Kudzu

Issue 95/4
Autumn 1995

Cycles

Navigation

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- To go backward one page, click in the lower left hand corner of the page, labeled “Backward” on this page.

- To go back to the *Contents* page, click on the footer in the center of the lower portion of the screen, just below where the word “Contents” appears on this page.

- The cursor will change to a pointing hand whenever you move it over a link.

Contents

To get to a particular story, click on on the title or use the regular Navigation tools, explained on page 2.

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Off the Vine

Steven W. Jarvis

Well, here it is. The fourth issue of *Kudzu*. There for a while, I wasn't sure it would ever make it. I started law school in August, and — even though I'd been warned — I wasn't quite ready for the crushing workload. But, I found time to get this issue done. In and among keeping up with my law school work, we lost an editor and gained another. Blake Wilson has taken a leave of absence to concentrate on some other projects. We'll miss him. However, on the bright side, we've just added James Katowich to the staff. If you've been with us since the beginning, you'll remember James' wonderful story "Not a Shadow, Not a Sigh" (and some good poems — he's multitalented) from earlier this year. And — another happy coincidence — when he and associate editor James Martin arrived at graduate school this year, they found that they share an office as graduate teaching assistants in the English department.

This issue represents several landmarks for K*udzu*. First, it's the final issue of this first year; we made it. Second, though unintended, it's our first theme issue. Out of the sizeable stack of good submissions we received for this issue, these stories stood out as a group. Since it's late fall and approaching winter, it seemed appropriate that these stories and poems all seem to concern endings of one sort or another. Sure, it's a little bleak, but facing the end of one thing and looking forward to the new has always been a powerful theme in literature, and each of these stories or poems approaches the issue from a different perspective. I think you'll find this issue intriguing.

And, before I go, I'd like to thank all the folks who have kept with us through the delays and sent kind words of encouragement. Here's to a safe and prosperous new year to all of our readers.

— Steven W. Jarvis

Transit Delay

Thomas J. Hubschman

She once said she would paint her ass red if that was what it took to keep him. That was before she changed jobs, before her best friend returned to New York — and before the abortion.

He reminded himself not to make too much of the abortion. Her new job (which he helped her find) and the friend's return were explanation enough for his no longer being the "only bright spot" in her life. Hell, he thought, unable to hold his ground against the wall of flesh pushing into the train at the elevated 4th Avenue station, the abortion was just an excuse.

The doors closed and the train began to labor up a steep incline. Below, the rooftops of Gowanus sloped north to the lone tower standing as a monument to the borough's arrogant parochialism: the Tallest Building in Brooklyn. Once, it was a beacon to him. *She* lived within its shadow. The clock on top, its red hands visible at night from his rooms in Park Slope, was a symbol, like the cigarette ends in the fireplace and the socks she borrowed to keep warm after the heat went off. They watched that red glow together from beneath an old navy blanket. When he was alone, it comforted him. But this morning the clock's face seemed permanently darkened. He raised his wrist carefully to avoid contact with a trim Afro on one side and the sports section of the *Daily News* on the other. As he had suspected, the tower wasn't even close to being right.

He gripped the metal bar above his head, though the crush of bodies made falling impossible. His fellow passengers stared out at the distant skyline of Manhattan or the backs of their neighbors' skulls with equal indifference. A few managed to read carefully folded newspa-

pers, their elbows pinned to their chests. The density of warm flesh combined with hot sunlight pouring in the windows was too much for the air conditioning. But no one seemed to notice.

At Smith and 9th Street the doors opened on a throng three and four deep. There wasn't a square foot left to squeeze into, but the waiting crowd began to advance anyway, its front rank pushed forward by those behind. Somehow some wriggled in. His legs sank into spongy buttock.

A second row pressed forward. Lockstep, marking time like zombies or mechanical soldiers, they kept coming, a few finding a couple inches of unoccupied space, the rest stymied by a phalanx of back and thigh. They continued to surge forward anyway until the doors, repeatedly closing on their legs and shoulders, beat them back. He had seen film clips of Tokyo platform conductors using their knees to force in the last possible passenger. He had listened to, and himself made jokes about, the IRT. But he had also ridden the IRT and, bad as that line was, it never approached anything like this. He actually could not draw a full breath. And that big behind was bottoming out into bone.

The train moved toward the tunnel leading to the next station, hesitating every few seconds as if wary of the dark ahead. Someone opened a window, letting in hot air.

No one in his right mind would subject himself to this ordeal five days a week. If he had kept his Manhattan apartment he wouldn't be enduring it himself. But *she* lived here. And *she* couldn't cope with Manhattan's pace and congestion. So he had moved to Brooklyn, at first to a dark furnished room, then to a two-room apartment in Park Slope. That was before rents went through the ceiling. Now he couldn't even afford a better place in Brooklyn, never mind Manhattan. When he lived in the East Village he could walk to work. He had turned his life upside-down for that woman and even become an exile in this godforsaken borough. For what? All he had to show for those two years was a longer and more unpleasant commute, recurrent bad dreams, and somewhere the lifeless atoms of a child he would never know.

At Carroll Street a few passengers got off. He was too deeply buried in the crush to consider making an escape himself. The throng on the platform seemed appalled by the sight of so much compressed flesh. Few

attempted to get on. The doors closed without difficulty and the train started forward. Someone showed the good sense to close that window. He tried to relax, let his body just hang between those pressed against it. But each time he let go, the pelvis of his fat neighbor stabbed at his spine.

Then, suddenly, the main lights failed, leaving only the blue glow of emergency lighting. The air conditioning shut down as well, causing the compacted flesh to generate an immediate, intense heat. As if in response, his fat neighbor collapsed. She made no sound, just breathed a little sigh, more of satisfaction than distress. Thanks to the press, she couldn't fall, but he tried without success to support her.

"I think this woman has fainted."

A few heads turned. The rest ignored him. He couldn't think what else to do. Ask them to "step back and give 'er room"? He wished he had walked the few extra blocks to the BMT. At least when that train became overcrowded you could step between cars for a breath of air. But the doors of this line were sealed. It couldn't have been a worse morning. First, those morbid dreams about *her.* Now this dreadful subway ride.

His unconscious neighbor found a few inches of unclaimed space to slump into. By some calculus of forces her weight transferred itself to his groin. He twisted free, forcing himself into the back of a blue linen suit jacket. The shoulders inside pushed back. The train itself was still motionless. Even the sporadic belches and hisses stalled subways usually made were absent. He cursed the New York subway system. Then he cursed himself for being fool enough to submit to this torture.

But even as he raged against his predicament he realized that a familiar object had just crossed his vision like a long-anticipated, almost-missed roadsign. The blue light had made the faces around him seem immaterial, spirits waiting to be called to a seance. But one, hovering between a shiny scalp and a heavily mascaraed profile, seemed especially other-worldly.

Where had she gotten on? Not at Smith & 9th. And no one got on at Carroll Street. This wasn't even her neighborhood. Had she been on the train all along? Why didn't he spot her earlier instead of now when they were virtually in the dark?

His impulse was to call out to her. But he couldn't think what they would do then. Stare at each other? He

wondered if she had seen him yet (she was badly nearsighted) and if so, what she was feeling.

The collapsed woman moaned. She listed to one side, then the other. The other passengers finally began to show interest. Even *her* head reluctantly turned. For a second her small blue eyes seemed to focus on him, then looked away.

"Oh, Lawd! Where am I? Lord Jesus, set me free!"

"Relax, lady," someone said. "We're all in the same pickle."

Luckily, even an immense bulk like hers was checked by the press of other bodies. She cried out again for deliverance. Someone told her to shut up. She called louder. "Lord Jesus, save me!" A noise like a pistol shot silenced her. At first he thought someone had actually fired a gun. But then the woman began to whimper, and finally to sob.

"That's good," the *Daily News* to his right said. "That's what you have to do. Brings them right out of it."

It was as if everyone else's fear was also dispelled by that slap. Someone started to sing.

A-may… zi-ing grace,
Ho-ow sweet the sound,
That saved a-a wretch…
like me…

Other voices joined in. The Afro to his left thundered into his ear

For I… wa-as lost…
But now I'm fo-ound…

Even the fat woman stopped crying and, in a powerful church voice, joined in. He searched through the tangle of heads until he found *her* again, her lips drawn into a pained kiss, her eyes locked on the car's ceiling. As the chorus swelled, her eyes wavered, then began darting about: She was having an attack. She got them on elevators, subways, in any enclosed space. She also had a fear of heights, squirrels and, oddly, sunsets. He used to pride himself on knowing all her phobias and being there to comfort.

…how sweet you-ou are,

The choir ontinued as if they all sang together regularly. But her mouth remained shut tight. Her face had turned white, her eyes wild.

"Excuse me," he said, trying to shoulder his way toward her. But the chorus pressed against him was unyielding.

For I wa-as lost, but now I'm fo-ound…

"Excuse me. I have to get to that woman."

He lost his balance as the train lurched forward. By the time he righted himself the lights had come on, but his view was blocked by an expanse of white shirt. The air conditioner blew its cold breath on his head.

"Excuse me, please."

She was facing the door, her hands pressed to the glass. The train was pulling into the station — it must have stalled just a few feet short of it. The doors opened. She got off and was lost in the crowd on the platform.

He raised his arm to make a path toward the door, but his feet failed to respond. What, after all, would he say? That he had seen and understood her anxiety? That he "forgave" her for the abortion? That he still loved her? But it was not his place to forgive or not forgive. And did he still love her? Did he really?

The train glided out of the station. He was finally free of the fat woman. There was even room to move his arms and legs. But the singing had stopped and the passengers were again preoccupied with stock quotations, parimutuels, a dress for next Friday's movie. He wondered if he hadn't imagined it all — the slap, the harmony of voices consoling each other in the dark… the face of someone who once loved him and then, inexplicably, loved him no more. It was easier to believe none of it had occurred, that this morning was like any other — that the rest of his life would still happen.

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Tom Hubschman's short stories have appeared online in *Gruene Street, Morpo Review, Blue Penny Quarterly* and *In Vivo.* He has published two science fiction novels as well as short fiction in *New York Press, Brooklyn Free Press/The Free Press* and other print media. He makes his living as a writer and editor in Brooklyn, NY.

Kat Lively

The Late Night Picture Show

Lip-sticked men and Transylvanian librettos
dance across the screen like cockroaches,
scraping popcorn off their shoes in perfect
4/4 time to the delight of the drunk and
extremely bored. This is the midnight
cabaret, check your coat and your brains
at the door.

There has to be more to life than acid
dreams and fishnet realities, the fat lady
in sequins who thinks she's just so sexy...
as she bounces down the aisle, all six-hundred
pounds of her...

Who knows the attraction—the lights, the sex,
the orgy of wanton minds—yet we're here
every weekend, arms thrust out, tournicets on,
waiting for our dose of cinematic methadone,
forever prisoners in bright feather boas,
until maturity or poverty sets us free.

Whichever comes first.

They tucked themselves in a corner
with steaming ceramic and talked softly
of Phylis Wheatley,
like she was a secluded relative,
seen only at funerals or on holidays
when the smallest of children would
curl his sticky fingers around her frail
hand and wonder who the hell she was
and why Mama loved her so when she
was old and smelled like hospital
sheets, and all I could think of
was their coffee, getting cold.

Kat Lively <klively@uga.cc.uga.edu> lives and writes in Athens, Georgia and has been published previously in *So It Goes, Lazy Bones Review, 256 Shades of Grey,* and other print and electronic journals. She is a columnist for the Internet zine *WebZine Weekly.*

Kiosk

William Dekle

The black pistol flew from the car window into the dumpster so quickly it might have been a butter fly, if phantom, deadly butterflies reflected late afternoon sunlight. From her tiny kiosk window, Anna Maria Constanza Bernstein watched the dirty silver sedan slow down as it rounded the corner onto Centre Street and crunched quietly across the hard crusts of melting gray snow piles. Anna Maria worked till eleven and forgot the dumpster gun till the following morning, when she cautiously climbed down from the Boston Metropolitan Transit bus and shuffled toward the kiosk through fresh white snow, inside her black dress inside her black coat, wary to escape falling on the frozen pavement. A clump of wild gray hair poked out from under her black scarf; she smiled her wide morning grimace, flicked her tongue against the tiny gap that separated her two middle top teeth — an instinctive reaction when concentrating on a challenge — blinked almond eyes and prepared for the ordeal of keeping her bones intact across frozen sidewalks.

Anna Maria always required one and a half steps to remember that conquering slick streets worked one way for children and another for people on Social Security; so she took a step, stopped to see if she was still alive, poked the ice ahead with the point of her furled umbrella, took another step, and so on till she reached the dumpster, when she remembered the night before and, with startling agility, flipped open the grungy dumpster door with the umbrella's point.

The kiosk, forty feet beyond, was a plain, fourteen foot in diameter, cylinder shaped building with magazine racks around front and colorful posters advertising rock concerts and movies plastered across the back. Its physical layout guarded her; concealed her; protected

her; enveloped and sheltered her, except for the one tiny hole where she transacted business.

Inside the kiosk, Anna Maria set down her Danish, lighted the gas stove, put on water for coffee and studied her new treasure. The pistol was big and black and heavy with a rearing horse carved into an oval frame at the top of the bone grip and the letters *IDA* crudely notched on the barrel.

"Hmmm, at least a quarter inch across." She shuddered slightly as she looked down the barrel. "That's a big bullet."

In no time, she discovered the little door behind the cylinder, flicked it open and recognized the back of the bullet. She couldn't turn the cylinder, but by peering at the pistol from the front, she felt sure she held a fully loaded weapon. Anna Maria had no gun license, and she feared police almost as much as she did criminals, so she laid it gently beneath the gross cash deposit envelope by the kiosk door opposite the sales window, grabbed her umbrella, and trudged outside to haul in the bundles of papers and magazines left during the night. She'd take the pistol home and ask her neighbor, Mr. Carver, to explain it to her. Mr. Carver was a retired Army clerk; he would know.

She arranged her display magazines around the front of the kiosk. Then she plodded inside and checked the pistol once more and decided to hide it instead beneath an identical envelope adjacent to the gross cash deposit envelope that she called her *rainy day* container. At the end of the day, the gross cash deposit envelope would contain most of the day's receipts, the amount she reported to the government tax people. The *rainy day* container held what Anna Maria considered a fair amount to be *withheld* from the government considering ever since World War Two, they'd been withholding from her.

Hauling in the magazine bundles had reinvigorated the arthritis in her thumbs, so she took two aspirins just in time for the morning rush. Occasionally, between customers, she would sit in her cushions piled on the old wicker arm chair and stare out the tiny sales window at her three scenes. If she leaned forward and looked to the right, and the slow moving traffic didnt' hide it, she saw the dumpster; if she looked to the left she saw the small park at the intersection. It was winter so she pretended the park's trees were dormant rather than dying. At least the snow covered the trash, and for a few hours the fresh

snow would stay white. Her third scene was what she watched most when leaning back in her chair. Directly in front of her hung the center of the gaudy electric clock that always ran late in the window of Wexler's Delicatessen. Its red second hand clicked from number to number, never quite aiming properly.

At eleven — Wexler's said ten fifty-three — the morning rush was over, and Mrs. Cohen stopped by for her paper.

"I refuse to move!" declared Mrs. Cohen. "I got to Jamaica Plain first. If the thugs want to move in, I'll fight 'em." Mrs. Cohan was four years younger than Anna Maria and although she hadn't known Mrs. Cohen in her youth, Anna Maria admired her still soft looking skin and sparkling blue eyes.

"Do you have a gun, Mrs. Cohen?"

Mrs. Cohen ignored the question. "To think! Only half a block from my house. And the poor girl was beaten for no reason. She's lucky she wasn't raped." Mrs. Cohen frowned ironically. "Maybe the hoodlum liked men. Ha!"

Anna Maria smiled back. "Maybe the *teppista* was a woman. I've been reading about that." She gestered over her shoulder.

"What's a *teppista*?"

"A hoodlum. Maybe either the robber was a woman, or the man was a...."

Anna Maria's take on the subject either dampened Mrs. Cohen's enthusiasm for unconventional men or left her confused. She didn't know which, but she changed direction.

"Of course," she continued, "it would be pleasant to move somewhere safer like the North End. But then I'm not Italian. They might not accept me. Besides, the next time I move, it'll be either Miami or Heaven." She laughed. "I haven't decided yet."

Anna Maria laughed too and hung a new maga zine by the window with a clothespin as the phone rang. "Good day, Mrs. Cohen," she called while lifting the phone; and her eyes followed Mrs. Cohen's thin form waddle and crunch across the glare of the still fresh snow till she stepped out of view.

"Hello." She answered the phone and listened a moment. "Yes, Buddy, I love you, too, and no I won't

retire and move. Yes, dear. Thanks for calling. Goodbye."

Anna Maria hung up and again wished her son, Buddy Burnstein, wouldn't call once a month at the same hour on the second Friday. That was too mechanical to suit Anna Maria. But she forgave Buddy; he had his problems. And one was he always bugged Anna Maria to move from Jamaica Plain. For another, Anna Maria had spent so long being married to Irv that she felt part Jewish. Her thoughts, her vocabulary, even her accent had changed. It would be too long a shot trying to become totally Italian again.

"*Field and Stream*," a low voice croaked.

"It's to your left, bottom row," she reacted automatically, without seeing the man. "Two twenty-five."

He put down the right change and left, and Anna Maria thought she might order more *Field and Stream* next month. The current one with the special hunting section was selling well.

She thought about the North End. No hunting there; it was Boston's safest neighborhood because everybody there was somebody's mother; so if thugs found themselves in the North End, they left their crimes at home, no guns, no muggings, no problems.

Like Mrs. Cohen, the North End might not accept her. And even if they would, the insecurity of believing they *might* not, compelled Anna Maria to avoid taking the gamble. And as for moving to Florida...it was hard enough remembering which of her unique slang vocabulary was Italian and which was Yiddish. She thought about Miami, threw up her hands and wailed to the Kiosk, "*Oy vay, Ma Donna!* At my age, I should learn *Spanish*?!"

Anna Maria's dead husband, Irv — *may he rest in peace* — had never figured out that by yielding to Irv — as she had about everything — and giving their son three Hebrew names, she'd sneaked a Catholic reference past him; so in her mind, Buddy would always be ST Paul Bernstein. It was comforting. She'd never dared mention this *coincidence* to Irv because Irv believed, as did Anna Maria's long dead papa, Guiseppi Osvaldo Palazzolo Castellamare Baldaracci — *may he rest in peace* — that a woman's place was in the home, preferably in the basement or the bedroom and after seventy-four years, it was impossible for Anna Maria to think any other way. A lifetime of conditioning is not canceled in a day, or a decade.

Anna Maria had forgot all about the big black pistol, and as was her habit, had coffee, soft pretzels and plain yogurt for lunch; after which, she brushed her teeth at the sink, flicked her tongue in the gap between her teeth, and recombed her untameable gray hair. Then she relaxed, glanced at the customers pushing in and out of Wexler's, and picked up a week-old magazine to finish reading an article she'd started earlier. Before she could get situated, a customer crossed from the deli, knocked on the counter at the window and asked for directions to Dorchester Heights. She sold him a map and relaxed again.

Anna Maria had read her kiosk magazines on many subjects and she was not so stupid she didn't know that ever since Irv died, she'd supported herself. But, despite this knowledge, Anna Maria was afraid: afraid to try something different; afraid she wasn't mentally tough enough. Times had changed radically in her lifetime, but her thinking patterns were formed two generations back. Anna Maria was...*farmisht* Irv had called it, a state of conflicting emotions. Her only salvation, the element that protected her, saved her from this confusing quandary was that she knew her opinion didn't matter to anybody anyway.

Anna Maria's only conscious political doctrine — and it had died out of society over her lifetime — was the ancient rule that said criminals who robbed kiosks should be punished, an eye for an eye — she remembered the gun; then put it out of her mind — and a tooth for a tooth and maybe occasionally an eye for a magazine or a tooth for cash snatched before she could get it to the bank.

But, kindness had been forced upon Anna Maria by her father, Guiseppi, then Irv, and finally by habit. In fact, just about everything in her life had been forced on her. Irv left the kiosk to her; she ran it because it was forced upon her and because it had become her tradition. It was comfortable. Warm coffee and Danish every morning, plenty to read, enough money, simple bookkeeping, customers to chat with.

Anna Maria cut the string off the stack of new *Playgirl,* stacked them in their proper place and hung one on a clothesline behind her so customers could see it. She too two more aspirin and settled on the cushions, worn flat, in her wicker chair, and glanced back at the *Playgirl*. *Had she ever looked like that? Mrs. Cohen*

probably had, but never such outfits. She looked around at her wares, cigarettes, X-rated magazines, news magazines, *Field And Stream* with the shotgun on the cover.

Anna Maria had never thought of it, but she was gentle. It was not in her to harm others; thus her conscience was not offended because although cigarettes killed and X-ratings probably hurt some people, the news magazines were the most dangerous and even the President read those. He'd said so. And besides...she slapped her forehead with her left hand and automatically chopped the air with her right, symbolically cutting away all her problems...*what was a woman to do? Oy, Mama Mia*!

Nothing had gone right, even though she'd loved Irv. He was loud and gruff and entertained her. But she never should have married a Jew. Nothing against another tribe, but it left Buddy confused. At one young age Buddy wanted to be a doctor, which pleased Irv's mother. Later Buddy wanted to join the mob, which infuriated Anna Maria, but pleased her younger brother, Leonardo, known around the North End as Lennie Hotdog, till he reappropriated "Leonardo," joined the Navy, and found a real career. Now Buddy sold real estate in a falling market, and even in a hot market, it wasn't Buddy's *forte*. She often joked to herself that Buddy could have pleased both sides of the family by becoming a plastic surgeon specializing in fingerprint replacement.

"Got a *Time Magazine*?" The gravely voice jolted her from her reverie. She looked out the window and froze at the wide black, mustached face filling the window. In a moment, and automatically, her tongue flicked the gap in her teeth. Then, from habit but not so automatically, she bit lightly on the first knuckle of her right index finger. If she'd heard the hard snow crunch, which she usually did, she wouldn't have been so surprised, but the *Time* customer walked quietly.

She recovered. "Yes, sir," she said. She sold the man a *Time* and sighed with relief as he stepped out of the tiny frame of the world the kiosk window allowed her.

She'd been robbed seven times, three in the last six months and always by black men. She'd considered thinking of them as African-Americans, but decided "black" was shorter and more convenient for thinking purposes. *If I gotta fear somebody, I'll fear somebody with the easiest name to remember.* Her reasoning was that by the time she could remember *African-American*,

she'd have forgot the thug's description.

She'd feared blacks ever since the murders in the early 70s when whites who stopped for traffic lights in Roxbury were sometimes dragged from their cars and beaten to death with bricks. In those days, she'd felt safe in Jamaica Plain. Now....

She remembered the pleasant Mr. Crawford who ran the all-night grocery on the next corner. Out of respect, she'd wanted to go to his funeral, but she couldn't go all the way to Medfield. She'd seen Mrs. Crawford who had seemed to be in shock, not quite believing that on that Monday morning she'd had a husband and on that Monday afternoon, she'd become a widow who couldn't sell her husband's store because nobody wanted to buy a place where the owner had been shot over a few dollars, or shot at all.

Anna Maria didn't want to be shot. The thought of dying didn't bother her; but pain she didn't need. Why couldn't she be held up by an Italian? She could throw a few *paisano* phrases at him; maybe he'd go away. Or a Jew? Her married name might carry weight, soften his heart. But no, it was always black men, mostly young; and she had no experience in keeping them under control. In fact, it was only since Irv died that Anna Maria had *any* experience in handling men, that is, in *not* submitting to men. Her father, Guiseppi, never allowed her to think. Irv's Jewish tradition of intelligent, heroic, Biblical women had been sidetracked by several centuries of Danziger patriarichal firmness. Anna Marie had loved Irv, and had feared him. Even now, she loved Irv; and now she feared everybody, but lately it was young thugs who looked illiterate, but sometimes asked for *The New Yorker*, before drawing their weapons.

Anna Maria's older brother, Joe, Jr., had been reared to be fearless, aggressive and not a bad guy in Anna Maria's eyes. She continued to be fond of Joe; and the fact that he didn't follow in their father's footsteps as a sign painter, a profession requiring a talent Joe lacked, didn't lower him in her esteem. Joe painted houses, but that was not the point. He was reared to be fearless, and he was. Anna Maria was reared to be timid and submissive, and she was. She was reared to be the perfect Victorian wife one generation late. She had tried to fight fear and timidity and had succeeded to a small degree, but not enough to suit herself, and nowhere near her potential. Ironically, by working most of her adult life,

Anna Maria *was* independent, but she didn't know it because she had always been told she needed to be helped. In ten years of running her own kiosk business in a declining city neighborhood, she had grown braver than she knew. She was tough, and certain of her fragility.

It was about three thirty when the bland white face appeared. He couldn't have been more than thirty but he was already balding and trying to disguise it with thin blond bangs growing in knots from the edges of his head. He had no overcoat and his blue work shirt hung loosely beneath scratches on his face and neck that looked like he'd just lost a street brawl. The sewn-on name tag read Albert. A *schtoonk*, she thought right off.

"Give me your money," he said, gravely, almost in pain. "I know you have some." He stuck the little pistol through her window and rested his forearm on the counter.

Not a schtoonk, a *goniff teppista*. His whiteness had thrown her off guard.

"Albert," she said. The bandit didn't respond, so he'd stolen the shirt; and yet she'd always think of him as Albert. At the same moment, she knew she must take control of her life; this might be her last chance...not just to live, but to show she mattered.

"*Facacta teppista*," she muttered.

"What?!"

"What kind of a robber asks *what*? You're supposed to give the orders, not *ask*."

"Hurry up, lady." Albert's pupils were wide and they cut back and forth like they were watching a tennis match, only faster. "I ain't got all day."

As Anna Maria was invoking filthy, Yiddish-Italian worms in Albert's stomach, the phone rang. She looked at the phone beside her and mumbled *caca maggoti tu stómaco*. She smiled inside, looked at Albert and said, "You expected a *call*?"

"Lady, I'm...!"

He shut up as Anna Maria said "hello" into the receiver. It was Buddy. *Two times in one month. He forgot already*. She considered handing the phone to Albert just to see what he'd do, but changed her mind. Instead she said, "Oh, hello, *Ethel*. I'm tied up right now." Her thumbs hurt as she shrugged her shoulders at the thug,

indicating she had no choice but to speak to *Ethel*, an S.O.S. to Buddy.

She heard Buddy mumble, "Uh, what? Is that you, mom?"

"Yes, *Ethel*. That's right, *Ethel*," Anna Maria said, smiling a grimace at Albert, trying not to cry and afraid she might laugh. She looked at his little gun and gripped the phone tighter. "That's right, Ethel," she repeated with more urgency. "And Albert's here. You remember Albert."

She feigned concern, stared directly into the thug's unfocused eyes. "What was your last name, Albert?"

"Hawkins, and it ain't Albert?" The thug's brain reacted automatically to the question; then with his last ration of reason realized that nothing was making sense. "Lady!" he threatened.

"Remember now, Ethel. Hawkins, blond hair...." and Buddy interrupted his mother with a muttered, "Oh, wrong number. Um." And the phone clicked to a dial tone.

"I'll have to check," she said to the dial tone, hung up and looked at Albert who was starting to sweat in the cold winter air of Jamaica Plain.

"Now, wait a minute, Albert. There's some change here," she pointed under the counter, "but the main receipts are already bagged. You'll have to let me step over there." She pointed to the back of the kiosk. "Don't hurt me. I'm cooperating."

Albert nodded.

It usually took Anna Maria four steps to reach the cash deposit envelopes, but today she used seven to give herself time to think. She already hated Albert; and she knew his eyes looked drugged out, so *he* didn't hate. He didn't *anything*, so he might shoot her for no reason. As she moved, exaggerating her normal shuffle to elicit sympathy from a pickled brain, she murmured soothing words to Albert. "*Bruto senza gulo, gay cock in der yom.*" She halted, cut an eye back, and sensed her tranquilizing tone was working. Albert's eyes continued to flit around the kiosk's interior; but he seemed calmer, the way a wild dog might after his teeth sever his prey's throat and he waits for its breathing to cease.

She started to pick up both cash packets, then decided Uncle Sam's could go, but why give away her *rainy day* reserve? She carried the gross cash deposit envelope back and set it in front of Albert, who tore it open and pawed through it.

"You got more, old lady." He shook the little pistol. "I'll kill you."

She bit her finger and whispered *buttamangial-osangre*; and her world changed. She'd never know if it was because of a sort of a prayer or because for the first time, after all her confrontations with thugs, someone had threatened to end her life, not kill in general — as in her news magazines — but murder *her*, Anna Maria Constanza Burnstein.

"Wait," said Anna Maria, softly. "Maybe I find some more." She shuffled back to the second envelope, lifted it, and remembered her cannon was bigger than Albert's. But she'd never fired a gun and besides, Albert's was aimed. Without pondering, she bent forward again, picked up the pistol with her right hand, covered it with her *rainy day* container and started back. She took nine steps, all the way straining to cock the grotesque black brute, but her thumb was too weak and every time she stretched the muscles arthritis pain shot through her hand and up her arm. It would take two hands, maybe three.

She thrust the dark monster under the counter, out of Albert's sight, and handed him the second envelope as she sat down. With her left hand she patted his forearm. "You can relax, Albert. Everything's gonna be all right."

With her right she strained to cock the pistol. If Albert could have noticed, he'd have spotted the struggle in her eyes. Her thumb ached; her hand ached; her head ached. She almost overpowered the spring but before the hammer cocked it slipped back, making a clicking sound.

"What was that?!"

"Nothing, young man. The phone always clicks a minute after I've hung up." Anna Maria watched Albert's stoned face that failed to register the skepticism such an absurd remarked deserved. And while Albert's brain reposed, Anna Maria's raced. For the first time, she knew ultimate *farmisht*; but she refused to allow her face to show her soul, which was at that moment hurling around inside her like a hurricane, torn between mercy and murder.

As Albert scooped up the cash and disappered, Anna Maria, with both hands now, forced the hammer back and lifted the unwieldy pistol into the window.

"Young man," she said quickly, and rattled the pages of the nearest magazine. She heard his shoes crunch to a stop on the snow's crust. She grabbed the pistol again

with both hands and aimed at the center of the kiosk window. Her hands were killing her; pain wracked her wrists. The heavy barrel weaved a pattern across the red second-hand of Wexler's deli clock, still running slow.

"Young man," she tried to tantalize. "I found some *more*."

Anna Maria Constanza Burnstein heard the snow crunch. Her tongue flicked the gap in her teeth.

William Dekle holds a B.A. in Political Science from Emory University and a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Georgia. He has sung backup on the Johnny Cash T.V. Show, led a folk trio in Spain, acted in *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *I'll Fly Away*, been a farm laborer, airplane pilot, real estate broker, Yosemite garbage man, naval officer, and an L.A. *muggee*. His two act play, *S.O.P.* (Standard Operating Procedure) was produced at the BRC Theater, Hollywood, in 1990 and his short play, *No Miracles For Me* is published by Contemporary Drama Service. He has lived in Munich, Madrid, Copenhagen, Massachusetts, Florida, Texas, and once innocently started a riot in Tetuan, Morocco.

Beach House

Todd Brendan Fahey

The old man was propped up on the sofa, listening to Van Morrison, when I came in through the back door, to "Tir-Na-Nog," the string section of which made the flesh on my arms prickle furiously. Twice each week for the past five months, I would awaken just before 9:00 a.m., tear a long ribbon of cheap paper from the printer that had been chattering most of the night next to my bed, and run out the front door of the house I rented with two young men I had seen less than a dozen times combined, to scale the narrow-gauge incline that crested Santa Barbara's Riviera before it dropped down nearly into the surf.

If I felt I had the extra thirty seconds, I would skid into the parking lot of the Sea Cove, an outdoor restaurant with a decent abalone sandwich and a large, non-paying clientele of California gulls, slap a dollar on the counter and drive away straddling a huge iced-tea, which I somehow managed never to spill over myself.

I have always landed on my feet in Santa Barbara; what happens when I stay is another matter entirely. But on these sober drives to a noisy house on the beach, I had been a resident of the Gold Coast for less than two months, albeit for the third time.

The second began two years earlier, as a flight from a brutal Phoenix summer, my heart palpitations vanishing as soon as I saw the beach, then returning predictably and with a giddy vengeance as I awoke early one foggy, June morning and untwisted the top from a bottle of Coors, in what would be my first in a governing stream for something like the two- thousandth straight day. I kept my promise to Marcus that I would return to Arizona as soon as the summer session at UC Santa Barbara had ended but we both knew I'd be back.

The first time, Marcus and I had fled Santa Barbara

together, not long after the death of his girlfriend, establishing a pattern of retreat that haunts him even today, wherever he is I've heard rumors of some cannery rig almost to the Aleutian Islands, where the money is so good, even he could pay off his Mastercard balance in a year of double-shifts. I have a hard time imagining those flaccid-white hands slitting endless bellies of Alaskan king salmon in the ecliptic blackness to pay off some banker in New York he's never before met, even if he is a slave to his primitive Calvinist instincts; but penance is a fearful motivator, and I have never been privy to its persuasion.

John Patrick "Paddy" O'Hearn understood, in a nerveless way. "Agoraphobia," he nodded, reaching for the CD's remote-changer that seemed to function as something of a morphine pump: *click* (changing his tastes slightly to *St. Dominic's Preview*): another shot into the audio lobe. "The perfect environment. Pitch-black twenty-two hours a day; sleep through the daylight, then back into the cannery. Your friend is very clever. What brought it on?" he wondered, looking more than a little like Howard Hughes before the Old Aviator fixed the lever on his final descent. He sat up slightly on the musty sofa to peel open a tin of smoked oysters that lay on a folding card table.

I recoiled slightly at the scent, and wondered if I really wanted to get into it again. For more than four years, Marcus and I had been sparring partners in some strange shadowbox, feigning and fending, and hurting from imagined blows. The last time I saw him, after I got out of rehab, he was holed up in a condo his parents had bought for him in Phoenix: a two- bedroom, two-bath villa at Squaw Peak, with a swimming pool perched atop a promontory—a salve for the blistering summer, though I doubt he ever used it: He would have had to walk outside.

Paddy nodded, a thin stream of oyster-juice trickling into a grizzled, gun-metal beard. "Do you think you could bring me some coffee on Wednesday?" he asked. "About half a pound of that Irish Creme we both like. I'll grind it myself." Then he reached for his wallet and handed me a twenty-dollar bill. "And some clam chowder. If you remember," he said casually.

I nodded and tucked the bill into my wallet. As I stood up to leave, I handed the old man a mass of computer paper, still perforated at the seams. "Let me know

what you think," I said. I asked him if he wanted the curtains opened, but he seemed not to hear me, and so I left the house, the fog hanging over Santa Barbara as it always did in June, festering like a damp, dirty gauze. It was the kind of day that made me feel like drinking.

I drove into Isla Vista, to a wood-paneled sandwich shop called Grandma Gertie's, where I had once spent a year's-worth of Thursday evenings challenging a drunk driving violation. When I finally went into rehab a couple years later, I was proud to say that I had beaten a House where, at ninety-nine cents a pitcher when a man spends ten dollars, stays for three hours, and doesn't eat the odds are not long in his favor.

I was drinking nothing stronger than Pepsi this time just staring into a television perched high on a shelf in one corner of the shop, at the finely-oiled hitting machine that appeared to be Hector Camacho beating away on a hapless Bobby Chacon when a black man limped into the shop, causing the owner to make a move for the low, swinging door behind the counter. "Getouttahere, Preston!" he sputtered.

Preston backed up a few steps and tipped his knit beret. "Man, iss okay. I's jess comin' to see m'friend." The Jamaican turned to me, lowering his head in a short nod.

I had met Preston in adjacent Dogshit Park several years earlier, after the drugs had run dry in the dorms, and the brave and desperate were forced to take a Walk on the Wild Side, as it were. For his troubles, I remember giving him a $5 "finder's fee," and walked back to Francisco Torres dormitory with a small bag of magic mushrooms. While most of my classmates were content to wallow with the worm on the bottom of a flask of mescal, I found it increasingly necessary to grapple with the Philosophies—to unravel the kink in my frontal lobe, which compelled a young man with presumably Everything Going for Him to spend a lazy Sunday afternoon with known degenerates. Preston and I had asked very few questions of each other that day, and still I felt I knew everything about him I needed to know.

Eight years later, I found Preston leading me out onto the same sidewalk, talking his same low, Caribbean rumble. "Johnny walkin' 'round. He takin' it slow, back

over dehr," he motioned over his shoulder.

I slid a hand into my front pocket and scrunched up a five-dollar bill, casually flicking it into the dirt as I walked away, and which I'm sure Preston just as casually reached down and palmed as soon as I had made sufficient distance. After fifteen years on the streets, with only a recent few incarcerations for public drunkenness as his liver slowly gave out with age, Preston had become as discrete as a country doctor with a taste for smack. At forty-three, he lived by sweeping out shops, returning scrounged bottles, peddling here and there, and picked up a few extra dollars from students like me. His only fear was the soulless prep, who would give him up in a hot second to keep from getting buggered in the County Jail. Unfortunately for Preston, such an incidence of betrayal incarnate had come in the form of the only scion of the Grandma Gertie's empire, a lacrosse player a year younger than me, and whose name I recall as Mickey. Mickey's father (the man behind the counter) a proud and scrupulous man of Greek Orthodox extraction, refused to put up bail for his prodigal son, whose jail experiences, I am told, led him to the Lord in the form of a Pentecostal ministry.

I could walk through Dogshit Park in 80 years and still see the same faces: Clustered around a bench on the northeast corner, four or five Navajo Indians held a debased pow-wow, passing a bottle of Pisco and a pack of filterless Camels amongst themselves, a tubercular tribute to a young, smirking Sun God in the marketing division of Phillip Morris; a group of toothless old darkies sat huddled near a garbage can next to the swing-set, shuckin' that slow shuck, all orangelivered eyes, wetnursing their jones for Jim Beam; the skaters, the hackey-sackers, the prowlers.

Johnny was, by my estimation, a Casualty, though a functional one. He walked everywhere, and everywhere he walked, a bright, pleasant grin stretched his facial muscles, and he looked like a carpenter who had plied his trade well. His faded jeans and T-shirts were always clean, his sun-yellowed hair combed forward in a Caesar cut, the only blemish on his person the weather-chapped lips which spoke calmly, peacefully. A Casualty.

I wish to this day that I had asked Johnny to lunch, but the trust was hard-won and, to my mind, random and purely accidental, like a hunter of yage coming up on some young, abandoned puma, whom the beast rec-

ognizes as scared as she. So when I passed Johnny on the streets of Isla Vista, it was always the same scene: a vague, slowly-remembering dawn of recognition, followed by a thoughtful pause. Then we would walk toward the storage shed he kept in such a strip along a side alley near Dogshit Park. A quick whisk of the combination lock, door opens, Johnny pops in and out, while I stand, heart palpitating, spared but for the grace of God by the fast-rushing surveillance team that reportedly had been closing in on him in recent weeks, just a click of the cuffs, the world as one knows it, savagely altered.

Once, a few years earlier, I had felt such heat prickle the back of my neck, and probably I should have been taken off the road anyway—just another Thursday night at Grandma Gertie's. But somehow I had pointed the one-eyed compass toward the beach and got as far as the tony Riviera before losing my bearings in a decrepit Ford Fiesta rag-top convertible. The fear of God becomes real in times like these, palpable, a cleansing sort of fear that makes one promise outrageous lies, a nerve tonic that comes on like a veritable Beacon of Light, rinsing the pitchers from the dross, a grounding magnet to lead the rag-top slowly, carefully away from the marked patrol car following so intolerably close behind, those sixty hits of Woodstock acid in the wallet suddenly feeling rather superfluous.

As soon as I had entered the fringes of a less-affluent neighborhood, the patrol car hit its lights once and veered off onto a side street. And as soon as I had hit the neon pulse of State Street, I parked at the Bank of America and took in a clammy, late-night movie and prayed.

But I had no such fear this night; I was sober like a Baptist at Easter and took the freeway straight home. When I returned after midnight, the wood-shingled house I rented near the beach was almost dark, only the soft-orange glow from a Chinese lantern in an upstairs window telling me that Scott was still up. And I knew we would talk that night, because we had not yet, and things would explode if we didn't. I had been living in the house for nearly three months, and my bizarre hours kept the roommates guessing.

As Scott was sole signatory on the lease, and as I paid rent to Scott, all doubts as to the democracy of the household had been erased during the pre-screening phone interview. A subsequent personal interview re-

vealed Scott, in my cheapest armchair analysis, as a harried draftsman by day, a brilliant, frustrated, unconfident artist by night, the middle child of alcoholic parents since divorced, at just over five-foot five, suffering Little-Man's syndrome, a compulsive cleaner who, though aware of his compulsion, recognized it as merely the tip of a larger, more formidable neuroses to which he felt powerless and resigned. In short, a perfect candidate for some of the acid I had been allowed by the kind Fates to escape with late that afternoon.

I took a seat at my computer in the downstairs bedroom, tapping out one of my unnatural stories for Paddy, Peter Gabriel-era Genesis hissing perpetually through the speakers, until I heard the sound of the microwave. Then I unlocked the door and readied myself for a certain psychic hell that never came. Instead, Scott shrugged and turned his palms toward the ceiling, smiling in some resigned way.

"What's going on?" he grinned, not looking past me and into my painfully lighted room with the faux-vaulted ceiling, not looking overly concerned with what it was I was doing at nearly one in the morning, not even looking much like the same fussy landlord with whom I had withstood such a grueling interview weeks earlier…just a man in his early prime wanting to know what lay at the heart of the strange goddamned animal who lived in the bedroom underneath him. I exchanged the smile, grabbed one of the mugs of herbal tea from his fist, and motioned toward the weatherbeaten orange-and-rust colored sleeper-sofa that sat in my bedroom, and on which I had slept lately, when I slept at all.

"So what do you want to know?" I wondered, sipping the tea.

"I guess you've found a job by now," he said, groping. "None of your checks have bounced." He stared silently into his cup.

"Do you have plans for the next eight or nine hours?" I said suddenly, feeling that if I weren't going to eat some of this acid, I would have to go immediately to sleep.

He raised an eyebrow. "I don't know?" Those eyes continued to watch in stunned fascination as I emptied my wallet of several thin strips of brightly-stamped paper. "No wonder you're up all the time," he muttered.

"I'm going to eat two of these," I told him, "and you're welcome to join me. I think we'll have a good time. But you'll have to eat them if you want to stay."

He nodded blankly, then recovered to inspect the pattern on the paper, which appeared to be the feet of a Goony Bird; but I would have needed the rest of the sheet to really be sure. "Jesus, where'd you get so much of it?"

"Isla Vista," I shrugged. After I had told him about Johnny, I handed him two squares. "Here. Just put it in your lower lip, like Copenhagen, and forget it's even there. In about forty-five minutes, you'll feel like you need to laugh. Then you won't be able to help it. Neither of us will."

He did as I said, his tongue fiddling along the buccal membrane every so often as we talked about his dead-end draftsman's job with a local interior design firm, and how he would never see a promotion for lack of a college degree, of which he found himself shy by at least eighty units.

"That's a tough spot," I admitted, searching myself for the drug's first telltale clues, but finding none.

"So I keep thinking about my art," he said. "You probably haven't seen any of it yet."

I shook my head, suddenly feeling a strange new relationship with this wood-shingled house near the beach, and especially with its lessee. "I'd like to, though. I really would. I love art."

He nodded, settling down into the cushions of the sofa, and I could see it as some kind of physical manifestation of the acid, a hunkering down before the hurricane.

"Is this music okay?" I wondered, trying to make his journey on the Lysergic Express a pleasant one.

"It's really twisted," he said, and he seemed to be genuinely involved in the way Peter Gabriel had coiled himself around my speakers like the original King Cobra. He leaned forward and picked up the dust-jacket of Selling England by the Pound. "God, these guys were pioneers," he said, and it was then that I knew he had been bitten. "They make Led Zeppelin sound like a bunch of horny boys." He began slicking a thin lock of blond hair back over his forehead, which revealed a marked destiny toward male-pattern baldness. Then he sucked in his breath.

"You want to take a walk?" I asked him.

"Uhhm…" and he was forced to think about this one, "maybe soon. I think I should see where this goes."

The phone rang in my room, and we both looked at

it like a diseased thing.

"I'm not home," he said, shaking his head. "No way."

I picked up the receiver. It was Paddy. I looked at my watch, and saw that it was 2:08 a.m. "Everything alright?" I wondered.

"Oh, sure," the old man chuckled. I could hear the ever-present music pulsing through his Nakamichi system. It sounded like the Allman Brothers at one of their early-70s Fillmore gigs. "I hope I didn't wake you," he said.

"No. I'm just up talking to my roommate. Do you need something? Do you need me to come over?"

"No, no," he laughed brittly. "It's…I was just wondering…," he said, taking his time with what it was he wanted to ask. "Just something that stuck in my mind. I was just wondering what might have set your friend off. The one on the cannery rig: Marcus, was it, right?"

"Yeah," I said, getting edgy, because I knew Paddy would forget Marcus's name no sooner than he would forget his own: the old man had a mind like flypaper. It caught everything, some of it useful, most of it shit; but he kept it all stored upstairs to use someday, when he felt like writing again. As he told it, what motivation the Hodgkin's hadn't stolen, the chemotherapy took care of nicely. He hadn't written a story for nearly two years, and had been placed on an extended medical leave of absence by USC, his salary halved, but his job guaranteed until he felt able to return to full-time teaching. Until then, he convalesced beside the beach, taking on a few especially promising graduate students, whose writing he coached and guided and polished for inclusion into the literary magazines, the "littles" as they are called by those who find homes in them. I was not among the lucky.

Promising as my work appeared to the English department faculty, I owned enough rejection letters to spark a truly heinous fire at the houses of any of the individual editors of the hundred-odd "littles" on which I had wasted $.74 a pop over the course of more than a year. "Hang on a minute, Paddy," I told him.

I cupped the mouthpiece and looked over at Scott, who was now the proud owner of a seam-splitting grin. "Can you make it another couple minutes?" I wondered. "It's my writing teacher. I can't tell what he wants."

Scott nodded squarely, succumbing to the recesses of the sofa. "No problem. Take as long as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

I nodded, releasing my hold on the receiver. "What happened to Marcus?" I repeated finally.

"Uh-huh," Paddy answered breathlessly.

"Our freshman year in the dorms, he decided he wanted to date other girls—legitimately—without having to sneak around. He had been dating his high school sweetheart for a long time, but her parents sent her off to a Catholic college in Nebraska. So he wrote her a letter—at least he told me that's what he had planned on doing. He wanted to tell her in person, but Christmas break was four months away, and he just didn't want to string her along. He loved her, but it was over," I said, dredging up the putrefied foot-locker. "The girl took it really hard, and then she stopped writing. A few weeks later, Marcus's mom called him at school. We were playing backgammon and drinking Scotch in his room, and I'll never forget it. His face aged ten years. He didn't say a word, he just hung up. Then he put the cork back in the Scotch and we finished playing backgammon until the sun came up. He wouldn't let me leave. After that, he would stay in his dorm room for days. I brought him food from the cafeteria, and we drank and played games and got to be really close friends. But I was the only one. He was shattered."

"What did she do?" Paddy said. The music in his living room had gone off.

"She cut her wrists over the kitchen sink in her apartment," I said. I was shaking uncontrollably; it always happened when I talked about Marcus, which I hadn't, to anyone, in a very long time. "She locked the door from the inside. They found her the next day. They had to use the master key to get in, and they found her lying on the kitchen floor. A waste-paper basket was filled with used Kleenexes."

"Any note?" Paddy wondered.

I shook my head and breathed deliberately, trying to regain my composure in front of Scott. "No note. She burned a letter in an ashtray, but they couldn't tell who it was from. The envelope was on the table, though. It was still intact."

"Who was it from?" he said, but actually it was more of a demand.

"Marcus said he didn't know. He changed the subject when I asked him, and I've never had the heart to ask again," I said. "But I think it's fairly obvious."

There was a long silence on the other end, then the

music came beating back through his system, a Big Band sound, or maybe Broadway show tunes—I couldn't be sure. "I'll see you Tuesday morning, won't I?"

"See you then," I told him, and hung up. I could tell just by looking that Scott had been adopted into the Tribe in my absence, christened by St. Leary himself. "How're you doing, pro?"

"Screaming down the vortex!" was his thunderous reply. His eyes were moist, like he was bearing witness to something beautiful, and his natural wonderment made me forget all about the phone call. For the next two hours, he sat on the couch, saying very little, his face contorted by a grin that appeared to be permanently sculpted into his facial elastin, as I sat in my reclining writer's chair with the scuffed wooden arms, about five feet away, combing the grey fissures of my addled brain for any number of weird anecdotes that I knew would make us howl like a pair of jackals until sunrise ushered in its own harsh realities.

At four-thirty, he began to level out, displaying signs of confidence. "Let's go upstairs and look at my art now," he said, his eyes glittering like a neon sign.

I was only too happy to get up and unlock the atrophied facet joints in my back, and so we walked up to Scott's bedroom, which was heavily decorated in a sort of Hindi-Japanese—a lot of bamboo and pots and woven textiles, which trapped the lingering scent of incense that he explained he burned ritually each morning before leaving the house. His artwork, mostly airbrush portraits of women, reminded me of Nagel, only less deliberate. They were exquisitely good, and I told him so.

"Why don't you show these things?"

He shrugged and kicked at the ground with a socked foot. "I tried once," he complained, "but my art teacher in junior college hated them. I think she was a lesbian. She just couldn't stand anything I did. That's why I dropped out of school. That's why I'll never get promoted," he said, and I caught him before he wound himself into an irrescuable loop.

"I've got a friend whose parents own two galleries in Scottsdale. I guarantee you can unload five of these a week. This stuff's great," I said, admiring the alien cobalt-and-rose of one of the pieces.

We sat upstairs, listening to Kate Bush for the rest of the night, talking about Scott's sometime-girlfriend who

used to share this very bedroom, but who was now suffering from candida, a bizarre aversion to yeast that he claimed transformed her over a period of months from a mild, sex-crazed thing of utter perfection into a screeching nut. He showed me a couple topless photos he had taken of her with a Polaroid the previous summer, and I had to agree that she looked like an angel.

At 5:45, the door of the other bedroom opened quietly and a bearded man in his earlythirties popped out, clad in leather riding gear. "See ya," he said in a clipped Welsh accent, and walked down the stairs and out the front door. Out in the carport, we heard the sound of a motorcycle sputter to a start, then roar away.

"We don't see much of Jeremy," Scott shrugged. "I moved in five years ago, and he's been here about three-and-a-half. He's kind of like you were. *Are*… I guess," Scott muttered, realizing that before midnight, he had never spoken ten words to me, aside from the interview, and at nearly dawn, we had become brothers in some strange way. "Were you ever going to get to know me?" he wondered.

I shook my head. "I took a weird job last month as a technical writer for an aircraft company that does work with the Defense department. It's a ten-hour shift, and we're not allowed to leave the hangar. Everyone eats at the cafeteria. But it really works out to about three hours of work and six hours of writing time. I come back here and stay up all night typing those yellow pads into the hard drive," I said, pointing downstairs where a pile of handwritten yellow paper sat next to my computer. "But then you came downstairs tonight and fucked everything up."

We both laughed, but mine was more from nervous exhaustion. I hadn't slept in over thirty-six hours, and my heart was starting to palpitate. "I've got to crash." I saw the pained look on Scott's face, but there was no other way. "You'll make it. It's been fun," I said. "We'll have to do it again soon." Then I walked downstairs and dismantled the sofa and went comatose on the flimsy mattress.

I didn't see Scott for the next few days, but when I did, he told me that he had seen me that night, after the LSD had taken hold, as some kind of tribal figure that he called King Storyteller, and that the perfect

spectrum of colors had trailed out of my hands when I spoke, and that it had been one of the most entertaining nights of his life. He also said that he had worked through all of his problems with his family after I had gone to bed, and had even forgiven his father for molesting his younger sister—something he thought he would never be able to do.

That Tuesday, Paddy said he had discovered what was wrong with my fiction; it was something I said on the phone the night he had called so late. "The kitchen sink," he chuckled. "Throw it in. You're too spare. Add the goddamn kitchen sink. If that won't do it, I give up."

It turned out he was right: a mass-mailing of stories to thirty "littles" netted three letters of acceptance—two from fairly new publications out of Illinois, the other from a venerable rag in Tennessee.

Scott met the news indifferently. We had gone on a couple more Tours of Duty together, including a disastrous morning drive to Malibu, after I convinced him to call in sick from work. I had been operating on nearly two days worth of adrenaline, and wasn't feeling real sharp to begin with, but Scott insisted that I stay up all night with him anyway. And by the time the sun had come up, I caught a second wind and felt the need for the breeze in my hair. We sailed down to Malibu, listening to Steely Dan, and somehow found ourselves at the breakfast table of a roadside cafe near Pepperdine campus, seated next to Rod Steiger, who looked like he weighed in at least threehundred pounds and who resonating a palpably heavier vibe. Steiger was eating oatmeal and pitted prunes, talking about investment strategies with a pony-tailed freak, whose hair was as long and gray as his own.

Scott kept his sunglasses on, fruitlessly trying to avoid eye contact with Steiger's breakfast companion, who had caught onto our conspiracy and was smiling and nodding at us in an animated sort of way. At one point, Steiger became irritated by his friend's inattention, and turned around stiffly and bellowed, "Well, why don't you just fucking ask them to eat with us?!" It was then that Scott fled, walking out to his convertible Alfa Romeo Spider, on which he still owed over ten grand, leaving me behind to pay the check. We said nothing to each other on the drive home.

I worked the swing shift that evening, riding the rail of chemical insomnia for over fifty hours before the

switchmaster sought mercy on my soul. After that, I saw Scott less and less. But one night, he came thundering downstairs to tell me never to adjust the thermostat again, that he "felt like a baked turkey," and that he would control it for the household from there on out. Sometime the next week, he left a bitter note on the breakfast table, telling me to clean up the crumbs around the sink the next time I decided to make toast.

I saw him only once more—after discovering his airbrush and his canvasses carelessly packed in a box in the rafters of the carport—and I remember the time and place well, because it was also the last time I have ever walked through Dogshit Park. On a tip-off from Preston, I headed over to the storage sheds, then watched a sacred ritual turn sour as Scott shook hands with Johnny.

After that, I moved down to Los Angeles and got married, finishing my Master's degree at USC, where I learned that Paddy O'Hearn had been fully recovered from Hodgkin's disease for at least two years, but that his agoraphobia was so acute, the school didn't know if he would ever be back full-time.

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John Terry Cooper

Paling Grass

I stand, with the shovel in my hand,
blood draining down my neck.
The ache lowers my head,
turning the grass pale:
a thousand sharps (Whitman in negative).
Looking up
would send me to the ground.

The heavy Sun is pleasurable surprise
when one is sick,
when everything is so light,
and immaterial.
Even the sinking of my head
from that throbbing ache is fine.
My heart, so quick and lithe,
I stop and listen, bending
at the knees and waist,
the salty face,
the fly orbiting my head–
like the thought that I am weak.

I don't faint; it passes-
though I loose my thoughts:
they fly away like big black crows
harried by cheap specks.
A sting, a young thistle
growing flat to the ground,
I don't mind them.
They are part of the digging
I must do…

to escape the sheets:
I was digging the rose-bed
with a catheter dangling from my chest;
vitality grows in dangerous weather.
(I was planting twenty-one.)

Yes, I was foolhardy,
but now,
I have something
to give away.

The Operation

I try not to be afraid on wash days,
but the first time I smelled that antiseptic clean
I sensed something perverted, obsessive
about it.
How they wheel the load down those tiled halls,
I knew what was coming:
who can stand up to such bright lights, the so very
whites?
I open the dryer door,
and the bright, warm colors
spill out onto the floor.
They will fold them all (I hope),
and put each back
into its god-given place.

But then,
please,
sew the drawer shut again.

Expulsion

Like a bawling child,
towards a gravid womb,
I will curl into my glistening tomb,
listen to mother murmuring fat.
Wet void upon a hospital sheet,
a grown man's rotten egg:
my twenty-first birthday.

Self-indulgence is now my medicine,
the invalid's anesthetic and prop.

Pain spreads a peacock tail,
My peccadillo: to seek meaning
in this body's subtle dances.
A needle,
my butt assumes a deeper shade of blue.
Pain submerges;
my strength hides with it:
"go."

I lean onto the toilet
prophesying my ignorance,
the simple gravity
of my life,
and its dwindling stink.
Where an education?
Where a job,
where a wife,
even children?

Should I not interrupt my fate
with the blue tasting scattergun?
Because I will again be standing
with a woman lithe and curly?
Because someone will call at midnight,
needing talk?
Because after these things-
I will still not know
yes or no about whether or not
I should have saved myself.

Mr. Butler

Looking lowers my eyes –
we all know
Mr. Butler is dying.
Once articulate and clean,
(the nurses say)
in middle age,
he soils himself.

(A stroke.)
On the next chair
in the line of machines,
simpering, gesticulating,
clearing a speechless throat,
almost as if to prepare… but no.
Hardened, shrunken tendons,
have curled him into a hard fetus,
as if becoming
a stone (insensate?) moaning.

It is for the family
that he remains with us,
though there is little recognition or remembrance.
If I could (possibly) say what I wished,
I would say:
  Those screams that do not part lips
  are like insatiable larvae
  inside their paralytic caterpillar host.

John Terry Cooper is a native of New Orleans, where he has lived most of his life. He attends Tulane University and works in an antique shop in the Vieux Carre. His work has been published in the *Sierra-Nevada Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *The Tulane Literary Magazine* and others.

The Loch

Grace Willetts

THE SMALL TOWN SHE HAD COME FROM was now gone, drowned like an unwanted kitten by the Loch. She was eighty-nine years old, and no more a part of anywhere than a breeze blowing through a window.

Miss Elaine lived by herself in a small house that had been her daughter's before the daughter, Abby, had died of cancer at age thirty-nine. Miss Elaine was short and wizened, like a doll made from a shrunken apple, but had a steady, hustling gait like a wind-up toy. During the spring and summer, she tended her vegetable garden behind the white cottage.

When she needed anything else, she walked two blocks down the empty road by the river to the general store, where she quietly filled her rope bag with milk and butter, chocolate and lunch meat, eggs and dried noodles. The Masons, who ran the store, bid her hello and goodbye with waves of their hands, but didn't say much else because they somehow assumed she was deaf. The small, firm figure never did anything to condradict that belief. She hustled back down the road in silence, always on the side opposite the river as if the water were an enemy, her flowered dress, one of a dozen, barely moving against her body.

She had lived in the town for twenty years, yet she was not a part of it. She was recognzed, but not embraced or even named, like a gift sent by an acquaintance that is kept, but left in its box. Miss Elaine was indifferent to most things including the town, the land she tended, including the clothes on her back and the bills she paid. She had learned long ago to treat her surroundings as a vision, neither more nor less frightening or real.

"Make friends," Abby had said. "Then you won't be

alone here when I'm gone."

"Friends, pah!" Miss Elaine had replied. "I've had enough friends in my day. I'm just as happy with my own company." She could never explain to Abby that the only real friends are those who saw you grow up. They were the ones who knew you through and through. Her girlfriends from Cartersville, Emily and Alice, sat beside her playing in the mud when they were five, and sat in her livingroom when she and Colin announced their engagement. When her family had gone to church, she had walked in straight and proper in a fresh dress, proud to say she knew everyone there, and that they could all be asked for help if neccessary. But that had been before the men came.

She spent her afternoons listening to the radio and doing a little cooking to last the next couple of days. She listened to Sunday services, hoping to keep in her bid for heaven. Always she was ahead of herself, freezing casseroles cooked meats and gravies for her big white freezer. To her way of thinking, if she dropped dead, whoever found her would have plenty to eat for his trouble.

Her eyes were not as good as they used to be, even with her glasses, and she sometimes had trouble reading her own labels. Instead of spaghetti, she would thaw out strawberry jam, and instead of gravy, she would find she had cooked chocolate sauce. Every thing began to look like water to her. The air was water, and so were the things she touched. It's come back for me, she thought, and sighed. Three years ago, she had given up reading her magazines and even the Bible, yet her eyesight worsened. She could never tell how high the river was getting any more, and suspected one day it would begin to lap at the front door. It all comes around, she thought.

When she thought of Abby, it was in an immediate yet far-off way. She knew and yet she didn't always remember. Abby had come into the world a baby and miraculously left one, baldheaded and mewling and sweet. The day Abby had died, Miss Elaine had changed her diapers as she had Abby's first day on earth, after Miss Elaine had birthed her in the Towson Hospital. Oh, how it had hurt! Sometimes it seemed to Miss Elaine Abby had never grown at all that she had been a bald-headed infant all those years.

Miss Elaine moved through the white cottage with reverance. The furniture was old and made from a cheap mahogany, and the floors were covered with rag rugs. Almost everything in the house was Abby's, and many of her papers still lay in stacks around the house, her clothes in the closets. There were times when Abby's possessions made her seem very close by, and Miss Elaine would speak to her as if she were in the next room. "Cartersville was a good town," she told her. "There was no reason to take it away. They could have put the Loch somewhere else, but they didn't."

Miss Elaine would never have dreamed of leaving Maryland before Abby became sick, but now she was old and had learned the secret. The secret was that she carried her lost ones inside her, so it didn't matter where she laid her head. Her husband, who had died forty years back in an automobile accident, was there too as she went through her day in the town, in the back of her mind, even when she got caught up in the visions of ordinary life. What a handsome man he had been when they first met! He had fine red hair and a big mustache like two licks of flame. Colin strong, from his construction work, with a big chest. She had loved to lay her head on it, and felt like a warm piece of steel. Married at sixteen, widowed at thirty-six. "I was so proud when he asked me to the movies," she told Abby, "he and his brothers had chipped in and bought a new Ford. I was so proud to be seen in that car." Yet she had rued that vanity the day he had run into a truck and been decapitated. For many years she had been sure she brought the sadness on them all.

There was nothing Miss Elaine loved to do better than pull up her dress and kneel in the earth of her garden. She rose at five in the spring and summer, and prepared herself a cup of tea. After a few sips, she went outside and got to work, weeding, digging, watering, feeling the dirt. She did the entire garden herself, beginning in April, and needed no one's help. She had had her own plot since she was a girl in Cartersville. Her Daddy had given it to her, and marked it off with sticks and twine. She had raised tomatoes and cucumbers. After they all had to leave, she had had nightmares of her plot slowly being flooded with water. She could feel it on her feet and legs. There were times when Miss Elaine

looked down and realized she had wet herself. A first she was ashamed, but she soon forgot.

Miss Elaine liked to stew her tomatoes and freeze them, and make pickles from the cucumbers. Her cucumbers from the past few years hadn't tasted right. They were too bitter. Last month, a batch had made her vomit. "I've never been one to be sick," she told Abby. "The only time I went to the hospital was to have you, but I cried so much when we were told to leave town, Mama thought I would die."

Who was it who had broken the news to her? Had it been Daddy or Colin? They had found out and from then had a year and a half to get out. Had she been old enough to date Colin? She couldn't remember. She remembered a deep voice, male and steady saying, "They are going to use the land for a resevoir. We all must find somewhere else to live." She had asked if they couldn't use just part of the town, and leave them alone. "No," she had been told. "We all must go." Had her mother said one of these things, or had she been dead? Miss Elaine had begun crying and had cried every day until Colin asked her to marry him, and they got married and moved to Towson.

Miss Elaine sighed. He had been such a handsome man, carrying her from the dead town like an avenging prince. He father had slapped Colin on the back at their wedding and told him, "If you can make Elaine smile, you must be all right." There had been many jokes about getting wet. Miss Elaine frowned at the thought of the wedding. She couldn't remember if she had had any bridesmaids. She had worn a lace and white linen dress her mother had made. Did she have any sisters? No, Colin had had a sister.

Every Saturday morning Miss Elaine put on a headscarf and cleaned the house. After she cleaned the house, she loaded the laundry into the light blue machines by the back door and, when everything was dry, folded it and tucked the clothes into drawers and closets. After all of this, she allowed herself one cigarette and a piece of chocolate. Thank goodness I'm still on my own, she sometimes thought to herself as she lit her cigarette. If it's one thing I can't stand, it's being told what to do. Colin had learned this early on. He would show up at her parents' house and

tell her they were going to the movies, and she would slam the door in his face. She did this four times before he figured out he should ask her what she would like to do. He hadn't known that she had burst into tears every time he had left, afraid he would never return. There wasn't too much to do in Cartersville at night, besides park or meet up with other young people at church or on the steps of Saunder's store, but with Colin's car they could go the movies in Towson, or go to concerts nearby, or even to Baltimore if they left early in the day. She would have been glad to go anywhere with him, but she had taught him to ask her first.

From time to time, they dredged the river because of silt. Miss Elaine's house was right across the street from the river, and the hoopala made her crazy. She put her hands over her ears, and went to check on her vegetables, as if they might wilt from the noise and movement of the machines. When she walked to the Mason's store, she peered at the invaders curiously. "Serves them right!" she sometimes shouted. "Serves them right!" There had been rumours for years that one could see the reflection of the town in the Loch water. They were obviously digging for it, trying to capture the ghost so they could be rid of it forever. They were trying to find the church steeple, which was also said to be visible when the water was low.

But was the water low? Or was it high? She thought she saw it on her front lawn the other day. Miss Elaine crossed the road and crossed a little footbridge to the other side of the river. A young man in an orange vest stood in her way. She asked him, "How high is the water?"

"It's fine,"He answered. He took her by the elbow and steered her back to the footbridge. "Be careful around here, okay?"

Miss Elaine stood very straight and crossed the bridge. The insolence. These men knew nothing about what they were taking. There were only four families left in town, including hers. Colin had gone to find work and an apartment for them in Towson, but she wouldn't leave until she had to. There were only three children at the school, and the water level kept rising every day. The Saunder's store was gone, an empty shell about to burn, and much of Main Street was under water. The

school yard was starting to fill up with water, inch by inch. They had no good furniture left at the house, and only a few boxes of possessions. Daddy said they had to wait for their new house in Ridgely to be fixed up, which would be any day now. Mama was tired and lay down a lot on a walnut bed they wouldn't take with them. S he tried to talk about Elaine's wedding, which would be in a month. "I promise I'll sew your dress for you," she kept saying. "Just as soon as we get out of here. I'll do it at Daddy's office if I have to."

Most of the buildings that were on Main Street had been knocked down by the men. They wouldn't listen to her. Now the ones that stood would be burned, and the ones that hadn't burned stood there like hulking tombstones. The men were making the way for the water, then letting the water come in and take over. The whole town smelled like a swamp. Miss Elaine looked at the men working across the river and yelled, "You're making a terrible mistake! Put the resevoir somewhere else! You don't need to kill the town!"

The men looked up at her. Finally, they were listening. Was that Colin? Was he helping them too? She looked across the flooded main street and began to cry. This was all that was left.

Miss Elaine returned to her cottage. She was exhaused, and lay her rope shopping bag on the floor. What day was it? She hadn't smoked for quite a while; she found a match in the kitchen drawer and lit it. She usually kept her cigarettes on the shelf above the stove, but they did not seem to be there. The match burned her fingers, and she dropped it on the ground.

She was so very tired from her day's journey. It was early, but she knew she should go to bed. "Good night, Abby," she called out. She pulled on a white nightgown. Her mother had made it for her, along with her wedding gown.

She waited for Colin to come to bed. He came in, and started to take off his shirt. His pants were caked with dried mud. The red hairs on his chest shone in the lamp light. "Are you happy?" he asked.

"With you, always," she said. Then she became very sad when she remembered Main Street, all of its buildings reduced to graves. "Why did they have to take the town away?" she cried.

Suddenly she was younger and asking her father the same question. "Progress," he replied.

She smiled. She knew he was wrong. The town had never gone away after all. “Don’t worry, for heaven’s sake,” she told all of them.

Miss Elaine laid her head down for the last time.

Grace Willetts lives in California, has two cats, and is in search of the ugliest object in the world.