

down in the dirt

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

v. **031**
February '06

Table of contents

02/06, Down in the Dirt, volume 031



Eric Bonholtzer	2
Michelle Greenblatt	6
Stephanie Maher	7
Devin Davis	8
Raud Kennedy	8
Sharon Esther Lampert.....	9
Richard Thieme	10
Jon Kuntz	12
Constantine P. Firme III.....	14
J. Williams	14
Linda Webb Aceto	15
Christopher Barnes.....	15
Ken Dean	16
Anthony Liccione	22
Cheryl Lynn Moyer	23
Michael Shannon	24
Andrei Postolache	26
James Cline	27
Emily Griskavich	32
Sandra E. Waldron	33
Janet Kuypers	41

Scars art, pages 10-11, 12-13, 15, 23
(Arlington National Cemetery and
Gettysburg's unmarked graves). Cover
art: a heart-shaped pool at the Poconos.

Home Sweet Home When You're Not Alone

Eric bonholtzer

from the book *Duality*

“Your call cannot be completed as dialed. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please hang up and try your call again.” The impassive robotic voice repeated itself until Petie finally hung up the phone, slowly, trying to keep his hands from shaking.

Why didn't I just go to movies? Petie thought grimly as he searched the shadows, every nook and cranny seeming to hold its own threat, every slight movement caught from the corner of his eye signaling potential danger. He could have gone with his parents. It was just down the street. He'd even sort of wanted to see the film, but a rebellious inner voice yearning for more independence won out, convincing him that staying home alone was an essential part of growing up. Feverishly peering into the dark recesses of the family room, trying to see if anything had snuck inside and was now lying in wait, Petie wished he'd just told that voice to mind its own business. Now he was alone, horribly, horribly alone in a house, with something or some *things* coming for him.

He'd heard the noise, the awful scampering just outside the front door about fifteen minutes after the rain had really started coming down. He'd been sitting back enjoying a violent TV show he wasn't supposed to be watching when he'd first heard it, a scratching sound that had the ten year old boy's imagination running wild. Then there were footsteps outside the window and deep squashing noises as mud was disturbed. Petie's thin legs trembled when he'd heard that, becoming certain that something was definitely out there, his Mickey Mouse flannel pajamas fluttering as his knees creaked together and his stomach knotted. And by the third time he'd called his parent's cell phones and was unable to get through, he was so scared he wanted to cry. Never before in his life had he missed the comforting grasp of his mother's arms around him more than he did right now.

“Help me,” he whispered through chattering teeth. Heart heavy, Petie

cautiously approached the window, mustering every ounce of his courage, figuring that doing something was better than just standing there and letting his mind draw its own conclusions. The shuttered white window frame stood like a portal into a world of danger, a thin barrier to the unknown. *I'm the bravest kid in the world. I'm the bravest kid in the world.* He repeated the thought over and over in his head, trying desperately to believe it. This time he couldn't keep his hands from shaking as he cracked the shutters open, just a hair, and peered out.

The wind had taken on a feverish pitch, the storm transformed from a seasonal drizzle to torrential downpour. Petie couldn't help but wonder, as he stared into the darkness trying to make out anything in the rain, just why his parents had left him here, alone in this storm. But a voice, one that sounded

suspiciously like the voice which convinced him to stay home in the first place, spoke the truth, one Petie desperately didn't want to hear. *You brought this on yourself.*

The boy breathed in deeply, filling his lungs with air that seemed suffocating. Petie didn't realize, until it was too late, just what a mistake he was making, opening the shutter in a lit room so he could look out into the darkness when the only thing that would be seen was him. Petie still tried to squint and catch a glimpse of just what was out there, leaning closer and closer to the window, searching.

BANG!

Petie jumped back and the window shook violently as it was rapped upon, once, then twice, hard and fierce, a shattering thump so strong Petie thought the window might shatter. Then he heard the calls. It was difficult to make them out over the howl of the wind and rain, but the words, distorted as they sounded, were unmistakable, "*Petie... Petie... Petie...*"

His legs wouldn't respond to his mind's frantic commands, the whole time thinking, *it knows my name.* Then the voice spoke again, screaming,



the wind whipping and cutting off the words, but the message was clear, “LET US INNNN...”

Finally Petie’s unresponsive limbs obeyed and he was off running, grabbing the cordless phone as he went. He desperately tried to press the buttons to summon help, as he raced through the house, praying his fingers hit the right ones.

The message was different than when he’d tried his parent’s cell phone, but equally disturbing. “All circuits are busy, please try your call again later.” A horrifying thought came to Petie as he ran, wondering if he’d remembered to lock the front door. His parents had latched it when they’d left, throwing the deadbolt, but Petie had gone outside when it first started raining to feel the cool wetness on his tongue. Now he wished he hadn’t. He knew he got careless sometimes and forgot to relock it. He desperately hoped that this wasn’t one of those times, so he headed in that direction to make sure.

It seemed as if luck was on his side because the door *was* locked. Petie breathed an expansive sigh of relief, but it was short lived. The voice came again, this time just beyond the door. “LET US IN PETIE!”

The boy’s teeth chattered, his eyes going wide as he saw the bolt turning, the door unlocking. Petie would’ve dropped the phone if his fingers hadn’t been so tightly clenched, and it wasn’t until he had punched in the entire number of his dad’s cell that he realized the line was dead.

The lock turned over and then the door was opening. Petie didn’t hesitate, tearing off down the hallway. He couldn’t hear anything except for the frantic beating of his heart, filling his ears with its rapid-fire thump. The intruder was close behind, the thing that knew his name, and it was coming for him. His mind blocked out everything except his room, and the sanctuary he thought it could provide. He couldn’t have looked back if he wanted to, the door just ahead, the *thing* just behind. Then his hand was on the knob and he was inside. He shuddered, realizing there was no latch as he slammed it shut, diving into his bed and crawling under the covers.

There was nothing else he could do, shivering in the same little fortress he’d made hundreds of times before to guard against imaginary monsters, hoping that somehow the thin layer of his comforter and sheets would magically protect him from this very real monster. He could hear the foot falls just beyond the door.

“PETIE...” The voice muffled, his mind unable to make sense of it. Why was it here? Why was it coming for him? But more importantly, the rebellious voice screaming at him, *why didn’t you just listen to Mom and Dad?*

He wished he had. The door was opening again. The footsteps drawing closer now. One, then another, plodding up to the bed. Through the covers he could almost see the hand reaching out for him, grasping the blanket and throwing it back. Exposed, Petie screamed as he had never screamed before, a passionate wail that a siren would envy.

His eyes were closed. But when moments passed, painfully tense moments where he expected any second to feel the sharp sting of claws digging into him and nothing happened, Petie opened his eyes.

Dimly, he realized he was being shaken. Waking from the waking nightmare that had become his life ever since his parents had left, Petie was astonished to find that he was in the arms of his mother, encircled just like he'd been praying for. She was saying things to him, and he could hear them and make sense of them, but it was a slow process. All Petie could feel was a palpable sense of relief, mixed with love, as the tears streamed down his cheeks. He hugged his mom tightly, not letting go, telling her again and again that he loved her.

After he'd calmed down a little, she told him just what had happened. How Dad had locked his keys in the car at the theater and how they had walked back in the rain. They'd tried to knock and call out to Petie but he hadn't answered, and they'd figured he'd fallen asleep. Then his mom remembered the spare key tucked away for emergencies. But she still couldn't understand why Petie was crying until he finally told her. She smiled, kissed him on the forehead and told him again and again that his parents wouldn't ever allow anything to harm their precious little angel. Petie finally relaxed, it all making sense now, and his mom concluded by asking if he'd like to go to the movies with them next time.

Petie smiled through his tears, sweeter words never having been spoken and said, "I'd love too."



*Angels & Angles**

Michelle Greenblatt

And why not? Erasing letters off a chalkboard, my kindergarten writing sloughed off, my 22 year old hands trembling, while you transmuted to angel, to angle, equal & extreme opposites of cherry preserves & nighttime spreads of glistening, glistening irrupted...

Why not drop this here, unfinished, let it fall to the beige & green tiles, let it crack a little, let it know the meaning of pomegranate seed, tell it it's alone, though we are watching, though the ants come from crackling slices of uneaten toast on your plain china white plates to the porcelain bits of...

Why not do nothing different this time? Hold me close then drop me down, unfinished, let me crack a little, let me know the meaning of alone though you are watching me, my equal & extreme opposite, erasing eight years of letters off a chalkboard—sloughing me off, angles of a plan I wrote & lost at the age of 13...

12.13.2004-

title taken from a Muriel Rukeyser poem, "Theory of Flight"

Says He Never Gave a Damn for Me

Stephanie Maher

The moment when you realize you have ruined everything,
Is never as dramatic as you had expected.
Look out the window, the leaves are falling at exactly the same rate,
No matter how broken your heart might feel.
And even though you strongly believed they were connected,
The red crisp leaves falling in the spaces between your heartbeats,
(keeping you safe from that silence)
They are not.

And as I drive, or walk, or answer a question,
I realize how mutually exclusive everything is now that you are gone.
My thoughtless, selfish pushing is finally successful.
And when we spoke, my belief that I was part of this world,
That my hands actually touched things and my voice carried,
Was so much stronger.

let's get infantile

© devin davis 98

smooth legs
do not want to
stay in one place;

these
become a part
of you, that keeps
entering my mind ...

this winter,
is your out-
dated

soul remembering
how cold those 80s were?

... when
all the ladies
wore leggings--
sheaths over jeans.

what beautiful,
gnarled babies we'd have made; asleep
to their short-handed wards;

under weight;
premature lights, that shined for us.
and our heads were warmer
than pampers full of lust.

Portland

Raud Kennedy

A man in a printed flower dress,
a winter coat with a faux fur hood,
pushes a Safeway shopping cart
through the rain down Broadway.
Another man, sideburns to his jaw,
a navy suit jacket over dungarees,
reads the ads for teeth whitener
in a Fred Meyer's newspaper insert
like they were stock quotes.
He moves around the intersection,
a minute hand going corner to corner,
acting out this same tableau.
A bearded lady in running shoes
passes with her dachshunds.
Lyndon Johnson, black as a mortician.
A homeless man as a gnome.
No, it is a gnome. Homeless.

And God Created Abortion

Sharon Esther Lampert

1. In the Beginning of God's Creating the Heavens and the Earth -
2. When the Womb was Astonishingly Empty, Inside of Every Woman Being God Made Millions of Eggs That Lived a Fleeting Lifespan. And One by One, Each Egg Cascaded to its Death. God Made Abortion for Womankind. And It Was So.
And Inside of Every Man Being, God Made Billions of Sperm That Lived a Flitting Lifespan, And Cascaded to Their Deaths, on the Upstream, Against Gravity. God Made Abortion for Mankind. And It Was So.
3. God said, "Let there be Abortion," And there was Abortion.
4. God Saw that Abortion was Good, And God Separated the Eggs from the Sperm.
5. God Called to the Sperm: "Male," And to the Eggs God Called: "Female." And There Were Men and There Were Women, One Day.
6. God Said, "Let There Be a Conception. And One Plummeting Sperm and One Plunging Egg Melded into One, And Propagated the Human Species. And God Let the Lower Species Have a Greater Survival Ratio of Eggs to Sperm.
7. And God Said: "Let There Be More Ants Per Square Inch Than Human Beings Per Square Mile." And It Was So.

BIO:

Sharon Esther Lampert has a POETRY WORLD RECORD: 120 rhymes from one family of rhyme. She is a poet, philosopher, pioneer, paladin of education, pin-up, painter, photographer, politician, prophet, and princess. Her publications are too numerous to list. She has an international fan club. She is also a poet-in-your pocket activist, and there are hundreds of people walking around with one of her poems in their pockets.

I Mean Asparagus

Richard Thieme

“Don’t forget the spaghetti,” Mary said.

Harry was on his way to the front door. He stopped and turned.

“Spaghetti?”

Mary laughed. “I did it again—no, not spaghetti. You know what I mean. I mean asparagus.”

“No, I won’t. Jeez,” he said. “Spaghetti. Where did that come from?”

“Now, don’t start,” she said. “You do it too.”

He was caught between admitting it and irritation with her slips.

“I guess I do, some,” he said, choosing a middle ground. “But it’s getting more.”

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Don’t make it more than it is. It happens to everybody.”

“Everything happens to everybody. Sooner or later.”

She was standing at the far side of the entrance hall, her toes on the edge of the cold slate. It was chillier near the door where the weather stripping was loose. “Is something wrong?”

Harry didn’t answer, feeling in his overcoat pockets for the prescription.

“Harry?”

“I’m looking for the physician, just a minute,” he said, moving his gloves inside his pockets and feeling beneath them.

“The physician?”

“Oh, jeez,” he said, “I was focused on what I was doing. I mean the prescription. I could swear I took it from the dresser.”

He took his gloves out of his pockets so he could feel deeper.

“The prescription? No, I told you last night, it’s already at the pharmacy, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right,” he said, putting on his gloves. “Then what did I take off the dresser?”

She shared his faraway look for a moment.

“Last night?”

“Yes.”

They joined in a force field of collective effort.





“Oh, I remember,” she said. “You wrote down a phone number, put it on the dresser, then picked it up—“

“And put it in my wallet!” He took off his gloves again, holding them in one hand while he fished out his wallet with the other and opened it to the slits. The folded paper with Julie Anne’s new telephone number at the bank was in the first slot. “That’s it. Julie Anne’s new work number.”

“That’s right,” Mary said. “She called from her new job.”

“We should call to see how the week went. I want to talk to her anyway, see how Doug likes that new whatever it is, that way station or—“

“Play Station,” she said.

He put the wallet back in his pocket, put on his gloves again and said, “Well, give me a hug.”

“Come here, then” she said. “That floor is cold.”

He crossed the hallway and took her in her nightgown and robe in his overcoat arms. Her head just fit the cleft next to his neck.

“We’ll be OK,” he said, holding her a little too tight. “Really.”

“Of course we will,” she said, talking into his muffler.

She held him as best she could through the thick coat. She felt his gloved hands move up and down her back then pull her to him and hold her close.

It was nine o’clock on a Saturday morning in March, the temperature ten degrees colder than normal. Sunny out but very cold.

“Now, don’t forget to stop at the bank.”

“I won’t.” Harry said.

He knew where he was going. That was everything, now. That, and remembering to pick up the asparagus, stop at the pharmacy, oh and don’t forget to look around at the snow on the fir trees all around the frozen pond when you come home, remember to stand there a minute, stomping off the snow before opening the door with the yellow

Too Catty For Willard

Jon Kuntz

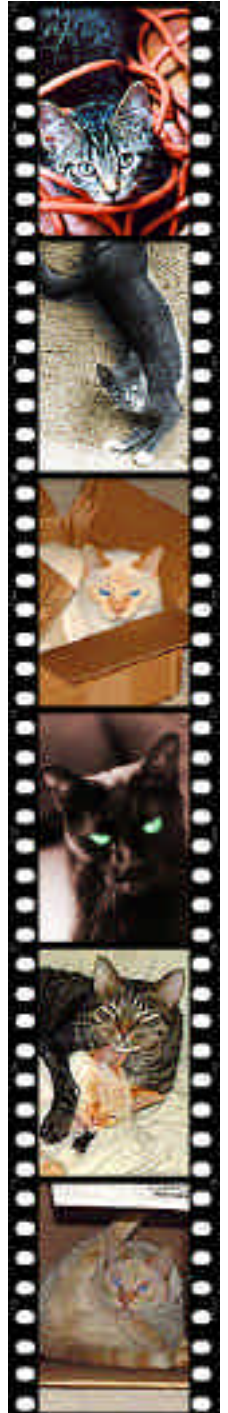
"I'm not even sure what day it is anymore." Willard said aloud, to no one... In fact, he didn't know if he awoke an hour ago or a day ago. He felt kind of drugged. Whatever it was, it seemed it was only beginning to wear off. The fact he was in total darkness would have normally panicked him, but he was thinking in a clinical way and not from a tactile sense.

He could tell he was in a confine, a type he couldn't place. It was soft, almost like skin, and had a faint odor to it. The smell persisted and became vaguely familiar to him. Could it be coal tar, creosote, or maybe a type of plastic? He felt certain it was black in color, because everything around him was totally dark. This was coal mine dark. It was so dark he couldn't see anything, not even his hands in front of his face.

His hearing was all right. He could identify different kinds of noises. There was an alternating sound that built to a crescendo, then it faded rapidly. More different kinds of sound came to him. Another was like air being moved, a "whoosh." There was a mechanical element, like machinery being operated, and a whine he couldn't place. All combined, it sounded a lot like a freeway, close up.

Willard chuckled. He would take cats, strays, neighbors' pets, but it didn't matter from where. He even adopted some cats from the shelter. He'd put them in a black garbage bag, tie it off, and toss it onto the freeway. He thought it was great fun and never tired of it. Sometimes the bags would last up to an hour, but the end was always the same.

Now he remembered. There was a little old lady who came up to him in the supermarket. She started talking to him about the cats. How could she have known? Willard never told anyone. She started telling him about a Cat Higher Power that watches out for all cats, telling them





where to find a home, helping them on a journey, whatever their need. She told him the Cat Higher Power was extremely angry at him for what he was doing to its creatures.

Willard couldn't believe what he was hearing. She had to be making this up, except she knew what he was doing with cats. She knew days, times, details..., things no one else but he could know. He couldn't believe her in the supermarket, how could he? It clicked. Complete and total panic came over Willard. Suddenly he realized, she must

have been following him. She lived in his apartment complex, and had a lot of cats in her unit. He probably scooped a couple of her cats from the neighborhood occasionally, but unknowingly. She had to get help for this stunt, but that didn't help Willard now.

He was in a black plastic garbage bag! He was on the freeway! He would be given a second chance, wouldn't he? There was a way out of here, WASN'T THERE? He heard the sound of an eighteen wheeler coming toward him. Was the "eighteen" to be his answer?

He thrust his arms and legs back and forth, in and out, and the bag began to tear in several places. He really started to panic. In no time, the bag was shredded, and he could see the big truck bearing down on him. He spotted the shoulder of the road, which was adjacent to him, rolled across it, then thrust his body up and over the guard-rail, landing on a mound of fire ants.



Willard didn't notice a thing. He just lay there, on the ant mound, collecting his thoughts, about cats. He was determined, that no more would he torture or kill cats. He would leave them strictly alone.

Shortly his thoughts changed from cats to ants, fire ants in particular.

Ubiquitousness

Constantine P. Firms III

Lyrics are poetry,
they come in stanzas.
Verses and choruses,
sure.

Comedy is poetry,
it's sold with a pun;
it takes some knowledge,
and an open mind.

Money is poetry,
it talks when talk is cheap.
Written words bind,
best contract of it's kind.

Power is poetry.
Laws read with rhythm,
they come in subdivisions.
It puts folks in prison.

Boring is poetry,
deadweight for English class study.
Less you call it something else,
then it gets more interesting.

A Lesson from Grandpa

J. Williams

I remember sitting out on the veranda with my grandfather one night while we were on a family vacation in Florida. I must have been no older than ten years old when the subject of sex was raised. I don't recall how it came up but I remember what was said—word for word—as if it were yesterday. It went like this:

“Grandpa, do you and grandma love each other?”

Yes, we certainly do son. But why do you ask?

“Well, I am just curious, who do women marry men?”

That's simple, because they fall in love with them.

“Well then grandpa, why do men marry women?”

That's simple my dear boy.
Alcohol!



Phone Lines

Linda Webb Aceto

Nasty talk and lonely action,
whoops and hollers, he rubs
and, oh God,
against my screams I wonder
if his moans
are
as phony
as mine.



The Good Ship Lollipop

Christopher Barnes, UK

Mr Smuts, the window's sponger
bubbles and squeaks
a pot-luck snack
setting a cap to his Hollywood troll.

At this snigger-scoff sanatorium
in every pane's a motley Shirley Temple,
15 tea-gown changes all-absorbing.
Tinselly twinkle toes Morse code a slogan:
more curls, more frills, more fame.

She's 37, a long time cramped,
each get-up's first day at kindergarten.
Mouth-foaming, bee-bonnet drunk
she's still a blue-joke puppet show
worth grovelling up
the shins of the ladder for.

The Intelligent Master

Ken Dean

Akil Akilah hunched his head down in the desert wind, holding tight to the reins of his horse, while trying to keep the howling sandstorm from penetrating the kufiyya covering his face and eyes. He assumed his two traveling companions, Abdal-Akiim and Abdul-Rafi, were doing the same. There was no way to ask, the wind was howling far too loud. Akil could feel the wind-driven sand trying to force itself into every crevice of his clothing.

He hoped the storm would clear soon. It looked like it might be a clear night except for the sand swirling about, and Akil needed to take some bearings from the stars to verify they were traveling in the right direction.

Abdal and Abdul were both rough men; hired help who also doubled as bodyguards in the harsh desert terrain they were traveling in. Hard to tell who you might run into out here...even though it was a desolate area. Both men expected to share in a portion of the treasure they were searching for, although Akil knew if they found what they were seeking it would be far more than treasure. It would be power.

That described Akil justly, for he was a man who sought out influence and power. To have power over others was his ultimate goal, and he used any ruthless means to obtain it.

He was a hated man for his tactics and motives, but that sat with him just fine, for that was a form of power too.

Akil was searching for a legend he had heard of when he was just a boy. His search had covered many years up to this point. He had just recently heard of an old Arab named Halim in Riyadh who was a collector of maps and scrolls; some rumored to be ancient.

Akil sought the old man out and made the proper introductions. Soon he was sitting in Halim's villa one evening, sipping fine espresso and poring over the many maps and scrolls in Aban's possession.

"Halim, show me the oldest pieces you have. I would love to see them."

"Of course, of course," the old man answered. "Let me show you the oldest one I have."

Halim was always delighted to show his collections to anyone with an interest. He did not realize what Akil's real intent was.

"This scroll has been handed down for so many generations now that I and the person who sold it to me have had no luck in tracking its origin."

Halim laid it out on the table carefully, as if it were fragile. But the scroll was made of tough cloth, and still had good color. How could it be that old, Akil thought to himself?

“See...look here,” Halim pointed with a withered finger, “this scroll is actually a map.”

“A map of what?”

“A map that matches an ancient legend that speaks of unimaginable power, far beyond fame or fortune. As you can see it clearly points to a remote area in the southern desert with waypoints and an ending marked by a Pillar of the Gods.”

Akil could not believe it! This was the very legend he had heard about as a boy!

“Halim...you must let me purchase this scroll from you. The price is whatever you ask.”

“No, No...I could never sell this scroll. It is one of my most prized pieces and Allah only knows how old it is. Is their possibly one of the other ones you might like to acquire?”

Halim made the mistake of turning his back on Akil while trying to pick some other scrolls to show. There was suddenly a grip of steel around Halim’s neck, he couldn’t breathe. Of course, being an old man, it didn’t take him long to collapse.

Akil left the villa with the scroll tucked under his arm. Luckily it was late and a dark night...he wouldn’t be seen. Halim’s body would stay where it was a long time before being discovered, Akil had made sure of that.

Akil and his companions had headed south into the desert the next day after obtaining horses and enough supplies for the trip. He had to pay the two men something in advance along with a promise of a possibly greater reward later.

The sandstorm had finally subsided and left the sky clear and sparkling with the stars Akil had hoped for. Once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness there was no problem seeing the desert before them. There was also just enough moonlight to help see without washing out the stars. Akil was looking up at the stars, assuring himself they were still heading in the right direction when Abdul yelled, “A waypoint marker!”

“Where?” The other two said in unison.

“Off to the right.” pointed Abdul.

All three jumped off their horses and ran to investigate. The marker was only about fifty feet away. They all slid to a stop beside it. It was about the height of a man and maybe two feet square with text still legible but

unreadable. The one feature that they could recognize was a large arrow. It was pointing in exactly the right direction.

Praise Allah, thought Akil. They were on the right track.

“Quickly,” Akil shouted, “Back on your horses. The map only shows one more marker after this before we reach the Pillar of the Gods!”

They all mounted and began riding briskly towards the next waypoint with Akil leading the way. About a half an hour later they came upon the second marker, exactly like the first.

“Keep moving,” yelled Akil. “We are riding in the right direction.”

Another hour passed. Off in the distance they could see a vertical line on the desert horizon. It didn’t take long to reach it at their pace. The horses slowed and stopped under the command of their riders.

“Allah is great,” murmured Abdal.

“Yes,” Abdul replied, “this is truly a holy place.”

“Shut up, both of you,” replied Akil. “We need to take a look around this magnificent structure. It must truly be the Pillar of the Gods.”

What stood before them was breathtaking. They could see the Pillar well enough in the partial moon and starlight. It was bronze, at least a hundred feet high and thirty thick. It was adorned on the top with a huge eagle with lightning held between its claws.

The whole surface area of the Pillar was covered with inscriptions.

Akil called excitedly, “Abdul, the torches. Light them and bring them here.”

Abdul unpacked the torches set three of them ablaze. He handed one to each of them. They all set about examining the Pillar in the flickering light thrown off by the torches. What had looked like bronze before in the starlight was actually gold. All the inscriptions looked to have been exactly hand-etched into the surface.

“Is this the treasure?” asked Abdal. “It appears to be made of real gold. And if it is, just imagine its value.”

“Most likely it is the treasure,” Akil lied, “let’s keep examining it.”

Abdul and Abdal looked at each other knowingly. Being partners in crime many times before, they both were calculating that a half share of this much wealth would surely be more than a third. They both nodded to each other, knowing what they would eventually have to do. There is no honor among thieves.

Akil had taken out the scroll and was examining it closer in the torchlight. Beside the picture of the Pillar was a phrase in Arabic.

“Stand back, both of you.” Akil commanded.

He shouted the phrase just as it was written on the scroll.

“_____” (In the name of Allah, bring forth your treasure!)

Suddenly there was a rumbling, as if they were experiencing an earthquake. There was also a loud sound like a continuous peal of thunder. The whole Pillar began to lift off of the ground. Abdal and Abdul scurried back away from the moving Pillar, suddenly terrified. Akil didn't flinch at the movement or sound.

The Pillar stopped about ten feet off the ground. Akil came closer to get a better look with the torchlight. The underside looked to be solid, yet at ground level there was a small platform holding a very ornate table that had been exposed by the rising Pillar. It was decorated with red velvet covering which extended to the bottom along with pillows on top that were embroidered with all types of gemstones. In the middle of the pillows sat a golden oil lamp covered with inscriptions similar to the ones on the Pillar.

He quickly picked up the lamp before the other two could guess its purpose; he couldn't take any chances being this close to success. He held the handle of the lamp and quickly began to rub the side.

The lamp began to vibrate and hum. Akil quickly set it down on its table. It also started to glow in an iridescent fashion. Thick smoke was beginning to come out of the spout of the lamp and was taking the shape of the upper half of a man about fifty feet tall.

Suddenly the desert night was illuminated with stark flashes of lightning along with rumbling thunder. The torso shaped cloud began to swirl rapidly while all the commotion continued. Akil stood his ground, even though he was fairly close to the calamity.

He glanced quickly towards Abdul and Abdal and noticed they had taken refuge behind a low dune nearby. Sons of coward dogs, he thought contemptuously.

Akil looked back up and noticed the cloud had finally finished morphing into the shape of a man floating in midair, surrounded by an ethereal glow and tethered to the lamp by a thin wisp of smoke. He was gigantic, as tall as the Pillar itself. The commotion had died down now. The floating man looked down at Akil and began to speak in a booming voice that seemed to echo from all directions. Akil had knelt down in awe at the amazing sight and sound.

“You can call me Genie,” his voice reverberated, “But I must call

you Master.”

Akil stood up.

“Yes...you’re right! I am your Master. That is how the legend is presented.”

“Of course, you released me from my imprisonment. And it has been millennia since I have been free of this accursed lamp! And I have you to thank, Master.”

“And what of my three wishes?” Akil said in a demanding tone.

“Oh Ho! You know the legend well, Master. You shall have your three wishes, of course.

But choose wisely, you would not believe what some past Masters have wished for. They were short-sighted to the point of foolishness.”

“Do not concern yourself about that, Genie. I have put much thought into that area for many years now. Am I allowed to ask questions about how I state my wishes?”

“Of course you may, Master. Ask anything of me.”

Hmmm, this one seems to be much brighter than any of my former owners. I need to be wary of this one.

Akil asked, “Genie, first off, are you all-powerful?”

“Absolutely...nothing is impossible for me. Except for my constraint.”

“What constraint is that?”

“I am forever tied to my lamp. I am only allowed out if summoned by my Master of the moment. When the three wishes are given, I must return to my confines until the next one comes along. The only way to be totally free is if a Master wishes me free. But as you can see, that has never happened.”

“Very well, Genie. My next question is am I allowed to make conditional wishes?”

“Yes, so long as the condition involves the wish itself.”

Where is this going, Genie wondered, and what is this bright one up to?

“Good, excellent!” Akil responded. “For my first wish Genie, I want to be all-powerful just like you without any of your constraints.”

Oh no, thought Genie, I do NOT like where this going. But he had no choice, he had to grant Akil’s wish.

Genie clapped his hands twice and said, “Let it be done!”

Akil was suddenly surrounded by swirling clouds, with lightning flashing in and out along with loud claps of thunder.

The cloud cleared, leaving Akil still appearing quite normal. But then he exclaimed in a thunderous voice:

“It is done! I feel so powerful now, like nothing is beyond my ability.”
He suddenly grew to the same height as the Genie, matching his stature.
“Thank you, Genie. You have truly delivered a dream come true.”

“You are quite welcome, oh mighty Master.”

“Abdul and Abdal,” Akil thundered, “Come claim your reward!”

Both of the men scurried over to Akil from the dune they had been hiding behind.

They fell on their knees before him, heads bowed.

“Oh wise and mighty Master, you are all-powerful now and can grant us any wish we desire.”

It was a half question, half statement.

Akil motioned with his hand and both men floated up into the air. He pointed a finger at each man; bolts of lightning flashed out from his fingertips and consumed both of them. They both vanished in a bright flash of light.

“A just reward for two thieves who were thinking of killing me and taking the treasure for themselves.”

He turned back to face Genie.

“Genie, I still have two wishes remaining. I could grant them myself, but I choose to give you the honor.”

“That is very considerate of you, oh wise and powerful Master.”

What else could there be, thought Genie. Akil had already surprised him with the first wish and was now as powerful as himself and free on top of that.

“Genie, I now request a wish that you have been wanting to hear for an eternity. I wish you free of the lamp.”

More thunder and lightning, along with loud sound as of a chain being unshackled.

“ _____ ” (May the Creator be praised!), shouted the Genie flying upwards, “I am finally free of that accursed lamp and can now go where I will!”

“Aren’t you forgetting something? Like my third wish?”

“I’m sorry Master, in my rapturous excitement I had forgotten. Please let it known, and then I can be on my way.”

“Genie, my third and final wish, is for you to be a mortal human!”

A loud scream of “NNOOO!” was drowned out by a whirling cloud with lightning and thunder. Genie slumped to the ground, shrunken to human size, obviously weakened by the sudden transformation.

All Genie could say in a weak voice was; “Master, why?”

“It’s very obvious, I had to eliminate all competition to my power. Now if you will excuse me, I have a world to conquer.”

Akil clapped his hands and was gone in a flash of light.

Genie sat on the sand. He had been all powerful for so long that he had never contemplated what it would be like to be mortal. It was a terrible feeling of inadequacy and weakness.

There was nothing he could now call his own. The horses and supplies the men brought with them had fled at all the commotion earlier. And the torches that were lit earlier had gone out, so that it was dark. He looked around and noticed in the starlight that even the Pillar was gone.

He was also lost in this vast expanse of desert, cold and hungry, which all was new to him.

And, for the first time in eternity, he had to go to the bathroom.

Spoon & Fork

Anthony Liccione

While yet married to a dish,
the spoon ran off with the fork
to elope into a knife
cut-throat marriage-
going feeding porkishly
at Las Vegas buffets
and drinking glass
after glass martinis and wine-
gambling the night away.

It wasn't until the cow
jumped over the plate perfect
moon, that spoon thought of his
dish back home,
probably by now dirtied
with tears and peas, as
the big dipper
above the brightly lit strip,
and small dipper below
his belt, somewhat aroused-

where the little dog laughed
to see such sport,
when the spoon and fork
slipped between the sheets
of a napkin.

Dark Power

Cheryl Lynn Moyer



Human ants, thirteen less one
crawling burrowing deeper
clawing rock walls with iron
fingers, black bituminous bowels
no light here, above above above
carbon monoxide in, oxygen out
dissipating somehow, somewhere
seeping upwards to all the bright
day people; mothers, wives, children.

We know this darkness
in our blood, 10, 20, 30 years.
Don't wake the dying sleep
daily our graves dug.
Now let us rest while others
tremble who buried
us premature - our lives
spent, stocks exchanged
inhumane profits
for another minute or two
of light.



He Thought of HER

flash fiction from Michael Shannon

The room smelled like summer. Like rain. Wet flowers. Wet trees. Flowers and trees soaked in rain. Summer. Rain.

Her bare-breasts, scintillating with sweat under the ceiling-fan's dim light, were pressed against his chest. They had just finished making love and were lying on their sides. She was looking into his eyes. Her eyes were blue, clear blue, like dyed glass—sharp and intoxicating with truth and love and promise.

"I love you so much," she said, her eyes becoming somewhat translucent with tears.

He sighed.

It was one o' clock in the morning and he was tired: tired of looking at the love and sadness in her eyes, the future and dreams in her eyes, them in her eyes. **Them.**

"Maybe," she said gingerly, "we can move somewhere else, get on with our lives."

"Maybe."

The tears, which were now accumulating in her eyes, broke through the dam of her eyelids and a deluge of salty grief sifted from them and onto the pillow beneath her head.

She had hoped, at that moment, that he'd say something to comfort her, maybe wipe the tears from her cheeks or gently place his forefinger beneath her eyes to catch the moisture before it formed ridges across her sweaty face.

He didn't do anything. He didn't say anything.

"If you really love me," she said insecurely, embarrassingly, "why'd you do it?"

"Do what, Sarah?"

"Why'd you do it, Sean? Why?"

He didn't know what to say. He didn't feel like saying anything, really. It was over with. Done with. In the past. Forgotten.

He thought it was forgotten.

Almost a year ago. Almost a fucking year ago and I still have to deal with this shit, he thought.

Her eyes were *still* looking into his eyes, imploring, searching for

answers, like an awl, digging, looking, digging, looking.

She found no answers. His eyes were uncaring, callous.

Sean got up from the bed, grabbed a cigarette, lit it, and lay down on his back beside her. He inhaled. Exhaled. A plume of smoke formed an inverted eddy and drifted towards the ceiling-fan and disappeared throughout the room.

He felt her looking at him. He felt her eyes, blue and cutting and sharp like icicles poking at his introspection.

He remembered the night, even though it was a year ago, with such lucidity. He recollected smells—of her body, the wet-summer grass, the rubbery smell of the condom burning with friction inside her.

HER. Not Sarah, **HER**.

HER, who was so sexual—a slut even, having slept with, he heard, nearly forty or fifty guys—and beautiful under the stars, moaning, commanding, leading, wanting. He remembered **HER** on **HER** hands and knees, turning **HER** face back towards him, entreating him to push ‘harder, Harder, *oh, God, fucking HARDER.*’ **HER** blonde hair. **HER** green eyes. **HER** small, perfect B-cupped breasts. **HER** puffy, almost-purple nipples in the moonlight. **HER** moans. Moans. Moans.

HER HER HER HER HER .

“Sean, answer me,” Sarah said, ending his reverie.

“What? WHAT?”

“Why’d you do it? Tell me.”

The composure inside of him snapped. A year of simmering accusations and inquisitions reached a boil in his head:

Who? What? Where? WHEN? FUCKING WHEN?

He wanted to break things. He wanted to break mirrors, windows, faces—people’s faces—tables, chairs, Sarah.

He wanted to break Sarah.

He wanted to break Sarah because he hated her. He hated that she loved him. He hated that she stayed with him. He hated that she wouldn’t let the past be the past. He detested Sarah. Sarah, who loved him, he detested.

She put her arm around him, brought herself closer, put her hand on his chest and her face against the bristles of hair burgeoning around his nipples.

“It’s okay, Sean, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He looked down at the back of her head idling on his chest. He felt the convulsions of her sobs while her tears formed a shallow pool on the concavity of his chest.

"I have to go," he said.

He got up violently, indifferently, tossing her head from his body. He put his clothes on, his shoes on, and looked at her—naked on the bed, tears covering her face with a mask of humiliation. She looked beautiful, helpless and beautiful. Her eyes were glossy and abound with pain, and he, for a moment, felt remorse. For a moment, he felt horrible regret for wanting to leave her naked and forlorn. For a moment he thought of them together, with children and dogs, a house and car, children and dogs, children and dogs, children and dogs, children and...

He walked out of the room, down the light-blue carpeted stairs of her house, each step reminding him of her eyes like clear oceans and water and...

...he reached the door, opened it, and was gone.

His own name, coming from her raspy larynx was reverberating in his head: *Sean? Sean? Sean? Stay. Please. Please stay, Sean.*

He never went back.

He could have.

He never went back.

He got in his car, thinking of **HER**. Thinking of how impure and meaningless that night of sex was, how exciting it was, how he spent the last year reliving it, fantasizing about it, obsessed with it.

He thought of **HER**. He thought of **HER**.

And left.

Charades

Andrei Postolache

I have to act "carnal love" and I pick an imaginary knife,
Cut flesh off only I know who,
Put it in a pile and kneel to put my hand on it.

She has to do "art".

Takes my meat and makes a statue of it,
Piece after piece, she shapes legs, chest, skin, ears,
The joints and the tendons,
Just the right neck, the hair, the surprised lips.
Then she takes a step back. "No", I hear, and she smashes it.

Emperor

James Cline

He pulled the stereo plug from the outlet and stuck the prongs in an adapter. Electronic devices were greedy, sucking up electricity even when turned off. Flipping the switch on the adapter would cut off consumption completely.

There was only one digital clock in the entire house, the alarm clock on the dresser in the bedroom. The refrigerator wasn't modern or efficient, but the cost of replacing it would outweigh any energy savings. His phone plugged directly into the line with a cord and worked without a power plug. The answering machine, necessary in this day and age, consumed a trivial amount of power. There was no air conditioning system, only a gas furnace for heat in the cold winter.

The water heater in the basement already had insulation wrapped around it, and was turned to the lowest tolerable setting. Suffering for faith was one thing, but taking cold showers was pointless torture. He was leaving so he flipped the adapter switch on the stereo. The red receiver light, waiting for a signal, faded away.

"You cannot have a negative square number. It is not real, it doesn't exist...relatively. The root of four is two, but what number do you square to get negative four? You can't do it. However, we need to be able to quantify this term. Therefore, we write a negative square root as i . i is the square root of negative one. Everyone follow?"

One person in the back nodded.

"Erherm! Does everyone follow?"

This time more people nodded, some murmuring what sounded like agreement.

"Good. Make sure you keep up, people. It's going to get more complicated now."

In the back row a student's hand raised tentatively.

"Yes?"

The student said, "Where's X?"

"Excuse me?"

"What happened to X? In the equation?"

"X isn't in the equation. Only i ."

“I what?”

“The term *i*. The one that represents the square root of negative one.”

“I’m sorry,” said the student. “I’m lost.”

“See me after class,” he said, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Which happens to be ending right now. We’ll stop and finish Wednesday. Follow the assignment on your syllabus, section 2.1.”

The speed with which students evacuated the room was always amazing. Within five seconds a clot of people formed as they all tried to fit through a single door. He couldn’t help muse to himself that had they maintained a semblance of order their exit speed would be increased two-fold. When they clustered it became a question of whose turn it was to go, and when the reaction time of one student waiting for another to go was multiplied a dozen times, it greatly increased the time needed to pass through.

He crossed one Hush Puppy over the other, leaned against the table in front of the classroom, and slipped his hands into the nooks of his elbows. Very quickly it was only he and the student left in the room.

“Well, let’s see what we can do for you. Tell me where you got lost.”

“The X and I part. The part about the square root.”

“I’m glad you stayed to get straightened out. People might underestimate Algebra, but when you get to this level in college, it moves very quickly and it’s easy to fall behind.”

“I know. I made that mistake with English Composition.” The student smiled. “Luckily my teacher took pity on me and gave me a B.”

“Ah, well I don’t serve pity in my class. Everyone has to earn their grade here.”

The student’s eyes, like two frosty ponds, immediately darted down to the notes.

“Oh, I know, I was just saying that I know what falling behind is. I want to earn it. My grade, that is.”

“You should see the tutor if you do get behind. She took two of my classes and gives very good notes.”

He left the table and walked through the rows of desks, stopping at the back row. Up close he could see the student was an athlete, a developed form masked beneath loose clothing.

“Show me where the problem is. Oh, and your name is?”

The student smiled with perfect teeth. “I’m Marc. Thanks for the help.”

Water this good didn’t come from the tap. Professor V, as he told the students to call him, filled a sports bottle at the Mathematics

Department. It was cold, purified spring water. One of the straps on his leather attaché case was secretly stapled inside. The rest of his appearance was clean cut. He knew that being a professor required an investment in clothing, for maintaining a respectable appearance was necessary. The tweed sport coat he wore had been repaired, but professionally, and the shoes were only a few months old. The pants themselves were bought off a discount rack at J.C. Penney's, but that counted as new since they came from a department store.

There were some in the past who had called him an attractive man, people remembered wistfully but guiltily. That life was gone now, sacrificed for a higher path. He fingered a chain around his neck, lifting a cross and letting it fall. It was worth the sacrifice.

Someone rapped lightly on his office door and a moment later Marc pushed inside. "Hi, Mr. V. That tutor chick is completely booked."

"Tutor chick?"

"Jennifer, the tutor, is completely booked. For the next two months."

He responded with "Ah, that's a shame."

"So, I was wondering if you could tutor me. I mean, do you do that?"

He said "Not usually. Sometimes I make exceptions if it's warranted. Are there no other math tutors available?"

"No, none of their schedules match."

He looked at his desk, thinking for a moment. There was a cup of Earl's Breakfast Tea steaming on a cork coaster and Tchaikovsky was playing lightly in the background. It was worth the effort if the help was appreciated, but if it was just someone looking for the answers to a test... Yet, he didn't get that vibe.

"Maybe we can set something up. Do you have a copy of your schedule so I can figure out when a mutually plausible appointment could be made?"

Marc nodded, reached into the book bag across his shoulder, and thumbed through a binder. After a moment of looking, he slipped out a sheet of paper with dog-eared corners and set it on the desk.

"Are you free next Tuesday? Or do you want to do it on a day you have classes?"

"Oh, I work Tuesdays and Thursdays at Hulligans, my uncle's bar. If we could do it Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, that would be great."

"How is next Monday, four o'clock?"

Marc said "That'd be perfect. Hey, a religious man."

He turned towards where Marc was looking, the worn King James bible on the coffee table. Though it wasn't the most recent update, for

scholars were always discovering nuances on the translation, it had been reliable enough for two decades.

“Yes, although I would say more spiritual than religious.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, religious people follow rules and writings more devoutly than faith. Spiritual people focus more on that faith.”

“In that case, I’d have to say I’m pretty spiritual too. Sometimes I still wear the rosary I got in the eighth grade.”

He rose from the chair, standing half an inch shorter than the young man. In his own day he had been in good shape too.

“Well, thanks for stopping by,” he said, extending his hand.

Marc said, “No problem, thank you for helping me out.”

For a moment the grasp lingered, each one squeezing tightly, testing the other. He didn’t relent, matching Marc’s callused grip. A moment later they broke free, smiling broadly.

“You work out, Mr. V?”

“Occasionally. The Bible says the body is a temple to the Lord.”

“That’s good. Not enough people do nowadays. Anyway, see you Monday.”

It was too cold and the thermostat wasn’t working. The problem hadn’t been discovered until late in the afternoon, and he was still waiting for maintenance to come. In the meantime, the vents continually blasted cold air. The clock read 3:59 when Marc knocked on the door.

“Come in,” he called. Marc was already holding the textbook. He looked up and smiled from the swivel chair.

“Pull that over,” he said, nodding to a wooden chair in the corner. Half an hour ago it had been the receptacle for spare books and papers. Now it was clear in preparation for the study session. Marc seated himself and opened his books.

As soon as he saw what the difficulties were, he was relieved. The problem was with the note-taking process. Apparently what was going into the notebook wasn’t exactly what was on the board.

He said, “Just make sure to pay exact attention in class. I’ve seen people who assume they can catch up later, correct their notes from the book, etcetera. Those people never actually fix the missing pieces. It’s much easier to get it down right the first time.”

Marc said, “Ah...I didn’t see it that way.”

“It will, trust me.”

“Mr. V.”

“Call me Russell out of the classroom.”

“Kay...there’s a rumor around campus...something I wanted to ask your advice about, something completely off topic.”

He froze. Rumors were bad.

“What rumor?”

“Well...I don’t know how to put this...umm...oh, hell.”

Marc did something that completely shocked him, something that made him appreciate that the door was closed. Marc leaned across the distance and kissed him.

Every inch of ration in his body screamed to push away the advance of a student, but ration failed. His arm came around and his palm went flat across Marc’s back. For a moment their lips were putty.

Finally they broke apart at the same time.

“Oh God, it’s wrong, it’s wrong,” he said.

Marc said “No, no, it’s not wrong. We just think it is. It’s all relative, Russell. Like in philosophy, morals change from generation to generation.”

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t supposed to happen, we can’t do this.”

Marc said “Meet me in five minutes.”

“What!”

“Meet me in five minutes in the weight room. It’s closed but I have a key. Meet me,” he said, opening the door and rushing out.

“Marc!”

There was no response. He stepped forward and shut the door. This was wrong. Completely, totally wrong. This was temptation. This was sin. But he was torn, oh he was torn. Please, he begged in his mind. Strike me with guidance right now, don’t force me to choose. Not one sign came.

Coming to the weight room turned out to be a terrible mistake. Psychics may be able to see the future, but most people can only see mistakes with hindsight. Professor Russell knocked on the locker-room door, then pounded. A sob came, “Go away.”

“Are you...are you okay, Marc?”

The response resounded through the door, causing tiny curls of peeling paint to vibrate. “Go away!”

“I did not mean to hurt you. Do you want me to get help? To get a doctor?”

“Leave...me...alone!” The response came closer to the locker room door.

Something like a fist pounded on the other side. There was quiet for a moment and then the hush of sobbing in the distance. It sounded as though Marc whispered something inside, but it was an indiscernible murmur.

He pressed an ear against the mottled plane of the door. The whisper came again, more audible "...fuck did you do? Why? Why!"

He cupped a hand against it and said "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you stop! I was fighting to get away! I was fighting!"

"I...thought you were groping."

Marc didn't acknowledge whether he heard. Except for the sound of rustling paper, it was silent inside. Either he was wiping away tears or wiping away blood.

There was nothing to do leave another to be remembered guiltily. It would be okay, though, because all sins were forgiven. All sins.

DININGTABLE CASTLE

Emily Griskavich

the geriatric creak of the deadbolt
in the lock of our postwar ranch house
sent me flying to the door

his hug always smelled
like marlboros heineken oldspice
and the sweat of a hardworking man

beery kisses from fiveoclock
porcupine pinprick lips
for pupunchka babushka leetle one

golden shag carpet entryway
sit down for pattycake crabwalk
horseyride
sing me cornbread 'n' buttamilk

again again again

no thundervoice discussion tonight
with mommy about gleaming green
empties
or the tummybump baby coming

can't you stop for a week
stop for a weekend
honey can't you even stopforaday

not today
the king of diningtable castle
cannot see above her knees
anyway

It's Not Your Concern

Sandra E. Waldron

Gilbert slammed his glass down, splashing cold milk all over his gasping mother and the table. Furiously, he shoved the chair back — all the while glaring at his hawk-eyed father — and stomped up the stairs to his room, immediately turning his radio so loud that the mirror over his desk quivered like water.

“Why does Mom put up with him?” he asked himself, before plopping heavily onto the side of his bed.

Ever since he could remember, the ritual had been the same, never varying a week or a day. With the exception of three nights a month, his dad was the perfect father and husband — always home from work on time, never staying out drinking with the guys, thoughtful to Gilbert’s mother, attentive to Gilbert — but when the time came, Gilbert’s mother, Elaine, would suddenly grow very quiet and uncommunicative. That was Gilbert’s signal that it was “time”.

Instead of her cheery self of a morning, Elaine would have that dark — lost — bleakness about her; her eyes, somber and red-dry. How Gilbert had come to dread the “time” like nothing else.

As frustrating as it was to Gilbert, his parents never would discuss the problem. That was the main thing that made him so terribly angry. Numerous times he tried to drag it out of his mother and father. “It’s not your concern, dear. None of your business.” If he persisted, he would be punished in some way: grounded or his allowance withheld.

The last time it happened, he raised such a fuss they docked his allowance for three months! That was a head-hanging shame to a fourteen-year-old. Instead of trying to explain to his buddies why he couldn’t go to the movies or join them at Bonnie’s Arcade in the afternoons, he pretended he wasn’t interested and wanted to study — giving them the impression he was becoming a nerd! The whole thing was horrible.

It was bad enough not having his money or friends, but the dreaded “time” had rushed around again. He saw it in his mother’s eyes at breakfast, and again, when he came in from football practice. As always, the worrying upset his stomach. He knew the futility of it when — at the dinner table — he asked one more time. He just had to know! As anticipated, he was promptly sent to his room.

Shortly, there was a soft swish-slapping of his mother's slippers as she quietly went to her bedroom across the hall and bolted her door from her side. Downstairs, the front door opened then slammed.

Gilbert bolted forward. His dad wouldn't be home for three days!

"Shit!"

He peeped down between the blinds and watched his dad slip into his white Toyota Camry and drive off towards town. "If only I were old enough to drive and had a license," he fretted, "I'd take Mom's car and follow him."

He heard his mother's door being unbolted and opened. She rarely left her bedroom once his father was gone, except to cook. Usually, when his dad wasn't there, she was a recluse. He hurried out to the hall and called to her, just as she was heading downstairs.

"Mom?"

She stopped, right foot dangling just over the top of the last step. She didn't turn around. "What is it, Gilbert?"

"You know what it is. Where's he going? For once – just this friggin' once – can't you tell me something? anything? Even a lie would be better than being ignored."

She answered with the so-irritating, "It's not your concern, dear."

"Dammit! Mom!" He did something he never had done before: he grabbed her shoulders and swung her around from behind, nearly knocking her off the last step, realizing for the first time that he was actually bigger and stronger than she.

He frightened her. Her olive-green eyes looked like saucers.

He stepped back, releasing her. "..... Sorry Forgive me?"

She nodded that she did, but the fear still showed.

"This is driving me nuts. And it's not helping you. For your own sake, tell me!

"Please?" he begged, knowing he sounded as pathetic as he felt.

She studied him for several seconds, eyes swimming with strange reflections. "Gilbert you're right. You do deserve an explanation. I am sorry. I realize this is as much hell for you as it is for us."

"Why?"

"Because, it's best you don't know."

"I disagree, Mom. Nothing could be worse than this nightmare of wondering, watching my mother so sad, not knowing where my dad is. Mom, I hate to say this, but it's just plain weird! None of the other kids' fathers do whatever it is he does "

"You've told them?" She seemed more alarmed at the possibility of oth-

ers knowing, than his not knowing and being so hurt. Her freckled face flushed slightly, exaggerating her carrot-red hair.

“Not really. You don’t have to worry yourself, Mom. I see what is important to you. I’ve been afraid to tell anyone how weird my family is. I know they’re not like us just from hearing them talk about their moms and dads..... Is Dad some kind of freak? A transvestite? He has to meet his real lover three nights a month? You love me too much to get a divorce and tell me? Help me here! Are any of these possible explanations right?”

“No, Gilbert. They’re not” she didn’t finish. Her hand went to her mouth, instead.

“They’re not what? Mother?”

She turned around and steadied herself to the floor.

“Drop it, Gilbert! I can’t tell you! Please? Just leave it be.”

“Aw Dammit!” He returned to his room, but wasn’t there long. As soon as his mother was secured in her room, he slipped out of the house, determined to find his father, find out – once and for all – what was going on.

It took Gilbert four hours of riding around town on his ten-speed, but he finally found his father, sitting in the Little Doggie Bar, sipping a tap beer. He appeared alone and looking every bit as sad as Gilbert.

Gilbert waited for some time, standing outside, leaning against the lamppost, watching his dad through the big plate glass window with the bright pink neon sign. He half expected to see a bosomy blonde – or – another man.

No one ever showed.

Another hour passed, ever so slowly, and Gilbert’s eyelids felt like old leather. Seemed no one was going to show, no secret lover. He seriously doubted that he could make it back home on his bike without falling asleep. Besides, he felt like he was going to vomit, as extreme nausea had suddenly hit him. He made it to the city park, found a bench and curled up – after heaving his guts out for half an hour – and curled up in a fetal position, even sucking his thumb, nursing his rolling stomach.

The next thing Gilbert knew it was morning and he was curled up in his bed, hugging his blanket.

Had his venture out been a dream?

No!

He had left. He had seen his father in the Little Doggie Bar. But he did not remember riding his bike home. He tumbled out of bed, shaking off his covers, and peered down at the walk; his bike was parked by the willow on the side of the drive. He rubbed his throbbing forehead. “Why

couldn't he remember coming home?"

There was a light tapping on his door. His mother said, "Made you breakfast, Gilbert. Hurry or you'll be late for school." Then, the door to her bedroom closed.

He knew he wouldn't see his mother again until dinner that evening. He picked up the remote and turned on his small television. The morning news was on. Some young prostitute had been brutally mutilated and murdered the previous night, adding to a long list of mysterious deaths over the past five years. As all the others, it appeared the victim could have been killed by a wild animal, but the police – because of the obvious cleaning up after the deaths – now believe the murders were executed by human hands. Gilbert had seen enough. He switched off his TV and went to the bathroom.

He leaned into the bathroom mirror. Was that red fuzz on his cheeks? a beard? He reached up with tentative fingers. A couple of times before, he had thought he was growing a beard. It always turned out to be a false alarm. But this? No way, could it be false! Definitely, this time, he was starting a beard. "But I'm only fourteen!" he said in his reflection. The thought, the possibility, made him proud. "Maybe I'd better shave He fumbled around in the bathroom drawers and finally found his dad's electric razor and plugged it in, just to the right of the mirror. Just as he raised it to his face – the fuzz disappeared right before his unbelieving eyes! "What the –?"

He furiously rubbed his cheeks with both hands. Smooth as a newborn's skin. Not even peach fuzz. "Shit! I am going bonkers!" He didn't bother to unplug the razor. He was too pissed.

That evening Gilbert sat quietly, merely nibbling at his fried chicken leg and staring at his dark-faced mother from across the table. He was a little sick at his stomach again. At the end of the table, his dad's chair was empty.

He was caught by surprise when his mother actually spoke: "They found another young woman murdered I should say slaughtered in the park this morning."

"Yeah?" How many did that make this year? ten? fifteen? "So?" he said, vaguely remembering that he had been in the park. He didn't remember seeing anyone. He guessed he was just lucky.

"Well, you don't have to be so insensitive! Even if this one was a prostitute like so many are she was human. She had family somewhere friends feelings a life."

"Didn't say she didn't matter, Mom. But we have a few problems of our own. Don't we? Like where is Dad?"

"Gilbert – "

“Come to think of it. Seems like every time someone’s murdered, Dad is gone.” Realizing the gravity of what he had said, he dropped his fork in the middle of his mashed potatoes and gravy and stood from the table, throwing his chair back. “That’s it! Isn’t it? Dad! He’s the one! You’ve been covering for him all these years.”

She stretched out thin arms to him. “No! Your father would never kill anyone.”

“Right!” he snapped sarcastically, with his head bobbing up and down like a rubber ball. “Explain it, then?”

“ I can’t.”

He shoved his plate across the table, knocking over salt, pepper, butter, peas and carrots, right into his mother’s lap, and left the house in a huff.

“Damn!” he hissed as his frosty breath streamed into the autumn air. “God! Why haven’t I put this together before? Why?”

Gilbert soon found himself down the dirt road and in old Bob Miller’s conventional, red barn, a straw dangling from his teeth, and observing Miller’s prize Guernsey, Elsie, chewing her cud. “I’ll run away,” he said to amber, saucer eyes coolly observing him. “Yeah that’s what I’ll do. Maybe Mom doesn’t mind living with a weirdo maybe even a butcher but I do!” He tongued the straw to the other side of his mouth, practically matching Elsie’s chewing rhythm and thumbed his chest. The cow just eyed him as though listening and kept placidly chewing her cud. “Tonight when Mom’s asleep, I’ll pack a few things and thumb my way west. Yeah Los Angeles. Always wanted to see California. I know where Dad stashes his extra cash. He thinks I don’t know about it. But, I found it when I was ten.

“Late one night when I couldn’t sleep, saw a mouse settle back of the piano. I wanted to see if I could catch it. Well never caught that vermin, but I did find a Kleenex box stuffed full of tens and twenties.

“He’s probably been saving for his getaway when things get too hot for him here. Yes! That’s what I’ll do. He must have several thousands tucked away by now. Last time I took a look-see there were four full boxes of sweet greens. Enough to not only get my butt away from here, but enough for me to take care of myself for a while.” With that thought, he realized it was getting dark. He had been there much longer than intended. He jumped up, dusted straw off the seat of his pants and patted Elsie on her head. “Thanks for the chat, Elsie. You’re the best listener I know. See ya around.”

When Gilbert reached his home, he stopped cold in the drive. He couldn’t believe it. “Huh?” Never, as long as he could remember, had his father come home after only two days. His folks were arguing upstairs. He

bounded up the steps in three swift leaps. Their door was closed, but he easily heard every word. They were yelling.

“We can’t quit now,” his dad pleaded. “We’ve hung in this long just as you begged me to do a few years ago. What difference can a little longer make?”

“A lot! I can’t take anymore, Bob. It’s only a matter of time before the police put all the pieces together. I seriously doubt if they’re going to understand and they’ll be coming after us. And I’m afraid! Scared silly. Never thought I would be, but I am!”

“We’re family!”

“We have no choice. We’ll have to move away somewhere where he’ll be safe we’ll all be safe.”

“Gilbert’s getting too old, too big. He’s demanding answers. If we don’t supply them soon, he’s going to run to the police or run away. Maybe both.”

“But – “

“We can’t allow him to do that.”

Gilbert heard enough. He shoved the door hard, expecting it to be secured, but he was very glad it wasn’t.

“Gilbert!” his mother and father said in unison. “We thought you were gone.”

“We’ve been so worried about you,” his mother added.

“We were afraid you might be trying to run away,” his dad offered.

“So that’s why you’re home? Nice to know you care!” He wanted so much to confess he knew about the money, but that would blow his chances of taking it. He figured he would need it soon. “So you’re thinking of splitting maybe leaving me behind. I’m getting too big. Ask too many questions. Right?”

“Whatever it is you thought you heard, Gilbert, you’ve got it all wrong.”

“Have I? Why can’t you ever tell me anything, then?”

“It’s not your concern!” his mother said.

“Shit! How I hate that answer. It is my concern! I’ve been so concerned about it for so long that I can’t ever get a good night’s sleep. It is driving me crazy! And you don’t even care! But when I tell the police that you always disappear, Dad, at the same times the murders take place, they just might think it is my concern, too.”

His father stepped forward. There was a deep furrow in his brow, making his deep-set eyes appear even deeper. “Gilbert Son I didn’t kill those people.”

“Yeah? Prove it!”

His father shook his head apologetically. "I can't."

"Ha! That's exactly what I thought. Tell me why would you want to move away, then? You'd better tell me quick, before I do go to the police."

"You've got to trust us, Gilbert," his dad pleaded. "Please?"

"Tell me!" he screamed. The veins stood out in his neck, and his face was red.

"We have to tell him, Elaine."

"No!"

His father sighed from deep in his soul. "Okay Son. Just simmer down. Okay?"

"When I get some friggin' answers. Not a second before."

His mother turned and looked out the bedroom window. "Oh my God! Bob! The full moon's up! It's the last night! The worst night!"

His dad paled. "Not already!" There was hopelessness in his voice.

"What's this full moon crap?"

Elaine shoved away from her husband. "Get Gilbert out of here!"

"I am not budging! You are not fooling me with some ridiculous bull-shit about the moon."

His father looked as sick as Gilbert felt. "There's no more time, Son." He lunged forward, getting Jake in a headlock and forcing him into the hall. The door slammed and his mother slid the bolt on the other side.

"What the shit are you doing, Dad?"

Without answering, he dragged a wriggling Gilbert downstairs through the kitchen and out the back door, finally releasing Gilbert. "Run for the woods, Son!"

"Huh? What for?" He asked, now very sick to his stomach, enough to throw up everything he'd eaten for the past week.

There was no response from his father; already, he was disappearing into the pines in back of the house. Pain engulfed Gilbert. He vomited heavy and hard, heaving and heaving, more ill by the second – before everything went black.

Gilbert awoke in his bed, head reeling and feeling sluggish. He looked as though he had a hangover as he studied his face in the mirror. That fuzzy weird beard was back! "What the shit's happening?"

Loud sobs came from down stairs. It was his father. Gilbert's legs were still crampy – like he'd run the Boston Marathon; but, he managed to make it to the kitchen. His dad was at the end of the table, nursing a cup of black coffee. He was weeping and holding a folded sheet of Elaine's pink stationery.

She wasn't there.

"Where's Mom? And how'd I get home? In bed?"

The look in his dad's black eyes was that of total despair. "She's gone, Gilbert."

"What do you mean? she's gone? Is that why you're crying?"

"She's been really brave for a long time, Gilbert. But these past few months have just been too much for her.

"When I came home last night, I found this note." Bob handed the folded stationery over to his son.

"Dear Bob," it read,

"I cannot go on like this. I feel that I am to blame. Please find it in yourself to continue taking care of our son the way you always have do whatever it takes to protect him. I just pray that someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive me for not telling you my family secret before we married and Gilbert was born that the gene that produces redheads sometimes produces other things. It's just that I love you so very much and you probably would not have believed me anyway Please forgive me.

"Love, Elaine"

Gilbert's face flushed hot. "You have to tell me, now, Dad. What's this family secret? What the frig does she mean? What's this gene thing?"

Bob scooted back his chair and stood. "You look a bit shaky, Son. How's about a cup of black coffee?"

"Dad! I don't believe this! Tell me!"

In spite of Gilbert's demanding tone, Bob ignored him, just slowly stepped over to the counter and poured coffee for Gilbert.

"What is this family secret, Dad?"

Bob kept his sun-veined eyes straight ahead, not uttering a sound. He placed Gilbert's steaming coffee on the table and went out to get the morning paper, while Gilbert stood emotionally paralyzed at the audacity of his father's refusal to tell him.

When Bob returned, he unrolled the newspaper and sat back down. He read only a few lines, then, in a strange tone said, "You know she really shouldn't have run out on us, Son." He dropped the paper on the table and went to the window and peered out.

"That does it!" Gilbert yanked the paper up, anxiously scanning the front page. His eyes fell on one sentence. Four Kleenex boxes full of twenties and tens found in latest victim's suitcase. Authorities haven't been able to identify"

"You know " his dad said in a matter of fact manner, "My mother was a redhead."

Gilbert screamed.

Freedom just past the Fence

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

After working for the Army for years on repairing jet engines, I ended up being stationed in Pennsylvania one summer repairing air conditioners and refrigerators. I'd only do a little work, and then have nothing to do for a day or two.

But the thing I remember is that at the time Cubans were defecting to the United States by boat. They'd sail to Florida, most of them dehydrated and all of them malnourished.

The U.S. government didn't want them spreading diseases in our country, so when the Cubans would appear off the coast of Miami, the military would be waiting to make sure they were healthy. Well, all I knew was that they got all these Cubans into trucks we called 'cattle cars' with only a few benches. and trucked them up to Pennsylvania, where I was, and the military gave them some shots to make sure they weren't dying.

So these people, after escaping their country in a shoddy wooden boat were taken by the U.S. military, herded into a boxed-in truck and shipped up the country so they could be given shots and detained. These Cubans, who came here wanting freedom, now had to wait in a fenced-in area until they were tested and given food.

And it was my job to make sure that their fridge and air conditioner was working. So I sat there for a day or two at a time, drinking cans of beer and looking out my window. I had a view of the razor wire fence, and all I remember was seeing all of these Cubans leaning on the chain-link fence, wondering if this was what it was like to be free, holding on to the metal, looking out to what they were sure was freedom.

praying to idols

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

every once in a while I question whether or not there is a god. but I changed my mind - I thought I have found him.

he had dark hair, almost black (just like a god should), and he had these blue eyes - not just blue, almost white, so light they look like glass

and you could almost see right through them.

and could I see right through you if you gave me the chance?

I'd clasp my rosary necklace and pray to the right gods (and wouldn't they be you) and i'd let the necklace drape over my shoulders around my neck, and i'd let the rosary fall between my breasts and you would forgive me that much more for my sins.

how many hail marys would you want me to say, i'd ask.

I cannot believe I have seen you and I have talked to you - and does everyone get to see their god like this, and does everyone remember?

why do you have to be my god? why did I have to see you and talk to you...and realize how young you are, and realize how inexperienced you are (i mean, you're supposed to be the god you're supposed to be teaching ME)?

Is this what people think when their gods let them down (did you let me down or did I just never know what I was looking for)? is this what people think when they realize they are only praying to idols - what then?

because this is what we do

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

we arrive to our parties an hour after they start. we know full well when we are supposed to be there, but we show up late anyway. we don't have any prior engagements, but we act like we do.

and we make sure we're dressed well, but not too well. enough to impress, but not enough to be over-dressed. you can't overdo it. you have to look good, you know, but not like you tried to.

and we don't talk to anyone we don't know. and we make sure our gaze doesn't wander for too long, because we have enough friends and lovers and we don't need you.

and as soon as the party is starting to decline, we make our way to a bar, bring a few friends with us because we can't stay in one place too long, because we have other places to go we must move on to bigger and better things we must get out of here.

this is how we keep our friends, and this is how we keep our social standing, because this is the way it is. because this what we do.

Whether or Not It Is From Religion

Janet Kuypers
from the chapbook "Dual"

A.

"I'm ambidexterous. The nuns would hit my left hand when I wrote because I was supposed to use my right hand. When my right hand got tired when I wrote a paper at home, I would just switch hands."

Things are supposed to be a certain way, aren't they? There can't be anything different from the norm, you'll have to abide by our rules.

"who's rules?"

ours.

"I thought I was listening to God's rules."

We have interpreted God's rules. It is for your own good.

"Doesn't the Bible state that YOUR behavior and your changing the Bible is wrong?"

That is when the child was shut up again. Quickly.

Sometimes rules are needed to be instilled. They didn't care how the rules would be enforced even though they preferred swiftly, cunningly, and angrily.

B.

"She beat me because I spilled some milk. She was showing me what Jesus would do."

It is strange how people choose to instill the word of Christ. It is amazing how people get a "power trip" by putting a ruler to someone's hands

when you let someone else tell you that you can't be married, when you let someone else tell you that you can't have children, when you let someone else tell you that you can't have sex (well, isn't that why they molest little boys?), when you let someone else tell you that you can't drink, when you let someone else tell you that you can't have any fun, when you let someone else tell you that you can't have your life back

wouldn't you do your damndest to take a little bit of life away from

everyone else

well, that is probably what they did. they will take every power trip they can get

C.

“But when they go to a private school they have better manners than kids who went through a public school. Kids just need that strict direction in their life.”

I knew a woman who went to a Catholic school and she wore a ton of make-up and she smoked and drank and she screwed anything she could

I knew a woman who went to a public high school and she was an honor student and she was in a sport and she never drank, and she never smoked, and she never did anything wrong - and she never went to church.

maybe it is not religion that keeps them in line. it could be that strictness coming from anyone, like the parents, religions, or friends. it could be being raised with rules, or morals, or values, or standards. whether or not it is from religion is irrelevant.

taking out the brain

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook “Dual”

I'm a med student and for the past few weeks we've been working on a cadeavor. at first

I didn't want to know anything about him. I covered the head of the guy, wanted to pay him some respect. I didn't want to think that this person lived before I dissected him.

I had a hard time taking out the brain cause you know, that's where the memories are. that's what makes him him.

It's not so hard now. they get the bodies from the morgue. they're homeless people, mostly, no family. it's not so hard now.

ISSN 1554-9666



Down in the Dirt
Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

Alexandria Rand, editor
AlexRand@scars.tv

<http://scars.tv>

• **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail (AlexRand@scars.tv) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.

• To contributors: No racist, sexist or blatantly homophobic material. No originals; if mailed, include SASE & bio. Work sent on disks or through e-mail preferred. Previously published work accepted. Authors always retain rights to their own work. All magazine rights reserved. Reproduction of **Down in the Dirt** without publisher permission is forbidden. Copyright © 2000-2006 **Scars Publications and Design, Down in the Dirt**, Alexandria Rand. All rights of pieces remain with their authors.