

down in the dirt

revealing all your
dirty little secrets

038
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What Goes Around, Comes Around

Gerald E. Sheagren

The 1952 pickup shook, rattled and rolled down the back road, its exhaust spewing great clouds of gray smoke. Scabs of rust had spread across its body like leprosy, fifty years of weather having turned its once candy-apple red finish to a sickly salmon pink. The tires were nearly bald, the driver's window a cobweb of cracks. Hidden behind an old bedspread in the rear was an AR-15 rifle, a sawed-down pump shotgun and dozens of boxes of ammunition. An old kewpie doll with wide eyes and painted lips dangled from the rearview mirror.

The driver was a short, scrawny guy with the unlikely name of Delbert Ripple. Tattoos festooned his spindly arms, stretching from his shoulders clear down to his wrists. Amongst them were a Roger Rabbit, a fire-breathing dragon, assorted knives and daggers, and a rattlesnake coiled through the empty eye sockets of a skull. There was a pin and ink letter on each finger of his right hand, which, together, spelled out the word DOOM. His gaunt, sunken-eyed face held only a tad more flesh than the skull on his arm. The ash of a half-smoked cigarette was threatening to drop into his lap.

His twin brother, Albert, was slumped in the passenger's seat, finishing off what was left of a bag of Doritos. Finished, he blew up the bag and popped it, sending crumbs flying around the cab.

"Jesus H. Christ, Al. Why'd you do a dumb-ass thing like that?"

"Cause I frigging felt like it, that's why." Albert fumbled around under the seat and came up with a package of Hostess Twinkies. "We better come across a convenience store right quick. I'm damn near out of snacks."

Delbert stared morosely at the Kansas farmlands; a patchwork of greens and tans and browns for as far as the eye could see. There was nothing but corn, soy beans and wheat, wheat, soy beans and corn.

"Yeah, right, sure. What are the chances of coming across a convenience store out in these boondocks?" Del barked a laugh. "And if we did, it probably wouldn't sell nothing but Wheat bran and corn chips."

Al rearranged his scrawny butt, trying to avoid the broken springs.

“When you killed that old man, back there, I wish to hell he was driving a Caddy instead of this hunk of junk.”

“Oh, sure, wouldn’t that be great – two rednecks like us driving around in some Caddy. Now that would catch the eye of every cop in the state.”

“And this shit-box won’t? It’s a violation on four wheels.”

“You know – Mom was right about you. You’re nothing but a spoiled little whiner.”

“The old bitch always liked you better.”

They passed a small town that contained nothing more than a tractor dealership, four houses, three trailers and a grain elevator.

“Christ,” hissed Delbert. “We just buzzed through Hootersville. The Shady Rest must be up ahead.”

“The Shady what?”

“The Shady Rest, bung-hole. Don’t you remember Petticoat Junction?” Del cleared his throat and began to sing. “And there’s Uncle Joe, he’s a-movin’ kinda slow at the Junction.”

“Hey, is that the one with those hot babes – Bobbie Joe, Betty Joe and whatever Joe?”

“You got it, bro.”

“Mom never let me watch TV – not like you did.”

“C’mon, man. Cut the poor brother crap.”

Dusk was approaching, painting the horizon with purple, rose and pink. A possum scuttled from the underbrush and raised itself on its haunches, startled by the headlights. Del gunned the gas and hit it straight on, the body thumping along the undercarriage.

“Woweee, Del! You really nailed that sucker.”

“Road pizza. Maybe I should stop and you can catch yourself a snack.”

“You are totally —.” Al stopped short, leaning forward and squinting into the distance. “Hey, man, hey! I think that’s a —. Yeah, yeah, yeah – it’s a convenience store!”

“Should I stop?”

“What a stupid frigging question. “Yeah, man – you should definitely stop.” Albert opened the glove compartment and pulled out his .357 Magnum. “It’s my turn to pop the clerk.

“No way - it’s my turn.”

“Bull crap! You got the last one back in Missouri. Where in the hell was it – Joplin?”

“Okay, okay, now I remember. It was that little old lady – right between the eyes. Her false teeth sailed out and nearly caught me in the noggin.”

Delbert eased the pickup to the side of the road and they sat for a few minutes, casing the joint. There were six gas pumps in all with hundreds of insects swirling around the halogen lights. The usual ice chest, air pump and oil can racks. Not a single car was in the lot.

Albert released the cylinder of his .357 and spun it around to make certain it was loaded. “No cars. The clerk must have hoofed it in, or maybe he or she is going to get a ride.” He flipped the cylinder closed with a flick of his wrist. “Looks like a cinch to me.”

“I don’t like the word ‘cinch’. Remember that time outside of Tulsa – with the state cop?”

“We took care of him lickety-split. I stitched his nice, spiffy uniform like a Singer sewing machine.”

“Still, it was too damn close for me.”

“Who’s the whiner now? C’mon, let’s get this show on the road. I don’t want to celebrate my birthday here.”

Letting out a slow hiss of breath, Del drove the pickup across the parking lot and around to the back of the store. He sat there for a few moments, listening to the chirping of crickets. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something didn’t seem quite right. A chill coursed down his spine to nestle in that little hollow just above his butt.

“Maybe we should pass on this one, Al. My sixth sense is acting up.”

“Well, your sixth sense isn’t worth two cents.”

Albert clambered out, reaching under the bedspread in the back for a pair of wire cutters. Skirting the rear of the building, he located the phone line and gave it a snip. He motioned to his reluctant brother and they marched around to the front of the building.

It had gotten darker, the fields across the road lost in shadows. The only activity was the horde of insects churning around the lighting – sounding to Del like an orchestra of tuning forks. Somewhere in the distance, a dog let out a long, mournful howl.

Albert tucked the .357 into his belt, covering with his denim jacket, and they entered the store, a small bell tinkling over the doorway. An Oriental woman looked up from her magazine behind the counter, offered them a quick smile and returned to her reading. It was the usual setup; racks of candy up front, four aisles of basics and the coolers at the back. Albert wasted little time in heading out in search of snacks, leaving Del to wonder why in the hell the store was so cold. “Frigid” would be a better word. He huffed and saw his breath in the air.

“Hey, lady.”

The woman's head jerked up, a brow raised in question. "Yes?"

"Why's it so darn awful cold in here? I got goose bumps for crying-out-loud."

"Trouble with air conditioning," was all she said, her eyes giving him a quick once-over before returning to the magazine.

Del squinted, searching his memory bank. The woman looked familiar – to darn familiar. He had seen her somewhere, sometime in the not too distant past. But he couldn't be absolutely certain. After all, Orientals all looked the same to him.

"Hey, Del!" shouted his brother. "Don't just stand there like a statue. We got things to do, here."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." Del made his way down one of the aisles, rubbing his arms to keep warm. "Man, it's as cold as Antarctica in here."

"Still gripping, huh?"

"And Susie Wong, up there, looks awful familiar to me – a bad familiar."

Rolling his eyes, Al opened a cooler and grabbed a container of milk. Twisting off its lid, he took a long gulp, suddenly gagging and spewing the milk against the glass door of the cooler.

"Eeeecchhh! What in the Jesus H. is this shit?" Turning the container upside down, he stared in disbelief as a green cottage-cheese-like substance oozed out and plopped to the floor. "What the hell's the date on this crap?"

"C'mon, Al – we have got to get out of here. This place doesn't feel right to me."

"Just hold your water. I've got to get my snacks. They probably just overlooked this milk, is all."

"Yeah – just like God overlooked giving you a brain."

"All I need is five minutes," whispered Al, craning his neck to see if they had attracted any attention. Satisfied that the clerk was still deep in her magazine, he gave Del a small shove and held up a hand, wiggling its digits. "Just give me five frigging minutes."

Sighing in frustration, Del strolled over to the magazine and newspaper rack, heart thudding and chilled to the bone. After thumbing through a magazine, he turned his attention to the newspapers and saw immediately that something was wrong, terribly wrong. They were all yellowed with age and from a number of far-flung cities – The Des Moines Register, The Fort Wayne News-Sentinel, The Kansa City Star and The Tulsa World, The San Antonio Express-News. A convenience store in the boonies wouldn't carry all those editions and old ones by the looks.

Frowning, he picked up the News-Sentinel and the bold headlines screamed at him – Young Clerk Killed In Tragic Holdup. Throwing it aside, he snatched up the World and there it was, front and center – State Policeman Slain In The Line Of Duty. Holy shit! These newspapers were recounting each and everyone of their robberies and murders! And, then, he spotted the Oriental woman’s smiling face on the front page of The Little Rock Democrat-Gazette – Part Time College Student Executed During Late Night Robbery.

“Albert, get your butt over here, now! Come here, come here, quick!”

“What’s the problem now? Keep your voice down.”

“Look at this shit! You are not going to believe this!”

Albert wandered over, taking his time, tearing open the top of a bag of cheese twists. “Your imagination is running amok, bro.” Reaching into the bag for a cheese twist, he instead came up with a big, fat worm, squirming in his fingers. “What the hell!” he shouted, tossing it aside and dropping the bag, releasing dozens more worms to slither across the floor.

“This is the frigging Twilight Zone!” screeched Del, reaching inside his jacket and yanking a revolver from his shoulder holster. ‘I’ll plug the bitch and grab the cash – then we get out of here, pronto!”

His bullet struck the woman in the forehead – making a squishing sound – and exited the back of her head to pulverize a pack of cigarettes. She smiled at him as if it was nothing more than a mosquito bite. “Good shot, Delbert. You a reg’lar Annie Oakley.”

Whimpering in terror, Del dashed for the front door. But no matter how hard he tugged it wouldn’t open. Cursing, he kicked the glass with his boot – over and over and over again – but the glass failed to shatter, the little overhead bell tinkling frantically.

“Del, follow me! There’s a back door!”

As they made a panicked flight down one of the aisles, all hell broke loose. Caps popped off soda bottles, sending geysers of hissing liquid high into the air. Bags of potato chips and pretzels started to bulge and dance crazily on the shelves, their entrapped occupants struggling to break free. A jar of Spanish olives fell and smashed on the floor, fat green beetles scurrying in every direction. A box of macaroni started to tremble, swarms of maggots rolling behind its clear plastic window. The lights began to flicker, threatening to plunge the store into darkness.

As the brothers thought that escape was only a few feet away, they skidded to a stop, alarmed by a strange scuffling noise coming from the back room. A putrid stench suddenly invaded the air.

“Oh man, oh man,” warbled Del, taking a quick step back, his stricken eyes as big as saucers. “What the hell, now?”

The lights flickered, went out for a few seconds, and flashed back on.

“You were right, Del! You were right!” Albert started to gag, easing back the hammer of his .357. “This place is — is —!”

And then they shuffled around the corner; a dozen terrible sights with worm-infested skin, empty eyes sockets and soiled clothes. The leader — a tall corpse with gray, moldering skin and oozing lesions — stepped forward, a baggy blue dress uniform with silver badge draped over his decomposing body.

“Howdy, boys.” it croaked. Remember me: Officer Gordon Hodges from Tulsa, Oklahoma. You shot me dead in my tracks and there I was — a loving husband and father of three.” The corpse stepped closer, dried skin flaking off and falling to the floor. “Well, what goes around - comes around. It’s time to pay the piper.”

“I — I — I didn’t shoot you,” stammered Albert. “It was brother, here, Delbert. He’s the one who shot you.”

“You lying sack of shit,” screamed Del. You popped him, Al, and you were proud of it.”

“No sense quibbling, b’hoys. You’re both going to hell on a roller coaster.”

Del heard the fanatical tinkling of a bell and turned to see his brother once again struggling to open the front door — screaming and kicking and pounding the glass with his fist. The Oriental woman, who had transformed into one of the walking dead, was shuffling in his direction, a grotesque mewling sound coming from her ruined throat.

Del started to run toward the woman, emptying his revolver as he went. Each shot passed through her and struck his brother in the back. Albert slowly slid to the floor, leaving a long smear of blood down the glass of the door.

“No, no, no! Al, I didn’t mean to! Oh, please, no!

In his haste, Del slipped on one of the green beetles, hitting the floor hard and striking his head against some shelving. Before he could recover and react, the victims of his past were upon him.

*** * ***

Officer Malloy spotted the old pickup parked out in a soy bean field and slammed on his brakes, swerving to the side of the road. It resembled the truck in the APB to a T. Scrambling from the cruiser, he pulled his automatic and slowly approached the vehicle, his eyes trying to dart in every direction at once. The old man who had owned the truck was dead and his killers were reported to be armed and dangerous. The driver's door screeched open on rusty hinges and he peered inside, taking in the empty junk food bags, candy wrappers and crumpled cigarette packs. There came the strong odor of whiskey and body sweat. He walked around to the bed and flipped aside the bedspread, exposing the small arsenal that had been hidden beneath. Sucking in an excited breath, he retraced his steps to the cruiser and snatched the mike from the radio.

"Dorothy, are you there?" he panted, ignoring the usual call number and jargon. "Dorothy, pick up!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here, Todd. What's up – you sound a little out of the ordinary."

"I found that old pickup in the APB, sitting out in Tom Prescott's soy bean field. There's nobody around as far as I can see. You better get hold of the state boys, real quick, and send them out here."

"Roger that. Be careful."

Malloy was heading back to the truck when he spotted the .357 Magnum lying on the ground. Taking out his pen, he carefully picked up the weapon by its trigger guard. Squinting his eyes against the sun, he surveyed the surrounding soy bean field, which seemed to go on forever.

"Where you at?" he asked himself. "Where in the hell are you off to?"



ROSES

Brooke
Strickland

Thorny roses
Crying—
Wrapped in desire
Picked with love
But kisses—
Unanswered



Dear grand dad,
I don't want
To inject the syringe
And therefore shut
The lawless up,
Future anarchists.

The accursed doctor
And his blue ink
Have given the night
To the casualties,
To the nervous suicide.
It is the supply of death.

The hangman with the needle
I don't want to be.
The great sequestration
Is horrible torture
For me miserable
In the sand pit.

As a child I wrote
But the kids played
In the fateful sand pit.
My guilty jealousy
because of you, parents,
You baby-batterers ...

WINE PRESSES

jm avril

... Turned into alienation
When you allowed me
To join the children;
My emptiness is not bogus,
I became demented
In the mental night.

And the corpses injected
With detested blue ink
Are like grapes
Horribly ground
In the wine presses
They want to put me into.

Wishing to send me to the army
They would have killed me,
With the help of the blue ink
And I see the bloody
Wine presses,
Governmental destiny.

Untitled haiku

Michael Levy

In the media sez - pool
stagnant puddle - minds
turning green with envy

Watching Coverage of War in Iraq

Corey Cook

Sprawled out on sofa.
Remote rouses TV – limp
body lies in street.

~ Previously published in bear creek haiku

Three Point Oh

Pat Dixon

(for Barb)

Years from now, historians may try to piece together the causes for the Great Academic Burnings of the early Twenty-first Century. I doubt that any of them will get the true origin right: a beer-inspired practical joke played by Betty and Veronica Wright on Sheldon Drescher, a math professor who insulted one of them by e-mail rather than return three overdue mystery novels.

Since you've asked me for a tour, let me tell you a little bit about it as we stroll around the rubble of my own university—totally off the record, of course.

Betty and Veronica are a pair of twins—identical twins whom none of us has ever been able to tell apart. Their natural hair color is auburn, I think, though the one called Betty wore a long blonde wig to work in the library of our little university, while the one called Veronica wore a long black wig to work in the Music Department. On any given day we never knew which one was wearing which wig since they both had master's degrees in Library Science and Music Education. Only in the evenings after work did any of us ever think we knew who was really who as we hoisted our pints with them at our favorite local tavern.

Last February 28th, Sheldon (“Don’t call me Shelley!”) Drescher was informed by Betty, whichever was working as a librarian then, that the Josephine Tey mysteries he’d checked out the previous summer were almost eight months late in getting back in circulation and that another “patron” has requested one of them, the one about the supposed innocence of Richard the Third, for use in a Shakespeare class. According to Betty, it was his fifth notice, and Drescher had e-mailed her an obscene reply. She showed us all his message, which read something like “Why don’t you stop pressuring me with your demands, Goldielocks! We men with Ph.D.s have real work to do, and I’ll read these goddamn mystery books at my own pace and bring ‘em back when I’m done with ‘em. Till then, why don’t you just sneak down to the Rare Books Room and fondle the spines of a few good authors—male and female! Or maybe sneak ten or twelve of ‘em home for you and your sister, so you girls can curl up together in your bed with ‘em for a really great time tonight!”

I swear, two or three of us thought Drescher's note was moderately funny, though we knew better than to let on such to the Wright twins. Veronica, or whichever was wearing the black wig, read that note aloud and joined her sister in expressing outrage, reinforcing that feeling and probably increasing its intensity to about the fifth power. 'Twas then that the need for a counter-attack was seen by the Sisters Wright, and I confess now that I was partly instrumental in the devising of that plan. At the time it truly seemed like a funny thing to me and everyone else who was there.

For convenience here I'll just refer to the one wearing the blonde wig as Betty and the one in the black wig as Veronica, whatever the reality may be. In any case, they were never known to disagree on any topic, and they were often known to complete each other's sentences—or even to say the same thing at the same moment.

So, after Veronica stated that Sheldon had been insulting to her on several occasions when she had reminded him of overdue books, Betty and she turned to the six of us men who were drinking with them and asked what we would do to get back at a guy like him. This demanded serious consideration, so we called the waitress over and asked for a couple of full pitchers, and we all refilled our mugs and gave it some thought.

Kenny Calabrese, a philosophy professor with a weight problem, was the first to make a suggestion: "Hit Drescher where he lives—somehow. If he has a pet, petnap it and hold it for ransom—or somethin'."

Roger Ludgrin, our track coach, picked up on this and said, "Or kill it as a lesson to him." And then he laughed so much he spilled some suds on himself—and me.

Chester Vonk, an English prof who was vying for the title of most despised college teacher in all of Kansas, laughed and said that Drescher didn't have any pets—or even any family anymore, since Mrs. Drescher had run off to Louisiana with a chemistry professor four years ago.

Alex Hendricks, a chemistry professor who had known of the affair in its early stages, nodded and said nothing.

I, with my big mouth, said, "Why not discredit him somehow concerning math? That would really hurt him where his living comes from, even if it don't hurt him where he lives!"

And then Charlie Malfitano, our token math buddy, said that would be hard to do but would be well worth the effort.

One hour and four more pitchers later, we determined by process of elimination that we'd have to use a tried and true political technique: an outright lie about something Sheldon Drescher had said or done pertain-

ing to math—something that would really piss off people who mattered, who had great influence with the powers that run the university, and who were dumb as hell. Since we were living in Kansas, that wasn't going to be difficult at all, we decided as we ordered yet another couple of pitchers.

“What,” said Veronica, looking at me I thought, “was the dumbest thing you've known Kansans to get worked up about in recent memory?”

As I opened my mouth to begin thinking as I talked, Alex jumped in and shouted, “Evolution! They got really pissed about people teaching evolution instead of the Bible account—Creationism or Cretinism or something.” He began to snicker and was joined by nearly all of us.

Kenny, the oldest of us, added his perspective: “Back in the late '60s when the state first made plans to join the rest of the country with Daylight Saving Time, the papers and TV and radio shows here were full of folks who were scared spitless about their crops failing and livestock losing weight or not producing milk—or whatever. It seems that nearly everyone in Kansas back then thought the government was going to somehow speed up the world at night and slow it down during the day so we'd have an extra hour of daylight, which meant we'd have an hour less of night!”

Kenny, who was the only one of us actually born and raised in Kansas, could speak with more authority about what had taken place back then. We'd heard him tell this story at least seven times before, usually in practically the same words, but it was one we all liked, and nobody could tell it better than Kenny. Because he'd lived it.

“The Lawrence Journal-World,” he said, “carried a letter from my own seventh-grade teacher, I remember, saying that we'd all have to go to bed an hour earlier so that we wouldn't be gyped out of our sleep by the government. This was an 'educated' woman, mind you. She taught us math and geography and history, along with every other thing we needed to succeed in life. She had a master's degree plus forty or fifty hours of additional graduate credits that put her at the top of the school's pay scale!”

Holding up his left palm to indicate he still had the floor, Kenny filled his mug again, as did those of us who were not in the process of emptying our mugs during his pause.

“The funniest thing to me as a kid back then,” he continued, “was when my local church minister preached a sermon against us changing our clocks called ‘Daylight Saving Time? What About the Lord's Creatures?’ It was announced a week in advance and was headlined on a big banner outside our church. I think we had more people in church that Sunday than we'd ever had before or since. Anyhow, ol' Reverend Bobby

Joe Jump spoke of the arrogance of modern science, which he was against. An' he asked us all to consider the lilies of the field, which would not be able to grow properly with too much sunshine—properly according to the Lord's plan, that is. An' how the sparrows and hawks and groundhogs wouldn't know when to get up, etcetera, as in 'There's a time to do X, and a time to do Y, and a time' Well, you get picture. 'A time to do Z' or whatever the critters all do. That's the Lord's critters, o' course."

Kenny drank his mug down and reached for the closest pitcher again.

So I said, "Why not tie ol' Don't-Call-Me-Shelley in with dissing the Lord or the Lord's plan somehow? It should be as easy as pie to think up some way."

And that's when Betty—or Veronica, for they both began to speak at once—said, "As easy as three point one four one five nine etcetera, etcetera, etcetera pi!"

And her sister added, "'Cause God's pi is three. Three point oh. Even. No loose ends. As in the three-point-oh Trinity. No arrogant secular Satan-derived raggedly unrepeating decimal. None. Just three point oh oh oh oh."

And so it began. In the next hour and the next five pitchers or so, despite "down time" in the rest rooms, we drafted up a letter that would be sent to our local Strong City Gazette and to all of the local preachers for twenty-five miles around. If that didn't roast ol' Shell's nuts, then we didn't know our neighbors!

The outcome was as we predicted. The letter appeared, denouncing Shell as a "Godless Atheist" Ph.D. from "back East" who taught anti-Bible material about the value of pi being other than an even, Godly three point oh in his university math courses, thus endangering the immortal souls of "all our innocent, God-fearing sons and daughters." Which was partly a joke because most of 'em went away to college just to have a chance to party at their folks' expense—or that of the taxpayers.

Reaction was swift. Thousands of indignant phone calls and letters reached our university president's office during that next week, and hundreds of people, most of them with no kids in college, made a pilgrimage to campus to protest the employment of this "Godless Atheist" by the taxpayers of Kansas—the God-Fearing taxpayers of Kansas. And ol' Shell found his office blockaded by them. And his classrooms. And his car was "keyed" and spray-painted with crosses and swastikas and obscenities, and his home was similarly decorated, and both had their windows smashed and their sides and roofs dented in with bricks and/or cinderblocks. And a cross was burned on his front lawn while the police and fire department stood by and looked on.

Our peerless president cluelessly issued a statement that pi had nothing to do with the Bible or God, per se, and he soon found himself being denounced in the press, the pulpit, and in person. His own office and home and car came under attack, and his ol' hound dog somehow vanished and was suspected to be the one that was found burned on a cross in the center of campus the following Sunday.

Well, the rest, as they will say, is history. Everyone pretty much knows it. Papers and TV stations in Kansas City, Kansas, picked up the story and ran with it—quickly followed by those in Lebo, Topeka, Emporia, Wichita, Goodland, and Fort Hays.

For ol' Strong City U, it was too late—just as it was, within a couple of weeks, for a half dozen of our other private institutions of higher learning. Our library, which is now those twisted girders with the melted glass that you can see behind those four scorched cottonwoods, our recently renovated red-brick classrooms and department buildings there and there and there, our sixty-three-year-old admin building over here, our student rec center, and even our new gymnasium with an indoor pool—all were burned to ironic “shells” (no pun intended) which we'll never repair or replace.

I admit I was freaked out the night it happened. It was like a scene from an old Frankenstein movie when a couple thousand men, women, and children drove onto campus in vans, SUVs, and pickups and then, with torches and cans of gasoline, walked from building to building chanting, “Vengeance is mine! I am His instrument!”

Ol' Dean Hazelwood, who's been retired for over twenty years, came out of his house over on the next block there to watch it all. Just before some young woman with a baseball bat whacked him across his head, he was telling me and his wife that the closest thing to this was the violence he'd seen during the Vietnam War.

He said that way back in '66 a small bunch of about forty anti-war gals and guys, chiefly our students, announced that they were going to picket the weekly ROTC parades at our football stadium. He said they no sooner got lined up for their first “protest,” wearing little black armbands and holding “Stop the Killing” signs, than fifty or sixty pickups from the town and nearby parts plowed through their ranks. About a hundred and fifty righteous men and women, all bearing witness with axe handles and mattock handles issued to them by Phelps Hardware Store, got out of the trucks and laid into those “Godless Un-American Pinkos” with a joyful will an' put 'em all in the hospital. Of course, as Hazelwood himself said just before he got smacked, that was as nothin' compared to the current uproar.

mother

durenda

birth caused your cells to stain over me
like remnants of water discoloring stone
yet no more my mother than
the preliminary cell in mitosis
you've destroyed hope by stepping on the one dandelion
that managed to grow through my sidewalk
made me feel as obvious as a lone facial hair
but don't worry yourself, mom
i've already checked out thanks

As you can see on that brick wall over there, one of the happy torch-bearers

spray-painted a quote from The Old Farmer's Almanac or somewhere—"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap." Notice it's a sexist remark? When I see Veronica and/or Betty again, I think I'll point that out. And beside it another one of 'em with a paint brush and a more meteorological mindset has picked up on that sowing theme, correcting it to show that the ante has been raised a bit—"They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind."

Anyway, our three state universities that tried using reality-based secular explanations to defend pi as an unending number all sustained extensive incendiary impairment, while the three that defended it as "unending, the same way that God Himself is eternal" were spared or suffered just minimal damage. Most private colleges and universities prudently took the position that they now realized pi is exactly three point oh and that this is how they will teach it from now till Judgment Day.

Of course, this witch-hunt rapidly spread to all of the other forty-nine states, though less seriously so on either coast. By the end of the second week, the U.S. Attorney General fully supported the new value of pi, as did our national president. The Congressional Record shows that on April 1st the party in power passed new legislation making three point oh the official U.S. standard for pi in all schools and businesses. Thankfully, this law defused the problem, and, for the most part, life across the nation returned to its normal violence and craziness.

Well, of course we had succeeded, and Sheldon Drescher did lose his job because of what we did—but then so did we. And with academic jobs being so scarce these days, we're lucky we can find plenty of aluminum beer cans along the highways.

ON THE CONEY ISLAND BOARDWALK, I SHALL NEVER DIE

Mel Waldman

On the Coney Island boardwalk
I shall seize an apocalyptic moment
dropped from the sky
I shall never die

On the Coney Island boardwalk
I reach for a pristine flash
shot from the sky
in a split...
to reveal
the meaning of existence

when I caught
the primal fire,
the furious force
lit my flesh
fried it fast
in the last moment of my life

the heavenly heat
was a knife,
separating soul from flesh
revealing
releasing

a whirling ghost
waits,
for a cold wind,
a holy howl,
to rush across the sand
& resurrect the dead

two 9/11 haikus



A DEEP SADNESS

Mel Waldman

Long ago, on Nine-
Eleven, Autumn gave birth
To a deep sadness.

I SAW THE SMOKE RISE

Mel Waldman

I saw the smoke rise
to the Heavens; no falling
Leaves, only bodies.

Of Lodging Pro Tempore

Jen Pezzo

The rickety stairs
of rotting wood
and splintered
worm holes led up
the side of the
general store to
our new apartment.

There was no
carpet, no shower,
and the tub was
broken, rust stained.
We kept our milk
cold in the winter
snow that gathered
on the stoop.

A table yellowish
with metal legs,
rips in the vinyl
surface and three
matching chairs sat
by the door. Each
day we ate pop tarts
and oatmeal, took
baths in the kitchen
sink's tepid water.

The living room
reeked of dog shit
and urine. News-
papers lay scattered
on the floor, left
there by previous
tenants who bailed
on the rent, just as
we planned to do.

Pro tempore lodging
became an enduring
childhood memory.

Just Thought I would Call You

Alla Vilnyansky

Just thought I would call you
You know cause the last time we talked
I kind of hung up on you
didn't give you the chance to say
all the things you probably wouldn't have said
Had you felt them
to see if you were, I don't know, still alive?
To give you the punch line
in the joke of our relationship

BLACK SEABIRD

Steve De France

My asshole's on fire this morning.
A big swollen vein throbbing with every
heartbeat. It's really too early to deal
with thoughts of such mortality.
I need perspective. Maybe distraction.
I walk to my rooftop.

The seascape's gray,
at which point sky and sea
are separate is hard to say.
It's all a single seamless color of gray.

A black seabird
hangs on what wind there is
tilting & just hanging there
until
it spies something in a wave,
curls itself into a fist
and slams into the water with a splash.
Seconds later
its head pops up like a cork,
beak empty, looking bewildered.
It swims in listless gray circles,
dreaming of sardines,
then slowly gathers itself
back into the inverted gray bowl of sky.

I stand at the edge of my rooftop
Wondering...
I lean forward & stare
down at the gray face of
morning commuters
as they smoke, gulp, and snarl



their way to work.
Maybe on this day, I might fly away?
I think of Florence & the mystery
of the Domo Cathedral.
No miracles, at least not today.
Not with my asshole burning the way
it is.

I walk back inside my apartment
feeling as unsatisfied by my hungers
as the black bird,
or as mystified by mortality as any ordinary priest.



BRIEF ENCOUNTER WITH A LUNATIC IN A BOOKSTORE

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

The way things had been going lately, the last thing I wanted to do was run errands, but I had a mile-long list I'd been avoiding; thought I might catch up on half of it, help distract myself from one disaster after another

Kept fighting the urge to scream, cry or kill someone in my frustrated, helpless mood, the battle clenching my hands tight around the steering wheel as I drove, press of bone turning my knuckles death-white as I jackknifed into the parking lot, another stop crossed off the list



Bookstore clerk approached me to ask if I needed help with anything. "Up here," I said, pointing to my head. They started to chuckle, but I must have had a strange look on my face, for they smiled awkwardly before turning to go; even the nearby customers started to edge their way subtly towards the door, merely highlighting the fact that I should not even be out, but I forced myself to do this, to busy myself with projects to get my mind off things, only to find myself stranded, numbly, in the thick of it all, completely lost within and even unsure of my actions now, trying to swallow the fist in my throat that wouldn't let go, so I turned my back, grabbed a book and rustled the pages loudly, almost tearing them in my effort to cover the uncontrollable sobs that were shaking my whole body, which, from everyone's perspective, probably looked a lot like I might have been laughing

The Shadow's Mend

Effie Blake

i see the fist freckles he dots on her face,
when she shows at the door.
she comes in rambling on
her forgotten lay-away, split-ends,
chipped polish on bitten nails
i end up holding her in damp clothes
near the dark shower. i stroke the water
from her eyes and whisper, "i'm here."

she seems to wander through a ghost town,
as she stays to hide the black and blue
shadowing brown eyes. i plead for her
to push aside the barbed wired tumbleweed
reaching out,
yet she vanishes to cool gun smoke.
i reply in her spreading mist, "cradle your hum.
you shouldn't have need to run from him to me."

she holds fast
to the bullet casings
she wears around her neck,
as she hums her world is winding down
to begin. she wants to see
and touch the skin of life beyond
the shadow's mend.

Goal Setting

Martin Willitts, Jr.

President W. Bush once said
he never made a mistake

that's impossible,
the New Testament even admits it

saying the first without one
could cast the first stone

it does not matter how small,
like the time his tie was not hitched right

or large like over 2,000 dying
for some bad intelligence

he never met a mistake he never made,
the only perfect one without flaws or pimples

I am envious and strive towards perfection
stumbling over untied shoes

using him as a role model, an impractical goal,
unattainable as forgiveness & 1000 batting average.

Buildin g a Portuguese Mystery

Richard Ward

I have this thing I can do with my mind when I'm driving long distances. Fifty thousand miles a year for twenty years as an outside salesman taught me how to turn a four hour drive into forty minutes, and not miss my exit, usually. I turned on the CD player as I turned on to the Interstate and Sarah McGlocklin stuck her warm sweet tongue in my ear, again and again.

I fell in love with her before I even saw her. I fell in love with her heart. When I read her poetry, I did not sleep that night and spent most of the next day trying to compose something for her, but could not. Finally I wrote her a note asking if she had possibly read my verses, and might I have an audience, I so admired her work. A few days later, she replied, yes and yes. I might come on Thursday between 10:00AM and 1:00PM. I was at her door at 10:00. The maid led me to her bedroom, I had heard her health was delicate. Jet black hair contrasted with a much too fair complexion for the small frail lady. In my eyes, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I tried to keep things light and social but everything spilled over. I had hoped I could control myself but I heard me telling this person I knew so well and loved so deeply whom I had met only an hour ago my feelings for her. "Hush Robert, you cannot talk this way". "You can see my condition, and I'm 12 years your senior, anyway we just met." "You should go now, but if you promise to speak of this no more, you may call again at the same time next Thursday."

I entered the house on Wimple street later when I was sure she was ready, ready to say goodbye to the reason for her "condition". I picked up her feather light body and carried her to Italy. Sunny Italy, where she recovered and flourished and bore our child. How did I love her, I can't count the ways. Elizabeth died in my arms, the last word she said was "wonderful".

My exit came up and I stepped off the genetic E-train back from the nineteenth century to the new millenium and the reality of the hand dealt. This time, not Robert but Richard, not Elizabeth but Sarah. This time I'm the one older, a lot older and I've been to beat up by the Gods, they have their reasons. I don't think this is a hand I can win. So I decided to do what any hairy legged boy would, faced with these circumstances. I'm going to buy a bass boat and a Natalie Merchant CD, she looks more like Elizabeth anyway.

FRIGID DAYS AND FLEETING PHILOSOPHY

James Michael Ward

freezing rain
strikes the window
leaving beds of ice
on the pane
it is a cold march 2nd
smoking cigarette
after cigarette
the hangover
from yesterdays binge
seems to settle
in my lungs
while I find it hard to breathe
the cold air
like a suicide preention
my mother yells over the phone
for having borrowed the money to drink
this is my life
struggling with addiction
until one day you say
death take me
and God have mercy
on my soul
I think I have a few more years
to beat away at this typer
trying to say something sacred
screw the existential dilemma
I am trying to live life
to the fullest
with the excesses
come the knowledge of humanity
and with despair comes the wisdom
of divinity
I still dream

of the wildest visions
of beautiful days
and beautiful lovers
tomorrow is payday
and I'll be back in the bar
laughing with joy
at my own stupidity
and the absurd plight of man
so come and sit for one more
and I'll tell you a story
on the intoxication of dreams
and the mixed reality of the mind-

Land

Benjamin D. Herson

Mason gazed across his field with a countenance hard and wary. His features suggested a much older man, maybe fifty, thanks to seven years of Dorado farming, which really came out to eleven point something years. Jakton, down the road, could tell him the conversion factor, could calculate how long Mason had spent here, his real age including relative time passed in transit, but Mason didn't feel like walking all that way to kill a curiosity. It would die on its own, given time. Everything did. The harvest began tomorrow morning, so tonight Mason would celebrate and prepare the only way he knew how.

He stepped cautiously to the first carrot, pulled, put his back into it, pushing aside the useless wish for the new harvesting equipment. Without production in place here, nothing could be done but wait on Earth's response. The opposite end of the carrot reached far enough down to poke into the aquifer. Strange how the topsoil could remain so scorched with the water table high. With a sucking sound, the carrot began to rise from the mud. Once he'd gotten the first half foot out, Mason's body fell back as the rest sprung from the hole. The breeze cut across him where he lay for a moment—the carrot held at his chest like a rifle, but heavier—and Mason felt the chill in it.

This damned little rock had a funny tilt to it, and turned slower than the manual rotisserie operated by that sluggard at the market, but it did turn. Had already turned so that the white star blazed low on the western sky, but the atmosphere took a week to radiate its heat away and catch up. When the almanac said harvest time had arrived, they meant it. The long winter would be here. Mason gritted his teeth as the back of his eyes began to burn. No, he wouldn't break like the others, the ones who cried and cried for home and then couldn't work the land any longer. The winters were bearable in the moment; the anticipation was what got to the neo-frontiersmen. These fading summer days.

A whirring sound startled him to his feet. Mason hefted the carrot up over his shoulder and headed toward his house. Jakton had sped by, wasting the oil to hover-speed here, which meant it had to be important. "Help," he said. Jakton grew blueberries bigger than fists. He only had to pick the things. (Mason would probably rotate to strawberries himself next year—no one did two consecutive vegetable seasons.) When Mason

responded with only an eyebrow raise, Jakton explained, “My son’s ill, and my wife’s afraid it’s...I think she just needs to stay with him. I’m solo for harvesting.”

Mason knew only too well that this planet had not been good to children. Sally had actually smiled when she’d been diagnosed with cancer; she never fought it. Mason glared back at Jakton, who awkwardly took the explanation back a step. “They timed it wrong. The cold’s gonna fall on us early. We work together—salvage both crops. I’ll help you pull...”

“That’s still two men pulling two fields. Won’t help either of us. Who says cold’s falling early?” The memory of the breeze that had just arrived tingled on his skin—just how cold had it been?

“I say. And my berries get ruined by a day in that cold. Your carrots...”

“Get entombed.”

“But they’re survivable. Help me get the berries up, and I’ll be here to dig them out with you, hard as it’ll be.” After a heavy pause, he added, “We’re in this together!”

Mason shook his head. Only he seemed to understand just how alone they were. Their first crops still hadn’t reached home, wouldn’t for another couple years yet.

“Please, Mason. Please.”

Mason set his dinner carrot down in a show of disgust. “Don’t get all womany on me, Jak. Something awful’s liable to happen if I mistake you for one.” Of course no women who weren’t family had come along. A man’s job here, this hard farming. Would still have been even if the crops hadn’t grown so large as to make their harvesting equipment inadequate. Between the fancy gene-play the scientists had done and the long summers in the rich soil hidden under the layer of angry hardness, the food had become gargantuan, monstrous—the short definition of Earth’s necessity. But Earth felt too far now. They were alone here. Jakton liked to see the collective of neo-frontiersmen and their families as all being alone together, and that could be poetic, sometimes even feeling true. As the younger man waited expectantly for his answer, Mason cycled back to the same thought, the trick he’d played on himself. The idea had been to come here to make a better life for the family he’d begun. Yes, with the money he’d begin making, his son and daughter would never suffer hunger like he’d known. How had he fallen for this? Why hadn’t he quit already? He almost had to laugh.

“Jakton,” Mason said, his voice almost threatening, “this planet doesn’t spin fast enough to keep children’s souls interested in staying aboard. You remember those spinning things at parks back home.”

“Dorado is my home,” Jakton insisted.

“Not if you want my help. I’m going to go inside and change into something dark for the blue-splatter, and I’m going to find a good pair of gloves. In exchange for my help, this is your last season here. Cede me your land and get your family on board the very same shuttle that’ll take your produce home. By the time you get there, the food you’ll have sold from four seasons here will have made you wealthy enough.”

“My deal was for a five-year stay.”

“You say that like it matters, Jakton. Or—how ‘bout this. I only promised three, so in trade for your land, I’ll give my fifth year’s harvest. It’ll look like I took a holiday year while you did double-duty in year two.”

“No one does—either.”

“Jak, you’ve got to get home.” Mason didn’t want to say anything condescending to Jakton about not making Mason’s mistake, so he shifted gears. “I’m going inside. You have till I come out to make up your mind.” Mason dragged his dinner into the house with him.

The carrots would be a bitch, but Jakton would have his blueberries and then help Mason yank, even if it took an hour per carrot...weeks for the field, bringing them well into winter’s opening darkness. He hoped the kid had miscalculated, but the shutters shook in another cold wind. Mason took the extra time to walk through his house closing windows. Time to make it a winter hideaway already, a humble heat-trap. He stepped back outside.

Jakton had left, seeking another neighbor for help, refusing Mason’s offer. If they’d been friends, Mason would have just lost his last friendship. This place hated youth, killed young bodies and young hearts. Mason huffed out a breath of frustration, mad at himself for the wasted effort. Already in work gloves, with the chill coming early, Mason stepped up to his second carrot, leaned over, and pulled hard enough to make the land release it.

GO AMERICA!

Gerald Zipper

Come to our Kiddieland Park
rides galore
fun and thrills
action heroes smash evil invaders
muscle-bound troopers pulverize
bearded villians
POW BAM SLPAT and SLAM!
ARRGH SMASH BOOM
and BANG!
Go America!
have the time of your lives
fun for all
the kiddies and grownups
everybody in the savage fun!

A hotel beside Interstate 44 in Tulsa, Oklahoma

David Van Bebbler Jr.

A hotel beside Interstate 44 in Tulsa, Oklahoma
defies gravity with its formation.
For now it provides stay only to my thoughts.

Windows, some boarded some just gone.
Years of defending neighbors from
the bullets of rocks and beer bottles.

The eroding ivy has overtaken the once blue paint
and the fortress of stone work,
carved to defend it's weekend rates and complementary breakfast,
has fallen victim to its phantoms.

This casualty of capitalistic warfare
once elegant,
suffers the humiliation of currency defeat.

And though the rooms lay empty
this hotel leaves no vacancy in my imagination.
It stands a monument
a place of rest for the wandering mind.

One Night is Stopping Me

Mark Joseph Kiewlak

One night is stopping me
as surely as the autumn leaves
fallen
withhold from the earth
the sun's warmest embrace

One night
were I to become
audience
to my own play
to see that which
being so much a part of me
eludes my everyday senses

then I would realize
as with sunlight through the clearest pane
no true barrier
exists

I am the one
living in my soul
with the shades half-drawn
and the promise of scorching clarity
a decision away

One night
is stopping me
and one night
I will rise
and make of the world
at last
my home

untitled

Umesh Ghoshdastider

I'm looking at foam and vast wave
In the ocean- from a stand of supreme
Human feelings to breathe the reason
There are many people in the world
But how much of them are good?

200's

Evan Walsh

Just enough to show the speed
But not enough to kill it
A mentally vacant break
Bliss is so brief in so many things
A light sweat and breath struggles
Return to almost there then again
Blank or close to it but time closes in
The body can only allow this so many times
Years correct dreams with a snap
The purpose is vague but the method focussed

A Moment's Eclipse

Tonelius Oliver

Changing changes evaporating the mist
of any illusion, of any emotion
In a snap of a finger
Shoes on the wrong foot
Not noticing the uncomfortability
Until someone points it out
Rearranged situations
Backwards traveling, slipping into darkness
Time does not expand
In the blink of an eye
Being on top of being on the bottom
Whoa! what a sight

Dear Rapist

Jodie Haley

I was twelve when you pulled me behind that building. I was twelve when you covered my mouth with your huge coarse hand. When you pushed me to the snow covered ground, when you grabbed my undeveloped breast tightly while ripping off my pants, I was twelve.

I thought you would kill me when I looked in your face, your black skin, your deep eyes and your silly grin. Then I thought that maybe this was just a game for you, to play with me only until you had your fill. I thought wrong. You should have killed me.

I remember your weight on me; it was so hard to breathe. I remember your presence between my legs, the sheer pain of my young body ripping under you. You laughed so quietly in my ear, you smelled my skin and licked my face, I remember.

I can still hear you whispering in my ear "It's okay baby, it's ok. Do you like that, does it feel good baby?"

You grabbed my face so hard you left a handprint bruise. You pulled my hair so hard I was left with bald spots.

Did you know that after you got up from me and spread your seed on the fence before leaving, that I was dead inside? Did you know that I would feel you in me for the rest of my life?

They found me there, with my clothes torn and my boots missing, behind that building in the snow. My body was trembling and blood was running down my legs. I could not move. I could not hear. I could not see. I was in shock, which is what they called it.

I did not speak of you for fear that you would find out. I could not risk you coming back for me. I was carried to the car and brought to the hospital were my hell would continue.

Large metal tools were used to look inside my body at the damage you had done. Sixty stitches were placed there to close the rips you had left for me. It took them hours inside of me to try to reverse the mutilation. They drew my blood to test for any other gifts you may have left behind. I had begun having a period three months before so they also made sure I was not pregnant. They made me see counselors. They made me spends hours talking to police.

Did you just go home to bed? Did you go to a party or to see some friends? Because I didn't, I spent the next months of my life dealing with what you did to my body. Then I spent the next years of my life dealing with what you did to my head.

I know while I write this that you will never get it. I know you never had to pay for what you did to me. You are free. I am torn and will carry this forever, and you are free.

Sometimes when I go on the bus, or when I shop at the mall, I see you. You always have on a silly grin. You are always looking at me. You are always gone in the blink of an eye, but you are always carried with me.

When I was sixteen I learned about sperm. Only then did I understand that it had not been urine that you left on the fence. I spent the rest of my teenage years wondering why you had not cum inside of me. I thought that I had not been good enough for you. That maybe it was your way of telling me that I was nothing. Isn't that ridiculous, that I felt so much hurt just because of that? I have always felt guilty for letting you make me feel so horrible about myself. But my feelings of self hate always win. Did I mean less to you than a prostitute would have? Did I mean anything at all?

Was I your first? I often wonder how many others you have done this to. How many others suffer as I do on your behalf? Did you get caught after someone else? Or did you walk away as if it had never happened just like with me?

I think about you so often. I can still smell the leather of your coat, your after-shave, and your breath. You enter my dreams, you ruin the sex that I now have with my husband. Sometimes when he touches me I see and feel you.

You have stolen any freedom that my children could ever hope for. I am paranoid and spend weeks sometimes without ever leaving the safety of my home.

Does it make you feel good to hear this; do you laugh at me? Or maybe you do care about the hurt you have created. I tell myself that you suffer each day that you will never live down what you have done. It is the only way that I can continue getting better. Every night I put more and more of you to sleep for good. I will spend the rest of my life getting over what you did, because I am hurting now, and you are winning, but will beat you. I have too.

I was twelve when you took my life and left me breathing.

Do you remember me rapist? Because I will always remember you.

Mother

Raud Kennedy

At dinner
at her daughter's house,
she forces a smile,
but her darting eyes
give her away.
Her skin is screaming,
her eyes itching.
With a hot flash
of adrenaline,
the leading trail of detox
washes over her.
She needs her wine,
but she can't drink
around her ex-husband.
He told her
they were both alcoholics,
and now she must feign
she's not.
But it's beyond that.
Everyone sees the nerve
damage,
the awkward walking,
the poor balance, drunk or sober.
She avoids
social affairs unless
there's wine
available
and she's accompanied
by others who won't say
anything
about her drinking
because they don't want
anyone to say

anything
about their own.
When dinner
is over
she leaves
abruptly,
and her anxiety
wanes
now that her first sip
of wine
is just a short trip
away
and she wishes
she could've stayed
longer.

Beautiful Monster

Sam G. Martin

The airmen in the barracks frequently fielded calls from strange girls. One would prove strange, indeed.

“Joe’s pool parlor, Eightball speaking.”

There was silence, then a laugh.

“Is Jake there?”

“Who?”

“Jake Kraker.”

He knew immediately she had a hidden agenda, but he only thought he knew what it was.

“He ain’t here. But I am.”

“Silly. I know you’re there.”

“What’s your name?”

“Mercy-Grace. With a hyphen.”

She neither laughed, nor reacted to his.

“What’s yours?”

“Sam.”

“Ah. Samael.”

“No. Samuel. Want to get together?”

“You’re fast!”

“Well, the telephone is a rapid means of communication.”

This exchange, they both laughed, a little.

“But it’s not the only one.” she countered. Her voice had grown soft and sleek.

“Or the best one.” he added, to encourage that voice. But she didn’t respond.

“Come on. Let’s get together.”

“Tonight?”

“Now who’s fast?”

“Tonight?”

“Sure. You bet.”

“But, Sam. What if I’m a monster?”

“I’ll bet you’re not. I’ll bet you’re beautiful.” He soon learned there was more than one kind of ugly.

It was a cold Sunday evening, late enough to be dark in the Northwest, but early enough for the young and clueless, so he agreed to meet her at the snack bar just inside the main gate. He beat her there because his bus trip was shorter. He sat near a window so he could watch her exit her bus. She was wearing a long coat and a scarf, and for a moment he was apprehensive.

I could pretend not to be here.

But he went outside to meet her. As soon as she saw him, she pulled off her scarf, to reveal her beautiful face and blonde hair.

“Wow!”

“Wow, yourself.” The telephone hadn’t changed her voice, like he’d been told it did his.

“You look as beautiful as you sounded.”

“You, more. I mean, you, too.”

Inside, she removed her coat and revealed a matching, nearly matchless figure. They took the next bus to the barracks. On the other side of the perimeter fence just outside the barracks building were tall trees, bare, with whitish bark, and he imagined he heard a howl from there, and saw shadows without substance.

“Wolf?!”

“You are?” Her smile showed sweetly wicked.

“No.” He drew out the word.

They slipped into his room near the hall end door. He had learned some sweet words and ways.

“Wait. You have something on your cheek. Ooh! It was a kiss. I had to get it off there.”

She looked pleased.

“Oops! There’s another one [at the corner of her mouth].”

He progressed slowly, but steadily, kissing and uncovering, until they both occupied the one-man cot. She looked even more beautiful naked. Her skin shone white, her hair was the blonde-step before white, her eyes were bright-light blue. She showed curves in places where other girls didn’t even have places.

He didn’t forget the most loving words he knew (natural to a potential procreator). Just at the moment of sweet surrender, he whispered,

“You’re beautiful.”

“I’m ugly.”

“No, you’re beautiful.”

He won the argument—temporarily.

Afterwards, they rushed to dress, then hurried out to the bus stop, and after she got on, and in front of the driver and passengers, she suddenly beseeched,

“Oh, Sam! Come home with me!”

“I c-c-can’t. I gotta go to work tomorrow!”

The door closed, the bus pulled away, and he walked back to his room, experiencing the least-thrilling anti-climax in the History-of-Let-Down.

He couldn’t wait for her to call him again. He sought her out. She had told him approximately where she lived, so he rode shotgun and his roommate, Buddy, drove, while they searched and asked. They ended up on a gravel hill that looked like it had migrated from the Appalachians (to the western slope of

the Rockies). Atop the hill stood an unpainted shack, from under which he expected to be rushed by a pack of hounds. Instead, a sullen-looking teenage boy strode out on the porch, after shutting the door behind him.

“Whadda you wont?”

“Is Mercy home?”

“No.”

“I’m Sam. She told me to visit her.”

“She ain’t here.”

Sam didn’t believe him, but the boy appeared intractable, so he and Buddy slid into the car quickly, slammed the doors, and drove away. At the bottom of the hill, the car hesitated, even shuddered briefly, not from mechanical deficiency, but because Buddy jumped slightly when he heard the howl, or yowl, from the direction of the cabin.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. Sounded like hell.”

Buddy shot him a quick glance: “What in hell was that whole thing?”

“I don’t know.” *She sounded a little like that in my room.*

But the pull was strong, and when he discovered she’d left her number in his mind, he called her. When he asked for Mercy-Grace, a familiar voice said,

“She ain’t here.”

“Who are you?”

Silence.

“Are you her brother?”

“No.”

“Are you her husband?”

“No.”

“Are you her father?”

“No.”

“Are you her mother?”

“No.” (No change in tone.)

He had swallowed all the negativity he could stomach, so he hung up, and semi-forgot her, for a while.

One morning, on break from the squadron, he detected a non-stop buzz in the cafeteria.

“What’s ever’body talkin’ about?” he asked Angela, a civil servant he’d agreed to meet there.

“You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“The police found one of our airmen dead in a shack near here.”

“What happened? What’d he do?”

“Nothing. The paper said two witches were fighting over him.”

Crazy Ray leaned over from the next table, and said,

“Must be nice. Two women fightin’ over your body.”

Angela turned and looked at him and said,
“They were fighting over his soul.”

At that, Sam felt his own soul start to leave his body. He jumped up.
“I gotta go!”

His new girl friend looked puzzled, almost startled.

The next spring, Angela invited Sam to Green Mountain Resort. After an amble down the hill from civilization, she sat on the bank, removed her shoes and stockings, and dangled her feet in the Green River.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“No. As long as you wash the germs downstream.”

She smiled.

Just then, he heard a thrashing in the brush across the narrow stream. His first thought upon seeing the emerging object—a bear!

Angela jumped up and grabbed him, then winced in pain from her bare feet on the sharp rocks. She pleaded, putting her hand in front of Sam’s mesmerized face,

“Sam! Don’t look!”

As he brushed Angela’s hand away, the “bear” exposed itself—Mercy-Grace!— in a black robe and hood she shed in one motion. *She’s grown darker!*

“Samael! Samael! Samael!” she chanted—or pleaded.

Angela screamed. “She’s invoking Satan!”

Not me! Not me!

Walking backwards slowly, she disappeared quickly.

Her robe and hood!

He considered crossing over, but declined to, fearing what he might not find.

As they were ascending the hill, Sam related, confessed his part in the story Angela was already familiar with.

She appeared pensive.

“Okay?” he asked.

“Sure.” She tried to smile again. “Dirt washes downstream, too.”

FALLEN ANGEL

Luis Cuauhtemoc
Berriozabal

I’m the fallen
angel, who
became a
devil.

I’m a devil
with a man’s
body, which
makes me

angry with rage.
In this weak
body I
can’t fly,

which is why I
try to break
free. But they
have me

locked up in here.
They don’t know
who the hell
I am.

Language Barrier Don Stockard

On awakening, Navigational Officer Evans's first sensation was of white. A quick glance around showed why. He could see nothing but a soft, diffuse white. He sat up. Other than a headache, he did not feel bad, and the headache felt more like a hangover than an injury. He wondered if he had been drunk. It wouldn't be the first time he had woken and not known where he was, but there had usually been a woman and the surroundings had at least been comprehensible. This was someplace he had never seen, even in his imagination, and after kicking around the Space Service for twenty years, that was saying something.

As an injured man gingerly touches a wounded limb, he probed gently around the edges of his mind. Images flashed back — the interior of the ship, the commander standing beside him, the video screen. Emboldened, he probed deeper, looking for more specific memories. He saw the fleet spread out in battle formation on the screen. That made sense. They had been going into combat.

He closed his eyes and frowned in concentration. There was a strange image on the screen and the sound of the Commander's frantic voice. Something big was approaching their ship. After that, there was nothing. That was, he assumed, when he had passed out. He sighed and looked around. The soft white was unchanged. He felt the surface on which he was sitting. It was hard and glassy smooth. He stood up to explore. It soon became clear he was in some sort of enclosure. All sides rose steeply to near vertical.

He sat down to ponder his situation. Jail and a hospital were two ideas that came to mind. He dismissed both, for he had spent enough time in each to know what they were like. The only other possibility he could think of was capture, which seemed equally remote. Throughout the war, there had been no direct contact between the warring races. No one even knew for sure what the enemy looked like or where they were from. Contact close enough to allow capture was not likely. He gave up speculating, assuming his situation would eventually become clear. In addition to wondering where he was, Evans was concerned about water. Although he was only mildly thirsty, there was nothing to drink. Given enough time, the problem would become acute.

Suddenly he noticed a light gray globe suspended in the air above him. He had no idea how long it had been there. He wondered, in fact, if it had always been there. Its color was not that different from the white. As he watched, it slowly grew in size. He was trying to decide whether he needed to defend himself or merely avoid it, when the motion stopped.

A noise swept over Evans. It sounded like a high, discordant note from a violin in an echo chamber. Although it was not uncomfortably loud, it had an annoying discordance. The sound eventually died away, and after a pause, there was a second tone, lower in frequency. He assumed, correctly, the sphere was the source of the noise. The sounds continued, changing slightly each time until finally it stabilized and repeated itself monotonously. Suddenly Evans realized it sounded vaguely like a word. He listened intently. The initial part of the sound approximated "spee" but the rest was lost in the reverberations. He frowned in concentration.

“Speak!” He suddenly recognized the word. “Speak!”

Immediately the reverberations ceased, and the sound changed to a very close approximation of Evans’s voice.

“Speak . . . speak . . . speak.”

“What do you want me to say?” He wondered if he were actually talking to a gray sphere or if he had completely lost his mind and were babbling to thin air.

“Speak more.”

“Where am I? Who are you? What’s going on? Do I get any food? Do I get anything to drink?”

Abruptly the gray sphere vanished.

Evans stared at the space that the gray sphere had occupied. He rubbed his face. Perhaps the idea of capture was not that remote after all.

Outside the white pit, the gray sphere approached two shiny, metallic-colored cubes. It hovered over one and, in a communication based on ultraviolet radiation, related what Evans had said.

“Has it established communication with the enemy entity?” one cube transmitted to the other.

“Yes. The probe has communication-matched with the entity. I have analyzed the data from the probe. The alien entity is a being.”

“A being?” A slight distortion in the ultraviolet indicated surprise, which was remarkable. In their race any suggestion of emotion was highly unusual. “They send beings into battle? Are you sure it is not a probe as we had originally assumed?”

“I am a scientist. I have analyzed the data. It is a being. It has asked thought-provoking questions. Only a being can do that. You are a philosopher. You must interpret this information.”

There was silence.

“A being in battle is beyond our comprehension. Perhaps they send a being with each fleet.”

“Why would they do that? It is such a risk.”

“Perhaps their probes are not sophisticated enough, or perhaps they have found the intelligence of a being advantageous in battle. Maybe that is why they have been such a determined enemy.”

“Can you interpret more?”

“No. I must have additional information. Do you have any more data?”

“None that I can analyze.”

The philosopher made no reply.

“Is it time to call the spiritual being?” the scientist transmitted.

“No. I do not have a coherent interpretation to present to the spiritual being. If I have additional information, I can interpret further. In particular I must know more about the being.”

“I will send the probe again, but it cannot stay long. The alien atmosphere which we took from their vessel is poisonous.”

The gray sphere floated into the white pit again. Evans did not see it until it was directly in front of him. He eyed it suspiciously and waited for it to do something. He did not have long to wait.

“What are you?” the sphere asked.

Evans considered the question. If he were a captive, any information could be potentially dangerous to mankind. On the other hand, he did not think it was wise to lie outright. It could come back to haunt him. Generic answers seemed the safest.

“I am a navigator.”

“Where are you from?”

“Home.”

“Are you a being?”

He wondered what was behind the question but could think of no response other than the obvious. “Yes.”

“What is your purpose?”

Evans smiled. “Breeding.” His answer was born half in frustration and half in disillusion. He had discarded several more colorful words in favor of the generic term.

The sphere vanished and returned to where the two cubes waited. It gave its report and left. Several hours passed before the scientist communicated.

“I have more information.”

“Tell me.”

“The entity, by its own admission, is a being. I will give the original data.”

Something roughly equivalent to Evans’s “yes” modulated to ultraviolet arrived at the philosopher’s cube. The philosopher found the trait, so common in scientists, of giving samples of their original data, annoying. There was, it knew, no use in suggesting that it was unnecessary.

“As I had surmised.”

“It is a special kind of being. It is one who finds the way in the universe.” The scientist dutifully sent over the rendition of Evans’s statement, “I am a navigator.”

The reply of the philosopher was so garbled from surprise that it was incomprehensible, forcing the scientist to ask for a retransmission.

“It is their spiritual being. Their spiritual being goes into battle?”

“You have interpreted the analysis of the data to mean that it is their spiritual being. It was taken in battle; therefore, it computes that they send their spiritual being into battle.”

The philosopher paused for a moment, ruminating on the inability of a scientist to recognize a rhetorical question. Finally it resumed transmission. “Do you have any further information you can give me?”

“It comes from the center of their basic unit.” The scientist transmitted the word “home.”

“That is what one would expect of their spiritual being. Can you give me more information?”

“I have other data but it does not compute.” It transmitted “breeding.” “I must do research before I can analyze. Shall I send in the probe again?”

This was serious. Rarely did a scientist have to research before analyzing. There was such an enormous bank of knowledge in their shared consciousness system, that there was little that was not readily available. “No. Do your research first.”

A day passed and Evans did not see the sphere or anything else for that matter. His thirst was becoming acute. He slept fitfully from time to time.

Outside the white pit a third cube joined the other two.

“There is an existence decision to be made,” the third cube transmitted, “and as the spiritual being I must make the decision. I will need your interpretation, Philosopher.”

“I need more information.”

“I have finished my research,” the scientist transmitted.

“Give me your analysis.”

“The data key is ‘breeding,’” the philosopher did the equivalent of a wince, “and my analysis is as follows: their spiritual being is able to reproduce itself.”

Shock overwhelmed the philosopher’s irritation. This was the most surprising information of the whole bizarre episode. It held its response, for it would not do to send a garbled message with the spiritual being present. “It is a fantastic concept,” it transmitted finally, “a spiritual being that can create other spiritual beings. Such a concept, if true, is formidable. In the vessel in which it was taken there were other entities, were there not?”

“There were other entities.”

“Did they not have the same likeness as the spiritual being?”

“They did. At the time of capture we assumed all entities to be probes. We only kept one as an example.”

“It is possible, even probable, that they were also beings, perhaps even spiritual beings. I presume we have no information on that?”

“None. I need more data. Shall I send the probe?”

The spiritual being entered the conversation for the first time. “It is critical for an existence decision that all information be known. I must have a complete interpretation. We must know if there are other spiritual beings and what the aliens want from us.”

“I must have more analyses on which to base an interpretation.”

“I must have more data in order to generate analyses.”

“Send in the probe,” the spiritual being transmitted.

“Send in the probe,” the philosopher transmitted.

“I will send the probe.”

Evans was asleep when the sphere arrived again. The sphere asked a question and waited for a reply for as long as it could safely remain in the alien atmosphere before it departed.

“I have no data,” the scientist transmitted. “The alien gave no phrase.”

“We have angered it.”

The two waited for the Supreme Being to transmit. “Let it be alone for a while. Perhaps it will forgive our provocation with time.”

It was several days before the sphere appeared again. Although Evans was awake, he was drifting in and out of delirium. He raised his head to look at the sphere, which floated in and out of focus. It was a full minute before Evans recognized it.

“Are there many like you?” the sphere asked.

Evans tried to concentrate on the question. With an immense effort of will, he managed to understand the implications. *Let them think we’re infinite*, he thought. He tried to respond but no words came out of his dry throat. He panted for a moment and tried again. “Stars,” he croaked. “Like stars.”

“What is it that you want?”

“Wat . . .” He worked his mouth, but nothing more would come out. Evans panicked. The gray sphere finally asks what he needs, and he can’t get the words out. “Wat

... or ... I ... die.” Evans dropped his head to the floor in exhaustion, and the gray sphere vanished.

“Compute?” the philosopher transmitted.

“Compute. There are many like it — as many as there are stars.” The scientist transmitted a version of Evans’s words. The philosopher did not even notice the irritating rendition of the alien phrase. “If stars of all magnitudes are considered, this is a number greater than can be easily calculated.”

“Incredible!” the philosopher transmitted. It was past amazement. “They have vast numbers of spiritual beings, and since they can duplicate themselves, they can continue forever.”

There was a pause as though the concept was too much for them.

“Have we established what they want?” the spiritual being finally transmitted.

“Yes.” The scientist transmitted Evans’s broken statement as, “watt or I’ll die.” “This is the most difficult of the transmissions to understand. The most subtle sub-key, ‘watt,’ is a quantification of power.”

“Enough of this gibberish!” the philosopher sent a blast of radiation at the scientist. “Give me the analysis!” Such a display in front of the spiritual being was unthinkable. That the spiritual being transmitted no energy at all in response indicated the magnitude of the crisis.

“The alien spiritual being demands our power. If it does not receive our power, it will cease to exist.”

The concept of ceasing to exist was incomprehensible to them. The scientist, philosopher, and spiritual being had always existed and would always exist in the sense of being part of a colonial intelligence. They could not conceive of individual centers of existence that had finite life spans.

“It is a staggering concept. I interpret its demands for power to mean it wants to add the power of our spiritual being to its own. If it does not, it shall cease to exist. This is difficult to interpret. It is, in fact, probably uninterpretable in a literal sense. I think what is meant is that the war aim of the aliens is to destroy our spiritual being by absorption, and that they plan to take what is our essence for their own and use it to destroy us.”

“Analysis and interpretation are in agreement,” the spiritual being transmitted. “The aliens are bent upon destroying us. If they fuse the powers of the spiritual beings of the two races, they will truly be invincible. And if this spiritual being fails to achieve the fusion, they have many more to send.” The spiritual being paused for a moment. “It truly is an existence decision. As the spiritual being, I decree that we break off all contact with this alien race. Let us go to the far universe, beyond the reaches of their fleets.”

There was no transmission from either the philosopher or the scientist. The spiritual being had made a decision; thus the matter was no longer relevant.

In the white pit, Evans slipped into unconsciousness. As the last wild nightmares of his expiring brain flashed through his mind, the fleets of the aliens were vanishing from the known universe, never to be seen again.

Expecting the Stoning

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I

you know how you want a popsicle and you want it for the longest time, and you don't even know what it's going to taste like when you get it, and then you finally get it and it tastes oh so good and you have some if it and you want to save it so you can have it later. And then you realize that in order to keep the popsicle from disappearing it has to stay in the freezer to avoid melting and becoming just a liquid pile of remains instead of what you wanted.

that it had to stay in the freezer in order to survive, and you couldn't stay there with it. That it was meant to be cold forever, or consumed.

It was either one or the other. They taught you that fact when you were little. You can't have it both ways. You can try, and it might be fun at first but everyone knows it will hurt later on.

And it will.

II

I think what I liked the most about us was the theory of romance.

No, wait, it wasn't that, it was the fact that it was forbidden; you were a friend of a friend and this wasn't quote unquote supposed to be happening. But I liked the idea of being with you. I would travel across the country to see you. The thought of you and the times we had behind everyone's backs, those times were like poems to me. Maybe looking back we weren't technically together when we couldn't even tell anyone that we we ever together in the first place, but it was still nice for me to fantasize.

And what did it get me?

III

maybe my problem was that it was all in my head, and maybe I didn't realize the novelty would wear off for you. You were like the average American and after twenty seconds of watching a television show you'd want to change the channel with the remote on the arm of your chair.

I didn't know you were a popsicle that would melt when you were exposed to ANY sunlight or ANY heat at ANY time.

I didn't know you had problems. Don't we all. We all don't go to psychiatrists and





stay on medications. Maybe I didn't know how bad your problems were.

I didn't know you were a snowman that I made in the backyard at my house in the winter when I was little. A snowman that was fully equipped with a carrot nose, like pinocchio, no, wait, like you, with no hair, like you, with black rocks for eyes, like you.

And yeah, that snowman melted with spring, like you, and maybe I should have learned my lesson from that damned snowman.

I guess there was a lot about you I didn't know because in so many ways I didn't know you.

IV

I remember how little kids would want to build snowmen in the winter. They didn't seem to mind the snowman eventually going away.

I hated the cold, so I didn't play in the snow as much.

Maybe in playing those little games everyone else learned their lesson, maybe they learned something that I should have learned.

V

I should expect the stonings that I am bound to receive for telling you that I know what you have done and that I want the rest of the world to know it too. I will expect the stonings with time, I have been getting used to the punishments for telling the truth, even when people don't want to hear it.

So, thank you for getting my hopes up and then blowing them away with one breath from your lips like anyone would do to a pile of sand.

(or table salt spilled on the counter)

because I think I needed to learn that lesson. And in a way, for now, I only have you to thank for it.

Dreams 02-20-04 ONE

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I remembered a dream, when John told me that I was talking in my sleep from some dream last night that I have no memory of. He said that at 2:07 I woke up saying,

"The hat cat photo on top of the books is blocking the view that I want to see.»
That's all I said.

I have no memory of this.

hancock suicide, chicago, dec 1994

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

So me and the guys were just taking a break from the construction on the hancock building. you know they've been doing construction work there, right? they put that big wall up around the block, the tall fence, and they've been doing remodeling stuff.

well, I had been working on some tile work and we were just walking around the building, me and three other guys, walking kind of like a square, in formation, sort of, and I'm at the

back and I stop and step back to check some of the grout work, so I just kind of lean back while standing still.

well, one of the guys says he heard it coming, like a big rush of air, like a whistling sound, but much heavier. I didn't even get a chance to look up, though one of the other guys did and saw it coming a split second before it happened.

and the next thing I knew there was this loud cracking sound and I felt all of this stuff hit me, like wet concrete thrown at me, but I didn't know what the hell it was.

and I opened my eyes and looked down and I was just completely covered in blood and there was just this heap of mass right in front of me. it took a while for me to realize that a woman jumped. she hit the fence, her head and spinal cord were still stuck on the fence and the rest of her was just this red pile right in front of me.

the police had to take all of my clothes. every inch.

they say she broke through the glass at the fiftieth floor, I don't know how, that glass is supposed to be bullet proof or something.

and the one thing I noticed was that she covered her head with panty hose, in an effort to keep her face together. funny, she was so willing to die, but she wanted to be kept in tact.

I know I won't hear about this on the news, they try to downplay suicides, but other violence is fine for them. and they say she was handicapped, but then how badly, and how did she get the strength to break the window and throw herself out of the john hancock building? she must have really wanted to die.

It really hasn't sunk in quite yet, seeing her fall apart in front of me like that. I don't think I'm ready to think about it yet.

Dr. AirWair
Martens
Dr. Ma

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