

*down* in the *dirt*  
revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

*.037*  
August '06

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's face, focusing on their dark, wavy hair and eyes. The person's face is partially obscured by the hair, and they are looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a light, slightly textured surface.



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# TUNNEL VISION

Gerald E. Sheagren

I hit the D.C. beltway, squeezing my old clunker into the onrush of cars. A Mercedes made a point of cutting me off, a hand shooting from the driver's window to flash me the bird. Cursing, I returned the greeting, stomping on the accelerator until my front end was only inches from the luxury car's rear bumper. What a frigging jerk – probably some Congressional cretin running late for a joint meeting. If I had to deal with traffic like this on a daily basis, I'd be a blithering idiot – quite possibly an inmate on death row.

Two to four times a year, I made this pain-in-the-neck trip to Washington D.C. to spend some quality time with my brother, Ernie. Ernie was the oldest of my siblings – next came Estelle, Eunice, Enid and Elaine. I was the youngest, the baby of the brood. When Ernie was drafted a year out of high school, whisked through basic training and sent to Vietnam, I was still playing cowboys and Indians with my friends.

Being a mere five-foot-five and one-thirty soaking wet, Ernie was elected for one of the dirtiest jobs of all – a tunnel rat. Time after time, armed with nothing but a flashlight and a .45 automatic, he was attached to a rope and lowered into a tunnel complex to flush out any VC that might have been hiding out there. Considering the spiders and snakes, trip wires and punji sticks, the VC weren't half the problem. If the tunnel was large enough, he'd be part of a team, but more often than not, he had to go it alone. After six harrowing months – with his nerves in shambles – he was mustered out and sent home with a medical discharge. Thanks a heap for your sacrifices, sucker; now get on with your life.

I can still remember his less-than-glorious homecoming – as he shambling into the house with sunken eyes, a week's growth of beard and his breath reeking of alcohol. His dress uniform – stained with food and drink – was about as wrinkled as a piece of crumpled tissue paper. Two of his brass buttons were missing and his shoes looked as though they had been shined with an electric sander. Not to mention a purple mouse and a split lip from some barroom brawl in Los Angeles. He was a shadow of his former fun-loving self, not speaking much and jumping at the slightest of noises.

Nearly every night, he would awake us with his shrieking, and, hurrying into his room, we would find him sitting bolt upright in bed, eyes wild, his body drenched in a cold sweat. To make matters even worse, there was the claustrophobia, the arachnophobia and a half dozen other phobias.

Our father had been a gung-ho Marine in the South Pacific and was head of the local VFW, his many medals and ribbons and war souvenirs adorning the walls of his very private study. Oh yes, indeed – he was John Wayne, Audie Murphy and Sergeant York all wrapped up into one. Despite witnessing three years of vicious warfare, he prided himself on coming home “sound of body, mind and soul.” Not a day passed without him and Ernie squaring off in an argument, Dad calling him a “wimp” or a “sissy” or a classic example of the new “weak-kneed generation.” After each ruckus, Ernie would rush off to one of the neighborhood bars for some liquid consolation. Being that he was her first born, Mom would try to shield him from Dad’s patriotic tirades and cook him his favorite meals – meals that Ernie poked over with his fork and left largely uneaten.

Three months after returning home, Ernie notified everyone at the supper table that he was heading off for Washington D.C. – where he had landed a job with some unspecified government institution. Leaving our questions unanswered, he packed the very next day and bid us a hasty farewell, flatly refusing Dad’s offer of a ride as he hustled out the door. Embracing our tearful mother halfway across the front lawn, he promised to write every chance that he got – a promise, by the way, which he has never kept.

It wasn’t long before we learned what Ernie’s new job was; a homeless person, languishing on the Washington Mall and living off the charity and goodwill of others. And he was far from being alone, for Washington, it seemed, had more beggars than the city of Calcutta – fifteen thousand at last count, a good many of them Vietnam vets. I couldn’t help but wonder – why Washington? I guess it was the best place in which to make a point. An ongoing protest you might say. Hey Jack and Jill tourist – look what Uncle Sam went and did to us.

In a fit of rage, Dad sped down to D.C. to confront his “no account son” and they fell to fisticuffs, right there, beneath the marble gaze of good old Honest Abe. Lucky for them that the first cop along was a Korean vet, who, after taking both sides of the argument into consideration, had let them both off with nothing more than a warning. Unfazed by Mom’s sorrowful pleas, dear old Dad had laid down the law – under no circumstances was Ernie to be allowed home again. Not even for his funeral.

Parking, I locked up my junk-box and walked six blocks to the Mall.

I had no idea where to start my search – for every time that I had come to visit Ernie, he had claimed yet another spot to call his own.

Spotting two homeless guys parked on a bench, I decided to wander over – a bit uneasy with their unwelcoming stares. One was a huge black dude, clad in a knit watch cap and ankle-length wool coat, despite a temperature hovering around ninety-degrees. The other was a sallow, reed-thin guy, his spindly arms festooned with tattoos from his shoulders clear down to his wrists. I knew immediately from his inflamed nostrils and constant snorting that he was an addict. If looks could have killed, I would have died a thousand painful deaths.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. Can either of you tell me where I can find Ernie Prescott?”

Overcoat affixed me with a jaundiced eye, finally looking to his partner with a barking laugh. “Did you hear that? This guy called us ‘gentlemen.’”

“Jesus H.!” Tattoos glanced worriedly around. “I hope to shit that no one heard him. It would play hell with our reputations.”

I hesitated, not certain on how to proceed.

“Why you looking for Ernie Prescott?” asked Overcoat. “You a cop?”

“Naw,” laughed Tattoos. “He looks to wimpy-ass to be a cop.”

“You better watch your ass with Prescott.” Overcoat snatched a butt from the ground and straightened it between thumb and forefinger, checking to see whether there was enough to smoke. “That mother is one crazy dude. He nearly bit my ear clean off a while back. Yup – he is one crazy, psychotic dude.”

“Uh — Ernie’s my brother. I’m here to pay him a visit.”

Tattoos looked me over, squinting and nodding his head. “Yeah – now that I look, I can see the resemblance. Ugliness must run in the family.”

“All I want to do is find Ernie and spend some time with him. I’m not looking for any trouble, here.”

“We ain’t gonna give you any trouble,” Overcoat reassured me, holding out his massive hands, palms up. “You wouldn’t happen to have an extra some, would’ja?”

“Sure,” I replied, digging into my pocket and tossing him a nearly full pack of Marlboros. “Keep the whole thing.”

“Hey, thanks, man!” Smiling from ear-to-ear, Overcoat jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Ernie has a bench that he calls ‘home’ on the other side of the Reflecting Pool. It’s just up from the Korean War Memorial. You know – for being that psycho’s brother, you ain’t such a bad guy.”

“Thanks. You gents have a nice day.”

I followed a path that led me past the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, its black granite twinkling in the sunlight. A group of Japanese tourists – appearing as clones in their black suits and white shirts – were jabbering excitedly and snapping pictures of everyone and everything in their circumference of vision. Two little girls were dangling their feet in the Reflecting Pool, as they tossed scraps of bread to a flotilla of squawking ducks. A jet roared overhead, leaving a long white vapor trail in its wake.

I located Ernie surprisingly fast – stretched out on a bench with his legs crossed at the ankles and his fingers clasped prayer-like on his chest. Looking as serene as a corpse stretched out in its coffin, I was almost sorry that I had to wake him. I stood there for a minute, taking in his greasy, shoulder-length hair; his thin, weather-beaten face; the scruffy beard, flecked with gray and clotted with bits of dried-up food. The crescent-shaped scar, which he had received in a bicycle mishap when he was a kid, was stark white against the chestnut-brown of his skin. He was clad in camouflage fatigues – wrinkled and soiled – an olive-green bush hat, and a pair of dirty, scuffed-up combat boots. Why in hell – if these poor souls wanted to forget about Vietnam – did they choose to dress as if they were still there? Near the bench rested an old, olive-drab duffel bag, stenciled with the faded black letters U.S.A..

“Hey, Ernie! Yooo!”

Not a muscle moved.

“Ernest! Hey, Ern!”

An eye popped open, considering for a moment, then snapped shut, followed by a long, phlegmy groan. “Ah, Jesus, kid – you screwed up my nap.”

“Well, that’s some howdy-do.”

“I’m nursing a major hangover, here.” Ernie smacked his mouth, wincing at the taste of his saliva. “Christ, my tongue feels like a bloated sausage, resting on a bed of cotton. Cheap wine will do it to you every time.”

“Do you have some room for me to sit down?”

Groaning, Ernie swung his legs off the bench and sat up, burying his face in his hands.

I plopped down, sniffed the air and quickly moved to the far end of the bench. God, he smelled something awful – like an outhouse simmering under a hundred-degree sun!

“What’s a matter, kid? You don’t like my aroma?”

“When’s the last time you took a shower?”

“Maybe two weeks ago - in the White House. The Pres let me use his private bath.”

“Then, I just bet that the two of you sat down and discussed the fate of the free world.”

“Yeah, sure. He consults with old war horses, like me, all the time. It gives him a better perspective on things.”

A homeless person shuffled along the walk – an old man with a mop of snow-white hair with a matching walrus-type moustache. He reminded me of a down-and-out Colonel Sanders. Stopping, he held out a bag in Ernie’s direction. “I got some day-old doughnuts from Starbucks. You want one?”

“Jesus, yeah, Ruben – it’s just what I need.” Ernie shot a hand into the bag and pulled out a jelly doughnut, wolfing it down in two bites. “Wish you had a black coffee to go along with it.”

“The waitress isn’t that generous.”

“Ruben, this is my brother, Elliot. Elliot, this is Ruben.”

I accepted the old man’s hand which felt as curled and hard as the talon of a hawk. He smelled bad, but not nearly as bad as Ernie.

Ruben arched a bushy white brow. “I can tell that you two are brothers just by looking at’cha.” With that, he offered a small salute and hobbled off in the direction of the Washington Monument.

“You’re not going to believe this,” said Ernie, following the old man’s departure. “Ruben, there, use to be a hotshot broker on Wall Street. He had a loving wife, three college-grad kids, a twenty-room mansion, Mercedes, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, tennis courts, the whole frigging enchilada.”

“C’mon! You’re kidding me, right?”

“As God is my witness.”

“What in the hell happened to him?”

“The rat race burned him out. He’s actually happier, now, than he was back then.”

“Man-oh-man, that is totally hard to believe.” I plopped the bag that I was holding into Ernie’s lap. “That’s a little care package from Mom – a pack of underwear, another of socks, plus some toothpaste, mouth wash and dental floss.”

Ernie shoved the supplies into his duffel bag without checking them out. “Christ, she should have been a dentist. How’s she doing, anyways?”

“She thinks about you all the time, man. You know – you should move back to New Jersey and make her last years happier ones.”

“Jersey, eecccchhh! I’d as soon be back in Nam, burning leeches from my flesh.” Ernie scrubbed his face with his hands, sighing. “How’s the old man, just like I give two shits.”

“High blood pressure, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, you name it.”

“The indefatigable old war horse is finally going lame, huh? Does he still hate me?”

“He doesn’t hate you, Ern. He just hates the way you’ve chosen to live.”

“Christ, he would have been proud as punch if I’d been blown to smithereens in Nam.”

“C’mon, let’s take a walk. It’ll help sober you up.”

We headed in the direction of the Washington Monument, Ernie in the lead – moving along in his peculiar penguin-like strut, the duffel bag slung over his shoulder. The bright sun was playing havoc with his hang-over, and, every so often, he would let out a wounded groan, his free hand massaging his temple.

I looked over to see Overcoat and Tattoos watching us from the other side of the Reflecting Pool. Tattoos raised a middle finger in our direction, pumping it high in the air. “Hey, Ernie, you know those two losers over there?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re a real sweet pair. Tyrone, the black dude, was in the First Cavalry, Quang Tri, nineteen sixty-eight. Rumors are he got a dishonorable discharge for one reason or another. His pal, Lester, is nothing but a worthless junkie. I’m the Duke of Earl compared to those two.”

“Tyrone said that you nearly bit off his ear.”

Ernie barked a laugh. “He tried to steal my duffel bag. Next time, I’ll bite off his dick.” A serious look crossed Ernie’s face as he leaned closer to me. “Let tell you, kid – if you show the least sign of weakness around here, you’re dead meat. It’s a jungle and you have to stay in that top realm of predators.”

We walked past the Washington Monument, Ernie informing me that the difference in colors, maybe midway up, was where the construction resumed after the project had remained dormant during the Civil War. Upon spotting my brother, a number of tourists frowned and gave him a wide berth as we drew near. If Ernie noticed it, which I’m sure he did, it appeared not to bother him any. After being down for so long, pride and dignity were probably as foreign to him as a bubble bath or a meal at a four-star restaurant. As we approached the Capitol, about a half hour later, he screwed up his face as though he had taken a bite of some spoiled meat.

“Well, there it is, kid – the marble mausoleum – the home of the walking dead.”

“You really believe that, huh?”

“Shit, yeah, I do. There’s not a person in there that gives a rat’s ass about



you or me or anyone else. That goes for us Vietnam vets and it'll go for the troops in Iraq as well. All they care about is lining their own pockets and a good pair of shoes so they can balance themselves on their pedestals."

"There must a few good ones."

"At first, maybe, but a good apple can't survive in a basket of bad apples." Ernie chuckled, pointing to a marble walkway that was lined with flowers. "A few months back, I took a whiz right over there. I spent the night in jail for that little transgression. It wasn't bad though – at least I got a square meal of meatloaf, mashed potatoes and broccoli."

"You are really something, Ern. Say, talking about food – what say I treat you to a nice breakfast."

"You've got to be kidding me. There's not a restaurant in this whole city that would let me past its gilded doors. But it just so happens that I know a place where the food is top notch. C'mon, follow me."

We headed up New Jersey Avenue, heading for Old Downtown. The sky had darkened, portending a late morning rainstorm. Off in the distance, there came a crackle of thunder. Three blocks up, Ernie came to a stop before an old brick building, its windows boarded up with sections of plywood. Over the door there was a sign reading SOUP KITCHEN, OPEN SIX-TO-SIX.

"You're taking me to a soup kitchen?"

"Best food in town, kid, or pretty damn near it. The place is run by the Reverend Alonzo Biggs of the Emmanuel Baptist Church."

Before I could argue the point, Ernie opened the door and shoved me inside. Two steps and I was greeted by a crazy hodgepodge of smells – body odor, boozy breath and stale sweat mixed with the tantalizing aroma of bacon and eggs, melting butter and fresh-brewed coffee. Maybe two dozen picnic tables had been set up and there didn't appear to be a place left in which to sit. Scruffy, ill-clad men of just about every ethnic group lined the benches, wolfing down platefuls of food and conversing in raucous tones. There were even a few women – grubby and disheveled and clad in the weirdest ensembles I had ever seen. Cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air, as thick as a fog bank off Puget Sound.

A huge, broad-shouldered black man, wrapped in a food-stained apron, ambled over to Ernie, his sleeves rolled up, displaying arms as big as tree trunks. When he smiled, the overhead lights twinkled off a gold tooth, front and center.

"Ernest, my man – happy you could drop by."

They shook hands, performing a little ghetto how-de-do.

“How’s it going, Rev? This, here, is my baby brother, Elliot. El, this is the Reverend Alonzo Biggs.”

He grabbed my hand, squeezing until I winced. “Ernest has told me quite a bit about you – how the two of you are the last surviving members of the Prescott clan.”

I glanced at Ernie, crinkling my brow. “He said that, huh?”

“I’m happy you took the time to come down to visit your brother.”

“It’s the least I could do for — uh — for my only kin.”

“Well, the two of you eat hearty.” The Reverend headed back to the serving table, glancing over his shoulder. “If there’s anything you need, just let me know.”

I looked at my brother, trying to find some humor in it all. “Well, I guess we’re the last of the Prescotts.”

“Well, yeah, you know.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“C’mon, man – it gains me a little more sympathy. Let’s eat.”

After one of the best breakfasts I had ever eaten, we headed back toward the Mall, Ernie looking eagerly around as if he had been gone for two years instead of two hours. Before I knew it, we were strolling along the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, its black granite reflecting the sky, the trees, and the mournful faces of those searching for names. Tourists were taking pictures and a young woman was lifting a name with a pencil and tracing paper. At the foot of the memorial, loved ones had left such things as letters and flowers and photos, even a baseball glove and a can of Coke.

“You know, kid – all these offerings aren’t thrown away. They’re collected by the National Park Service and stored away in a warehouse in Lanham, Maryland.” Ernie winked. “Uncle Sam does have a heart at times.”

“More than you might think, Ern. More than you might think.”

Suddenly, Ernie stopped, gently rubbing his fingers over a name. I leaned in closer and saw that it was a soldier by the name of Arthur Wynoski.

“Did you know him, Ern?”

“Yes, yes I did. He was a little eighteen-year-old farm boy from somewhere in Iowa. Near Davenport, I think. He was a tunnel rat, just like me.”

“He was killed, huh?”

“We hooked him to a rope and lowered him into a tunnel near Cu Chi. There were a lot of tunnels in that area. He hadn’t been in that tunnel thirty seconds when we heard this loud explosion. When we

pulled him up, all what we got were his legs.”

“Ah, Christ, Ernie.”

“He was a real sweet kid,” said Ernie, still fingering the name. “Little, Artie,” he added in a strangled whisper.

I grabbed my brother’s arm and led him off a distance. “You know, Ern – you have to stop doing this to yourself.”

“Doing what?”

“Reliving that damn war, over and over and over again.”

“Let me tell you something,” he snapped, anger burning in his eyes. “This is my family, all fifty-eight thousand of them. They walked the walk and talked the talk.”

“You’ve got a family in Jersey.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Not one of them gives a shit about me, excepting Ma. Dad would have been prouder of me if I had been in that tunnel instead of Arthur Wynoski. As for my dear sisters – they couldn’t care less if I was dead or alive.”

“Maybe if they saw you more often. Come back to Jersey with me.”

“Bullshit! They’d still treat me like the plague. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

We headed back to Ernie’s bench and he suddenly took a step back, his distressed eyes growing as big as saucers. In seconds, he had turned ten shades paler.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“There! Look, look! The damn thing is right on my bench!”

I looked down to see a daddy longlegs and couldn’t help a laugh. A harmless spider, yes – but to Ernie it was a red-eyed, fire-breathing tunnel spider, waiting to suck the juices of life from his very body.

“Get rid of it, kid! Get it out of here, now!”

I gently picked up the spider and placed it in my cupped hand. Walking off a distance, I deposited it onto the grass and watched it scamper away. If Tyrone and Lester could have just seen Ernie, I thought to myself, my brother would no longer be in that top realm of jungle predators.

“God, kid, I hate those damn things. They’re worse than snakes, worse than tunnel rats, worse than those zombies in the Capitol.”

Still chuckling to myself, I looked up to see that the sky had turned the color of a fresh bruise, with angry gray clouds trooping along the horizon like circus elephants on parade. The rain would come soon and plenty of it.

“Hey, Ern – where do you go when it rains?”

“If it’s hot, like now, I just sit here and get drenched. It’s the closest

thing I got to a shower.” He gave a gritty laugh. “When it gets colder, I head over to the White House and the First Lady fixes me up with the Lincoln bedroom. Well, kiddo, I guess it’s adios.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ll try to make it back down in a couple of months.”

Ernie wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close and I didn’t even try to move away from his smell. “I love ya, kid,” he whispered, his breath warm against my ear.

“I — uh — I love you too.”

“Bring Mom down with you next time.”

“I’ll try. It’s tough - you know- with Dad and all.”

With that, Ernie sprawled out on his bench, crossing his legs and pulling his bush hat over his eyes. He gave a long, comforting sigh and wiggled his fingers in a goodbye.

As I headed back to my car, passing wordlessly past Tyrone and Lester, a thick drop of rain plopped against my head.

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In early September, I brought Mom down to visit Ernie – despite my father’s protests – but we couldn’t locate him anywhere. We asked Tyrone, Lester and Ruben where he was, but they couldn’t remember seeing him since early August. We also drew blanks at police headquarters and the shelters and the soup kitchens and the clinics. Even Alonzo Biggs – surprised that our mother did exist – hadn’t seen him for quite a spell. Ernie had simply upped and disappeared in a puff of smoke. Mom was beside herself with grief, but we had little choice other than heading home to wonder.

Then two weeks later, I was watching CNN, when I caught a special about a group of Vietnam vets visiting Ho Chi Minh City. They were mostly upper middle class to wealthy guys – dressed well, with expensive cameras and travel brochures. But, then, for the briefest of moments, the cameraman had settled on a bearded, long-haired dude, wearing a camouflage outfit and bush hat. My, God! Was it – could it be? I waited patiently for a repeat of the broadcast, and, finally, two hours later, it came, with my nose an inch from the screen. Yes, yes! Sweet Mary and Joseph and all the saints! If it wasn’t Ernie, it was his identical twin – right down to, if my eyes weren’t deceiving me, that crescent-shaped scar over the right eye!

I slumped into my chair and wondered how in the hell he had gotten

there. Had he stolen the money, or pulled an elaborate con, or maybe he had found some generous benefactor. The bigger question was – would he return home a better man after confronting his demons? That is, if he didn't pull a stupid stunt and wind up in some prison, not being able to come home at all.

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## CREATOR

Mel Waldman

Passing through the Waste Land, she stopped.  
The landscape was vast, empty.  
No one seemed to inhabit this place.  
Yet a terrible sadness possessed her.

Where am I? She thought.  
And she swallowed Loneliness, a swirling fog of despair,  
There-where no one seemed to be.  
Can't you see?

And when the snow dropped from the Heavens, and the  
Heavy rains followed,  
She stood in the center of the storm,  
Waiting.

Yet no one seemed to inhabit this place-  
Deserted, silent/howling place,  
Open space, private universe, inner space,  
Of dreamlike introspection and floating desolation.

And she stood,  
Where no one seemed to be. And  
Waited.

(Each day, we rush through bleak streets. And forget.  
Can't bear to "see" them, or hear their subdued cacophony,  
Everywhere, and nowhere, they exist.  
Ensnared in the hidden landscape, a Ralph Ellison world filled with  
THE INVISIBLE.  
There-and right here.)

Gripped by a force beyond and within,  
She stood in the center of this storm.  
And one by one, they appeared to her-  
The forgotten, the invisible, the needy-a  
Multitude of ghosts resurrected by her vision.

So it was!  
And perhaps, at that poignant moment of anguished creation,  
She too was reborn-the Creator.

# Into the Ground

Pat Dixon

Time t' get "Swingled" again, thought Larry Hoffman, letting out a long sigh.

He squared his shoulders, tightened his pecs, and glanced toward the far treadmill where old Howard Swingle had been steadily jogging for the past seven minutes.

Lorna Chalker, one of The Health Institute's two nutritionists, caught his eye as he ambled toward Mr. Swingle to get his half hour of supervised exercise started. She wrinkled her nose and, grinning, mouthed the words of their mutual nickname for the elderly man: Gaseous Anomaly. Larry was quite certain that pretty Lorna hadn't a foggy clue what the phrase meant literally, nor where it had originated, but she had laughed, and she had often repeated it after Larry first applied it four months ago.

During a lunch break, Lorna had mentioned that Mr. Swingle often wasted her time by reminiscing or chattering off on a dozen tangents whenever she was weighing him and checking his Body Fat Index—and almost always overstayed his time—and Larry had told her that the old guy also talked nearly the whole while he was doing his sets of twelve reps on the Institute's various exercise machines.

"Nearly all the older guys run off at the mouth—like gas bags," Larry had replied, "but this ol' Swingle's got 'em all beat by fifty miles. I'd say, as a rule, ol' farts are what y' might call 'gaseous anomalies.'"

And Lorna had laughed to tears, apparently at the word "fart," and apparently had assumed that farting was the point of the word "gaseous"—regardless of what an "anomaly" might or might not be. And thus Mr. Swingle's nickname had been born.

"Hi, there, young man," said Howard Swingle in his raspy voice.

"Hey, Mr. Swingle! How are you feeling today?" said Larry, glancing down at the printed green chart on his clipboard and penciling some numbers onto it.

"Oddly energized," said the elderly man, stepping off the treadmill. "Not unlike old Nestor—in the Iliad. Now there's a great story, if you've

never read it. I was up by a quarter to seven this morning. I've already put in more work than most people do in a week: I fed our seven cats, scooped their pans, did a big load of wash, cooked five chicken breasts—did twenty push-ups, took a shower, did twenty more push-ups, had my breakfast, washed a dishpan full of dishes, wrote three letters on my computer—and then jogged over here—mailed the letters on the way—all while my wife was still asleep. And I just now had a nine-minute mile going on this running machine—until I started to run out o' gas."

"Well, we don't want that t' happen," said Larry with a brief smirk.

"Running the seven blocks over here, I was thinking about how Charles Atlas—we used to call him Charles Fatless—how he must've finally had a day when he saw he was on the downhill slope as far as how his workouts were going—each one worse than the previous—though that'd be an average probably and not a straight-line-curve sort of thing—more like a tilted saw blade—but you probably never've even heard of Charles Atlas—a famous bodybuilder of the past. Anyhow, I don't know why I'm so energized today," said Mr. Swingle.

After a short pause, he continued, "I had a dream last night—actually I had four dreams I can still remember—but this one was about me running a five-mile race and feeling a bit tired during the last mile. Time was, I could do that sort of thing without even getting winded, but my legs just can't handle it for too long anymore."

"Lucky you didn't wake up tired from it," said Larry, leading him to the leg-lift machine.

"I don't know if it's like a sudden final flaring up of some embers just before a fire settles down and merely becomes a heap of cooling-off ashes—like one of my friends who had lung cancer last year. Just before the very end, he suddenly said he felt great—and he got out o' bed and wanted to go outside and mow his lawn. And two days later he was dead."

"Let's hope that's not what's goin' on with you, Mr. Swingle. Don't forget to buckle on the seat belt today."

"Like where am I going to go? How can I possibly fall off this thing? Now, with some of your Nautiluses—or Nautili—I do need the belt—like that back-strengthening machine, where my butt raises up if I'm not belted in, 'cause the weight I'm moving is more than that of the upper part of my body. And the same with your pectoral pull-down machine. But okay, I'll buckle up today—just to please you, young man."

Larry was silent and wrote something on the green chart he held.

"You know, Larry, I was not always as you see me now. Forty years ago I could do, oh, fifty to fifty-five push-ups at a time—several times a day."



Larry said, “Five more reps.”

“I found I could do more push-ups after—after warming up my arms by doing, say, ten or so and then resting for a minute or two. Then my arms could do it. But, if I tried doing them ‘cold,’ so to speak, I had a hard time even doing forty. I mentioned this to the students in one of my classes once, and one of the kids—I forget his name now, but it’ll come to me later—a nice Mormon kid that was on the football team—very respectful—and smarter than most jocks—much harder working—he said he’d discovered the same thing about his own workouts. I guess I went up a couple notches in his mind that day—a teacher who knew something about exercising muscles.”

“Hmm. That’s all for this. Good job. We’ll work your biceps next, over in that machine. Uh, what did you teach, Mr. Swingle?”

“What did I teach? I thought I’d told you that two, three weeks ago. Well, your young life is full of all kinds of distractions, I’m sure. I taught physics—over at ol’ Witherspoon Academy. Was there for forty-seven years. They practically had to beat me over the head to get me out. And I was an unpaid volunteer assistant coach for the track team, too. We had a good record—while I was working there. Now they’re not doing so well, but then the new head of the Phys. Ed. Department’s a douche-bag.”

Larry silently adjusted the seat and weights for Mr. Swingle’s next machine.

“This one is my favorite machine—not because it’s easy, but because I think I need it the most. It helps me with my shoulder that was injured forty years ago. ‘Train for your weakness’ is my motto—and my advice to others.”

He paused a moment and then said, “Douche-bag? Did I say that out loud just now? You know, Larry, my wife, who probably knows me better than anybody else does, says I tend to run things into the ground sometimes—so that people just tune me out. She also says I’m a bit—well—crass—sometimes. I just tell her I’m ‘disinhibited.’ Great word, ‘disinhibited.’ You know that word, Larry?”

“Two more reps. No—that’s one I don’t know, Mr. Swingle.”

“It means that, as I’ve gotten older and’ve had some loss to my little gray cells up front—we all, including young people like you and—whatever her name is—the cute little nutritionist—we all have dozens of little mini-strokes every week if not every day. We don’t notice even a second’s lapse in most cases. Some little vessel in our brain just pops open for a couple of beats and then our platelets seal it back up—and probably only a couple of tiny memories are affected each time, but we have hun-

dreds of back-up copies of 'em stored all over our brains, like computer disks almost, so it doesn't matter much."

"Good work. Pull-ups next. I'll take away only a hundred pounds today, since you're feeling so strong—just like Achilles."

"Nestor—the oldest heroic warrior in the Iliad—a favorite of Homer's. Actually, I'm not feeling quite so strong after coming off that bicep machine, Larry. Anyway, it's the cumulative effect of thousands of mini-strokes that give some of us 'Old-Timer's Disease.' Like that name for it? I first heard it about eleven years ago from my department head. So—we gradually get more and more forgetful as more and more back-up copies of our memories get killed off, and—here's my point coming now—"

Here's a 'point'? There's actually a point to this? Really? thought Larry with an innocent, friendly smile.

"—the frontal cortex of the brain is where we have our inhibitions stored. It's the last part of the brain to develop—conscience and discretion—and in some people it never develops much. Anyway, as that part starts to deteriorate because of the minis, we lose our inhibitions about all sorts of things—like saying 'shit' out loud in a supermarket—or worse things. Some people even start getting all sentimental and weepy at the least little feelings they have about stuff. God—Almighty—this is hard work today."

"Try and do just three more—two more—one more. There! Good work. Next we'll do some crunches—using your obliques—twelve very slow ones for each side."

"You're the boss. I used to kid Mary Beth—my other trainer here—and say I was buffing up for my sixtieth high-school reunion so I could beat the living crap out of all the punks who'd been bullies back then. At least I hope I said 'crap' to her—and not 'shit.' So, anyway, I'm a little disinhibited, but not as much as a woman I heard yesterday in the supermarket. Never mind what she called a person who cut her off on the way to the fast checkout line! She shouted, 'What the eff do you think you're doing, you fat eff!'—except she didn't—hoo—boy—she didn't say 'eff.' Oh—boy—I'm going to have a—tough time getting back—on my feet—after these are—done. I used to—be able to do—about ninety o' these with—no problem. And yet—I'm in better—condition than—when I—was sixty or—even fifty. There. Other side. Oh—boy!"

Mr. Swingle gritted his dentures and finished his remaining abdominal crunches in relative silence.

"Good work!" said Larry. "Now we'll do a dozen dips—followed by the ab-crunch machine. Your abs will get a little rest during the dips."

“Dips’ is a funny word,” said Mr. Swingle, snickering softly as he climbed up onto the machine and gripped its handrails. “Fifty years ago, if you called someone a ‘dip,’ you could expect an insult back—or a knuckle sandwich. We, my buddies and I, used to crack up if we even saw a traffic sign saying, ‘Dip in road ahead.’”

For the rest of that exercise, Mr. Swingle was unusually quiet. He seemed to be staring at the wall above the machine’s top, and Larry let him do three extra dips just to see whether he were counting them himself.

As Mr. Swingle sat on the seat of the abdominal-exercise machine, he said, “You were probably wondering whether I was having a senior moment or not—during those ‘dips.’ I was just recalling a road I ran on—oh—about twenty-seven years ago—which caused me to stop exercising for the next twenty-six years. My other trainer—Mary Beth—who went on maternity leave—used to tell me to shut up and focus on what my muscles are doing, but I’m sure in my heart that it doesn’t matter—and I usually find, if I talk, that I can get through my reps without noticing any particular pain—until an hour or so after I get home. So you keep good count, Larry—and I’ll tell you a little story—just one of many I could—tell you.”

He cleared his throat twice before beginning.

“Way back, when I was in high school—there were just football and—basketball and baseball—but not any track—or swimming for sports. My son’s high school—was different, and he—went out for race walking—and won all sorts of—medals doing it, but I—had to learn about the joys of track—when I got to college. I was pretty good at cross—country and not too bad—at dashes, and after college—I kept fit by running.”

“And stop there,” said Larry. “We’ll put you on one of the bikes for a good cardio workout for the final few minutes.”

“Okay, Boss. So the summer before my son’s junior year of high school we were all spending a week at a lake in Pennsylvania that my folks had retired to and built a house beside, and there was this up-and-down, hilly-dippy road—about three and three-tenths miles long—in a kind of roughly triangular shape—going around their little lake—and my kid says, “Let’s jog around it, Dad”—so we did. He was still fifteen at the time and probably wanted partly to show up his old man, and I was—oh—‘a perfect 36’—as it amused me to say back then.”

“Keep up your speed, Mr. Swingle,” said Larry. “Don’t let it drop just ‘cause you’re talking.”

“I’m watching it, Boss. So we go about three miles, up and down the rolling hills, keeping together, and then Billy begins to pick up the pace

as he sees the ‘finish’ ahead of us—Grandpa’s custom-built rustic redwood mail box. He pulls out, and I catch up, and he pulls out again, grinning his ass off, so to speak. So I decide it’s time to show the kid my infamous ‘Swingle Kick,’ and I shift into overdrive and catch up—and keep a-going—right past his smart ass—and I finish a good forty feet ahead of him—and he was one surprised young man, I can tell you. O’ course neither one of us told his mom or my folks what the outcome had been, but I’d like to think he learned something that day about his old man that was a good thing. Is this speed okay by you, Boss?”

“You’re doing just fine. Keep up the good work. Just three more minutes.”

“Think I may just barely have that much gas left in me. So, anyway, we didn’t go back there the next summer because my dad died of a sudden heart attack that fall—the very day after having a physical, of all things—and my mom sold that house and moved to Florida to be near some of her friends. Well, my point is coming up soon: when my son was twenty-seven and I was forty-eight, my wife and I were visiting him and his family in Lexington, Virginia, and one day, a Sunday morning, maybe just for the hell of it, he asked me for a rematch run—and of course, thinking I was in pretty good shape, I said, ‘Sure, Billy.’”

Howard Swingle paused and frowned, while the pedals of the stationary cycle still churned at a strong, steady rate.

“He’d measured a similar hilly-dippy course in his car and had run it a few times during the past year, I later found out. Well, he and I again stayed pretty close together for the first three miles, chatting about what a pretty day it was and about the hills and the autumn foliage and stuff—and then he made his move, and I made a move to keep up with my kid—and I did, for another tenth of a mile or so.”

Again Howard paused, this time biting his upper lip.

“And then—you had a heart attack?” prompted Larry.

“No. It was much, much worse than that. Much worse.”

“A stroke? Or a car ran you down?”

“Worse. I passed him pretty easily, being in good shape, and I didn’t even notice he wasn’t right behind me until I got to his driveway and looked for him—and he wasn’t there—but was lying back on the street. My boy—Billy’d had a heart attack. Twenty-seven years young, and he dropped dead on the street just fifty yards from his own house.”

“Sheesh. No kidding.”

“Picture trying to explain anything about our run to his mother—or

his wife—or his little girl—let alone trying to come to grips with the idea you'd killed your own kid by running him into the ground. But—aren't we about done with today's workout, Boss?"

"Umm—we've gone an extra—minute and twenty-some seconds. You can quit now if you like."

"Okay—thanks. Anyway, the autopsy showed he'd had a defect that had never shown up in dozens of physicals—sort of like that famous basketball player—Pistol Pete Somebody—somebody before your time—like Charles Atlas. Anyway, it took me more than a quarter of a century to realize that it was Billy's decision to run that day, and so I finally decided it was time to lose forty-five ugly pounds and try to get myself back in shape. Call it free will or growing up or whatever. I'd always told my students not to avoid the things that are hard to do. 'Train for your weakness,' I'd tell them, meaning 'Make your weak part strong by working and working and working to improve it'—whether it was a bad shoulder or certain type of calculus problem they had trouble with or some concept about fluid dynamics—or whatever. Well, thanks for coaching me today, Larry, and I'll see you next Friday—and I'll bend your ears with something else probably. Or—is it true Mary Beth is coming back to work?"

Larry was engrossed in writing numbers on the chart he held. A fiftyish woman in aqua tights gripped his left bicep with both hands and shook it.

"What? Yes, Mrs. Morgan—I'm finishing up. Be with you in a sec—we'll start with—your—chin-ups. Umm—Mary Beth. Mary Beth—is going to be here on Friday—and you'll probably be back with her, Mr. Swingle—and she—she said she'll be twice as tough as before. Hey, Lorna! Catch you later—for lunch?"

## THE WANDERING BUTCHER

jm avril

The wandering butcher  
Absorbs our vitality  
In throwing the fatal  
Hook into our dreams.  
He absorbs the sap  
Causing us to die.

The vampire-king appeared  
In the corpse of a cow  
That the cowardly butcher  
Was cutting with his tools.  
A naked, sky-clad verity  
Inflated the naive butcher.

He claimed to be blood priest  
In honour of the vampire king.  
The story makes the police  
And psychologists laugh a lot.  
In spite of this, children  
Are still offered as/in sacrifice.

# Overindulgence Will Forever Remain the Key to Enlightenment (Life)

Brett St. Pierre

I start to pray for the drip  
So I can see the truth  
As I tip back my head and cry.  
Lately it's been taking far too long  
For me to save myself from finally swallowing  
This potential lie that I see strewn across the daily news-  
That I am the manifestation of someone else's martyrdom.  
Waiting, I write perseverance between the lines with my final fading virtue  
Until I can ultimately open my eyes and begin to taste  
The fact that it'll all be over all too soon,  
But as long as I just keep my faith  
And continue to dig out my soul with this tiny silver spoon-  
I don't have to belong to anybody.

## Untitled haiku

Michael Levy

Certificate of birth  
establishing a paper chase  
proofs of life

# The Forbidden Zones

Christopher Barnes, UK

“As he (Keitner, an S.S. guard) showed me  
the main dining room, he smiled and said,  
‘you see, of course, how the Fuhrer  
appreciates comfort”.  
one of Hitler’s maids anon.

Hesitate at the fitchetlock  
he may be barring the door  
then  
sniff the ostentatious life.

Ignore voluble bantering  
of servants in white  
chiming as they reach  
giddy-points of the room.

The great jangle, wealth  
will deafen you,  
singing in this German madhouse,  
baritones, rare birds  
bouncing notes off priceless tapestries.

A clash at each course  
served up  
on solid silver of the Jews.

Rush happily over the prospect  
of arrant oak table  
flitting a crisp cloth.

Soft glow, four etchings by Durer,  
a vast Persian carpet,  
is this not for angels  
dancing on the rays  
of his pure light?

But when you have wearied  
to the chambers go  
with Parisian pornography  
private marble bathrooms,  
a portrait of the Fuhrer over the bed.

# I Don't get His "Shoulds"

Jen Pezzo

this man, seriously  
thinks, that I should  
go to church, to find God

this man, with his seven  
failed marriages, due  
only to his adulterous ways,

this man who knows, his daughters  
once lived in a church because  
he couldn't support them,

molested in the basement by a  
worried/caring/giving/generous  
pastor/minister/preacher/beast

or whatever the hell it was

it's not reverse psychology  
he's just a crazy bastard

Bat

Christian Ward

I saw a bat crawling along  
the railway tracks the other day.

The local lads started throwing  
stones at it, hoping to break its

papier-mâché wings. It reached  
a pair of coiled rubber snakes

and started to bite through  
their blackened skin, immediately

releasing a cloud of bluish vapor,  
which turned them into ash.



# The Field

Mark Joseph Kiewlak

The little girl was picking flowers. I was moving with the troops across the field, toward her position. She did not see us, and when she did, she seemed not to care. The enemy was closing in fast. I could hear their approach.

I decided to warn her, to try to help. If I made too much noise I would alert the enemy to our position. I was crouched behind an outcropping of rock near the center of the field. She was sitting with her legs tucked under her, gathering the flowers in her lap. She wore a pretty cotton dress.

When she lifted her head in my direction I began to wave and then to point at the men closing in behind her in the distance. She smiled but did not acknowledge me in any other way. I knew then what to do. Get the men out of there. Take the battle somewhere else. Before she got hurt.

Thankfully I was never given the chance to do this.

Gunfire exploded all around. It did not matter who fired first. We were at war. In my mind I saw the girl struck down, fatally wounded in our crossfire. I saw innocence slaughtered and the universe did not seem to care.

I saw this, but it did not happen that way.

The girl continued to pick her flowers. Chunks of earth were torn up around her. Bullets tore bark from helpless trees. Boots heavy with shame crushed all life in their path. She did not seem to notice.

I was out in the open now, making a run for her while there was still time. I thought she might be deaf, but the ground itself shook with our battle. I did not know what to think.

Then the girl lifted her head and her eyes spoke to me. They said something simple. They said "Hello." A bullet whizzed past my ear and I took cover in the tall grass, still a universe away from her. I was praying and clutching the cold steel of my weapon when another thought occurred.

She was sent here.

For me.

For me to notice.

Men were falling dead in the field. Men on both sides. We were killing each other and this was our choice. But what if we made a different choice?

No one stopped now for the girl. I don't know if they saw her. I didn't even know if she was real. They were hand to hand now, some of them, literally tearing each other to pieces right in front of her. There was no blood on her dress. No blood on her flowers.

I saw everything stop. As if I had stepped outside of it. The men were frozen in place. And then they were moving again.

I stood up in the field and laid down my weapon. I shed all encumbrances except for the most basic clothing. The bullets and the screams were all around. I took off my dog tags last and let them fall softly to the soil. I was feeling good about myself for the first time in a long time. I went to where the girl was sitting and sat down next to her. I began to pick flowers.

This went on for some time, each of us gathering what flowers we could. I no longer felt the danger. I knew that neither of us would be harmed by what was occurring between the others. I did not know how I knew.

“Catherine,” she said. “That’s my name.”

I returned her smile and became lost for an instant in the glistening of her long blond hair. Her voice was as I expected. Music.

“I’m John,” I said. “This used to be my war.”

She laughed at that, a soft giggle that I could somehow hear so clearly, despite the deafening artillery that was turning the land into a crater.

“This is a good spot,” I said, “for picking.”

“I’m done now,” she said.

And as she said it she gathered all the flowers together from her lap and stood up. She began to walk away without so much as a backward glance.

I stood up as well and surveyed my surroundings. The men were all dead, I think, but I no longer concerned myself with their state.

“Me too,” I said. “Me too.”

The next question on my mind was who I should tell, if I should tell anyone. But they already knew.

I was called into the office of my commander.

“We don’t have to fight,” I said.

He was unconvinced.

“If we don’t fight,” I said, “everything will be okay.”

Still unconvinced.

“We can’t know this,” I said, “until we stop fighting. The decision must come first.”

On a whim perhaps he took me with him to the front lines. We were breathing in the carnage. Despair was strangling every heart.

“Let’s just stop,” I said. “And see what happens.”

He laughed at this and then I took him by the hand. He tried to pull away, but not really. He wanted to be a part of what was coming.

We strode together onto the field of battle. Tanks and planes and

bombs and bullets. They were silly now from this perspective. They were useless toward a good heart and meaningless toward an open one.

“What the hell is happening?” my commander said.

“They can’t hurt you,” I said, “because you’re beginning to believe.”

“In what?”

An explosion shook the ground but we never lost our footing.

“Yourself,” I said.

We weren’t going to fight. That was the decision being made. The ripple was bigger all the time as it moved outward from our small center. Individuals were removing themselves from situations that could only end badly. They were giving themselves a chance now, for something better. So many were turning and walking in grace away from their conflicts.

I discovered that I could go anywhere, speak to anyone, without fear of harm.

I was with the enemy now, who had in their own way been experiencing the same phenomenon.

“You don’t see the reason anymore, do you?”

The enemy leader remained silent.

“We weren’t getting anywhere, any of us.”

He was as my commander had been.

“We have inward directions far more exciting to travel.”

Afraid.

“It’s a strange feeling,” I said, “to take the pain away from ourselves.”

He drew a gun on me. I was still the enemy of course.

“Let’s go,” I said, “and pick some flowers.”

No one had ever thought much about it. We were harming ourselves for no reason. It was silly. All the drama.

Strange ideas were abounding. There was chaos. But there were also those who walked amid the chaos. I was one of them.

I was back in the field. A long time had passed. It was overgrown again with beauty. The girl was there.

“What will we do without it?” I said.

We were staring up at the sky, making shapes with the sunshine in empty air.

“I mean, I know it was unnecessary, but we had been hurting ourselves for a long time. How do we get used to only goodness?”

She smiled a smile that was just for me. A special secret smile. She had thousands more.

# GIRLS ON DIFFERENT PLANETS

J. J. Brearton

1

Thistle hung around the courtroom for a while trying to figure out what to do. She then asked one of the clerks if she could see the Judge. The clerk was at a desk behind a window.

He said, "I'll check."

A few minutes later a uniformed officer came up to Thistle. She was sitting in the hall.

"Thistle Tragg?" he said.

She looked up and said, "I'm Thistle."

"The Judge will see you now."

Judge Black again noticed Thistle's striking beauty as she entered his chambers. He'd seen her at Derek Smithy's arraignment. She was somewhat tall, about 5'9", almost skinny, and had straw colored hair, short and straight.

"Sit down Tragg," he said.

He watched carefully as she did so.

"He is my prisoner," Thistle said. "I want to bring him back to my planet."

"Smithy?"

"Yes."

"Well, if he's not executed--I suppose you can, but you'll have to wait until then."

"So, if he's not executed, I can have him."

"Yes, assuming there is no other sentence, or if he's acquitted."

"So, if he's acquitted I can have him."

"Sure. Absolutely."

"I would like to guard him. Is there any problem with that?"

"No problem. Go ahead. Guard him all you want."

"Thank you. What are the chances he'll be acquitted?"

"Not good. I've just been informed Yolanda Bigg is the D.A."

“So?”

“Well, they say if you land Bigg, you land hard.”

“What, she’s tough?”

“The toughest.”

“Oh, great.”

Thistle waited outside the courtroom for Derek Smithy’s trial to begin. She had captured him at her mother’s strawberry farm. She had thought Derek was just a stray, only to find out that he was from Earth, and on the run from charges that carried the death penalty, sexual harassment. Something he did at a Christmas party. He said he wasn’t guilty. The charges to her seemed ludicrous. Yet here, on the Traveling Community Space Station, they seemed very serious.

Derek was the only man she had ever met who had been free. She wanted to keep him. He was good looking, after all. Yes, she said to herself, as she waited in the hall, at least that much was true.

And then there he was, being led into the courtroom. She followed, right behind the Assistant District Attorney, Yolanda Bigg.

Yolanda was not only tough, she came just as advertised, big. Some said, huge. Six foot three, she hovered around 220 pounds. She had a tendency to use everything, even her size, to her advantage.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” she said to the jury. “Do any of you have a problem with the fact that I’m a big girl? I mean, let’s face it. I’m overweight. Sorry, I just can’t help it. I’ve tried and I’ve tried, but I just can’t get a handle on it. Just got way too big an appetite. Any of you jurors have a problem--maybe, offended by my size?”

The flickering image of the jurors appeared on a screen on the wall. They said nothing. Some of them shook their heads “no.”

Smithy’s attorney, Jud Bo, stood up and said, “Objection, your honor. This has nothing to do with the prosecution’s weight.”

“Overruled,” Judge Black replied. “Maybe that’s her point.”

“I agree, Judge,” Yolanda Bigg said, smiling slightly, as she enjoyed the sight of Jud Bo falling for one of her old tricks.

“Some people are offended by big people,” she continued. “O.K., I admit it. Fat people. But this case is about the evidence. Can everyone agree to decide this on the evidence?”

The wall monitor video of the jurors showed several of them nodding

in agreement.

“Fine. But just to be safe, I’m going to promise not to eat until this thing is over. That’s my pledge.”

Bo stood again and said, “Objection!”

“Overruled,” Black said. “She has a wide latitude.”

“Around my waist,” Yolanda said, winking to the jurors, some of whom could be heard chuckling.

A bailiff whispered in Judge Black’s ear.

“Recessed to nine a.m. tomorrow morning!” he roared.

## 2

Thistle started to check in through the slammer, the new weapons detector they had on board, and she realized it would take too long. She decided to leave her large suitcase in her room and just go through to the cellblock with a small leather bag. As it was, it took a good 30 minutes for the security guard to examine her electronic equipment, not to mention her cosmetic case.

As she walked down the hall to Derek’s cell, she thought to herself how weird this culture was--all these men walking about--the empty cells. The only one occupied was Derek’s.

Where she came from, all men were incarcerated. Not here though. She continued down the hall.

Derek’s cell was the last one on the end near a wall. Video monitors turned to follow Thistle as she approached him.

When she stepped in front of his cell, she saw him lying down on a cot. He had a printout of a news report in his hand.

His head was propped up on a rolled up blanket. He turned to look at her.

She turned away and started putting her things down in a corner opposite his cell. She sat down on the floor and looked around. The whole place was painted white. The bars were metal. The toilet in the middle of Derek’s cell obviously provided him with little privacy.

“What are you doing?” Derek asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m just sitting here. I’m guarding you, actually.”

Derek thought about this for a few moments. He thought that he should be annoyed, yet, for some reason, it amused him. He had been in his cell for several hours, all alone.

“You don’t need to guard me. I’m not going to get away,” he said.

She just stared back at him.

He couldn’t meet her gaze. It was too powerful--too strong. He went back to reading the news report. He tried to, anyway. But he just couldn’t. He read the same sentence over and over. It didn’t make any sense.

He put the news report down. She had a headset on. She looked up and took it away from her right ear.

“Did you say something?” she said.

“No. No, I didn’t.”

He now watched her going through her suitcase. He noticed she had a T.V. monitor, a keyboard, and several electronic devices. He watched her take out a sweater and a pair of pants, roll them up and place them in the corner. She then lay down on the floor and put her head down on the rolled up sweater and pants.

After a few minutes she turned on her side and took off her headphones. He could hear music coming from the headphones, very indistinctly. She closed her eyes. In a few minutes she was asleep. Asleep!

Derek couldn’t believe it. She snorted a few times, and snored lightly.

He was now on the edge of his cot, sitting up, staring at her. He noticed the remarkable curve of her hips. Her arms curled up in front of her. He wished he could go into such an untroubled sleep.

### 3

Thistle entered the back of the courtroom.

Smithy’s lawyer was addressing a flat video screen attached to the right-hand wall. He seemed nervous.

The video protected an image of about twenty people.

It was a live broadcast.

Thistle turned to a guard near the door and whispered to him. “What is that?” she asked, pointing to the screen.

“That’s the jury. They’re picking the jury.”

“What do you mean, picking the jury?”

“Selecting the jury. They’ll get it down to 14. Twelve and two alternates.”

“They’re not here. Why aren’t they here?”

“Not enough people around here. The jury pool is about 300. You need hundreds for a criminal trial.”

Bo and the prosecutor were now standing before Judge Black.

She heard the gavel slam down and Judge Black say, “Adjourned to the Pre-Sirius Station.”

Smithy was led out of the courtroom. Thistle followed him.

After Smithy was checked through to the cellblock area, two security guards stopped Thistle as she went through the detector.

“Where are you going?” one of the guards said. He had a craggy face. He was tall, ugly and mean looking.

“I’m going in to guard my prisoner.”

“Says who?”

“Judge Black gave me permission.”

“He did?” He now looked her over carefully and glanced at the other guard. He grabbed her arms and said, “See if she’s got a tail.”

“A tail?” the other guard asked.

“Yeah. See if she’s got a tail.”

The other guard pulled up her blouse in the back where it was tucked into her slacks, tugged back her belt and looked down her pants.

Thistle was speechless. She couldn’t believe this was happening.

“Do you see a tail?” the craggy faced guard said, staring Thistle in the eye.

“No tail,” the other guard said.

“Turn around,” he said, spinning her with his hands. “Hold her,” he said to the other guard, who now tried to grab her arms.

Thistle pulled away and the other guard got her in a bear hug. Smiling. Grinning.

She now felt the craggy faced guard pull at her pants from behind, as if he was looking down her pants. He now grabbed at the back of her panties, and looked down there as well.

She struggled to get away and pushed hard against them.

“You can’t do this,” she exclaimed. “I want to see your superior.”

They let her go, and she tucked in her blouse. The two guards smiled at her.

“I’m in charge of security here,” the craggy faced guard said. “Just making sure you’re not a Meddler. Meddlers have tails, that’s all. Just doing our job.”

“Shouldn’t they have a woman do that?”

“You’re not on Antigone now, girl. You want to go in there, you’re subject to search.”

“You’re going to search me?”

“No. You’re all right. Go ahead.”



Thistle was burning mad. She went into the cellblock, but she was starting to lose her stomach for the whole deal.

She sat down and started to think things over.

Smithy was sitting on his cot. "What happened?" he said.

Thistle said nothing, but dried her eyes. She had shed a few tears. She was very angry.

"I heard something going on," he said. "Are you O.K.?"

"Just shut up," she said. "I don't want to talk to your kind right now.

She looked up to see a huge woman standing next to her, holding out papers. "You're being subpoenaed. You have to appear at the Pre-Sirius Station. Sign this." The woman held out a pen. Thistle now recognized her as Yolanda Bigg, the prosecutor.

Thistle signed a copy of the subpoena and gave it back to her.

"What if I don't show up?" Thistle said.

"You'll end up in a cell next to him," she said and nodded towards Smithy. "I'll call you when you're needed."

#### 4

After Thistle told Smithy about the "tail" incident, he shook his head in dismay.

"It's not right. There's something wrong with that. Meddlers don't have tails."

"That's what they said."

"You should see a lawyer. Maybe sue those guys."

"Are there any lawyers around here?"

"I don't know. Why don't you see my lawyer, Bo? He's a lawyer."

"Maybe I will."

"Sure. You should. Heck, he'll be here this afternoon. I'm not sure though, because I think I'm going to the Pre-Sirius Station."

At that moment Smithy noticed Looms, his old shipmate, rolling in a large green plastic locker.

"Well, what do you know? Here they are," Smithy said. "Couldn't they find anyone else?"

He had thought Looms was his friend.

"Just don't give me any hassles," Looms said.

In a few minutes Smithy was secured into the locker with his things.

“I’ll see you over there,” Smithy said to Thistle. “When Bo comes in you can talk to him.”

Thistle sat in the corner and watched Smithy being rolled out of the cellblock.

She quickly realized she didn’t want to be left alone with the guards. She picked up her things and followed Looms as he wheeled out Smithy inside the locker.

As she passed by the guards, she heard the older, ugly faced guard say, “No tail.” Then she heard the other guard say, “Yeah. No tail.” They started chuckling.

Thistle followed Looms down the narrow corridors to the shuttle gate.

Looms stood the locker on end and said to Thistle, “It’ll be about an hour. Maybe more.”

Thistle went back to her room and got the rest of her luggage.

She questioned in her head whether what she was doing was foolish—a foolish quest. Yet, she was subpoenaed. She had to go. Yes, but everything was going wrong. Now it looked like they wanted her to testify against Derek. That’s not what she wanted. If he were executed, she wouldn’t be able to take him back. Take him home to meet her mom.

## 5

Thistle, Bo and Looms headed out in the large shuttle bus.

Soon, behind them, the Traveling Community disappeared into Sirius’ bright glow. Above, Amore’s white starlight contrasted with Sirius harsh yellow light.

You knew you were getting close to Sirius when you saw Amore, its twin star.

But none of the passengers had any interest in what starlight shone upon them.

“Where’s Smithy,” Thistle asked Looms.

“In storage,” he said, just before they all passed out from the G-forces and the medication.

Smithy was on his back, on his cot, in his cell. His eye was on the clock on the wall. Then he noticed the security camera lens turn toward the door.

It was Thistle.

Smithy got up and went to the bars of the cell. Thistle leaned against the wall across from him.

“Any trouble getting in?” he said.

“No,” she said. “No trouble.”

“The guard here is a woman,” Smithy said.

“Yes,” Thistle said, and smiled. “I noticed.”

Smithy shook his head, realizing how stupid his comment was.

“You like her?” Thistle said.

Smithy was surprised. He never even gave the guard a thought.

“She’s okay, I guess.”

“Are you worried?”

“Worried?” Smithy repeated.

Actually, Smithy wouldn’t call it that. He couldn’t explain it. The gnawing, rotten feeling in the bottom of his gut wouldn’t go away. The feeling you get when you are in very bad trouble.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said to Thistle.

She looked down the hall.

Smithy walked to the other end of his cell. He leaned against the wall.

“Do you see the fancy accommodations I have?” he said, nodding towards his bed.

Thistle leaned forward and looked closer.

“You have sheets?” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Synthetic, artificial sheets. Quite cold, actually.”

They both stared at the cot. Thistle was now leaning against the bars, arms crossed in front of her. She had Khakis on, knee-high socks, a checkered blouse and a tan vest.

He inched over to the front right corner of his cell, a few feet away from her.

“Will you stay tonight?” he said.

She looked toward the guard. She didn’t respond.

He moved closer.

“What’s it like on that planet of yours?” he said. “I mean, do you have a lot of prisoners?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t have any prisoners.”

“What do the women do for men? I mean, if the men are all prisoners.”

“Those are our men.”

“So, you don’t have a prisoner?”

He moved towards her and she backed away to the wall across from the cell.

“Listen,” he said, “if you can get me out of here, I’ll be your prisoner.”

“They won’t let you go,” she said.

He held out his hand. She glanced at him, but Smithy couldn’t read her attitude. “Take it,” he said.

Still, she ignored him. He held out his hand for a full minute. She made no move. Finally, his arm dropped to his side. She looked over now. To his surprise, she seemed disappointed.

He held out his hand again. “Come on,” he said. “Take my hand.”

With just the tinge of a smirk, she pushed off the wall across from him. She took his right hand in her left hand, gently, tentatively. He pulled her slowly toward him. He held out his other hand. She took his other hand and they pressed against each other, with the bars between them. Silently, they kissed. He moved his arms around her and held her close.

“Stay with me tonight,” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Tonight. Forever. You know, for me, it might be forever.”

“What’s forever?” she said.

“For the rest of my life,” he said. “Is that good enough? It might not be that long. Won’t tie you up. Willing to risk the rest of my life with you?”

She smiled. “Is this your usual line?”

He had to laugh, thinking of the nurses in flight school, and the lines he’d used on them.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s my condemned prisoner line.”

Oh, what the heck, Thistle thought to herself. Maybe, he would be executed. If it didn’t work out, chances are, she’d never have to see him again.

# Quick Silver

Stephanie Modkins

The day I lost my curl, I almost lost my manhood.

\*\*

“Quick, you so f-i-n-e. Let me run my fingers through your hair.”

“Naw baby. Get your hands down! No one touches my hair!”

Now, how would I know that would be last time I'd ever get to say that. It was a dark Tuesday when I went to Mr. Ed's Barber Shop off of Fifth Street, two spaces down from Conti's Liquor Store and The House of Prayers Barbecue Ribs and Chicken Shack. I had on my Member's Only black leather jacket and a tight pair of Levi jeans. As I walked down the street with the wind blowing across the soft, thick curls covering every inch of my head and hanging in a V-shape just below my shoulders, I wondered could life get any better than this? And then it did. This fine girl name Levita stopped me on the street.

“Hey Quick.”

“Hey Levita.”

“I've been looking for you.”

“For me? Aw yeah — what's up baby?”

“You. I want you to come to my place tonight. I want to give you somethin' you'll never forget.”

“All right, all right. What time, baby?”

“Nine. Don't be late, Quick.”

“Don't worry. I won't.”

Levita was 5'7", high yellow with long hair that flowed down to her back. What I liked most about Levita was her big booty. It was the kind that caused the hemline of every dress she wore to raise a little higher up in the back. As I watched her walk away that day, I imagined what we'd do that night. Levita bent over on all fours, butt-naked with that big booty in the air. I was gonna ride her like a pretty pony. Now all I need-

ed to do was to get my curl together and take a quick shower. I walked into Mr. Ed's shop just in time to get a seat.

"Hey, Mr. Ed."

"Hey Quick. Whatcha wantin' today son?"

"A touch up on my curl. It's a little nappy at the roots."

"Alright, have a seat, son, and you'll be up next."

"C-o-o-l."

I sat down next to Jermaine, my cousin. He was the coolest fag I knew. Unless you met his boyfriend, pretty Tony, you'd never know he was weird.

"Jermaine, my man." We briefly hugged. "Did you watch the game last night? Kareem did it again!"

"Yes, he did man. Quick, I got in on this pool at my job and won big!"

"Yeah, man. That's c-o-o-l."

"Man, I was the only one who guessed right on how many baskets Kareem was gonna make with a right hook."

"That's cool, Jermaine. That's real c-o-o-l." I put my hand in my pocket and felt a piece of lint. I barely had enough to get my hair right. "Uh Jermaine, could you lend me a few? Just till the end of the week. That's when I get my disability check."

"Sure, man." He handed me a twenty.

"Jermaine, why didn't you come by Big Momma's house last week? I was lookin' for you."

He bent his head back and looked up at the ceiling. "Quick, Big Momma's been on me lately about... you know, my situation. Man, I just didn't feel like hearin' all of that. I am who I am."

"Yeah, well, that's cool. Big Momma's usually on everyone about their situation, whatever it is."

"True, dat. True, dat."

"Next time, man, come on around. Big Momma made a sweet potato pie that was out of this world! Man, I ate at least three slices."

"Aw, man, that sounds good. I'll come by next time. Quick, it's time for me to go." Jermaine got up and paid Mr. Ed. Then, he walked out of the shop behind pretty Tony.

"Come on son. You're next." I jumped up and sat in Mr. Ed's black leather chair. "Mr. Ed can you tighten up my back after you finish with the curl. It's lookin' a little ragged."

"Sure I can, son. Sure I can." He began parting my hair and putting Vaseline around the edges of my scalp. I was glad! Last time, he didn't

do that and my edges were raw. “Quick, what you been doin’ with your life lately?”

“Nothin’ much. My leg is still botherin’ me so I chill most of the day. But, I still hang with the ladies, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know, son.” He started spreadin’ on the perm. It had an extra foul smell, like a mixture of rotten eggs and gas. I grabbed my nostrils. “So, Quick, besides the ladies, what else do you do? You’re a young man; you should be goin’ to school or learnin’ a trade.”

“Yeah, well I don’t know what I want right now. So, I’m takin’ it easy ‘till I find out.”

“Okay, son. It’s your life.” The perm was burning now. I felt layers of my scalp melting. I didn’t say anything. I wanted the perm to take.

“So, Mr. Ed, did you watch the game?”

“Yeah son. Kareem is somethin’ else! He’s unstoppable!” My scalp is on fire now. I don’t say anything ‘cause it’s about time. “Okay, son, let’s rinse out now.”

We walked over to a sink and I laid back in the chair, resting up next to it. The warm water rinsing over my scalp felt g-o-o-d! I was feelin’ good too, until I looked up at Mr. Ed. His eyes were popped open like he’d seen a ghost.

“Uh son, hold still.” He kept rinsing. After a moment, he stopped and wrapped a warm, itchy towel over my head. Then, he walked me over to a mirror. “Okay son, stay calm now. You’re not a woman. Your life isn’t tied up in your hair. And, I got this toxin that can cure anything.”

“Cure what?” He pulled off the towel. I had no hair! Red, seeping blisters covered my scalp. I looked like a fuckin’ burn victim. “Oh my God! What have you done!”

“Now calm down, son! Calm down. If you put the toxins on your head regular, like, it’ll cure the situation.”

“Mr. Ed, I got a date tonight! What am I gonna do! I can’t walk around like this!” I began pacing the floor of the shop. Every time I touched my scalp, I flinched. “Just give me the toxins so I can leave!”

“Okay, son. Okay.” Mr. Ed reached into a drawer next to his chair and

pulled out a bottle and handed it to me. I, in turn, stomped out of the shop. I was home in two seconds flat.

As soon as I opened the door, my brother began laughing. “Ha-ha-ha. You look crazy! Man, what Page Four happened to your hair?”

“Shut up, Rick! Mr. Ed fucked me up!”

He followed me down the hall to the room we shared.

“D-a-m-n, what you gonna do now?”

“I got some stuff to put on my hair. I’ll be okay.” I pushed him away and slammed the door. Then, I looked in the small mirror I kept on my night stand. I sat looking in it for at least thirty minutes. I was in shock! Then, I spotted my latest Full Force record. Girls always told me I looked as good as the guys on the cover. Soon, tears began to fill my eyes. My life was over! No more dances, no more parties, no more chicks! I’d probably end up like my cousin Jermaine, spending money to get some dude’s hair done. Shit! I heard a knock at the door.

“Richard, it’s your mother. Let me in. Your brother told me what happened.” I got up and unlocked the door. I didn’t say anything. “Ah baby, come here. Let momma see.” She looked me over and shook her head. “Richard, this is why Momma always told you to stick with what God gave you. He didn’t mean for us to start putting chemicals on our head, tryin’ to change his original design.” She patted me on my cheek. “Baby, let me see what you got to treat your scalp.” I pulled out a bottle and gave it to her. “M-m-m, African Cure, guaranteed to heal burns, lesions and psoriasis. Well, it’s worth a try.”

“Yeah, I guess.” That night, Momma made me a special dinner. We ate smoked turkey legs with greens and corn bread. Afterwards, I showered and looked at the time. It was a quarter to nine. I didn’t know what to do. Just thinking about Levita made my nuts hurt. But, she’d never want me now. I put on some after shave lotion anyway. Then, I put on a nice shirt, tight jeans and my Members Only jacket. As I walked to Levita’s house, I began thinking. I came up with something just as I knocked on her apartment door.



“Hey Levita.”

“O-o-h, Quick!” She jumped back a little. “What happened to you?”

“Baby, you won’t believe it.” I walked in. “After I saw you today, I ran to the other side of town to help out with this clothes drive for church. And on the way, I saw these guys tryin’ to rob this old lady.” I pushed my chest out. “I got upset. That old lady looked just like my sweet big momma. So, I had to do something.” I danced around doing short jabs like Mohammad Ali. “I started fighting them and hitting them, but for a second they got the best of me. One of them pulled out a knife and the other two held me down while the guy with the knife cut off my hair.

Finally, I pushed the two guys off and punched the guy with the knife. They ran away, but it was too late. They got me. And, now, I don’t have any hair.” I dropped my head and looked down. Then, I looked up at her with two big puppy dog eyes.

“Quick, that’s terrible! Did you call the police?”

“Baby, you know the police don’t care about Black folks. Naw, I didn’t call them.”

“Come here.” She wrapped her arms around me and held me tight. She rubbed her fingers over my head. It stung a little. “Quick, I’m gonna make you feel better tonight. Come on.” She dragged me back into a bedroom. Hey, the rest is history.

After that, I never got a curl again. Mainly, because my hair never grew back. I put that African Cure on my head for a whole year. It did heal my burns, but I found out too late that it caused permanent hair loss. But, that’s c-o-o-l. The bald look is in now anyway and the chicks s-t-i-l-l love me.

# gary's blind date

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"  
this also appear in the book "Duality"

A friend of mine had a roommate named Gary and Gary was a man who was always down on his luck. So on one particular occasion, after Gary had a dating dry spell, my friend decided to set Gary up on a blind date.

Now, he said, this girl is beautiful, she's funny, you'll think she's great. trust me. Pick her up Friday night. And Friday came, and Gary, feeling more and more apprehensive, said, but I'm not feeling well. I've been sick all week. And my friend said, now I don't want to hear any excuses. You're going.

So Gary got ready for his blind date and drove over to the girl's house. She lived with her parents, so when Gary rang the door bell the girl's mother answered.

"Oh, you must be Gary, please, come in," she said.

Once Gary got into the house, the mother said, my daughter's still getting ready. Would you like to wait? and Gary, still not feeling well, asked where the washroom was. She directed him to the newly remodeled basement.

Gary walked into the brand-new bathroom. New fixtures. Thick, white, wall-to-wall carpeting.

Gary sat down on this new ivory throne, still sick. But when he looked over there was no toilet paper. He couldn't just stand up, he thought, this isn't just a regular trip to the bathroom, I need something to clean myself off with. He couldn't use a towel. So he took off his pants and used his underwear.

But he couldn't leave the underwear in the small, open trash can in the corner of this newly-remodeled bathroom, he thought. So he dropped them in the toilet and flushed. Which caused the toilet to overflow, causing the newly-remodeled bathroom to look less than new.

So here was Gary's dilemma: he left his underwear in the toilet and defiled this family's brand-new bathroom all without even getting the chance to introduce himself to his date.

What are his options, what are his options.

So he did the only thing he thought he could do in this situation:  
he climbed out the small bathroom window and drove home.

When he arrived at his apartment so early from his date, his roommate had to ask.

And after that, he never set Gary up on a blind date again.

# People's Lives Were at Stake

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I know everyone was talking about it and after the fact; you'd hear the reports on the news about the damage done, and you'd think that we were in a war zone and that all of this was done for religious purposes and people's lives were at stake...and maybe they were and I just don't know it. I don't know. I know what it's like to have a cause but I never tried to close people out to it, I tried to include them, to open them up to it, but I remember deciding once to walk to a woman's parade called "take back the night", so that people knew that women should feel safe walking alone in the streets at night without worrying about being mugged or raped or killed because they were female. Well anyway, I was walking to the parade to take photographs because I'm a photographer, and a group of women were walking in a group to the parade, so I walked down the street and started walking with them, and they were chanting and singing and I thought, wow, this is unity, people together for a cause.

and one of the women told me while we were walking that someone women there didn't like me walking with them because I was white and they were African American. and I looked around and noticed that there wasn't a racial mix, and I said, well, we're all going to the same place, and the woman replied, well, some people don't like you walking with us anyway. so I turned my head and let them walk and I crossed the street and took another block and got there before them.

and this is how we define how we should be separated, I suppose, though I still don't understand it.

and during that parade I heard about a trial case where a black man was convicted of a police brutality crime, and the black community was outraged, saying that the white man was holding them down, and maybe in a way they are right and I just don't understand it. a large group of people started their own rally that night which seemed to take center stage from women's rights, I mean, they're just women, what are they going to do, bitch a little louder, or complain a little more, but then again, maybe it is just a matter of deciding who has the loudest voice, or who has the most recent

problem to complain about, I don't know.

we went out that night, and I heard the next day that in light of the trial 23 fires were started on school property, and most of them were of books in libraries and I thought, this isn't nonresistant violence, this is out and out violent and what they're destroying are opportunities for learning and not ideas.

"yeah, but do these books hold what the white man wants you to learn? if this how he alters our preceptions?" I don't know, but this doesn't solve anything and this isn't the answer... then I heard about one of my best friends, a white man, hit once by a black man in the street while they were out that night, and the doctor said that they had to have a roll of quarters in their hand or brass knuckles because this was a clean break of their jaw and for six weeks his jaw was wired shut and he had to throw pizza or meat loaf in the blender so he could eat something instead of ice cream while he tried to recover. and I thought, is this all getting anything done?

are we coming any closer to racial harmony? what are we learning from this?

## headache

*Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"*

Whenever I get a headache it's right behind my eyebrows and it's a dull, constant ache

so whenever I say I have a headache eugene takes my hand and uses acupressure:

he pushes his thumb right in the middle of my palm. the pain disappears almost immediately.

but eventually I have to tell him to stop pressing my hand, that my hand now hurts.

he lets go,

and the headache, almost immediately, comes back.

## change my perspective

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

god, I do these favors for other people. and they're not making me a ton of money, and these people I do favors for complain so much. and I was asked why I do it (and it's not as if the work excites me any more) so my answer was that I do it primarily so I could expand my own collection of what I have done. but why am I doing it? is that my end goal?

and someone replied to me, saying they knew of a story where a bunch of bricklayers were laying brick to build a cathedral and someone asked a few people what they were doing...and most of the men said that they were laying brick; and one man said he was building a cathedral.

and when they replied to me, when they told me this, they said that it is all a matter of perspective.

so now I have to figure out how to change my perspective, or be happy with it, and sometimes I don't know how.

## holding my skin together

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

Is life pre-ordained? I've been trying to remember all the little details that I'm supposed to take care of, and I know I'm not even getting half of them done. I wonder if you feel what I feel. Is it just me? Is the stuffing falling out of my insides through the stretched seams holding my skin together?

Because I keep finding bits of stuffing fallen out, and I try to put it back in but damnit, I don't see the holes and I just have to work faster so that maybe I'll have a better chance of not losing my insides.

Is it just me? Probably. But I'll keep frantically trying to hold myself together so I can be a bit more normal, no, wait, so I can be a bit more like myself and I won't have to be pre-ordained.

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