misplaced

I should be brave fields tamed
only by barbed wire,
brilliantly weathered days
when the wind startles your lungs
and fills your legs with the desire to run.
I should be single-lane highways
cast out amongst open space
which have never known speed limits.
I should be boulders that purpose
as street signs and landmarks.
I should be green tractors
and yellow combines.
I should be corn husks, timothy, worn
leather boots and sun-bleached
cowboy hats. I should be
the dust that clings to you
after an honest day's work
and the calloused hands and heels
that remind you to keep racing that sunrise.
I should be the rocking chair on the front porch,
the summer evening, the old acoustic
slung across one knee, and the strings that,
try as you might, never stay in tune through that whole
sad song.

Mike Cole

The Economics of Delight

(after the debt ceiling debate of 2011)



The moon's pale eye is stunned awake.
The constellations fade.
The best the night can offer now
is sadness half-restrained.
I've found no way to shed good light
on what no one should see.
It's only wanting nothing more
that gives us what we need.
I'll keep what little I have found
of nothing they can take:
The wealth accrued in watching sun
force shadows to retreat,
The way the clouds above the ridge
spread embers cast in gold,
And how a hummingbird arrives
between the dawn's bright folds.

Michael Collins

To my former yoga instructor:

You know who you are. The one who once taught me
the exercise where you sit opposite someone
and stare at them until you see their other face.

You told us that once you'd been doing this
with someone you really didn't like,
except at some point in the meditation –

as you said it, *the woman's face fell*
and right there I saw Christ crucified.

Now, listen, I liked you just fine.

But at the time I was like, *good one, wackjob.*

And, yet, the more people I've looked at your way,
despite whatever they'd done to hurt me,

and seen their pain at the world's betrayal,

I think you were pretty much right:

True crucifixion is seen in such visions.

And since I have now given each of those jerks
more compassion than I ever offered you,
please accept my apology and thanks:

I can be just as much of an ass as them,
especially when someone tries to teach me
something I'm not yet ready to learn.

Even more so to the degree that I desperately need it.

Roy Guzmàn

Manatee

You've seen the movie, you've heard the story:
A manatee lost in an ocean of sailors' despair,
Missing the female sex, hoping it speaks,
Inhabiting a world exposed in the profile of
Reefs, crustaceans as brushes, somehow immune to lightning.
You've seen the girl with wavy, salt-water crusted
Red hair, swimming towards the sun, told
What to do, seeking advice from octopi. She's
Worn shells around her neck and often
Sang to sailors, accepting the ways flotillas
Crash against the rocks as encouragement to shed
Her scales and expose what's hidden in the green
Of her former lower body. She marries the prince.
And after being tricked by a vigilante on death row,
She finds notes only the pit of the ocean can bear.
She's finally human. At dusk when your boat
Has sailed off course you pull out the compass
And resort to the myth. Anything is possible
When you're lost, your voice has vanished, and she places
Her fingers gently on the stern or on the cleat of the boat. Triton
Is furious! He knows you're a neophyte to bestiality.
You are the prince and have been recently told
You're deficient in omega-3 fatty acids. You've been
On dialysis. This is how the sea calls you when
You're dying: As a mermaid that is (really) a lost manatee.

Tiko Lewis



put me down
cut me at the knees if need be
i've earned it
don't deserve wind
or sight of the moon

they put the coals to me
and i failed
screamed every letter
prayed for the screws

i hope
there's a prize in solitude
clarity in suffering alone
a certain victory in tasting your own sweat
learning your own smell

march me to the hole

and if there isn't one
i'm prepared to dig

Claire Scott Rubin

GODS

and the gods have departed
with their winged sandals
and suitcases, lyres, tridents,
thunderbolts, wafts of ambrosia
etcetera, etcetera
exiting quietly stage left
limping, leaning, listing
exhausted from bitter quarrels
casual affairs, petty jealousies,
wars waged for sport
winners long forgotten
last looks over their shoulders
already nostalgic for a past
in passion's grip, the indelible
lure of lust, frissons of deceit,
the soft pleasure of fleeting love
and what do we make of our felled
effigies? will we say good riddance
to their intrusive follies, their
insistent meddling or will we
remember them fondly as
mercurial figures holding
a mirror to our foibles
and frivolities, revealing
the messiness of life in all
its heavenly madness

WHAT IF

memories forget us

wind whipped as soon as formed
pages blown from the book of

sorrow, a palimpsest,
erasures mixing with
 memories of others

perhaps happier ones

 not filled with knives

 a screaming child

I say memories

pinned to black velvet

 unchanging, unmoving

 wingless moths

 flightless, fixed

to show what happened

to prove it happened

 and happened and happened

 but they form

shapes no longer mine

cloudy mingling

with those of others,

edgeless

leaving a book of blank

pages, pale watermarks of

a desolate past

wind whipped silent screams

But where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

Genesis 22:6

Burnt Offering

God looks disheveled, bristly beard, gown red-spotted with last night's spaghetti. Checking closets for missing angels. A book in hand: *Does God Exist?* Abraham muttering about a ram in a bush, pacing the halls, refusing to participate in group activities: dyads, triads, art therapy, light therapy, flower therapy. The TV tuned to cartoons. HA-HA. Roadrunner beep beeping endlessly across the screen. Wile E. Coyote in useless pursuit. What's the point? In the background a sylvan spirit carries wood up a mountain again and again. His slight body bowed double with the burden. Abraham sees knives hanging in air, beckoning. Sometimes he grabs one. Does he? God not sure if his angel was on vacation that day. His neurons fire randomly, no memory of a ram or a boy. Steel bolts slide shut. Smoke rises somewhere on a mountain. A nurse hands out pills in crinkled cups: Haldol, Zyprexa, Risperdal. Mix and match. For whom? The one holding a knife or the one looking on in approval? You choose.

Charles Thielman

Martha

Leaned against a blank wall
by the sludge of cheap whiskey
she whispers a filigree of emotion
to her right hand, the wing bones
of flying back to what was
snapped by her daily gust.

After hours of sweeping concrete,
swearing at pigeons and the jewel-clad,
she'll dine on a driver-delivered sandwich
then drink and ruminate on a midnight bench,
mother without pictures, waving the last bus on.

Tim Falkenberg

Hunting

“I’m going to shout, and when it stops you shoot.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get your rifle ready. It’ll be light soon.”

“Yes, sir.”

The boy chambered a round and laid his gun across the window rest of the stand and tested the sight and waited.

“I think I see one.”

“Be quiet now.”

“I think I see one,” the boy said a little louder.

“No you don’t.”

He did think he saw one, but as it got lighter he realized it was just some sticks. His nose itched. He scratched it.

“Be still.”

“I’ve got an itch.”

“Duck your head then. Slowly.”

The boy did as he was told. They waited.

“I don’t think they’re coming.”

“One will come.”

They waited. The barrel of the rifle hit against the stand. A hollow thunk.

“Quiet.”

He watched a couple squirrels chase each other up a tree trunk. Then a green jay. He watched it. It looked at the stand and then hopped to the end of the limb and flew. He watched it go.

“I see one.”

The boy jerked around, then remembered he was supposed to be staying still.

“Where?”

“To the left. Get ready.”

Now he saw it, moving haltingly through the brush in the field adjacent to their land. Brown, almost red. He’d expected it to be harder to see. It came to the barbed wire fence and jumped over. The boy looked through the scope.

“Ready?”

He swung back and forth looking, raised his head, repositioned, and then looked again.

“Hey!”

The call startled him. He lifted his head, saw the deer freeze, sighted in, saw it start, jerked the trigger back.

The rifle’s report rent the air, but the deer was gone.

“Missed. Shot right over it. You’ve got to squeeze the trigger.”

“Yes, sir.” He started to pull his rifle back.

“Let’s wait a while. There might be another come by.”

“Yes, sir.”

And they waited.

James Hanna



Another Will Take Your Place

It started with the flickering of the bedroom light—*on off on off on*—slow persistent repetitions that nibbled away her sleep. The voice was soft but measured, as though integrated with the fluttering of the light. “I have a gun, M’am.”

She rolled onto her back, not quite awake, and turned her head. A man was standing at the bedroom door—a tall ephemeral blur that seemed more shadow than substance. She opened the drawer to her night table and groped about for her glasses. The voice stopped her cold. “I have a gun, M’am. Roll onto your stomach. Please place your hands slowly on top of your head.”

She squinted at her husband who was lying beside her in the bed. He was flat on his stomach with his head turned towards her. His hands were bound behind his neck. She could not make out his face, his ugly red face, but she could smell his fear.

“Bridgett, stop fidgeting,” he snapped. “Just do as he says.” His voice was habitually reproachful, as though she had once again wrecked the car.

Slowly, she rolled onto her stomach and laced her fingers behind her head. She suddenly felt rebellious, not towards the intruder so much as the waspishness in her husband’s voice. It consoled her that his hands had already been tied, but she still wanted to punch his eyes. “Whatever you want, take it,” she snapped. “Take it and *go*.”

Her anger was so empowering that she felt she had willed it when the rope slipped loosely over her wrists. The rope tightened instantly—the knots had been pre-tied—but it bit only slightly into her wrists as the intruder fastened them to the railing of the headboard. That he was obviously experienced calmed her a little; she wanted the nightmare to end quickly.

The intruder spoke gently, as though addressing an invalid. “There’s an easy way to do this, M’am. Put your weight on your knees. Cooperate and I won’t take long.”

She obeyed quickly, scrunching her knees against her small breasts while the intruder lifted her nightgown. His hands were gentle and warm, as if he were already familiar with her. And so she was startled by the coldness of the jelly that he thrust between her legs. He smelled heavily of tobacco. “Please don’t,” she whispered. “*Please*.”

When he entered her, she shuddered—the act was so skillful, so clinically swift that he seemed to be sparing her pain. She clenched her teeth when he shuddered also—when she felt his seed challenge the grip of the condom. He withdrew from her slowly, surgically—she could feel his hand holding the condom in place. It had taken him only a minute to rape her.

He rose from the bed and the mattress springs groaned. A droplet stung her thigh. He was fumbling with his pants. “Would you like to share my towel?” he asked.

She nodded, irritated by the messiness of the gel, and sighed when she felt the terry cloth tucked between her legs. Her husband’s tone grew shrill. “You’ve taken what you came for. Now will you please go?” She wanted to scratch her husband’s face and felt vindicated when the intruder ignored him. Her marriage, what little remained of it, was collapsing like the Twin Towers.

“Some water, Ma’m?”

She shook her head angrily. “Nu-uh,” she muttered. “Nu-uh.”

She could hear his footfalls as he left the bedroom—a catlike rhythm that was soon inaudible. Her wrists had loosened slightly in the bindings, but she clung to the headboard as though it were a raft. After a minute, he returned.

“Have some water, M’am.” His voice was calm but commanding.

She turned her head; he pressed the glass against her lips. She gulped the water slowly, haltingly, but he waited patiently until she was done. When she had finished drinking, he placed the empty glass upon the night table.

“Don’t move for an hour,” he murmured. “If you don’t wait an hour, I’ll know. I’ll come back.”

He turned off the light as he left the room and she was stunned by the totality of the darkness. She listened carefully for several minutes, convinced that he was still in the house, convinced that he had forgotten something and would return to the bedroom. And then she heard the slamming of the front door.

Two years later, she learned something about him. His name was Curtis Rollins and he was serving five years for another rape. His DNA had also marked her, but the chain of evidence had been broken, rendering the lab results useless. Even so, he had agreed to meet her through a victim program at the Indiana State Reformatory. In exchange for his participation, he hoped to transfer to a prison closer to his mother’s home in East Chicago.

She learned this when a social worker phoned her to arrange the meeting. “You’ll talk to him in a neutral setting. It might take him out of your nightmares.”

She had answered testily, “I would rather he just stayed in my nightmares. There are far worse places he could be.”

“Let him know that if you talk to him,” the social worker replied. Her voice was smooth and sweet, like syrup. “Remember, this is his therapy too.”

She had clutched the phone as though choking a snake. Would meeting him really take him out of her nightmares? She rather doubted it, but her fear was so erratic that it frequently felt like a bat in her hair. Even death seemed better than keeping this turmoil in her life. And so she agreed to meet Curtis Rollins in a visiting room at the prison.

She now sat with her daughter in the prison reception foyer. Her smug self-centered daughter whom she had begged to drive her to the prison. It was a measure of her desperation that even her surly daughter was a comfort. She could not face her assailant alone.

Although it was the Christmas season, they were the only two people in the foyer. She tried to take cheer from the synthetic fir tree in the corner of the room but its colored lights, winking steadily, reminded her of the night she had been assaulted. Colored bulbs had been strung along the walls, but their glow did not compensate for the sterility of the room: the bare wooden floor, the hardback chairs, and the unvarnished table strewn with paintings that inmates had put on sale. She sat as though drugged, her back to the wall, and held tightly to her daughter's hand. Soon, a representative from the program would be meeting with them.

Her daughter grimaced, as though personally insulted by the drabness of the room. "I still don't believe you're going to meet this creep." It was the same selfish whine that had sparked their argument earlier that day—when she had angrily insisted that she would not pay her daughter's cell phone bill. Her daughter, a freshman at Notre Dame, had been glued to her cell phone ever since returning home for the holidays.

"Answer me, mother. How's *this* going to help?"

"It's only to talk to an aging man. That's how it was *put* to me anyhow."

"*Really*, mother. The kind you find lurking in alleys? You know, people get stabbed here."

She snickered. "So what? I'll bite his nose off."

"Just last month, a guard got stabbed to death. Don't you read the *papers*, mother? It's like Iraq in here."

She squeezed her daughter's hand—this wasn't a joking matter—but she found herself giggling uncontrollably.

"Mother, *none* of this is funny."

"Nor is that phone bill, Missy. I'm *not* made of money, you know."

She released her daughter's hand, blotted her eyes with a Kleenex, and noticed her reflection in a mirror across the room: a squat disheveled woman in her fifties with pale skin and jet-black hair.

She looked flirty yet banal—like a statue in a wax museum. “You’re a closed book, Bridgett,” her husband had once said to her. “Except to any peeper who wants to stare at your ass.”

Had two years really passed since the incident? Her night sweats, her hyper alertness, her inability to be alone had not subsided over the months. And her panic attacks were daily sieges, springing upon her with the entitlement of a household cat. She could not remember when things had been any other way.

“I’m not made of money,” she said, as though repeating herself would strengthen her courage. “Don’t think for a minute I’m paying that bill.”

Her daughter sighed. “I *promised* I would pay it. Really, mother, don’t be such a *brat*. I put you to bed last night, didn’t I?”

The door creaked open. A sallow-faced woman tottered into the room. She was moving gingerly, as though trying not to trip on her three-inch heels. She was holding an open file from which she was reading intently.

The woman glanced up from the file. “Bridgett?” She spoke as though startled.

The woman’s voice irked her. It was that same haughty social worker she had talked to over the phone. She answered sharply, “*Yes?*”

“I’m Anna. We spoke.”

“Yes, Anna. I *do* remember.”

Closing the file, the social worker sat down beside her. She arched her eyebrows. “Would you prefer that I called you Mrs. Hollowell?”

“Thank you, yes. Let’s stick with Mrs. Hollowell.”

Her daughter groaned. “The name no longer suits you, mother.”

“Or maybe it suits me a little too well.”

The social worker frowned. “When did your husband leave you?” Her voice was so saccharine that it could have been poured over waffles.

“*The worm*, you mean. Six months ago. And I left *him*.”

“It’s just as well. Marriages rarely survive these things. Not even the good ones—the ones that appear to survive. Is this your daughter?”

“This is Jasmine—yes. You can see I’ve spoiled her rotten.”

Her daughter sighed stoically and once again took her hand.

The social worker cleared her throat. “Well, she can’t accompany you on the visit, I’m afraid. But you’ll need her when it’s over. Do you remember your briefing?”

“No.... Yes. I’m not to use my last name.”

The woman nodded. “First names only. We don’t give inmates our last names.”

“So what do I call him?”

“He goes by Rashad, but I don’t believe he’s really a Muslim. He probably just does it to fit in.” She reopened the file, scratched a note in it, and then closed it once again. “He has many disguises, you know. *And* many visitors.”

“Does he really?”

The woman nodded. “Church folk, Muslims, even some plainclothes detectives. I doubt that anyone sees through his masks, but that’s probably for the best.”

She felt her stomach churning. She wanted to bolt from the room. “I don’t want things to be for the best anymore. The *best* is just something we have to wake up from.”

“Is that what you want to tell him, Mrs. Hollowell?”

“What I want is to bite off his nose.”

The woman sighed and nibbled her pen. “A pane of glass will separate you from him. And you’ll speak to him over an intercom phone.”

“How convenient,” she snapped. “Do I wish him *Merry Christmas* as well?”

“Discuss only small subjects at first—like the weather, your health, and what you had for dinner last night. Only afterwards should you bring up the incident.”

“What should I tell him about it? Should I tell him he ruined my marriage?”

“Only if it’s true, Mrs. Hollowell.”

“It’s not. It’s a lie. But maybe it’s a lie he ought to hear.”

“He must have had something to do with it.”

She giggled. “For that I should probably thank him.”

The woman frowned again. She brushed her skirt, as though ridding it of lint, and rose from the chair. “Keep your guard up, Mrs. Hollowell. He’s not what you expect him to be.” She again cleared her throat. “Are you ready?”

“*Must* I be ready?”

“It would help, but no. You’ll see him for only an hour. Now don’t waste that time getting angry with him—I don’t think he’d care. And don’t try to write him when it’s over.”

“Why would I ever *write* him? What would I even say?”

“I don’t know, but it’s happened. His other victim, the one he’s serving time for, has been writing him weekly. Shall we go?”

She heard her joints snap as she rose from the chair. Her heart was pounding like a sprinter’s at the end of the race and her stomach was growing tighter. She looked frantically at her daughter. “Any bits of advice?”

Her daughter smiled thinly. “Just one, mother. *Try* not to hog the phone.”

She accompanied the social worker into the inner prison. The hallway was narrow, freshly mopped, and shiny with fluorescent lighting. The woman’s high heels exploded upon the uncarpeted floor, causing her ears to ring. And so she felt relieved when they paused at a

checkpoint and waited on the officer in the control module. "It'll be a few minutes," the social worker muttered. "We have a security alert." Ignoring the social worker, she studied her image on a television monitor. Her hair needed brushing.

A Plexiglas gate inched sideways, and she followed the social worker into a cramped compartment. A mechanical drawer crept away from the module, as though reaching out to grab her. A logbook lay open in the drawer. "You need to sign in," the social worker explained.

When she had penned her name in the book, the officer in the control room asked to see the back of her hand. She turned her hand over, while leaving it in the drawer. She felt coldness against her wrist: an ultraviolet identification stamp that reminded her of the weekly singles dances she had been attending. She did not think much of the dances—hot spots for one-night stands—but this had not diminished their novelty. The pick-up lines, the clumsy suitors, even the thank-you-M'am sex, were worth putting up with for a few fleeting moments of touch.

The gate closed behind her. A second gate parted and she pursued the social worker into another hallway. They walked through a series of long corridors, passageways so slick and convoluted that it seemed as though the building were digesting her. Were it not for a sudden racket—shouts, laughter, the ringing of gates—she would have felt that she had been swallowed alive. The woman took her elbow. "We're approaching the cell ranges. You'll meet him in the anti-chamber the attorneys use."

"I've *already* met him," she replied. She glared at her escort and threw back her head, but her bravado vanished the moment they entered the visiting room: a severely lit chamber containing several booths with chairs and hanging phone receivers. The room was otherwise bare. "Have a seat," the social worker said. "He'll be here soon."

She first saw his shadow and then she saw him: a thin balding man in prison blues who stooped as he walked through the doorway of an adjacent room. He was taller than she remembered him to be and his face was as expressionless as that of a cigar store Indian. He was nibbling from a box of cookies.

Noticing her, he smiled—a smile both spontaneous and sunless, as though the pregnancy of the moment, the tension in her face, even the Plexiglas that separated them were of little consequence. His face was so still, his eyes so incurious, that he appeared to be in a trance.

He seated himself in the booth across from her and then guided the phone receiver to his ear. His movements were slow, sensuous—so utterly relaxed that she felt as though she were looking into a terrarium. She lifted her receiver slowly, doubting for a moment that he was capable of speech. When he spoke to her finally, her heart began to flutter. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Hollowell.” His voice was deep, soothing, and totally familiar to her. She was not surprised that he knew her last name.

She studied him critically through the glass. “*First* names only, Dirtbag.”

He smiled once again and dropped his gaze, not from embarrassment but to select another cookie from the box. He chewed the cookie slowly, methodically, as though it required profound concentration. He sucked at a tooth before speaking again. “Mrs. Hollowell,” he said. “I am a man inside a cage. Do you really want me on a first name basis?”

She felt suddenly angry, but her anger seemed puerile—a throwback to that irretrievable moment when her daughter had started to baby her. The childish tantrums in which she was now permitted to indulge were simply too delicious to resist.

She snapped at him once again. “Kinda *late* for that, isn’t it, Dirtbag? You just walk into people’s homes and rape them?”

He smiled, shook his head, and dipped into the box. He spoke patiently, as though addressing a child. “It would be better, Mrs. Hollowell, if you thought of me as a stranger.”

“I’d *rather* think of you as a creep.”

“And not a stranger?”

“No.”

Selecting another cookie, he shrugged. “Have it your way, Mrs. Hollowell. I *was* in your home more than once.”

He nibbled at the cookie, impervious to the chill his words had conveyed. It was the same loathsome chill she had felt years ago, when she had discovered that her husband had been seeing another woman.

“It’s *my* turn, Clyde. And I’ll have it *my way*.”

He nodded silently and continued chewing.

“So how many times were you in my home?”

“Seven,” he replied. He spoke the number softly, reverently, as though it were a standard.

Seven thieves, seven veils, seven deadly sins, she thought. Could anything be immune to so significant a number as seven? He seemed to be quoting from the Bible.

“Seven,” he repeated as though she hadn’t heard him. “I stood over you seven times while you slept—you and your husband. And each time I chose not to touch you.”

“What were you doing instead? Jacking off?”

He shrugged and averted his gaze. Looking beyond her, his face grew so still that she wondered if someone had entered the room behind her—maybe that snotty social worker she wanted to slap. She discarded the thought when she noticed the empty reflections in the Plexiglas. She was alone with him.

He again looked at her and smiled. “Let’s be formal, Mrs. Hollowell—please.”

“Why?”

“It will make it easier to speak the truth.”

“Why is the *truth* so important?”

“Anna believes it will help set you free.”

“Do *you* believe that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really know. But the truth is better delivered by strangers.”

“What’s the bitch think you are? A *caregiver*?”

He smiled, dropped his eyes, and looked pensively at the cookies. Was he recalling a past life—a life he had surely abandoned? When he spoke again, he seemed amused, “No longer, Mrs. Hollowell. But *once* I was a surgical nurse.”

She gripped the receiver and glared at him. This was not information she wanted to hear. “A surgical nurse. Well, *la-di-dah*. You shoulda let ’em castrate you.”

Her words were so forceful, her anger so invigorating, that it disappointed her when he simply nodded his head. The suggestion seemed almost appealing to him and his voice was pleasant when he replied.

“Do you really want to be cured, Mrs. Hollowell? Castration would only cure me.”

“I don’t want you cured,” she spat. “Just want ’em to cut off your balls. That’s all you *deserve* for raping innocent women.”

A smirk touched the corners of his mouth and he sighed. “There are no innocent women, Mrs. Hollowell. But perhaps you come closer than most.”

His words, their pious judgment of her, pricked her only slightly—perhaps because she had grown charitable towards her sins: her three abortions, her chronic alcoholism, the stolen hours she had spent posing for her erotic website. Her decadence seemed an endowment now—something this creep was *not* going to take away. She had had that website for five precious years—long before her husband had stopped screwing her. And long before this creep had crept into her bedroom.

She looked at him sharply, narrowing her gaze. “Quit talking to me like you’re Joan of Arc.”

“Mrs. Hollowell,” he said. “I’m a man with a disorder—no more. There was nothing revolutionary about my deed.”

“Well, isn’t that a pity. *Minuteman* describes you rather well.”

He laughed throatily and clapped his hands—an impact she heard through the glass. “You are a piece of work, Mrs. Hollowell. Thank you for coming here today.”

“Thank Anna—not me. She *does* want you cured.”

He lowered his eyes and again shook his head. Dipping into his shirt pocket, he removed a packet of Camels. “Must you insult her as well, Mrs. Hollowell? Must you insult a well-intentioned woman?”

“You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“No, Mrs. Hollowell. I am only sure of you. You are far less a mystery to me than myself.”

Her hand tightened on the receiver as though she were squeezing a club. “Listen here, Clyde. I’m a *closed book*.” She cringed as she spoke, realizing the idleness of her boast. What was she, after all, but an estranged mother, a librarian in a hick town, and a lush? She felt vaguely consoled that he already seemed to know these things.

“Who told you that, Mrs. Hollowell?”

“The *worm*.”

“Your husband?”

“Yes.”

He smiled politely, as though responding to a bad joke. “Husbands,” he muttered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Husbands are better off blind—don’t you think? But a predator must know his prey.”

“You make it sound like a goddamn sport.”

“To me it’s more like a parlor game. Like posing for strangers or cruising in bars.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re pretty smug for a rapist.”

“Maybe so, Mrs. Hollowell. But I know you far better than your husband ever will.”

Her skin prickled as he spoke, a sensation produced less by fear than by the disapproval in his voice—the ridiculous implication that she had somehow proved unworthy of him.

“Sorry to have disappointed you,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to give *rape* a bad name.”

He tore at the pack of Camels then pulled away the seal. “You didn’t disappoint me, Mrs. Hollowell. But even a predator has standards. I shouldn’t have visited you an eighth time.”

She gripped the receiver and glared, hoping to break his maddening composure—a coolness he wore like a pinstripe suit. “I’m sorry I didn’t meet your highfalutin standards. My husband thinks I’m a tramp, you know.”

“Must you keep boasting, Mrs. Hollowell? He left you for a tramp, didn’t he?”

“I gave *him* the boot. The slut can have him.”

“I remember him—a frightened little man. You’ll do better without him and he without you. Be glad he’s bullying somebody else.”

“You’re starting to *sound* like Anna, now.”

“I hope so, Mrs. Hollowell. Sometimes even social workers are right.”

“If you’re so damn smart, how come they caught you?”

He sighed softly, put down his receiver, and shook several cigarettes loose from the pack. When he had selected a cigarette, he returned the receiver to his ear.

“Mrs. Hollowell,” he said. “I chose to be caught. Otherwise, I would not be here.”

The room behind the glass suddenly reminded her of the animal shelter she had visited as a girl—where she had selected, at her father’s insistence, a beagle puppy with a spotted nose. The dog was her just reward for the many evenings she had allowed her father to sneak into her room while her mother was sleeping in bed or nodding in front of the television. At first, she had been content to punish the puppy—whacking its head with a rolled up newspaper and pouring red pepper into its food—but finally she had loved it, loved it more tenderly than she had ever remembered loving. And so she had remained silent when her father reminded her that the puppy could be taken away. Was this man behind the glass—this smug, superior interloper—an extension of the dark covenant she had made as a girl? Had she instead drowned the puppy in the

bathub or cracked its head with a rock, would this man have had the wherewithal to creep into her bedroom not once but eight times? Looking into his eyes, his soft intelligent eyes, she knew that she had sealed this moment long ago.

He had lit the cigarette and the smoke, like the tendril of a jellyfish, lazily approached the glass.

“They let you smoke in here?” she asked.

He laughed and coughed crisply. “No, Mrs. Hollowell—they don’t. But I’m only required to be honest with you.”

“Then why did you let the cops catch you?”

He sucked the cigarette slowly, deliberately, as though it were an obligation rather than a pleasure. He smiled. “I must have felt sporting, Mrs. Hollowell. They’re not very good at *their* game.”

“Or maybe you just couldn’t get it up anymore.”

He chuckled and dropped his gaze. “That would have been a blessing. When you have done it a hundred times, there is nothing more tiresome than sneaking into houses and taking women by surprise.”

“A hundred times?” She was stunned by the apathy of his disclosure: it was not a boast, not even a confession, but the mere recitation of a number. And so she believed him.

“The cops should have caught you sooner,” she muttered. “Those poor damn women.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “For me it was worse—many times worse.”

“How could it have been worse for *you*?”

“Mrs. Hollowell, don’t you know forbidden fruit is toxic? If lightning had struck me I would have preferred it, but God doesn’t share my precision.”

“So what made you do it?”

He glanced towards the doorway—hesitated—then looked back at her with hospitable eyes. “What answer would you like?”

“That you did it to get your rocks off. That you’re nothing but a fancy talking rapist. And a voyeur to boot.”

“All right, Mrs. Hollowell. I did it for the thrill. A thrill that had vanished a long time ago. Sadly, you are not the only one chasing ghosts.”

The smoke behind the glass was now thick enough to remind her of the dances she had been attending—dim celebrations where a couple of vodka tonics and an hour’s conversation were enough for her to follow a stranger to his car or scrawl her phone number upon a napkin. Although wary of the dances, she also ached for them and frequently counted the hours remaining until the weekend—the hours separating her from the soft muted lights and the all embracing smoke. She hoped never to tire of this vice—not as this creep had tired of his. Suddenly, she resented him all the more.

“It’s not a *crime* to be a slut.”

He looked at her tenderly and shook his head. Clearly, her presence was beginning to tire him.

“Would you stop if it were?”

“Of course.”

“Perhaps it should be a crime.”

She winced and lowered her voice. “Who died and made *you* the law?”

He shrugged. The question seemed to bore him—or perhaps it was the redundancy of his reply. “Who if not you, Mrs. Hollowell?” he said. “Didn’t you surrender instantly—as though I were a cop or a magistrate? Didn’t you ask me to hurry—as though I were taking you by right? Even now, don’t you tremble obediently whenever the door shakes or the window rattles? Who if not you?”

She felt the blood draining from her face. His boast, its haunting truthfulness, was like a hard winter freeze. “So I made you the law,” she muttered. “My, but you *do* like to brag.” He laughed. “I consider that an insult, Mrs. Hollowell. I’m far less corruptible than the law.”

“Then what were you doing on my website?”

“Scouting, Mrs. Hollowell—that is all. You’re so very bad at it, you know—the stiff poses, the outdated gowns, the insincere promises of a grand time. You looked like a child playing dress up.”

“So you *do* want an innocent woman?”

He chuckled. “Admittedly, I do. But you were the closest thing I could find.”

He put down the phone receiver and sucked once more at the cigarette. The smoke seemed to claim him now—as though it were a mist into which he would shortly vanish. Slowly, he returned the receiver to his ear.

“Do you wish to hear my story?”

She glared. “Who am I to argue with the *law*?”

Slowly, serenely, he told her his story—his voice so relaxed that he appeared to be reading from a script. And so she listened to him doubtfully, weighing each word in the manner of a book critic. Soon the warmth of his voice made her feel reprehensible, as though she were colluding in the production of a bad play.

He had grown up in a Chicago slum. He had briefly attended Indiana State University, leaving when a trespass charge had cost him a basketball scholarship. He had been drafted into the Army and had served as a cook in Viet Nam. He had been married, a childless union that ended before his military service. After leaving the Army, he had roamed the Middle East where he versed himself in The Koran. Later, he had studied nursing in East Chicago. He had worked ten years at an East Chicago hospital—a career he gave up when he was caught stealing amphetamines from the pharmacy. Weeks later, he had been arrested for peeping—a charge for which he received probation. When his probation ended, he forced himself upon a prostitute who would not consent to bondage. He had been sentenced to prison for this incident—four years at the Indiana Penal Farm where he had been assigned to the prison infirmary. Paroled two years later, he began to perfect his art—studying his victims for days before committing his assaults. He had raped a hundred women before he had discovered her on her website and he had spent eight days profiling her—watching her drive to work, reading her mail, studying her as she slept. After assaulting her, he had stalked and raped a dozen more women. The bust for which he was now serving time could not be attributed to the skill of the police but to his having left a condom at a

crime scene. He had plea-bargained for five years—one of which he had already served. With good time, he would be released in another 18 months.

She looked at him curiously when he was finished. He had told her much and he had told her nothing. “You’re supposed to be setting *me* free.”

“Free to do what?” he replied. “Free to tease men and numb yourself with booze?”

“That’s better than shadowing women,” she snapped.

He stretched and rubbed his eyes. “Mrs. Hollowell,” he murmured, “isn’t it sad that I was your only real adventure?”

She stared at him, disbelievingly. The receiver was now slippery in her hand. “Let me inform you of something,” she hissed. “You’re not exactly an adventure.”

He lowered his gaze as though inspecting his pants for cookie crumbs. “The law would agree with you there, Mrs. Hollowell. Why do you think I received just five years?”

“Because the cops didn’t do their jobs. Because the judge was a *real* pussy.”

“No, Mrs. Hollowell. Because *I’m* the one who informs.”

“Are you telling me you’re a snitch? That you’re dropping a dime on other crooks?”

His tone grew sharper. “I’m a registered informant, Mrs. Hollowell. Since I live among shadows, there’s much that I see. Much that the law finds useful. And so I am serving a nickel—no more. A nickel is all they’re requiring of me.”

“Who are they letting *you* snitch on?”

He looked at her protectively. “Haven’t I shocked you enough, Mrs. Hollowell?”

An ash fell from his cigarette, grazing his receiver. She looked at the streak of ash and the sullen expression on his face. “You’re not proud of it, are you?—being a snitch. You think it’s *worse* than raping and peeping.”

“I’m not proud of it—no. But at least I *deliver* on my promises.”

“So does the Devil.”

“And it’s not always wise to refuse him. But you know that already, don’t you?”

“All I know is you’ll get what’s coming to you.”

“I was worse off before I came here.”

“Stay longer. Don’t they know *half* of what you’ve done?”

“They don’t *want* to know, Mrs. Hollowell. And so I have told only you.”

“They should have booked you for all those rapes. You should be here for *at least* a hundred years.”

He gently smiled, “The law will take care of me.”

“What do you mean by *that*?”

‘I’ve already been booked.’”

He looked at her calmly, his eyes growing softer.

The cold double meaning of his words began to register in her face. *Was he really a conscripted informant?* she wondered. *Was he really that valuable to the police—the stupid fucking police?* Since he was only serving a nominal term, he had probably told her the truth. She felt her scalp prickle, her palms grow damp. “You’re getting out even *sooner*, aren’t you?” He shrugged. “We must all make sacrifices, Mrs. Hollowell.”

“*Hogwash. Why are they taking care of you?*”

“Not every devil is courteous—or content to remain in your nightmares.”

“That doesn’t exactly *console* me,” she snapped.

“Read the papers, Mrs. Hollowell, and be consoled. The community is safer because of me. And the prison.”

“Well aren’t you a hero.”

He laughed and shook his head. “In the land of the blind, a voyeur is king. But know there are far greater monsters than me.”

Her eyes flashed. “I’d *rather* stay innocent.”

“Well and good, Mrs. Hollowell. But know this, at least. Even to the law—the people responsible for your protection—you don’t amount to much.”

“So how many *more* will you rape?”

He smiled. “Maybe a hundred—if I get what’s coming to me.”

“*Must* you repeat that number?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hollowell, I must. Haven’t I sworn to be honest with you?”

“That’s too much information.”

He laughed. “I have told you almost nothing. But I have told you all that you need to know.”

“And what is that?”

“I will not be back to see you. You barely interested me the first time. But another will take your place.”

These words teased her like the smoke, not because she disbelieved them but because she suddenly felt ostentatious. It seemed as though *she* were the one in the cage.

“I’m glad you keep your promises,” she spat.

He sighed and spoke sadly. “Be glad for small things, Mrs. Hollowell. And be glad that I have remained a stranger to you.”

He pinched the cigarette, killing the smoke, and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. He then scooted his chair back and casually smiled, a smile that conveyed neither warmth nor concession—only her unimportance. He winked.

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Hollowell.”

She did not remember returning to the visitor’s foyer—the monotonous hallways, the sterile lighting, the inspection of her wrist by the checkpoint officer. She did not remember the debriefing from the social worker—probably a reminder that she not write him. And when she arrived at the foyer, she barely recognized her daughter—perhaps because she had set aside her cell phone and was concentrating on *Sports Illustrated*.

As she entered the foyer, her daughter looked up.

“So how was your date?”

She shrugged. “He was late.”

“But was he a gentleman?—that’s what *I* want to know.”

“No. No, he was a monster, all right.”

Irritated, she folded her arms and stared at her daughter. The gulf between them suddenly seemed wider—an abyss that even sarcasm could not breach. Given the demeanor of her assailant, his thoughtfulness and reptilian calm, she was especially annoyed at her daughter’s lack of empathy.

“What did you *expect*, mother?”

She looked across the room, noticing the fir tree once again—the artificial branches, the searing light bulbs, the cheap plastic angel perched on top of it. It was only its triteness, its sapless fidelity to the season, that prevented her from knocking it over. Who had decorated that monstrosity anyway?

She looked back at her daughter and glared. “I *expect* you to drive me home.”

On Sundays, she worked in her garden—a half-acre plot behind her suburban home. She grew squash, tomatoes, and melons—arranging the plants in orderly rows, which the rabbits ate up by the following week. She did not mind the rabbits in spite of their havoc; they were somehow

consistent with a lush's philosophy: *Sow your wild oats Saturday. On Sundays, pray for crop failure.*

Six months had passed since her visit to the prison and he had disappeared from her nightmares. This was not something she had anticipated or fully desired: having lost the dignity of martyrdom, she now felt cheated whenever she went to the dances. Now, when she looked in the barroom mirrors, she saw a tramp and nothing more.

And so, on Sundays, she worked in her garden—planting the seedlings, tilling the rows, and sweating out the booze from the previous evening. She detested the work—a filthy gritty business—but she took solace in the rustling of the trees, the darting of the humming birds, and the orbiting of the turkey vultures overhead. In the distance, they looked like kites.

Jessica Kluthe



Planting Fake Flowers

The scene always changes, and so new colors will thud against both their palms and then burst out of the crusty-lipped bottles. Alice gobs more black onto her brush until the water and spit form a smooth ribbon across the pot's rim, and then she repeats to create a line across the bottom. She rotates the pot until she has framed the scene she's been working on. A sunset overlaid with tangles of trees whose branches reach for each other. She turns to Mrs. Dee and

waits. Eventually, Mrs. Dee presses her chin to her chest and lips into a line: approval. They work like this, in nods and flared strokes, for hours. Mrs. Dee eventually lifts her sticky thighs off the leather chair, and slides back to examine the pots: a cactus to hold a cactus and a beach to fill with backyard sand. Then, Mrs. Dee hands Alice bits of a shredded plastic bag to dab over each paint pile so they will stay soft enough to use again next week.

Once, a few months in, after the pots start to fill Mrs. Dee's house—bright borders around almost every room—Alice heads home. Her passenger seat is stacked with books from Mrs. Dee, who'd ordered two copies of each, a pile she separated out like a stack of cards. When she slows at the yield, the edge of Mrs. Dee's yard still visible in her rearview, she sticks her arm out, and the corners of the stiff spines press into her bare arm. *Tiny books bites*, Alice thinks and then pulls her smile wide as she twists into a shoulder check and changes lanes. *A perfect summer*. These are the books they'll talk about next week before painting more pots and then lining more rooms. The two had taken to stacking the pots, wide-mouth ones on the bottom, and the smaller ones inside. Even the ring of the bathtub contained newly painted pots of shampoo, soap, face cloths, and disposable razors. She thinks about these borders before rounding onto the highway—while Mrs. Dee's living space is getting smaller, it is getting brighter. The gas gauge's orange pointer faces the capital E. First she thinks, *How far can I go?* and then she thinks of leaving the car parked in the Esso lot. She thinks of walking the twelve blocks back to Mrs. Dee's, and saying that the car died there, or the tires blew out, or the rim bent in a pothole and it was too dangerous to go on. She'd bring a paper bag of Coke-bottle candy so she had something to offer, she'd listen to a few minutes of Eleanor Wachtel on CBC to catch some book news, and she'd immediately start talking about the first page of *Mrs. Dalloway* that she'd skimmed at the red light so that Mrs. Dee would forget that it wasn't next week yet, and that Alice was headed home because it was evening. And maybe, she hopes, they'd just paint more pots and then talk about the incredible hook line: *Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself*. She'd never been at Mrs. Dee's after 6 p.m. What was the kitchen like without the bright afternoon throwing itself across the linoleum? When she arrived, she'd say she just needed to know more about the structure, or themes, or any other story words that appeared between her lips and took the shape of letters. Mrs. Dee was still *her* teacher—even when standing barefoot in the kitchen with red acrylic paint streaks on her arms and her t-shirt rolled up and tucked in at the shoulders. She signals right onto the highway and listens to the tick, tick of the blinker despite the capital E screaming at her to stop.

As she imagines Mrs. Dee's lemonade sweating a ring onto the kitchen table, and pictures pink droplets wiggling their way down the glass, her car yelps, then shoves forward and back and stops. A firm screech. A cartoon halt. She manages to make it a few feet up and over on the shoulder of the highway. She doesn't own a cell phone and thinks of her aunt Alberta—a boxy

woman named after a mostly rectangle province, form and content, Mrs. Dee might say—who had told her, only a few weeks before, that she should *at least* have one for emergencies. Alice stands almost halfway between Mrs. Dee’s house and her own, but she could easily say she was closer than she really was, and Mrs. Dee would never know. Her teacher couldn’t leave her house to come tip a jerrycan into the empty tank. But Alice doesn’t know enough about *Mrs. Dalloway* to impress her, so grabs Virginia Woolf from the passenger seat, locks the empty car, and walks the straight shoulder until she’s forty-two pages in. As she hangs up her coat in the front hall closet, and pinches her sweaty shirt away from her stomach, she thinks it rather poetic that she had been *wearing a coat too heavy for the weather*.

When she shows up the next week, a flash of anger squeezes her jaw together as a white t-shirted, dirty jeans neighbor is mowing Mrs. Dee’s lawn into perfect strips. Alice slides the books beneath her sweater and does not say hello as he lifts his thick arm to wave over his head at her. His lawn touches Mrs. Dee’s along the east side of her property. He doesn’t mind mowing, Mrs. Dee will explain, but really, he can’t handle the quack grass and scraggly edges up along the sides of her driveway. In just an hour, the yard will be manicured: every blade in place, every hairy-rooted weed yanked out. Alice will offer to care for the yard for the rest of the summer. And, when it snows, she’ll bring a wide-mouthed shovel to leave in the garage—she’ll be able to scrape the driveway and walkway clean in just a half an hour, she’ll tell Mrs. Dee.

Alice steps into the too hot house: a wall of salty summer sweat nearly forces her back outside. As Alice jiggles the metal latches of the screen door’s window, Mrs. Dee blurts that they are through with painting pots and she begins to place new materials across the table. There is a stack of thick boards and sharp utensils; Mrs. Dee explains that she’d ordered them online and they’d just been delivered to the post office and the neighbor, the mower, had picked them up for her. Sliced open manila bubble envelopes sit in a slouchy blue recycle bag, and a few small, unopened boxes, with white labels Alice wants to inspect, are stacked beside the fridge. They are to use the utensils to scratch pictures into the boards, Mrs. Dee instructs. She is eager to get started and Alice does not get a chance to tell her about the yard, or how she’d like to be the one to pick up the mail. Today they will talk about the books and scratch down into the boards at the same time. When it is quiet, between Peter Walsh’s visit and the line Clarissa quotes from *Othello*, the scratching sounds like nails against a chalkboard, and then Alice remembers Mrs. Dee there: in front of the room, in the high school that housed a couple hundred, with a book of Canadian plays in one hand, a piece of fresh chalk in the other: ready to write.

When this all started, it began with a short email that said: “Dear Alice, I’d like to write together, as friends. I need to write my way out of this mess.” She had ended the email with her first name, which Alice found jarring. This was the second shift in their student-teacher relationship. Alice

ended up at Mrs. Dee's house a few days later to plot out the writing project that would never happen. Alice was happy to have an assignment since the year after high school was proving as difficult as most people said that it would be. It was late afternoon and they had sat in Mrs. Dee's living room and the light grew too dim, but Mrs. Dee never flicked on a lamp or anything.

Alice had watched her a few months earlier on the news. Alice had been sitting next to her mother—an unwound ball of sunflower-yellow yarn between them. Her mother said, "Alice look," without pointing or indicating any urgency, and she continued to crochet through the story. Mrs. Dee's hair was windblown. And as Alice watched, and her mother made tight stitches, it was like that moment when you see your parents for the first time, not as your parents, but as people separate from you. You see them for a second the way that a stranger would. Her mother's metal hooks clinked as they bounced off the cushion. She left them there as she climbed the stairs to pull out something from the freezer.

That was the first shift in Alice and Mrs. Dee's relationship. Mrs. Dee was suddenly a human being, with a life, a backstory. And she made a mistake. She killed a man. On a road. Alice remembered that poster with bright block letters above the chalkboard, stuck up with four red tacks that read something about the road of life being long.

They scratch and scratch and scratch the boards and start pinning them to the walls. Over time, they start to develop some advanced techniques, and cover up earlier work with crisp trees they etch in, or the symbols for love and peace. After a few weeks of scratching and pinning the boards around the house, there isn't any room left. They pile some on top of the stack of magazines in the den, shove them into bookshelves, and display the best ones on top of the TV. Alice suggests they start going across the doors, treating the doors as wall space. First, Alice suggests, the door to the garage, since it is never used. Then the two patio doors, because they'd only sat out there once, and then the front door because she'd grown to love the way Mrs. Dee talked about stories as if they could enter Clarissa's party at any moment, or go and buy those flowers themselves and Alice just didn't want to leave. She wanted the lawn to grow so tall it would tangle over top the house and string the doors shut. Even though the two would never leave the house together, since the conditions of Mrs. Dee's house arrest ensured she stay within those 1600 square feet for the period of one year, they could see the whole world together, and they could paint and scratch new scenes, too. They didn't need to leave.

The third major shift happens on the last day of September. Alice had started staying at Mrs. Dee's for a few days at a time. When she had to leave, she would always return with art supplies—shadow boxes, a glue gun, a couple spools of ribbon, and a baby food jar of antique buttons that had been her grandmother's—and she'd sleep on the couch. On that day, Mrs. Dee

wakes Alice up with a mug of coffee and she sits down beside her. She wraps the blanket around Alice, and puts the pillow across her own lap. She leans forward with her elbows pressed into the pillow. Alice knows she is about to bring it up, and feels the jolt of the jaw-tight anger. Mrs. Dee mumbles something, and then says, “The Accident.” Words that sound like smashed metal, a can crushed in a tight fist—they push up through Alice’s bottom jaw, rush up her neck and out the top of her head. Her coffee is a mug of boiled anger that she swallows hard and scorches down her throat.

Alice was used to a different kind of language, and knew how Mrs. Dee curved her mouth when she said metaphor, characterization, static and dynamic. She could no longer imagine Mrs. Dee outside of the house, on the highway. On the wrong side of the highway. Drunk. The dark coffee drips into her belly, as she tilts her head back, her eyes up at the ceiling—they should have covered the ceiling—a blank white canvas. Alice nods, though she had already read the details in the paper, black text on grey sheets, sentences she’d memorized without wanting to. She’d defended the nasty things people said about her Mrs. Dee because one moment, she said, with her fingers spread in the air, should not define an entire person. A few minutes after Mrs. Dee said, “Accident,” she cried with her whole body and Alice hated her for it. “Stop crying,” she pleaded.

“I’m just so, so sorry,” Mrs. Dee whispers.

Alice picked up a painted pot from the coffee table and shook out the remote control and pencils. She stood up and then flung it to the ground. Slivers of sharp terracotta flew across the room. “STOP CRYING,” Alice instructed. “This is enough,” she wanted to say, but didn’t because she was too busy trying to grab Mrs. Dee by the shoulders while she sobbed them up and down so that she could kiss her on the mouth, push her down across the couch and put her legs around her. She wanted to love her as hard as she was about to fling the rest of the pots at the floor. Mrs. Dee turned her head, and Alice pressed her face into her cheek and then down into her neck. Mrs. Dee’s thick brown ponytail whipped against Alice’s face. Then, while still seated, she asked Alice to leave. Her lips were pressed together, but her eyebrows were raised and Alice couldn’t tell if she was angry or shocked or both. Mrs. Dee only had one week left of house arrest, she explained, and then she went on to say that she was going back to university. She said something about not deserving to start over, to start a new career, but that she had to. It was clear to Alice that someone more official than her had told Mrs. Dee to start moving on.

From the top of the stairs leading from the living room to the kitchen, Alice whooshed her arm through the air, pointing at everything they’d done. She wanted to take it all with her, but instead started flinging pots at the floor—each made a glass-like crunch.

Alice paused, “But you’re a teacher.”

“Not anymore.”

Alice sensed that she only had a few minutes, and grabbed what she could: a tinfoil palette, a mason jar, and too many paintbrushes considering she’d never paint again. Mrs. Dee flicked her eyes up at her, shrugged and then nodded toward the only door. Alice stopped, stepped back, and looked at Mrs. Dee: one hand on her hip and the other squeezing her ponytail at the scalp. Alice wanted to say, but couldn’t bring herself to form the words, *for there she was*.

Al Kratz

Clear Lake Miracle

Fish was making his way through the cold murky waters of Clear Lake when he saw an innocent minnow easier to take than forbidden fruit. When the hook set into his cheek, things *meant to be* began flowing. It would be easy to think nothing special could happen on an off season night in a small Iowa lake town, but that kind of assumption invites exception. After a fight, mostly for show, The Messenger took Fish off the hook, and The Witnesses, who to this point of the night had nothing worthy to say, began to speak:

“Is he big enough to keep?”

“It looks like an on-the-liner to me.”

“Yellow Bass have more meat in ‘em then you’d think.”

“You gonna clean it?”

“I can’t feel my legs.”

They had raised enough doubt, and it was apparent The Judge would have to decide, so The Messenger carried Fish on a hundred foot journey down the dock, up the deck stairs, and into the cabin.

Fish waited in The Messenger's hand, in the dry air of the cabin, and listened to the conversation of life or death. It wasn't quick or easy. In earlier times, The Judge had been respected, but lately there was unspoken concern for his capacity.

"What should I do with it?" The Messenger asked.

"Well, it's not time for breakfast, is it?" The Judge got up from the couch to take a better look at Fish.

"So you want me to string it?"

"Where's my drink?"

The Messenger handed him the drink and asked, "String it or not?"

"Jesus, calm down," The Judge said and finished his drink. "Let me see it."

After almost fumbling Fish on dropped words and meanings, it looked like there wouldn't be any decision. The Messenger could have sat down and watched the game, hung out with Fish like a new friend, oblivious to the suffocation. The group was headed for failures like this without a ruling.

"Did he just tell Jesus to calm down?" The Witness asked no one.

"Maybe if it was still Friday," The Judge said and handed Fish back to The Messenger and declared, "Let him go."

"Did you see that?" The Messenger asked.

"What? I said let him go."

"Who does he think he is, telling Jesus to calm down?" The Witness asked.

The Judge held a hand up to silence The Witness and had the look of a man finished with conversation.

"Hey, did you see the fish's eyes?" The Messenger asked again.

The Judge sat back on the couch and said, “Just take him out already. I’m too tired to clean fish. Let them all go.”

The Messenger nodded like a man about to apologize. On the way out, he said, “His eyes bulged when you said it. He *knew* what you said.”

At the end of the dock, after they walked back through the midnight air, it appeared Fish had negotiated not only his own freedom, but the freedom of five brothers on a stringer, some who spent more than twenty-four hours in hopeless waters, but now were night swimming far from the bright yellow light of the cabin.

This wasn’t a departure, it was a moment of arrival. The fish carried up the dock wasn’t the same when he was released. He transformed from Fish to Hero. The news would spread quickly through the Yellow Bass population of Clear Lake. It wouldn’t be long before it passed to other breeds and waters. Organic stories like this always grow legs.

If it were left to the hibernating townees, humans would have had no sense of it. History takes the right kind of people. After the release, the Witnesses were still buzzing and, from the dock, imagined they could see Hero swimming into his legend.

“You shoulda seen him work.”

“I did see it, you damn fool.”

“Did you see that eye?”

“The peace of it all. That little fucker was like Gandhi.”

“I think we’re supposed to tell people or something.”

“No one had to die for our sins either.”

“I still can’t feel my legs.”

Gleah Powers

Abortos

One night in late summer, two months after we graduated from high school, Arlene and I drove from Phoenix, where we lived, three hours through the desert in ninety-five degree heat, to Nogales, so she could get an abortion.

We'd been told to go to the bus depot on the American side and wait in the cafeteria for the doctor to approach us. When we walked in, pairs of brown eyes darted toward us; tired looking women in long skirts and men in faded black pants. Their children pointed and said, "Mira, las hueras."

We sat at a long metal table on an attached bench, drank coffee and smoked cigarettes. A huge clock, its face stained brownish yellow from food grease and dirt, hung on a paint-cracked wall. Its hands, barely visible, read 10:35. Our appointment was at eleven. An evaporative cooler rattled above our heads, spitting out hot muggy air. I tried to conjure up a good outcome, but couldn't help tensing the muscles in my chest and ribs, armoring myself for the possible butchering of Arlene that I would somehow have to handle. Raised Catholic, she feared God would punish us and, though we were almost in Mexico, I worried that if God didn't get us, the government would. We were under age, but we could still be arrested and thrown in jail.

Arlene slumped on the bench, smoking with a shaky hand. We tried to look inconspicuous, which was impossible. All the people who came in and went out of the bus depot were dark-skinned, except for the two of us and a white man who sat a few feet away on the same bench. He wore a ponytail and a thin spotty beard. He half-smiled to no one as he held up a paper cup and picked his teeth with the straw that stuck up out of it.

I'd arranged everything, pretended I wanted the information for myself when I asked Donna, a divorced woman in my art class, what to do. Donna's drawings were confident and technically perfect and she was thirty-eight, so I trusted her. She wrote down a Mexican phone number, said to make the call from a phone booth, not to worry, it would be safe, she'd been through it herself.

"This must be him," I said, as a chubby man with glasses came through the front door and walked toward us. I flipped the lid of my Marlboro cigarette box, took out another cigarette and lit it.

Arlene looked at her watch. "It's not time yet."

I leaned over the table and whispered. "Well, he's coming this way. Don't look around." I dropped my head and kept watching with lifted eyes. "Forget it. He turned."

Arlene wore a blue tank top. A gold Italian horn meant to ward off evil glistened at her throat. As usual, she had a dark tan and her short brown hair was bleached from the sun. I wore blue too, a t-shirt that read "Ft. Lauderdale."

"I don't know why you said blue. This top is all I have and it's so tight since my boobs have grown."

"I told you. When I made the phone call the woman asked what color we'd be wearing so the doctor would know who we were. I was so nervous, I couldn't think. I scanned the inside of the phone booth and saw "Butterfield Blues Band" written on one of the metal slats with a heart drawn below it. You know how much I love them."

Arlene sighed and leaned across the table. "I could never have handled this alone."

"It's lucky I knew who to ask."

"I didn't tell Leonard or anyone but you. I have to end it with him. He's a drug dealer. The people he hangs out with are scary. I'm so grateful you're here."

"Me too." I reached for her hand.

Arlene and I became best friends the year my mother's third marriage failed. She could no longer afford to keep me and I was sent to Phoenix to live with my grandmother for my last two years

of high school. I didn't know anything about my grandmother except that she drank too much and had money but acted poor.

When I arrived, she told me that, if I obeyed her wishes, things might work out. She had two rules: no wasting electricity—"Like you're doing now," she'd said, "standing there with the refrigerator door open," and no lying, "I can't stand liars." But when I asked for something, it didn't matter what, gum, hairspray, a pair of jeans, her first response was, "I don't have the money," which I knew was a lie. Sometimes she'd give in, but only after I begged, which I wasn't very good at. All discussions had to happen in the morning. She went to bed at four in the afternoon after drinking straight shots of bourbon for three hours.

One day, on my way to Spanish class at my new school, where I hadn't made any friends, I walked by the fence that enclosed the football field. Dirty papers stuck like gray blinds in the diamond shaped holes. I passed the basketball courts where some guys were playing. The sun felt red-hot. How did people live in this heat? I thought I might pass out. I held onto the fence and closed my eyes. Suddenly, a horn honked and I jumped, startled to see a girl pulling up beside me in a red Corvette convertible. She screamed over the blasting radio, "Wanna go for a ride?"

"Sure," I said, looking over my shoulder to make sure she meant me.

"Hi, I'm Arlene." She turned down the radio. "I've seen you around."

"My name's Linda." I walked closer to the car.

"I know. We're in the same art history class.

"Oh, right."

"Get in."

I opened the door and slid into the buttery leather seat.

I lit a cigarette, twisted my bangs and tried to think of things to say. Every once in a while, Arlene looked over and smiled at me. I could talk about art, but I'd never caught on to social friendliness. I knew there was a particular tone of voice and appropriate words to say, questions to ask, to get a positive reaction from another, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Sometimes I wondered if I was an extraterrestrial.

“Neat car,” I said, finally.

“It is, right? But it’s not mine. It’s my boyfriend, Jerry’s. You must have seen him around school. He wears designer clothes and he’s destined to become a doctor. His parents own Montoya’s, a chain of Mexican restaurants in Arizona and Nevada.”

“Cool,” I said, pretending to be impressed. Jerry was in my Spanish class. I hadn’t talked to him. He was cocky. He walked with a swagger in tight pants and lizard skin Italian shoes. He wore a diamond and gold pinky ring that he twisted and flashed like he was in the Mafia.

Arlene pulled up in front of the Ranch House, a small wooden building next door to a gas station. Two old ladies, originally from Bisbee, did the cooking with nets over their hair.

Out back, at a picnic table, Arlene dumped her fries out onto a napkin. “So, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Back in Florida. He’s much older, a lifeguard at the beach. He models, too. Cigarette ads for magazines.”

“Really?”

“John treated my foot one day at the beach when a stingray stung me so badly I could hardly walk. We dated that summer until I came here.”

“Have you gone all the way?”

I’d been afraid to, but I didn’t want Arlene to know that. I took a bite of my cheeseburger and didn’t answer.

“Jerry and I do it all the time. Some days I can hardly walk I’m so sore after a night with him. Know what I mean?”

I pushed some fries into my mouth and swallowed hard. “I know what you mean.” I wondered if Arlene made the same strange moaning sounds I’d heard from my mother when she came home with her dates.

“Want to come to my house on Saturday? We could bleach our hair.”

I must have said the right things. “Sounds great.”

“I could fix you up sometime with one of Jerry’s friends. We could double date.”

“Maybe,” I said, knowing I wouldn’t like his friends and wondering when I’d really go all the way.

Arlene’s family began to include me in holiday and Sunday dinners. For Christmas, I gave each of them their portraits painted in acrylic and oil. Her mother took me to my first gynecological appointment. Her father took us out to lunch in celebration of our birthdays and Arlene’s saint’s day. And when my paintings were shown at Baboquivari’s, the local coffee house, Arlene came to the opening with her parents and brother. It was too late in the day for my grandmother to come.

Arlene and I spent all our time together except when she was with Jerry. We cruised Central Avenue and practiced smoking. Like my mother and most girls I’d seen, Arlene’s boyfriend came first. I had to accept it or be friendless. I couldn’t find a boyfriend I liked. I kept things going with John, writing letters back and forth. He sent me gifts, mostly tiki god necklaces. One had real rubies for eyes. Arlene wanted to wear that one. I told Arlene I was too much in love with John to date other people.

We graduated from high school and my grandmother bought me a used car with a stick shift on the wheel and no radio. Arlene’s father took up with a young woman named Trudy, and the whole family fell apart. I felt the same as I had every time my mother divorced. My spine seemed to shrink. My back and neck ached from the pressure.

Jack and Trudy left town and never came back. That’s when Arlene got a job as a topless go-go dancer at the Tradewinds Bar in downtown Phoenix.

She’d been afraid to go alone, so I went with her to the audition.

“Your tits ain’t big enough,” the manager said to me, thinking I was there to audition too. He was fat and sweaty. A tight gold chain disappeared between his neck and his chin. He fingered a large gold cross that stuck to his throat.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stepped away.

Every night, for the first few weeks, I sat at a round Formica table and watched Arlene dance. Colored lights flashed from the ceiling. She rubbed her hands over her breasts and rotated her hips. She moved her arms like waves through the air. She shook her whole body up and down, side to side. She spun in circles across the floor. Men in faded jeans and dusty cowboy boots made loud whooping noises. I felt embarrassed for Arlene, but at least she didn't smile at them.

On her break, she'd join me at the table. We'd talk until she had to dance again, and I'd go home to my grandmother.

"This is so weird," she'd say. "These guys are such creeps."

But when I asked her if she was sure about this, she said, "I make good money," in a flat voice with a stony face. Having been her father's princess, daddy's girl, I knew that more than anything she was doing this to crush him and to get back at Jerry, who had dumped her when her family fell apart.

When men approached our table and said things like, "Hey sweetheart, that's some fine dancin'," I'd clench my teeth and glare at them. "If you don't mind, we're having a private conversation."

"Just tryin' to be friendly."

One night, I came late and saw Arlene standing at the bar in the short nylon robe she wore at break time. She was laughing, surrounded by men. One of them had his arm around her waist. One guy yelled, "Hey, Linda. How ya doin' babe?" Arlene waved for me to join them.

How did they know my name? What was Arlene doing?

"Come on over," she said. "These guys are okay. Really."

I couldn't move. I felt frozen inside.

One of them said, "We were just tellin' Arlene what a fine dancer she is. How about showin' us what you can do." He wiggled his hips and they all laughed.

I stood there staring, unable to speak.

"Oh, well," the guy said.

“Forget her,” said another.

They all turned away from me and huddled together around the bar. I couldn't even see Arlene. I walked out and never went back.

We didn't call each other after that. I tried to paint but couldn't concentrate. There was a gnawing in my stomach. The odor of oil paint and turpentine made my eyes sting. I'd end up staring, glassy-eyed at the muddy canvas, smoking cigarettes and sucking on frozen chocolate turtles.

One day, I sat at the kitchen table trying to eat a sandwich. My grandmother sat across from me snapping cards down for solitaire. She asked me when I'd be getting a job. “That's why I bought you the car. Weren't you and Arlene going to get a place together?”

“I'm not sure,” I said.

“Maybe you should go back to your mother.”

“You know I can't. It might still work out with Arlene. I'm going to call her right now.”

She said she was living with a guy named Leonard. “He's a bartender at the Safari Hotel. We have a good thing going. I'm meeting all kinds of interesting people. You probably wouldn't like them.”

“Oh, I might.” I lied.

“What have you been up to?”

“Working on some paintings. I'm thinking about applying to art school. Maybe we could get together.”

“Sure, I'll call you.”

I didn't expect to hear from her, but soon after that she called. She was in trouble and didn't know who else she could trust. She made me promise not to tell anyone. At first, I didn't know exactly what to do, but I knew I'd think of something. I had to. Arlene and I had been best

friends for two years and, if everything worked out, maybe we could be close again. Maybe she'd go back to the way she was before.

Now, waiting in the bus depot, I thought of the times during high school we spent Saturdays getting stoned and changing the color of each other's hair. "Remember when we dyed my hair auburn?"

"That was the best color on you. Much better than when it turned green."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about the green." I put my head down and laughed.

Suddenly, a slender man, about forty, was standing next to Arlene. He wore a polyester short sleeve shirt with a tie and gray pants. His hair was combed down with something shiny. He smelled like lemons.

"You waiting for me?" He swung his legs over the bench and sat down next to Arlene. She leaned away from him.

"You have the envelope?"

The woman had said two hundred dollars in small bills sealed in a white envelope.

Arlene handed it to him under the table.

His nails looked clean and he wore a nice watch and a wedding ring. I told myself this was a good sign.

"I go out now and you follow," he said. "In the parking lot, I have a brown Chevy. You drive behind me in your car. What kind do you have?"

"A white Plymouth."

"Across the border, three miles, is a hotel, two stories. There is no name. Look for a flashing sign that says 'Bar.' You get a room. I watch from the parking lot. After you're in, I come to the door. Okay?"

I nodded in agreement and he left. I picked up my lighter and box of cigarettes, put them in my purse. I tried to remember everything he'd said.

"Let's go," I said. I untangled my legs from under the table, lifted them over the bench and stood up. Arlene didn't move. "Arlene, we should go now."

"What do you think?"

I put my hand on her shoulder. "We should go."

Outside, the night was hotter than before, the air crackling with dryness. There were no streetlights and the moon was too thin to light our way.

"I think that's him," said Arlene. "Over there." She pointed to a pair of uneven headlights off to the right. "What if he drives away with the money?"

I hadn't thought of that. "He won't."

I tugged at Arlene's arm and we walked faster toward my car. We climbed in and I started it up, followed him across the border through the blackened desert into Mexico. The highway disappeared behind us. Ahead, we barely saw the flickering "Bar" sign. It looked like a dying signal from a space ship that had landed long ago, still trying to get a response from earthlings.

We got a room on the second floor facing the gravel parking lot. The room was small and dark. The curtains and bedspread were a purple and black print, made from cheap rough cotton. It looked clean enough. I parted the curtains and peeked out.

He got out of his car with a doctor's bag. Donna had said he was a real doctor. I thought about what kinds of instruments were in that bag and wondered how often he did this. My chest felt tight. I closed the crack in the curtain and heard his feet crunch on the gravel.

Arlene sat on the bed with tears in her eyes. "You know I tried to get a blessing from Father Michael. He wouldn't give it. He said it's been too long since I've been to church."

I sat down next to her. I wasn't Catholic but I couldn't imagine a blessing from a priest making any kind of difference. I wondered but didn't ask if she wanted a blessing to have an abortion, which would never have happened, or to have the baby.

The doctor tapped on the door and I let him in. He put down his bag and shook both our hands. "I am Doctor Medellin." He didn't ask our names and we didn't give them. "Which one?" he asked. I nodded toward Arlene. "Nothing to worry. How many weeks are you?"

Arlene told him seven or eight in a bad Spanish accent.

He opened his bag and pulled out a needle and vial of something. "You leave," he said to me. "Come back in two hours."

"I didn't think I'd have to leave."

"Neither did I," said Arlene.

"What is that anyway?" I asked the doctor.

"To make her sleep. She will not feel a thing. I cannot start if you are here."

"I'll leave after you give her the shot."

He gave Arlene the injection and I stood up to leave. "I'll be back soon, Arlene. Don't worry."

"I feel fine. Just fine." She was already getting groggy.

I didn't want to abandon her, but I didn't know what else to do. I got in my car and rolled the windows down part way, locked the doors and sat there staring up at Room 235. Now that I was alone, I wanted to cry about what was happening, but I had to stay alert in so much darkness in the middle of nowhere. My body began to sweat, struggling with the heat and fear. Crickets chirped off in the distance. I'd read somewhere they were a sign of good luck. I took a deep breath and looked at myself in the rear view mirror. Smart, I thought. I'd handled everything. My grandmother thought I was in Tucson on job interviews, staying overnight with Jane, a girl from school. I knew she and her family were on vacation. I gave my grandmother a made up phone number, knowing she'd never call. There was no way she could find out about this trip, unless something happened to Arlene.

But it wouldn't. Soon, everything would be back to normal. I really would get a job, maybe something to do with art. And I'd move in with Arlene.

I'd been in the car for a few minutes when a pair of headlights shined in the mirror and I heard tires grind through the gravel. A car pulled up behind me. A man got out and walked toward me. He had long hair and a moustache. His body was weaving and his speech was slurred.

"Where is she?" he said into my half-open window.

My heart pounded through my veins. My fingers shook as I felt for the handle, rolled up the window as fast as I could.

"I know she's here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I yelled through the glass. I realized this had to be Leonard and he must have followed us from Phoenix to the bus depot, waited to see where we'd go, then followed us here. I didn't know what he might do.

"Where is she?" he shouted and started toward the hotel, his arms swinging around his tight muscled body. I had to keep him away from Arlene. I got out of the car and ran in his direction.

"I've got a gun," he said.

With courage I didn't know I had, I planted myself directly in front of him, put my hands on my hips. "What are you going to do, shoot her?"

"I don't know," he said in a quieter voice. He looked down and his arms went limp. The gun swung from his finger like a toy.

"Let's get in the car," I said. I led him away from the hotel. "Put the gun away." He slipped it under the seat. I pulled slowly out of the parking lot and drove up and down the streets of Nogales making sure I kept the "Bar" sign in view. We drove in silence.

He smelled like stale beer. Arlene must have met him at the Tradewinds Bar. Snobby Jerry was a prize in comparison.

"I know what she's doing down here," he said.

"I don't think so."

“She told me about having to wear a certain color and all that. Pretty far out.”

“What?” I stopped the car.

“I didn’t believe it was mine at first but you know I’ve been thinking about this one night we made love where it felt like something was there that was never there before. Know what I mean? Of course, that doesn’t mean I want to keep it.”

I leaned my arms and then my head on the steering wheel.

“You okay?”

“Just shut up,” I said.

“What’s with you?”

I jerked the car into gear and drove back to the hotel. “Get out.”

“Hey, I don’t know what your problem is. I don’t even know you...”

“Just get out.”

“Okay, okay. Tell Arlene I’ll be in the bar. She’d better be alright.”

Leonard retrieved his gun and got out of the car. He lumbered across the parking lot dragging his shoes through the gravel.

“Bastard.” I rubbed my scalp. My head felt like thousands of pins pricking the inside of my skull. I got out of the car.

The doctor’s car was still in the parking lot but the two hours were up. I wanted to talk to Arlene, hear her explanation.

I knocked at room 235. The doctor opened it and stood there wiping his hands carefully on a towel. The room smelled of sweet lemon cologne.

“Just finished,” he said.

“Is she alright?” I moved closer to Arlene, passed out on the bed, covered with a blanket. She was still breathing.

“Everything’s fine. A little bleeding for a few days. Nothing to worry. Do you want to see it?” His eyes got bigger and he smiled.

“See it?”

“It’s in the toilet.”

“God, no.”

He went to the bathroom and flushed. He came back, still smiling and rubbing his hands together. He sat down on one of the chairs. “What’s your name?”

I looked over at Arlene and said nothing.

He crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair. “She will be out until the morning. I order some drinks from the bar. What do you like?”

“You’d better go.”

“We have a party, no?”

My palms beaded up. He wasn’t going to budge. I cleared my throat and crossed my arms over my stomach. He could do whatever he wanted and no one would know. Who could I call for help in Mexico? Leonard was it. I watched myself pick up the phone and ask for the bar.

The doctor said, “I like scotch.”

I put my hand over the mouthpiece and said, “I’m calling her boyfriend to come up. He’s been waiting downstairs. He has a gun. If I were you I’d get out of here as fast as I could.” The bar answered and I asked for Leonard. “Come up to room 235.”

The doctor grabbed his bag, ran out the door.

“Creep.” I watched from the window as he slipped on the gravel and headed toward his car. Arlene looked peaceful and innocent. I was furious. My chest and throat tingled. The doctor’s wheels spun as he took off through the parking lot.

For the rest of the night, I sat draped over a chair, clutching a pillow and chain smoking, waiting for the double-crossing Arlene to wake up. Leonard dozed in the other chair, holding the gun in his lap. I wanted to pull the trigger right where the barrel was aimed. I hated that he’d become my rescuer. But at least he didn’t know that.

Before daylight, Arlene began to stir. I woke Leonard and told him to go get coffee. I wanted Arlene alone. I sat on the edge of the chair and watched her wake up. Her face looked soft and puffy, mascara globbed under her eyes.

“How do you feel?”

“Fine, I think.” Arlene pulled back the blanket and sat up. “But I’m pretty sure that guy had sex with me right before I passed out. I could have dreamt it.”

I didn’t care. “Leonard’s here.”

“Where?”

“He knew everything.”

“Where is he?”

“You said I was the only one who knew.”

“I couldn’t help but tell him.”

“Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t think you’d help me.”

“Of course I would.”

“Look, he followed me here. That proves he loves me.”

Arlene got up and moved slowly to the bathroom. Over running water she said, “Your problem is you’ve always been jealous of my boyfriends.”

I felt the acid rise up into my throat and mouth. The sour taste was sickening. It was all I could do to gulp it down. I could have strangled her.

“How can you say that?” I shouted into the bathroom.

“I don’t have the energy to discuss this now. I’ll drive home with Leonard. I’ll call you later. Thanks for everything.”

Leonard came back to the room and they left. I stood by the window barely breathing. My chest felt like a cave. I watched him help her navigate the stairs. They got in his car and sped down the highway.

When they were out of sight, I made my way to the parking lot. The sun climbed up the sky as I made the long drive home. I’d worried about Arlene being butchered, but now I felt permanently cracked open and wondered what I would tell my grandmother about the job interviews.

I got home to find all my clothes and belongings in a pile on the lawn. I saw one of my drawings caught in the rose bushes. My whole body went numb. I couldn’t believe my grandmother wanted me out of the house that badly. She must have gone on a binge. I rang the doorbell over and over. I banged on the door, screamed, “Grandma, why did you do this? Let me in.”

After several minutes, she came to the door, drunk, wearing only a pajama top. She weaved back and forth behind the locked screen. “You lied to me.”

“I did not.”

“That Jane called here, tried to cover for you but you can’t fool me, Missy.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, half choking, still trying to swallow my failure. “I had to help Arlene. She needed an abortion. She made me promise not to tell anyone. I was trying to be a good friend. What’s so bad about that?”

My grandmother didn't say a word. Her eyes closed. She held onto the doorframe. She looked like she might pass out. Finally, she unlocked the screen door, wobbled down the hall to her bedroom. "Don't forget to turn on the burglar alarm."

I stayed outside for a while looking at my life in a heap on the lawn. I retrieved my drawing and dragged my things back into the house, making as much noise as possible.

Pink Flamingos

I visited Arlene at the three-bedroom ranch-style house that she and her husband, Frenchy, had just bought on Osborn Road near the old Holiday Inn in Phoenix. Sitting on a black Naugahyde barstool at the kitchen counter, I looked through the Venetian blinds at the front yard while Arlene, wearing a reddish-brown Afro wig, made margaritas in a blender. Water from the sprinklers made half-circle arcs over the yard, which was bare and smelled of manure. Arlene said Frenchy had just put the grass in.

I hadn't talked to her in five years.

"I heard you were in town," she said on the phone. "Please come over. I want you to see my baby. I've missed you."

I'd missed her, too, and her family. But I'd stayed away since the abortion. Rarely did I feel as deeply crushed as I had then. She never thanked me for helping her through it. She left me alone in the motel room where it happened and drove away with her boyfriend, who'd done nothing but get her pregnant. Now, here she was again, and I couldn't stop the churning in my stomach. I'd hoped that seeing her would help me get over it. Maybe motherhood had changed her.

"Where's the baby?" I asked.

"In the bedroom. We can look at him later. I need a break. We named him Oliver, Ollie for short," she said.

"Wasn't that the name of the singer at the Red Dog, the club where we used to dance? The guy you had a crush on? I remember doing a painting of him."

"Yeah."

"Are you nursing him?"

“No way.”

“I’ve never seen it done before. I was hoping I could watch,” I said.

“Well, it hurt like hell and I got an infection.”

Arlene turned the margarita glasses upside down in a dish of salt, then poured the frothy pale yellow liquid from the blender. Holding it by its stem, she handed me a glass. I took a sip. Salt and cactus juice burned my throat. I stared at the diamond ring on her finger.

“Cubic zirconium,” she said. “I bought it for myself. No one knows we’re not really married. You’re the only one I would tell.” Arlene sat down on the bar stool next to me and lit a cigarette. She smoked it out of the side of her mouth. “I was just looking for a good time. I dug shocking people. You should have seen the looks we got.”

“I’ll bet. I’ve never even seen a white woman with a black man in this town.”

“I liked making them uncomfortable, but now, with Ollie, it’s a different story. People come up and call me a nigger lover, right to my face. Frenchy’s sister Leona accused me of getting pregnant on purpose just so I could have a brother for myself. So I hit her. I never expected to have a baby with Frenchy, but I couldn’t go through another border town abortion.”

I thought, Yeah, neither could I.

Arlene sucked smoke deep into her body. Her skin was lined like leather from too much sun. In high school we were always perfectly tanned. During our sitting out sessions, our bodies shining with baby oil, we held the backs of our hands toward the sun to make sure they matched the rest of us.

“Anyway, Leona hit me back and we really got into it. Frenchy’s two aunts had to break us up. All those women are on welfare. Well, I won. Leona’s nose bled and I ripped her blouse. She didn’t know who she was messing with.” Arlene poured herself another margarita. “She thought I was just some wimpy white woman.”

A warm breeze carried the smell of wet manure through the front window.

“How do you and Frenchy get along?”

“Oh, he turned into a pretty good guy once we got past the slavery thing.”

“The what?”

“One night he drank too much and hit me pretty hard. I couldn’t figure out what I’d done. The next day he apologized. He said it had to do with 200 years of slavery. I understand it I guess, the anger and all.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll do it again?”

“Oh, no. It was just the one time. See all those orange trees out there in the backyard? He planted every one of them. And he’s going to dig a hole for a swimming pool too.”

“Are you sure about all this?” I gulped down the rest of my drink.

“I know it’s a little freaky, and some days I don’t know how to handle it. Thank God for weed. I’ve made my bed, as they say. Besides, black men are better in that area.”

“Bigger than white men?”

“And better kissers too. There’s more cushion to their lips.” Arlene pursed hers and made in and out motions like a fish.

Maybe I should try it, I thought. I didn’t know if I could stand to be called a nigger lover. I thought that was a southern expression from another era. I’d have to live in a big city or someplace in Europe. But maybe if I loved the guy I could live anywhere, including backward conservative Phoenix. “Are you in love with him?”

“I wish I’d had the chance to find out for sure before I got pregnant. If you want to try it out, I could introduce you to Frenchy’s cousin. He’s cute. You look good though. This guy Ray must be treating you right.”

“I guess. He’s a lot older. Can I try on your Afro?”

“It’s cool, huh?” Arlene pulled off the wig. Her hair was bleached platinum underneath. In her short, African print tunic, almond-shaped brown beads around her neck, she looked heavier without the big hair to give her more height.

I went down the hall to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Arlene turned up the sound on the television. Soap opera music played. In the darkness of the hallway I could barely see the wall photos of Arlene's parents, her brother and the portrait I'd painted of her in high school: thin, tan, blonde, smiling and in love with Jerry, the guy she wanted to marry.

The walls of the bathroom were painted forest green. The color of the shag rug and toilet seat cover matched. The light was low. I almost didn't see the baby lizard making its way across the windowsill.

I looked at myself in the mirror and then made my way back to the kitchen. "It looks good with my skin color. Exotic, don't you think? Like I'm part Brazilian, black and Irish or something."

Arlene twirled around on her barstool to face me. "Far out," she said. "It looks great. Frenchy'll dig it."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"That place we used to go for burgers when we ditched school. The Ranch House, with those old ladies who did the cooking with nets over their hair. He was on a job nearby and stopped to eat his lunch out back at those picnic tables. He had on really tight bellbottoms." Arlene wiggled her hips on the bar stool and smacked her lips. "He knows how to give that good lovin' every night. Anyway, he politely asked if he could join me. Frenchy makes good money too, as long as the construction jobs keep coming in. In the summer he has to eat salt tablets it gets so hot. One hundred-twenty degrees some days. He never complains. He's used to hard times. When he was a kid in Greensboro, Mississippi, he and his brother used to walk to school through the snow in their mother's high heels. Isn't that a trip? They didn't have shoes of their own."

"Your mother must be thrilled about all this."

"You can imagine. She did loan me the money to buy the ring."

We watched silently as the soap opera ended.

"Are you still painting?" Arlene asked.

"Yeah. Ray said I could turn his garage into a studio."

“That’s great. Listen, I’m going to have Ollie baptized and I wanted to know if you’d be his godmother. If I die, you need to make sure he gets Catholic teachings.”

“Why me? I haven’t seen you in years. And I’m not Catholic.”

“I know we drifted apart, probably my fault, but we go back a long way.”

She hadn’t said that before. Maybe she had changed.

“I told Father Michael you were brought up Episcopalian. He said that was close enough for a godmother. You just have to promise you’d make sure he got Catholic teachings.”

Arlene went to the kitchen to warm a bottle. “Do you want to see him now? I have to warn you, he’s pretty dark.”

We went to the baby’s room. It was the same color as the bathroom except one wall was covered with bamboo print wallpaper, ripped at the seams. Sunlight seeped in from the edges of an ill-fitting window shade pulled down below the windowsill. One stuffed teddy bear sat on a shelf above Ollie’s crib.

“See what I mean?”

She hadn’t exaggerated his darkness. It was hard to believe he’d come out of her.

“Well, he’s a pretty color,” I said. “Shiny burnt umber.”

“What’s that?”

“A dark reddish-brown.”

He was a skinny baby. He lay in the middle of a small mattress covered with an animal print sheet. His body looked like a wooden board. Arlene didn’t pick him up. She put the bottle in a plastic holder next to him. Ollie turned his tiny head. His eyes stared up at me as he sucked at the fake nipple.

We heard Frenchy come through the garage door singing.

“Maybe you’ll want to give me kisses sweet. Hey, Arlene, you here?”

We went to the kitchen to meet him. His hair was cut short against his head. His jeans hung low on his hips. When he pulled off his white t-shirt and tossed it on the counter, he exposed his flat muscled belly. His navel was encircled with an oval of black curly hair. He opened the refrigerator and bent down to get a beer.

“Where have you been?” asked Arlene.

“Hey, Baby.” Frenchy put his arm around her. “Out to the Junkanoo Club talking with Marvin. We came up with a dynamite idea. We’re going into business together.”

Arlene looked at me and rolled her eyes.

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Linda.”

“Oh, the artist. Nice to meet you.” Frenchy extended his pink-palmed hand toward me.

“We’re gonna manufacture Marvin’s Deep Pit Barbecue Sauce.”

He had a thick southern accent. I had to listen closely to understand what he said.

“White people in this town aren’t going to buy barbecue sauce from a couple of brothers,” Arlene said.

“Sure they will. We’ll be like Famous Amos, advertise our own thing. Start on local TV. We’ll film Marvin digging a pit, then slapping sauce all over a pig and lowering it down into the ground. You girls can eat the finished product on camera.”

“Nobody roasts pigs in pits anymore, except in Hawaii.”

“Baby, it’s just advertising.”

“What do you think of my idea?” he said to me.

I paused to make sure I understood him. “Sounds good. Everyone should go for what they believe in.”

“I am wore out. That is the bad part about all this. You get a house and you got to work harder. I’m too young for this.” Frenchy laughed.

“Did you bring the diapers?”

“Aw, shit.” Frenchy shrugged his shoulders and slid his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “Sorry, Babe. I’ll go now.”

“Never mind. Give me the keys? Come on, Linda.”

“Let her stay. I can show her the wall out back where you thought she could paint pink flamingos.”

I looked at Arlene, then at Frenchy. He scared me a little but I was curious about him. Other than the fact that he was black, he seemed different than other men I’d met.

Arlene shot Frenchy a look of warning, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head. I wondered if he’d cheated on her.

“Oh, alright. I’ll be back in a few,” she said.

Frenchy angled the blinds until the bands of light on the faded linoleum floor disappeared. “Have to keep the heat out,” he said smiling. “So, Linda. What’s happening?”

“Nothing much.” Maybe I should have gone with Arlene, I thought.

“Let me get you another margarita.” He went to the kitchen, pulled his shirt over his torso and pulsed the blender. “Did you see my main man in there?”

“He’s real cute. Looks just like you.”

“Cigarette? There on the table. They’re made for black folk.”

I noticed the brand. Parliaments.

“You smoke it, you might turn.”

I laughed nervously. “No, thanks.”

“That Afro looks good on you.”

“Oh, I forgot all about it.” I felt my face flush. I should have taken it off, but now my own hair would be a matted down mess underneath. I smoothed the fake hair with my hand like it was my own.

“Let’s sit down.” He put my drink and his beer on the coffee table and patted the couch cushion. I sat in the chair across from him. “You did that painting of John Coltrane Arlene’s got hanging in the bedroom. I like it. We’ll go out back in a minute. Flamingos look good with a pool. Don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I said. A picture he must have seen in a magazine, I thought.

“I don’t expect you to paint them for free or nothing. I used to draw as a kid. I drew things I wanted, like people going out to dinner. I got good at drawing cheeseburgers, tomatoes, onions, cheese and secret sauce dripping over the side of a bun.” Frenchy guzzled down half his beer. “My folks never took me anywhere. I mean nowhere. I’ve never even been on an airplane. I made paper ones all the time. My old man said, ‘You doing something girls do.’ He thought I was cutting out paper dolls. Can you believe it?” Frenchy leaned toward me with big eyes. “I tried to tell him, ‘No. They fly.’ But he wouldn’t listen. Arlene said you used to write poetry.”

“Yeah. Real depressing, suicidal stuff.”

“Can I read you one of mine? You’ll dig it. Wait here.”

He went down the hall and came back carrying a red notebook. He flipped through a pile of records and put one on the turntable. “Background music. This poem is from a dream. Really two dreams put together. Ready?” He turned some pages, stopping somewhere in the middle of the notebook. “I call this one “The Nagi Man.” His body began to sway to the reggae music.

**The Nagi man takes you down
Behind the shadow wall
Hey, baby, come with me**

**It's time for ecstasy
Oya sings below the tracks
Magnolia in her hair
Black arms wait to hold you
No more twists of fear**

Before I could say anything he explained that in African mythology Oya was a black goddess with nine heads, the queen of the winds of change. "When she opens her mouth, flicks out her tongue," he said, imitating Oya, "lightning strikes."

As he talked I pictured myself in Arlene's shoes. I couldn't raise a black child in Phoenix any better than she. I couldn't handle the gawking and whispering, but I saw why she'd been attracted to Frenchy. He was real, sensual and spontaneous.

The margaritas began to make my head buzz. The edges of my body felt doughy and thick.

"You got a man, Linda?"

"I live with him in Hollywood. People keep asking me when I'm going to settle down."

"If this guy's not the one, don't settle. You look good. You got style and you got talent too."

He turned up the music, took my hand and pulled me up from the couch. I hesitated but then followed his lead to the rhythm of reggae. I wanted to taste the salt on his skin. Dancing with Frenchy to the music of Bob Marley was a far cry from sitting around with Ray listening to Patti Page sing "The Folks on the Hill." Sometimes with Ray I felt sucked into childhood, remembering the music my mother listened to through all her marriages and divorces.

Ollie began to cry.

"I'll get him," I said.

Still moving to the music, I came back to the den holding Ollie's stiff body in my arms. His skin was moist. He smiled. "He knows I'm going to be his godmother," I said.

“That’s my man.” Frenchy moved closer to me. His bare arm touched mine. He stroked the baby’s face. Ollie laughed and for a moment we stuck together.

I looked out the back window as the afternoon sun shot streaks of yellow light into the leaves of the orange trees. I heard the cranking cogwheel sound of the garage door opening.

Frenchy moved away from me. Arlene came in with a box of diapers. “Hey,” she said, sizing us up. “I ran into Marcus at the store. He’s having a barbeque, right now. He invited us over for a burger.”

“How about it Linda, we can all go?” Frenchy said.

“I don’t want to take Ollie. Linda can stay here with him, get to know her godson. We won’t be gone long.”

I’m not doing this again, I thought.

I handed the baby to Arlene.

“What?”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Why?”

“What about the pink flamingos?” said Frenchy.

“Paint them yourself.”

“What’s with you?” Arlene said.

On my way out, I held my breath as I walked by the freshly manured front lawn.

Frank Scozzari



Hunters and the Hunted

“Until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.”

– African Proverb

“Yes,” Garrett said. “Yes,” and sighting through the scope, he could see the lion as clearly as though he were beside him, facing him now, head low, dark furry mane framing its large face. Its front paws were in the mud, his huge, black, triangular nose just above the water, and water was dripping from the whiskers of its chin.

This is perfect, Garrett thought.

He steadied himself, placed the crosshairs in the crown of the lion's shoulder, took a deep breath, and began a long draw on the trigger. The lion stopped, lifted his mighty head, and looked up at him, straight into the sights, his ears widespread.

"Yeah, look at me," Garrett whispered. "Look straight into my eyes." Holding his breath, freezing himself inside, he drew back on the trigger.

Bam! The bullet exploded, the barrel of the rifle surged skyward. A flock of birds lifted from the flat-topped acacia trees on the far side of the wash turning the whole horizon black.

There was a loud smack when the bullet hit and the lion went down quickly, his legs scrambling to keep upright. A loud, bellowing cry came from his throat, and, just as quickly as it had dropped, the lion was up again, looked back in a glance up the hillside to where Garrett lay, and then disappeared into the thicket beyond the water.

Garrett ran down the hillside, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Yowza!" he cried.

He held the rifle tight in his burly right hand and dragged his pack in his left, trying desperately to pull it on to his shoulders. By the time he reached the far side of the water hole he was panting pitifully and his legs were feeling heavy as logs.

There was a good deal of blood where the lion had been and a trail of it through the mud and into the thicket. Garrett took off his grey safari hat, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and studied the blood-trail. It was bright red and the tracks were deep and clean, clean like they had been cut with a knife. With the toe of his boot, he smudged the blood into the mud.

"He ain't going far," he said to himself.

He lifted his head and with his eyes he followed the tracks over the muddy rise to where they disappeared into the bush. Even I can do this, he thought, and he followed the blood to the edge of the woods, searching for dark spots in the dry, powdery white earth. He stopped where the trail led into thick undergrowth. Though he could not see the ground beneath, he saw bright red drops on the branches and twigs. He ducked low, beneath the acacia trees, and pursued the blood-trail.

It had all started the night before when they sat around the kerosene lamps drinking *Tusker* and whiskey. Marge Gordon, the woman he had shared a bed with for the last ten months, had mocked him mercilessly. All the fun was made of his inability to cash in of the trophy fee he paid for a lion. He could picture Marge now, her beautiful red hair flowing in the warm breeze, looking redder yet in the kerosene lights, her shorts fitting snugly around her perfect waist, rolling her big blue eyes. "It's plenty of money for a piece of paper," she said, referring to the lion permit. "It will look good framed on your wall." Even Ron Wilson, his long-time friend and hunting companion, was laughing. Thirty-five hundred dollars and no lion!

It was a crushing blow. He had come to Africa to hunt lions. It was a boyhood dream. Now that he had finally reached Africa, three weeks had gone by without a lion. There had been plenty of wilderbeests storming across the savannah, kicking up clouds of dust, and he had killed a few. And he killed a kudu on the second day out. Since then there was only the one bushpig and the pack of hyenas that all of them, frustrated with the lack of game, had used for target practice. Nearly three weeks had passed, and, on Wednesday, they would leave the Hwange tribal area back to the tarmac at Victoria Falls.

It was funny, all right, Garrett scoffed as he followed the blood-trail.

All morning he tracked the lion, crawling through thorn bushes and stepping over large boulders. Most of the way the trail was fresh. But by eleven o'clock the blood had gone stale. Those beautiful, big, bright-red goblets were now dark and dry, soaked up in the parched earth.

But Garrett knew the power of his rifle, a .300 Weatherby magnum. It packed 250-grain bullets, and he had hit the animal cleanly right in the rise of his shoulder.

Can't go far, he thought. Hell, nothing could go far with that in its side. He'll have to slow down sooner or later. Yeah, he's hurting now, and thirsty. Very thirsty. Garrett pulled a water bottle from his pack and took a long drink. He let the water trickle out from the sides of his mouth, down his neck, into his shirt.

By early afternoon the blood-trail came fresh again, and Garrett pushed himself hard, hard with his legs feeling numb beneath him, hard with the pack-straps cutting deep into his shoulders. Long before he came out into the clearing and saw the wounded lion, he had rehearsed it all in his head: pulling the rifle up to his shoulder, sighting down the length of the barrel, beading in on the large muscle at the top of the shoulder. He knew he had to concentrate and be sure. Slowly, calmly, he thought. The lion was wounded and could charge at anytime. Had to be very sure.

He stopped in the clearing and saw the lion standing not more than thirty feet away. It was without cover with blood streaming from its shoulder. The size of it was impressive, at least five-hundred pounds, with wonderful markings, and a big crowning mane that was dark, almost black. And it was panting now, and weak, and there was foam and saliva dripping from its mouth.

Garrett wheeled the rifle to his shoulder, fixed a bead on the lion, and drew back the trigger. The rifle kicked and a white cloud of dirt puffed up in the embankment over the lion's shoulder.

“Shit!” Garrett shouted.

Then they were both running, the lion into the bush, Garrett in hot pursuit, running hard, his stride long, his muscular legs stretching, then stumbling, up again and following the fleeing animal. He stripped the pack off his back and let it drop behind him. He leaped over bushes and saw the long, brown, sleek flank of the lion streak ahead, darting behind some green brush. He followed the noise of crashing thicket and saw the lion again, its hind quarters flashing before him, then vanishing in the undergrowth.

He could taste it now, and it tasted good. Each time he caught a glimpse of the lion, it was closer and the taste was better. You're mine, he thought. You are all mine. He thought of Marge Gordon's disdainful laugh, and he smiled.

“You are coming back to California with me!” he shouted out to the lion.

Though his strength was nearly gone, taken by the bullet and the long flight across the rugged countryside beneath the hot African sun – the same sun he had known for eight years of life and had basked in after a good hunt and a good feeding, the sun which was killing him now – the instinct to survive drove him further.

Garrett ran with all his might, waiting for the brief moment when they would come into a clearing and he could raise the rifle to his shoulder, remembered Marge Gordon mocking him

and how they all laughed sitting around the table beneath the glow of the kerosene lamp. And he was flying now, the ground passing quickly beneath him, his strong, sure-footed legs zigzagging wildly through the undergrowth, the brush streaking by on both sides, cutting through his shirt and into his arms.

Suddenly there was no ground left. The blue Zimbabwe sky flashed overhead, and Garrett tumbled down a ravine in a cloud of dust. A sharp pain bit into his left ankle, and, when he came to rest, coughing and choking on the dust, the pain throbbed up into his head and the sky went black. When the sky turned blue again, he found himself lying atop some boulders at the bottom of a ravine looking up at the top edge from where he had fallen. He held his ankle tightly in both hands and grimaced in pain.

He clawed his way back up and out of the ravine and walked gingerly through the bush to the edge of the gorge to look down for his rifle. There it lay on a ledge, some thirty feet below him. There was no way down to it, not on a broken ankle. It's history, he thought. *C'est la vie*. He squinted into the glare of the hot sun, just a thumbnail above the horizon now. Across the ravine to the north was a table of rolling hills covered with yellow grass and flat-topped acacia trees. Beyond his vision, loping across an open field, the wounded lion headed for the shade of the trees.

"Lucky bastard," he said aloud.

Immediately he starting thinking about Marge Gordon, how she would have much to talk about now, much to ridicule – thirty-five hundred dollars and no lion! A fifteen-hundred dollar rifle lost in the bush. Plenty of doctor bills. She was always thoughtful in that way, he thought.

And he had come so close. Had him in my hand! Now you have nothing, nothing but a broken ankle. Think of that! A hunter without a rifle, without a pack, a broken ankle, wandering through the African bush! Have to get my pack, he thought. Not going anywhere without my pack.

It was now dusk, and he had limped back several hundred yards to where he had dropped his pack, and he could not find it. The sky to the west was fiery red, fading eastward into deep tones of sapphire and tanzanite blue, his tall muscular frame a silhouette against it. He gathered wood and lit a fire and propped himself against a large smooth stone. The African sky arched dark above him, shimmering with starlight. He tried to sleep, but could not. Too many haunting thoughts on how he would explain it all to the group, and if they would believe him. The fire died down and the air got very cold and his ankle throbbed and was very swollen. He threw some more branches into the dimming firelight, and he rested his head back against the stone. He

thought about how he had broken off from the others; how they had found the tracks late in the afternoon; how they had determined it was too late to pursue a hunt; how they had gone long without seeing a lion and were scheduled to leave in two days; how Livingston, their young Zimbabwean guide who was as tall and thin as a young Abe Lincoln, had urged him to stay; how he walked away nonetheless, alone, with only his pack and his rifle in his hand.

It will be okay, Garrett thought, and he stared coldly into the fire. It'll be just fine tomorrow. Half a day and you'll be back at the water hole. Just half a day. Then it's a flat day's walk to the camp.

It was morning again, and he searched for his pack for an hour and could not find it.

So now, this is the way it's going to be? he thought. All right, then, you'll make it back to the water hole without the pack. Don't really need water. You can do this without water. You've done it before, he thought, and he hobbled awkwardly through the thorn bushes and rocks, heading northeast. He found a sturdy branch from a baobab tree and used it as a crutch. The hot Zimbabwe sun beat down on him mercilessly, growing hotter as it rose higher in the sky. The tsetse flies were out en masse, swarming around his blond head. He no longer had the benefit of his safari hat, gone in the chase, nor his sun block or insect repellent, lost in his pack somewhere in the bush. His rugged, handsome face was now baked red, and the ground he had covered swiftly the day before passed slowly beneath him now, and with great pain.

A mile back, moving slowly through the green underbrush, in equal pain, was the great lion, following the scent of the man-creature which had caused this tremendous wound in his shoulder. He had spent the night, bullet burning deep within, his strength all but gone, and in the morning found new strength when the wind brought to him this despicable scent. He did not know hatred, not as man knows it, but knew the desire to crush and destroy a creature that caused harm to him or his pride or competed for the meat which sustained them. It was his desire to kill, more dominant now than his urgency to live, that gave him strength. Within the lion's weary being there was but one urge, the primordial desire to kill, an overwhelming need to lock his powerful jaws upon the man-creature, crush down into his bone, feel the warm blood spurt.

He lifted his head and sniffed the warm air. From afar, through the tall elephant grass, the breeze brought to him the scent of the man-creature, within it the distinct trace of an animal lame or wounded. The lion lifted his head higher, and, through the heat shimmer rising from the land, three-quarters of a mile off, he saw Garrett struggling up a steep grade. The bullet burned in his

shoulder again. He was feeling very weak, breathing hard, his tongue lolling from his mouth, and death was coming over him like a dark shadow.

From the top of the grade Garrett could see that he had gotten far off course. There were big, puffy white clouds drifting slowly across the blue sky, and below them he could see the hilltop beyond the water hole, at the edge of the savannah, the place he had stood the morning before. But it was a long way to the southeast, wavering in the midday heat. The rim of the large river gorge ran near him to the west and curved around to the southeast close to the water hole. It was clear of brush, so he hobbled down toward it awkwardly, shifting his weight to his good leg and bracing each step with the baobab stick.

For some time now, Garrett had been aware of a feeling inside, a sense that he was being followed. It had been eating at him all day, and now, as he hobbled along the rim, he found himself looking back frequently. When he first saw the lion, he could not believe it. A fleeting figure appeared near the top of the grade and then vanished in the bush. He squinted his eyes through the haze of heat. The figure reemerged. Can't be true, he thought. He stopped and watched it coming down the game trail, swaggering gracefully as only a cat can walk.

Can't be, he thought. Not his lion.

It was still a quarter mile off, but he could see now what looked like dried blood running down the length of its shoulder and matted in its furry mane. Then it came out from under the shadow of a cloud-cover into sunlight, and Garrett said aloud: "Shit!"

Overtaken by a great fear, Garrett hobbled double time now, finding strength flowing from a source unknown. After fifteen minutes of hard peddling he looked back and saw that the lion had gained ground. His ankle was killing him and he stopped and unlaced the boot straps, hoping to relieve the pressure. The pain was intolerable but he had to keep moving.

The next time he saw the lion, it had closed the gap even more. He pushed on, faster, but a spike of pain ran up his leg with each step. He managed another fifty yards. Then, finally, he collapsed, fully exhausted, along the edge of the river gorge. His face was covered with sweat and dirt, and he could smell his own sweat. The tsetse flies swarmed around his head and bit at the back of his neck. He took off his boot and peeled back the sock. The ankle, twice its normal size, was black

and purple. It made him queasy. He quickly wrapped it in strips of cloth torn from the bottom of his shirt and slipped it carefully back in the boot.

By the time he got going again the lion had drawn within a couple hundred yards. The next time he looked back he saw that the lion had drawn within a hundred yards. He moved quicker. Then he heard it thrashing through the thicket behind him.

Garrett was hobbling wildly now, kicking up dust, choking on the parched air, frantically oaring the ground with the stick which he held tight in both hands. He tripped, fell to the ground, got up and tripped again. He scrambled to his feet a second time, looked back, and saw the lion coming on him in full stride.

The lion, eyes bloodshot, mouth foaming, and hair bristling, with long strides, closed the distance between them and leaped through the air at Garrett. But, just as his paws should have crushed down upon him, Garrett slipped down the side of the gorge and tumbled end over end in a cloud of gray dust. When Garrett came to, he saw, with more certainty than he wished, the lion scrambling down through the same dust, its forward momentum causing it to slide, and, though it tried to brace itself with its front paws, it tumbled past him, snarling viciously, and came to rest some twenty feet below. Through it all, Garrett had held tightly to the baobab stick and he used it now to get to his feet and climb, quickly, up the canyon and along a ledge. But he was limited in what direction he could flee. Above him was a sharp-rising cliff, and below the steep river gorge.

The lion, briefly shaken by the fall, was back to his feet and laboring up the slope to where Garrett had just been. Before Garrett could negotiate his way across a slope of talus, which would have led him to a higher ledge, the lion cut him off. All he could do now was go higher, straight up the slope, which he did promptly, hopping on his good leg, kicking down rocks, then crawling on all fours. Then he was clambering on his back like a crab, kicking and pushing down rocks and dust on the lion. Then there were no more rocks to climb, and he found himself flush against the wall of the cliff with only the stick in his hand to ward off the snarling beast. His heart pounded hard now, and his lungs ached with the pain that comes from breathing too hard too long.

The lion, knowing he had Garrett cornered, came up the slope slowly, his eyes wild, head low to the ground, swaying from side to side. His neck, from head to shoulders, was a mass of dark bristling hair. He grunted uneasily and looked fiercely into Garrett's eyes. Then he raised his

head and let out a thunderous, deep-throated roar which echoed far down the canyon. From deep within, the lion drew upon his strength, the sum of all he was, hunter above all hunters, all the pride and pain he had known, and prepared for the spring.

Garrett looked nervously from side to side, then to the rear, and he saw a black crevice behind him at the base of the cliff. He glanced quickly at the lion, then back at the crevice, and lunged for the crack just as the lion came at him. He fell sideways and tumbled into the shallow cave with his stick dragging behind him.

The crevice was thin and narrow at its entry, and the lion, coming on in a mad forward rush, smashed into the rock and was repelled backward. He reached deep into the cave with his giant paw and tore into the flesh of Garrett's forearm, momentarily snagging it. Garrett jabbed at the lion's face with the stick. But in a quick snap and crunch, the end of the stick vanished, consumed in the lion's powerful jaw. Reaching in and stretching, the lion clawed at Garrett who lay just beyond his reach. Then looking into the cave with his big yellow, dominating eyes, reaching in with his huge forearm, the lion roared.

Darkness came slowly and the lion remained, like a sentinel, at the entrance of the cave, breathing heavily, its forearm extended deep within. Garrett, faint and feverish, with lips dried and parched, did all he could to stay outside the lion's reach at the far end of the cave. His mind drifted in and out of consciousness and he fought from passing out. He wished the lion would just leave. If the lion would just get up and walk away, he thought, he could survive this. But the lion's breath, his huge muzzle just a few feet away, snorting and blowing dirt in his face, kept his presence known.

And the breath of the lion was horrible. It was the smell of dead and putrefying flesh. Each time Garrett tried to block it out of his mind, there came a deep-throated gurgling sound from down inside the lion's chest with vibrations that shook the earth beneath him, and the cave filled again with the odorous smell.

"Please God! Help me out of this," Garrett whimpered. "I will do whatever is necessary. Make me promise I will never hunt again. I will promise. I will never hunt again!" And he repeated this to himself over and over again.

Even now, in the dark of night, Garrett found himself dozing in and out. When he awakened and realized time had passed, he did not know for how long he'd been awake or had been out. There was consciousness, nothingness, then consciousness again. He could still hear the lion breathing, faintly now, from a place far away. Then he heard the sound of beating drums from a distant tribe, only to realize he had not heard the sound at all.

He began to fade off again when the drums came back. He fought to stay awake, listening intently. The drums were louder each time, beating methodically, throbbing in his head.

Then he knew they were the drums of death, and he fought more fiercely to stay awake. He could not believe this was happening to him. If only he could wake up and find himself back on his cot at the Game Camp, he would summon the porter for a cold beer. He could laugh about it all, tell everyone about the bad dream that never was real.

The sound of the drums stayed in his head, but changed now. It was accompanied by a human-like noise – the sound of voices that were singing, or chanting a song.

It is my name! he thought. Yes, it is my name! Now he could hear it clearly. It was human voices, he knew, singing his song: "*Jack-Gar-rett! Jack-Gar-rett! Jack-Gar-rett! Jack-Gar-rett! Jack-Gar-rett! Jack-Gar-rett!*" The sound pounded in his head, causing him to shiver and tremble all over. The more deafening it became, the more he thought it would cause his head to burst. Then, suddenly, it softened, and he recognized it to be the sound of a familiar voice: "Jack! Jack Garrett!"

From down below in the brush near the base of the talus slope, Ron Wilson hollered out: "Jack! Jack Garrett!"

"Here!" Garrett coughed and strained. "Over here!"

In the opaque light of dawn, Garrett could see the lion moving, and the large paw and forearm of the lion which remained out-stretched toward him, withdrew slowly from the cave, the life in it gone. And then there was a hand, a human hand, reaching in for him, and he grabbed it and held tight to it and let it pull him from the cave.

It was the third morning, and they all gathered around now, marveling at the greatness of the huge beast. Livingstone stood, rifle strapped to his lean shoulder, watching as one of the gun-bearers ran a metal tape down the length of the lion. Ron Wilson, his safari hat resting back on his head exposing a white forehead and sandy brown hair, watched with one foot propped up on

a rock and his arm resting on his knee. There were other gun-bearers, the cook, and many porters who had come in from the Land Rovers, parked a quarter mile away. They were all standing around and looking at the huge animal, the flies buzzing around its head. Garrett now sat, bandaged up on a piece of canvas, watching the others.

“It is the largest,” Livingston spoke. “The largest I have seen all year. It is very good, Mr. Jack! You got your lion! And it is a fine lion, Mr. Jack!” He reached down and found the bullet hole with his hand and he stuck his finger into it up to the first knuckle. “A fine shot!” he said.



Marge stood nearby. “You got your lion,” she said.

Garrett looked at her but did not reply.

The lion had clearly taken only the one shot. The dried blood, reddish-brown around the wound, covered the length of the lion’s flank and was matted thickly through the breadth of the mane. The porters, who had circled in, had seen Garrett’s injuries. They spoke now to one another in Swahili, recounting how Garrett had been pulled from the cave; the baobab stick, with large teeth marks in it, still clenched in his hand. They began crooning and shrilling in a high-pitched chant that Garrett had never heard before.

They hoisted Garrett onto their shoulders and began parading him triumphantly while others prepared the lion, strapping him onto long poles for transport back to the Land Rovers. There was one tall, skinny porter who had a long, cylinder-shaped drum strapped to his back. He was very dark, bare-legged and bare-chested, except for a colorful cotton cloth he wore gathered over his shoulder like a toga. He took the drum from his back, set it on the ground, and began beating on it.

From high on the porters’ shoulders, Garrett watched him, watched his bare hands methodically striking down against the thin strip of zebra hide that stretched across the drumhead. Meanwhile, two of the porters began sprinkling the dead lion with lye.

“Put me down!” Garrett yelled.

At first they did not hear him, perhaps it was difficult to hear over the sound of the drum, or they heard and ignored him, but he continued to yell, “Put me down!” And, weak as he was, he began to fight with them, slapping one on the head, and all them, surprised at his resistance, put him down quickly.

Garrett hopped, one-legged, back to the lion.

“Leave him,” he cried. “Leave him be!”

“It’s okay,” said Livingston. “They pack him for the trip home. It is a disinfectant.”

“Leave him,” Garrett said.

“It is okay, really. It is your lion. They are just making preparations.”

“Leave him,” Garrett insisted.

Livingston stepped up to the lion, dropped to one knee, and lifted the skin on the lion’s upper lip to expose the huge white fangs.

“He will make a beautiful trophy, no? he asked.

“Leave him, damn it!” And he was almost crying.

“All right,” Livingston said, and he waved off the porters who were preparing the lion.

“*Basi!* Stop!” he told them in Swahili.

There was silence among the porters. They were all very puzzled and looked at one another, and at Livingston, with curious expressions. Livingstone spoke to them again in Swahili and they dropped what they were doing and began gathering up their equipment, bringing it back to the Land Rovers.

A few minutes passed and two porters came with a canvas litter and helped Garrett into it. As they carried him through the tall green grass to the Land Rovers, he looked back at the huge animal, slumped lifelessly upon the boulders, thirty-meters down from cave entrance. He continued to look back, turning his head awkwardly until the lion was out of his vision. Then he

closed his eyes and he saw the face of the lion looking in at him from the cave's entrance, the big yellow wild eyes, taunting him and he could hear it purring and grunting in low, deep-throated bursts, rumbling the whole earth beneath him, and he could smell its breath, the breath of carrion and death. Then the sound of drums came back, just as he had heard them deep in the night, and he felt himself trembling all over again.

He opened his eyes and saw the tall, skinny native who had been beating the drum earlier, walking along side the litter in the tall grass. The drum, idle now, slung low from his shoulder with a thin piece of leather so that it dangled low in the center of his back.

The porters lifted the litter up a steep rise of rocks and carried him through the tall grass toward the Land Rovers. Garrett, still very faint and weak, rested his head back against the canvas. There was a long moment of silence, and, while lying there, he became mindful of a noise from far off. He lifted his head and held himself perfectly still. Then he could hear it, coming back across the vast savannah, through the deep river gorge, the sound of beating drums of a distant tribe in celebration.

Mary McLaughlin Slechta

The End of a Thousand Weekends

It's one thing almost everyone agrees on: don't ask a lover to sit with you for a colonoscopy. I've seen enough jaws drop to know nine out of ten women would rather choose cancer.

Naturally, the lone dissenter is my mother and to make a long story short, tough luck. She can't wait six months to reschedule a teeth cleaning because I didn't bother to get a husband and kids to taxi me around. No dice. I'll have to find another ride. I hear the clunk of a coffee mug on the table and the long pull off a cigarette. Next time she speaks, her words are so full of smoke you'd have to be me to understand. Me at thirty, me at forty, and now me at fifty.

My mother is a retired bookkeeper and quick to quantify things. "One morning is a small price for twenty years of free nookie." I imagine her punching away at the adding machine. "About a thousand weekends." In the silence that follows, she lets the number sink in. "Almost half your life."

With no other recourse, I ask my lover to take the morning off for the colonoscopy. And guess what? Four days later the world is still turning and I'm even feeling like my old self. The horrible cleansing ordeal is forgotten and a fog drifts over yet another lecture from my mother, happy, in the end, to have me recuperate at her house.

Returning from a quick trip to Jersey, my lover has left his wife visiting a new grandchild. I'm back in my apartment and we're taking a bed vacation, which is to say sweaty sex interrupted by trips to the fridge, answering the door for the delivery guy, and ball games. Honestly, no different from most weekends. He mops himself with my new panties then pitches them off the bed. "I still can't believe you've forgotten," he says.

His eyes haven't once left the television screen, so, well aware I'm speaking to a wall, I remind him that forgetting is the whole point of being put under. Snaking a camera through five feet of intestines allows plenty of time for lively banter between the doctor and nurses. A health

provider performing hundreds a year would be well over the embarrassment. Practically forced into making jokes no patient wants to hear. “And you should talk,” I throw in. “You’re almost ten years overdue.”

With his daughter popping out number four, he’s extra-sensitive about his age and that last dig has gotten his attention. He freezes through two in a row car commercials and a minute of game time before he rolls on his knees doggy-style.

“You can’t remember *this?*” he says. When I shake my head, he blows fart sounds through his mouth until I do. This, I realize, is supposed to be me: this sad-sack, this loser, this sheep that’s just gotten banged from the rear. You can’t leave the medical center until you pass gas and apparently I did. Owing to sedation, my exact knowledge of how, until his demonstration, had been mercifully vague.

He turns comfortably on his muffled flatulence, real at last, and the blood drains slowly back into his face. He lets me stew awhile, plugging my nose, before he announces I’m overly sensitive. He nuzzles my back like even he can’t stand the smell, and out of nowhere I imagine his wife and grandkids piled together on the guest room bed. Gorging on bags of junk food, singing along at the top of their lungs to Disney films. They wouldn’t hear the phone if he bothered to call.

Tomorrow a co-worker will ask about the colonoscopy. I’ll fuss with paperwork and upset my coffee cup. By noon I’ll have made a million errors while the grapevine debates why any of us misfile the things we think we know the best. In the coming days and weeks they’ll watch my weight explode and nine out of ten women will remember the colonoscopy and whisper, “I told you so.”



Sitting Woman by Hiram Lewis
Medium: Brush and Ink

Literary Bios

- **Jim Brega** earned his BA from San Diego State University and an MFA from the University of Illinois. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Haunted Magazine*, *Plenitude*, *r.kv.r.y*, and *Foliate Oak*, and in the 2012 anthology *A Year in Ink 5*. He lives near San Diego. You can find more of Brega's work on his blog jimbrega.com.
- **Paige Cerulli** received a Bachelor's of Arts in Music Performance and English from Westfield State University. She lives in the Berkshires of Massachusetts and enjoys writing, playing her flute, and horseback riding. Her work has previously appeared in publications such as *Persona*, *Chronogram*, and *Lavanderia*, among others.



- **Mike Cole** was born in Fresno, California and graduated from Fresno State College (now California State University Fresno) in 1971 when a Fresno Poetry Renaissance led by Philip Levine was underway. Over a very sporadic 45-year publications history, his poems have appeared in such journals as *Antioch Review*, *Beyond Baroque*, *In the Grove*, *The San Joaquin Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Midland Review*, *Blast Furnace*, and others. His first book manuscript *The Encyclopedia of Naught* is making the rounds of contests and publishers.
- **Michael Collins** is a graduate of the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers, teaches creative and expository writing at NYU. His work has appeared recently in *Glasschord*, *BlazeVOX*, and *Eunoia Review*. It will also be included in upcoming issues of *Brevity Poetry Review*, *Inclement Poetry Magazine*, *Constellations*, *Subliminal Interiors*, *Mobius*, *The Subterranean Quarterly*, *Grist*, and *SOFTBLOW*.

- **Tim Falkenberg** is a native Texan who has an abiding love for the outdoors. He is the editor of the online movie news magazine *mxdown Movies* (movies.mxdown.com). Falkenberg currently resides in Studio City, California. This is his second published short story, following “Mourning,” which appeared in *Touch: the Journal of Healing* (Issue 9).
- In Lars von Trier’s film, *Melancholia*, you probably remember the planets colliding.



Similarly, **Roy Guzmán** wants his work to be remembered as a clash of the absurd, a celebration of misfits, and a recuperation of blurred memories. Find him on Twitter: @dreamingauze and via rgman.wordpress.com.



- **James Hanna** is a published writer, a Pushcart nominee, and the fiction editor of *The Sand Hill Review*. He has recently retired from the San Francisco Probation Department where he was assigned to a domestic violence and stalking unit. Hanna’s profile may be found on www.willwriteforfood.org. He has completed his third book, *The Siege*, which depicts a riot in a penal facility. *The Siege* will soon be available through Sand Hill Review Press.



- **Jessica Kluthe’s** first book, *Rosina, The Midwife* was released in March, and since then has been on the Edmonton Journal’s list of best sellers for eight

weeks. Two chapters of *Rosina* were recognized before publication: in 2012, her story “Scattered” won Other Voices’ creative nonfiction contest, and in 2011, her story “Traces” was nominated by the Writers’ Guild of Alberta for the James H. Gray award for nonfiction. Her work has also appeared in journals and magazines such as *The Malahat Review*, *Other Voices*, and *Little Fiction*. After earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in Writing from the University of Victoria, Kluthe moved back to Edmonton to teach writing full-time at MacEwan University in the Bachelor of Communications Studies program. She believes in promoting literature in Canada; she reviews for *Canadian Review of Materials* and has recently created a promotion project called Snap Scene to feature images from Canadian books. Kluthe lives in a character house with her partner Reid and her cat Finnegan. She is at work on a children’s book and a novel. Visit her website at www.jessicakluthe.com.



- **Al Kratz** is a writer from Des Moines, Iowa. He has had work previously published in *Gravel* and forthcoming in the *British Fantasy Society Journal*.
- **Hiram Lewis** is an accomplished painter. He went to Washington University, received an MFA and became a bus driver in Seattle. He currently resides in Silver City, New Mexico.



- As an IT Professional, **Tiko Lewis** lives in Austin, Texas. He enjoys cooking and pairing cigars with fine adult beverages. Lewis is an editor at Poetrycircle.com.



- **Anthony Martin** is a technical writer, a graduate student in the MA Program in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University and a hopeless Slavophile.



- **Gleah Powers'** work has been published or is forthcoming in *Souvenir Lit Journal*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Lumina*, *Prime Number Magazine* online, *Prime Number Magazine Editors' Selection Volume 2*, *Prime Mincer Press* and *Naugatuck River Review*. A shortlisted finalist in the Summer Literary Seminars Unified Literary Contest in 2011 and 2013, she has been awarded writing residencies from Vermont Studio Center, Rancho Linda Vista arts community and a grant from the Barbara Deming Memorial fund. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Antioch University Los Angeles.



- **Jeannette Ronson** is a MFA student in Creative and Professional Writing at Western Connecticut State University. She teaches creative writing and composition at Southern Connecticut State University. Find Ronson and read her other published essays through LinkedIn or Facebook.



- **Claire Scott Rubin** is a published poet who has been reading and writing poetry for many years. Her work has been published in numerous journals including *Shemom*, *Organs of Vision and Speech*, *Trivia*, *Stepping Stones*, *Epiphany* and *Literary Yard*. Rubin is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with a private practice in Berkeley, California.



- Pushcart Prize nominee **Frank Scozzari** resides in Nipomo, a small town on the California coast. His award-winning short stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Berkeley Fiction Review*, and *The MacGuffin*, and have been featured in Speaking of Stories, Santa Barbara's preeminent literary theater.



- **Mary McLaughlin Slechta's** fiction has recently appeared in *Thumbnail Magazine*, *Colere*, and the anthology *Keeping Track* (Main Street Rag.) She's author of the poetry collection *Wreckage on a Watery Moon* (FootHills) and two chapbooks and is an associate editor for [The Comstock Review](#).



- **Shelby Stephenson's** *Family Matters: Homage to July, the Slave Girl* won the 2008 Bellday Poetry Prize (Allen Grossman, judge), and the 2009 Oscar Arnold Young Award, Poetry Council of North Carolina (Jared Carter, judge). Shelby Stephenson's *Maytle's World* is forthcoming from [Evening Street Press](#).



- **Charles Thielman** was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, moved to Chicago, and was educated at red-bricked universities and on city streets. Thielman is a loving grandfather of five free spirits. He married on a Kauai beach in 2011. Thielman's work as poet, artiste and shareholder in an independent Bookstore's collective continues.