

RIVER WALK JOURNAL  
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 3



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Table of Contents

Views and Mechanics

Publisher's Note . . . . . 3
Editor's Note . . . . . 5
Review of Nickel and Dimed
Review of Night Shade
By Elizabeth Murray
Radical Influence: Review of Spoken
Word Revolution Redux
By Romella D. Kitchens

Creative Nonfiction

Toiling in the Garden of Memory . . . . 6
By Madonna Dries Christensen

Poetry

Homecoming . . . . . 18
By Nic Sebastian
Maple Syrup Emergency . . . . . 20
By Paul Carlino
Bathroom Visitor . . . . . 19
By Michael Lee Johnson

Fiction

A Job Well Done . . . . . 31
By Catherine Cheek
Animal Man . . . . . 33
By R.B. Trout
Watch Over . . . . . 21
By S.K. Tatiner
The Frailty of Perfection . . . . . 8
By William R. Stoddart
Eat Drink and Be Merry . . . . . 10
By Rebecca Barbush

Cover Art

"Riot of Flowers"
By Dee Rimbaud

About the Contributors . . . . . 42

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## Notes from a Journal IV

It has been a long summer and regardless what the calendar says, it is still summer as far as the thermometer is concerned. If I didn't remember the Indian Summers of my youth, it might make me ponder the apocalyptic predictions of men like Al Gore, but I have had many more immediate issues occupying me lately.

Dissatisfaction in one's work is a common enough condition, but I think I may have a fairly uncommon form of that disease. In general, I still love my work – right now I am unhappy with the fact that I have to spend so much time writing reports and proposals. I believe to my bones in the importance of what I write, but cannot shake the feeling that my intended audience doesn't share my enthusiasm. Rationally I realize that the people receiving my reports and proposals are sitting behind desks at least as cluttered with papers as my own. Occasionally I allow the fleeting thought that people simply throw my work away without a glance. In my most cynical moments, I envision them shredding reports simply because they came from a woman.

*"...but here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction."*

The history of women taking a place in the academic world is a relatively short one. Virginia Woolf was writing of being excluded on campus in the early part of the twentieth century – a time when widespread exclusion was common.

Now exclusion is more insidious, hidden in myths about women's abilities in academic study and financial support within universities for programs about and for mostly women. Perhaps our current difficulties in education can be traced to the devaluing of the profession because women have traditionally held it.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* has become a perennial classic describing the plight of women, writers in particular. *"All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she – shady and amorous as she was – who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits."* Woolf is gentile in the fact that she gives no explanation for the scandalous reputation of Behn – whether from assumed familiarity of her audience with that reputation, from lack of proof beyond rumor, or from scant historical documentation is also unclear.

Behn's history as documented today remains scant, and is in part theoretical. It is possible she served as a spy for the Crown, and that she spent time in Surinam. A trip to Surinam would explain how she acquired the information for her novel *Oroonoko*, and being a spy would explain the apparent popularity of her plays – the mere fact that so many were staged during her life. She may have been married for a very short time, and may have simply changed her name. Two things that are not disputed – cannot be – are that Behn was a playwright and a novelist.

Scholarly interest in Behn was rekindled in the last century, and based on current information available on the Internet, continues today. In her time it was assumed – as it is occasionally today – that women had no head for business or politics. *"Money speaks*

*sense in a language all nations understand.*" In the age of Wal-Mart and Halliburton, those words ring as true as ever, coined not by an enterprising man of an earlier age, but by Aphra Behn in her play *The Rover*.

*Elizabeth Ross*

## Editor's Note

I hope this finds you all enjoying the end of summer, getting whatever it is you need done for fall. As a little break from leaf raking, or pie baking, we propose our latest issue.

First up for fiction we have Catherine Cheek's story, "A Job Well Done". Its about the odd ways that pride can be found in wierd places, by the oddest people, but for the right reasons.

R.B. Trout contributes "Animal Man". Do old fanatical activists die? Fade away? You decide.

S.K. Tatiner's story "Watch Over" and William R. Stoddard's "The Frailty of Perfection" examine weakness. "Frailty" is about commingling despair and hope, the known and unknown; "Watch Over" deals with superficiality, loss, and the all too often foolishness of humanity.

Rebecca Barbush rounds out our fiction section with "Eat, Drink, and be Merry". Anyone who's ever worried about cooking Christmas dinner instead of one's mother-in-law will appreciate this one. Our main character's fear of inadequacy leads her on a journey that ends with her learning more about her mother-in-law's "wild, misspent youth" than she anticipated.

This issue's creative non-fiction piece is Madonna Dries Christensen's "Toiling In The Garden Of Memory ". The story shows us the terror, and ultimate affirmation of life in living with and caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease.

For poetry we have Nic Sebastian's "Homecoming". It's a prodigal son piece, except that she's a daughter instead. Paul Carlino brings us "Maple Syrup Emergency". His is a romantic poem about maple syrup, but not too syrupy. Michael Lee Johnson rounds out

poetry with "Bathroom Visitor". His poem is a snapshot of an uninvited eight-legged guest.

Please enjoy this issue, and remember to enjoy how beautiful the leaves are, and not just rake them.

*Joseph Koch*

## Toiling in the Garden of Memory

By Madonna Dries Christensen

*There's rosemary; that's for remembrance.*

~ ~ Shakespeare

Writer Robert Ruark often ribbed his friend Truman Capote about his writing ritual. Capote wrote in longhand, at a slow pace, while lying down. Ruark sat at a desk surrounded by a secretary and several researchers, and prided himself on producing several thousand words a day. One day Ruark boasted to Capote, "I wrote five thousand words today. How many did you write with that little quill pen of yours?"

Capote said, "Just one, but it was the right word."

Good writers strive to put the right words in the right order, to create well-constructed sentences. Think about a day when your writing wasn't going as well as you'd like; when you couldn't find the exact words you needed to convey a thought or image. Now imagine you're writing a memoir, while at the same time your mind is being ravaged by Alzheimer's disease.

That's what Thomas DeBaggio began doing in 1999 at age 57 after being diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. Aided by family and friends and material he wrote earlier, the former journalist, commercial herb grower, and author/co-author of several books on herbs, combined memoir with a chronicle of his progressing disease. Now 65, he doesn't remember writing *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life With Alzheimer's*, and *When It Gets Dark: An Enlightened Reflection on Life With Alzheimer's* (Simon and Schuster).

*Losing My Mind* was cited by New York Review of Books as "Lit with intelligence... For its base honesty, for

its awful beauty...it won't go out of date." Other reviewers called it noble, life-affirming, unbearably poignant, frightening, powerful, and breathtaking.

DeBaggio's prose is all that and more. It's poetic, intimate, inspiring, sad, warm, humorous, emotional, and richly evocative of time and place. He described his anger, fears, frustration, sorrow, bewilderment, humiliation, nightmares, and hallucinations brought on by an accidental overdose of prescribed drugs. He explained how all this affected not only him but his artist wife, Joyce, and their son, Francesco, who now runs the family herb business in Virginia.

In *Losing My Mind*, DeBaggio wrote that AD "can isolate you quickly in a cocoon of sorrow," and that most people hide the disease from themselves and from others. Not long after being diagnosed, after some of the anger and depression waned, he decided that perhaps some good might come of his illness. He wrote, "After forty years of pussyfooting with words, I finally had a story of hell to tell."

In the first book he admitted that he spent several minutes trying to remember how to spell a common word, and realized the day will come when he can no longer write a clear sentence and tell a coherent story. "That day will be the actual time of death." He referred to his brain as "a jumble of words awaiting order, with nowhere to go." And, "The words are under control but the letters that form the words squirm in their own direction." And, "Words slice through my mind so fast I cannot catch them and marry them to the eternity of the page."

By the time he wrote book two he was spending an hour or more searching his mind for a particular word and how to spell it. "I sit at my worktable and rub my hand over the hard brown wood. I try to squeeze words onto the clean

white paper. I cannot spill the words  
hiding in my brain."

Repetition within the two books bears witness to the author's fragmented thinking. Yet, scattered throughout are observations so memorable that one wonders how he could have composed them. "More than sweet recollections are at stake when memories begin to lose their leaves. Fire scours the brain, disabling mind and body and squeezing what is left of life hanging on a tombstone."

Through his two books and multiple media appearances Thomas DeBaggio put a face on a dreaded disease, the face of a relatively young, thin, wiry man with gray hair, an unruly mustache and a haunted look in his eyes. He and his family did a series of interviews with Noah Adams for National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. He was mentioned in a *New York Times* article about AD, and featured in articles in the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and other papers across the country. He appeared on *Good Morning, America*, and he and Joyce appeared on *Oprah*. HBO cameramen frequently followed him around for a documentary on AD.

DeBaggio found his voice as a spokesman for himself and others whose minds and souls are being eroded. In *When It Gets Dark* he wrote this stunning passage: "It has not been long since I looked into the chaos of the abyss and cried. Now that tarnished world beckons again. I loosen shards from the steep walls to begin my long descent into the lonely world of silence. It is a world so secret its vocabulary has not been written."

It appears, however, that the vocabulary of Alzheimer's disease has been written, word by word, sentence by sentence, a legacy from a man who wrote, "The only time I feel alive now is when I am writing, under the spell of

work and memories."

Tom no longer remembers his friends, neighbors, and customers, but we remember him. When my husband was an apprentice Master Gardener in Virginia, he worked for Tom in his greenhouse and they became friends. Gary came home from work wearing a potpourri of herbal scents; among them my favorite, rosemary. Today, when I walk in the garden, I pick a sprig of rosemary to carry with me, and I think of Tom. There's rosemary; that's for remembrance.

## The Frailty of Perfection By William R. Stoddart

Grace McKenzie was born, and her birth was commonplace enough. Her father, Jack, fell in love, and that too was commonplace. But to Jack, it was as if the grand vault of heaven were opened, and he breathed-in icy fleece from angel's wings. He held her and his tears fell on her new face. He drove home alone that day and drifted off to a smiling sleep.

The McKenzies owned a small vineyard by the shores of Lake Erie. It was October, and the grapes took on the indigo color of dusk, just before stars broke the darkness. The cool breeze from the lake was just another blessing Jack welcomed. The dusty summer smell of chemicals was just a bad memory, like the anchor of smothering debt.

Sarah, Jack's wife, was there to remind him about money. The thing was money, and the lack of it trailed Jack as far back as Sarah permitted. It followed Jack like a mistake one can never make right. Sarah took the monthly calls from the bank and the various suppliers.

"Your buddy, Kevin, called from the bank yesterday. I'm beginning to know him better than I know you. He reminded me that you two were army buddies in Vietnam. Anyway, he says he needs a payment on the principal. That means, Jack dear, we borrow money to make the payments. Who's going to give us more credit?" Sarah took a long drag from her cigarette. She quit smoking for five years and started back when things got bad. She was eight months pregnant and miserable in the summer heat. "When are you going to talk to that loan officer? Can't you work something out with him? He keeps telling me about how close you two used to be. You best make some effort before we lose everything." Sarah was too tired and miserable to put up much

of a fight. She lit another cigarette, picked-up the television remote, aimed and fired.

Jack knew she was right. He loved her and told her daily that he never loved anyone else. Jack stopped answering the phone after his army buddy, Kevin, started calling from the bank. Jack was Kevin's platoon second lieutenant. Jack had just graduated from a state college and was in the ROTC program before being shipped-off to Vietnam. He feared losing the vineyard to the bank. He wanted Kevin to go away forever.

It was the day after Jack's daughter Grace was born. It was a workday, but Jack was too happy and relaxed to work. For the first time in years, the anxious, heavy feeling in his legs was gone. He felt almost giddy as he looked out over the blue lake. The white clouds sailed quickly through the cool sky, pulling shadows across the tense skin of lake water. With his wife Sarah and baby Grace in the hospital, it was just Jack and his dog, Spence, at home.

"Today, Spence old boy, I'll drink the McKenzie Lake Shore wine. We'll chill the swill and drink a toast to my new little girl."

Jack uncorked a year old vintage and drank straight from the glass bottle. Each long draw from the bottle left the aftertaste of failure. One local food critic recommended McKenzie Lake Shore wine mixed with water the perfect window cleaner. He pressed the cool glass hard against his forehead. His sinusitis was bad this time of year. The wine was not selling and Jack took to peddling his grapes at a roadside stand along Route 20. The new thing was ice wine, and Jack was confident he would be successful next year with his new venture. He finished the bottle and opened another.

Far out on the lake, Jack could see a freighter. It moved on the horizon like a

zipper, opening the seam between water and sky. Jack sat on the ground, leaning against a fence post. Spence put his head on Jack's leg. Jack held the bottle between his legs and stared into the blue sky. Over the years, the lake and sky burned its blue into his eyes and the dirt colored his skin. The wind kicked-up from the lake and a dust devil spun its darkness over the dirt road. Jack thought about his baby, Grace. One day, this will be her vineyard. She'll grow here; the land and sun will color her skin. Grace will care for Sarah, her mother, Jack's wife. They will care for each other.

"Today's the perfect day." Jack spoke to his dog, Spence. "I'm feelin' fine drinking my own fuckin' wine. I never liked the labels on this fine vintage, Spence old boy. No wonder no one wants to buy my wine. The labels are too damn ugly. Has nothing to do with the taste. Or the after taste. Then there's Kevin, my old army buddy. Fuck him and his little dog. He tries to take my paradise, I'll frag his ass. Just like in the Nam. I'll frag his fuckin' ass."

\*\*\*

The sun was setting far into the West corner of the lake, bleeding the clouds pink. Jack spilled quite a bit of wine over the course of the day. It was, after all, a day in October - a day when shadows fell long across the vineyard. He closed his eyes and imagined the smell of gunpowder. He liked the smell as it reminded him of the war when he was young and felt alive. Jack opened his eyes and saw whitecaps on the lake. He closed his eyes again and waited to feel the cool lake breeze one last time. It will be here soon, he reassured himself. Eternity will have to wait the meantime.

**Eat Drink and Be Merry**  
**By Rebecca Barbush**

I weaved my way around the stacks of exams on my office floor, wishing they were graded and organized neatly in the empty file cabinet. For the third or fourth time that week, I resolved to come in early the next day to start grading them. I left my cluttered office at the University of Pittsburgh before a student could catch me leaving my designated office hours early.

My goal was to get home for my mother-in-law's TV cooking show; "Eat, Drink, and Be Merry" and hopefully I would learn along with her. Since I was an academic, cooking had never interested me. Besides I didn't have the time or patience for it. I never had an "Easy Bake" oven as a kid and exploring the domestic world had never occurred to me until I married a man whose mother was a professional chef, Maxine Gilman. Sometimes I got so mad at her for making everything look and, even though I couldn't smell through the TV, smell fantastic. I was also mad at myself because I had been trying different recipes since July and four months later, I still wasn't good. Everything either had a burnt taste or was soggy or was bland as my students' papers.

The rust colored leaves were falling from trees at a feverish pace. Inhaling the crisp air of fall, I wanted to bottle the unique smell. What to make for Thanksgiving dinner? It was only October, but I needed time; time and practice. Time is a wonderful thing; especially since I constantly run low on it. I had too many students and I was working toward my PhD.

Maxine was very surprised at my proposal to make Thanksgiving dinner. My husband, Eric, was too; he didn't know about my secret cooking sessions. Heck, I don't even know why I volunteered. I suppose it was the

challenge. None of them had the least bit of confidence in me. Even Mr. Gilman had been doubtful.

"You're too smart to cook," my father-in-law said.

"Why can't I do both." I forced a smile.

This thanksgiving I was going to prove them wrong. It was only after volunteering, I realized how awful a boring old traditional Thanksgiving dinner would be - a turkey, mashed potatoes and green beans. Maxine would be critical if I made the same meal she perfected over the years. In fact, everyone would compare my meal to hers.

No, it had to be special. After entering my house through the kitchen door, I dropped my briefcase on the kitchen chair and headed straight for the cookbooks. I scoured them to find a special Thanksgiving meal, avoiding Chef Maxine's recipes contained in the books she gave me for a Christmas present. She put post-its on certain recipes; they were marked easy. Ham, no; steak, no; pasta, no; I mentally discarded possible recipes. I would like to say that I had a warm relationship with my mother-in-law, but we never bonded. We were too different. I stand up for myself, and she shrinks into the background. She seems strong and confident on her cooking show, but in real life she was a nag. She often complimented me on my academic work but her admiration sounded artificial. I turned on the TV.

"Yum...Can you smell that? Doesn't it just smell delicious?" Chef Maxine said. Her voice sounded phony. As if she were teaching preschoolers their ABC's rather than grown adults how to make a quiche. But she was sincere. It made me cringe as if I was watching Fear Factor and the contestant, the blonde with the fake boobs, was forced to consume live centipedes.

Maxine created a world for herself where every woman's place was in the kitchen and they were delighted to be there. Well, I wasn't. No siree, I have a life. After scribbling the recipe for the quiche on a note card, I began to gather and mix the ingredients. Putting the raw quiche in the oven and setting the timer, I watched as Maxine invited the audience into her kitchen to taste her perfect quiche. Show-off! I had a sneaking suspicion she paid these people to make yummy noises.

This was a regular segment of her show. She would point out that the recipe originated from France or Greece. She had an encyclopedia-induced story about how queens would serve a particular cookie at "un petite soiree." Sometimes she needed note cards to remind herself of the brief tale. Short term memory wasn't her strength.

"Hello?" the voice of my neighbor, Helen, as she opened the kitchen door. "I saw your car in the drive way," her gaze went to the TV. "So what is Chef Maxine making today?" Helen and I were the only full-time women instructors in the History Department at the University of Pittsburgh, and two of the youngest. I was twenty-nine, and Helen was thirty-three. The department was otherwise composed of a lot of old stubborn men. They knew their history, but failed to connect with their young audience.

"If there's no life in the classroom, then history is just history," I said to Helen, as we munched on fast food one night after another "could have snoozed through it" staff meeting. It was Helen who coined it thus.

"They don't infuse life into their lectures. You're right; it's just rubbish about dead people," she had said.

Now, glancing at the cookbooks, Helen sat on a stool next to the kitchen

counter, watching the TV with me.

"Tune in next time for table decorations. Setting décor for any festive dinner is oh so important. Join me. We'll "Eat, drink, and be merry."

"Trust me. I have a degree from Northwestern; I can set a table." I said, talking to the TV. I pressed the OFF button on the remote and Chef Maxine disappeared.

"No, pretend I didn't say that," I said. "Eric asked me to try to get along with her. You have to, too. If you start making fun of her I might join in. I'm weak."

"No, Sarah, you're not. You're a strong woman"

"Not where Maxine is concerned. She makes me feel like crap by showing me up. When Eric and I were still living in Chicago, she sent cookies and pies for a bake sale."

"That bitch!" Helen teased in a mocking voice.

"I guess it was kinda sweet. But it's like saying that I can't stick dough on a tray and pop it in the oven."

"Did she visit?"

"Nope, and we got married in my hometown. Maxine and I never even met face to face until the rehearsal dinner. After Eric graduated law school, we moved here. It's weird being so close to her. Now Maxine can just pop on over to tell me my cooking sucks and how she could do better. She doesn't say it like that, but it still stings."

"And the time I wanted to serve tuna fish sandwiches and carrot sticks at a historical lecture and discussion group I was holding at my house. Chef Maxine saved the day for me by advising me not to make that," I said, still feeling

embarrassment. "No one cared about the event. All they cared about was the food."

"She made avocado and sun-dried tomato spring rolls and tender slices of pork in garlic sauce, right? I remember, I was there," Helen said. "It was good, but everyone really enjoyed the lecture. It was just that dickhead from the department chair that made you feel lousy."

"The point," I said "is that they looked down at me the same way she looks down on me."

"Is that why you're killing yourself trying to cook? You know your going to start a fire," Helen said.

"I'm not that pathetic," I said. True, I made sure I knew where the fire extinguishes were, but I doubted I'd use them.

"Do you really think cooking is important?" she asked.

"No. It's for women who can't use their brain." I said.

"Teaching is important."

"The fall of the Roman Empire, the Industrial Revolution, and the World Wars were and still are important. Getting my doctorate is important."

"I don't have anything against Maxine," Helen said. "But she should realize some women can't cook."

"I can cook," I said, as I reached into the oven to take my quiche out. It was burnt. Helen smirked, and I had to laugh at myself. It was rumped, with brown patches. The basil had never blended and had drained toward the center of the quiche, which sunk in. It looked like a funnel.

"I just need some practice," I said. "Did

you mean some women can't cook, or won't cook? At least I try."

"Some women have midterms to grade," she said, trying to excuse her dependency on TV dinners.

"You are done writing your thesis. You have a PhD. You have more time than me," I said, smiling. Between writing and researching a thesis on early civilization and teaching about two hundred students, I had very little free time.

"I am crazy-cat lady. I have a reputation to uphold. Besides, I don't have a husband or a family to cook for," Helen said.

She was lucky. I had both.

At my first all family lunch, I had made grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, straight from the can. Chef Maxine looked disgusted, as if I had insulted her. Later when we had a moment alone, Eric told me to forget about it. He said his mother thought food was more important than religion.

"Sincy," he said, using his nickname for me. In college he called me "Sincerely Sarah" because I was always honest with people - sometimes a little too honest. I loved that he could look past my faults.

"Maybe you should let my mom do the cooking from now on. She enjoys it."

"You don't have to tell me twice, I'll never cook for that woman," I vowed. Eric didn't argue.

"Let's talk tonight."

We never did talk about it. It was this thing, neither of us wanted to talk. We suffocated our argument to the point where I didn't even know what it was anymore. Were we really arguing about who cooks family meals?

A few weeks ago, when I said that I would make the meal for Thanksgiving, I knew Eric wouldn't like it. Getting ready for bed, he voiced his displeasure.

"I thought we agreed to leave the cooking to my Mom."

"I think I can make a really good meal." I slid between the sheets and curled up in bed next him. We lay face to face. We agreed a long time ago that the only way to fight was to look each other in the eye, getting it all out in one spat. That way fighting was easy. And making up afterwards was easier.

"I know you want me to make peace with your Mom," I had said. "Maybe this is my way of doing that. She expects me to be a domestic."

"I don't want you to be a domestic. And I, sure as hell, don't think my mom would push that role on you," he said, clenching the covers with his fists.

"Then why? Why am I always expected to be a magician in the kitchen?" I shouted.

"You mean women like my mother," he said, arms flailing. "That's not all she is you know. She has other hobbies besides cooking."

"Yeah, I know it, but no one else knows it," I said. "She portrays herself, on goddamn national television as a domestic goddess."

"So," Eric said in a hollow voice. He acted as if it was okay for a woman to limit herself, defining herself by how well she can bake a pie. I had to fight off the impulse to hit him. We didn't argue a lot, but when we did it was a good healthy fight, a chance to air out aggressive feelings on both sides. Our fights had never turned physical. Although it wouldn't have been the first time I had hit a man for saying

something stupid. He had stopped listening to me, so I didn't even try to explain myself. I turned my back to him. Lying scrunched like a cheese curl, I closed my eyes, and concentrated on my breathing.

The next day, I went into the history department's computer laboratory to search Gilman, Maxine. I didn't know what I was looking for. Maybe as a novice chef she had burned her house down. Eric had told me about how she had started her cooking show, "Eat, Drink, and Be Merry," as a brief segment on the local news. She struggled to get a network to pick it up. When she got that opportunity, she ran with it, never giving them reason to cancel it. I knew there had to be more though.

When the results came up, I skipped over the material about Maxine's recipes and cookbook orders. Fan and anti-fan web pages took up the next twenty results. Wow, some people loved her for being an exemplary chef and some people hate her for not doing more with her life. She certainly stirred up emotion.

I typed in her maiden name: Maxine Conroy. One of the search results caught my attention. It read Picketing for Women's Rights at Women's College from St. Mary's campus newspaper's website.

I clicked on it, and a blurry, black and white photo appeared. It was taken on a fall day in Indiana. Leaves were lying on the ground in heaps. Young women were lined up, grinning and carefully clutching their signs. Their signs were like pieces of art. They were all different, in design and content. The signs ranged from outrage over sexual discrimination to the demand for birth control. In the center of the line, standing with her arms wrapped around her fellow picketers was Maxine Conroy.

Her short silvery hair was once dark and wild. Even though the picture was black and white, I could see that her face was flushed with excitement. And her eyes sparkled with emotion.

Looking closer, the girl was definitely Maxine because of her two distinct characteristics. One was her posture: shoulders back, head held high. She was proud to be at the rally at St. Mary's. The other her eyes, they were deep, and radiated wisdom. Looking into her eyes told me everything I needed to know.

The article from the campus newspaper was attached.

"Hey, I've been looking everywhere for you. What are you doing?" a voice said. In the dark, I could barely make out Helen's figure. I felt ashamed that I couldn't accept my mother-in-law for who she was.

"I want to see what makes Maxine tick. I'm researching her past," I said, knowing she would understand.

"Diggin' up the dirt on Cheffie," she said, rubbing her hands together. I showed her the picture and we read the article together.

Junior, Political Science major may be expelled from St. Mary's after staging another Women's Rights Rally in Central Square.

Maxine Conroy organized a rally promoting equal rights for woman. Three hundred and twenty people, mostly women attended the rally.

Dr. Fredrick Nelson, head of resident life, says "This is the third rally Maxine Conroy has organized and participated in. The administration does not condone the message of women's equal rights in all cases. Our purpose is to educate our women to be able to raise well-rounded children in the future."

St. Mary's laws insist that while planning an event, a group must obtain permission from a department chair. Since Conroy failed to do this, she faces expulsion.

"I'm just standing up for what I believe in," Conroy said at the rally. "I believe you should always stand up for things that are important to you."

"Miss Conroy knew the rules and she made a conscious decision to break them," Nelson says.

Conroy will stand before the board of trustees later this month. They will decide her fate. Helen and I didn't say anything for a few moments. My mother-in-law had been part of a revolution: the women's right movement. I had unearthed Maxine's secret. I doubted that even Eric knew about her days of rebellion. Was it rebelling though? She was fighting for a choice. She was fighting to make up her own mind about the woman she wanted to be.

"What do you think happened? Did she really get kicked out of school?" Helen asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But there's only one way to find out. I'm asking her."

Class didn't start until that night, and those exams could wait. I drove across town drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. I should have been planning what I would say to her, but I knew I would blurt out the first thing that popped into my mind anyway. Finally, I pulled up to the lot where "Eat, Drink, and be Merry" was shot. I didn't feel apprehensive about confronting her. To me, it felt like a challenge.

The aluminum door had a giant number four/cooking sprawled on it with green paint. Looking through the window on both sides of the door, I didn't see a

guard or anyone else who would ask me what the heck I was doing there. Once I slipped inside, I could see that the building used to be a high school gym. The bleachers and the scoreboard were still there. Bright lights highlighted the modern looking kitchen set. Grey formica counter tops encased the high tech stove. Behind the stove was a stainless steel sink and next to that were the huge double ovens Maxine constantly shuffled dishes in and out of. I had seen this set a million times on TV, but being up close I could see the special gadgets Maxine regularly used. The oven and stove had a complex array of buttons. Any man would get lost in here. I would get lost in here. A unique teal checkered curtain covered the window above the sink and flowers were etched in the ceramic squares tiled to the wall.

Through the window I could see the crew bustling about. They were not filming yet, so I got the chance to watch Maxine from a distance. She was sitting cross-legged, examining a script marking it with a yellow highlighter. Reading glasses were perched on her nose. Snatching them off, she rubbed her temples and sighed. I stood frozen in the middle of the set, rethinking coming to the TV studio. I was barging in on Maxine's territory. Somehow, it didn't seem right.

Just as I was about to turn to leave, the chef glanced through the window and I was pretty sure she caught sight of me before I ducked behind the stove. After a few minutes I peeked above the counter top and snuck a look through the window. Maxine stood in front of her chair as if she was uncertain of what she had seen and was thinking about investigating. Someone called her over to look in a camera - probably to ask her opinion on a camera angle. I didn't want to add to her stress, so I left. I got in my car, and went to the person who knew her the longest and the best, her husband.

Bob Gilman was a quiet man. He'd retired from being a salesman for an engineering company the previous year. Not knowing what to do with the free time he had, Mr. Gilman experienced a period of depression. When Eric and Maxine were decorating Eric's home office, I often sat with him, grading papers while he watched TV.

He invited me into his house and motioned for me to sit in a comfortable leather chair. I spotted books on Modern and Renaissance Art lining the shelves, calendars of famous works, there was even a card table displaying the pieces of a Picasso puzzle. I asked him how he was doing.

"Time can be a dangerous thing. I felt like I was drowning," he said. "Thank God Maxie was here to help me through my depression. She got me into art. I'm reading about famous artists, and I'm volunteering in the art museum once a week."

"That's great. I'm so happy you're feeling better," I said to the man who used to watch CNN all day and complain about a secret agenda motivating the war in Iraq.

"We're even planning a trip to D.C. to visit the museums," he said. "Maxie says she needs a break. I can't wait to see the Smithsonian."

"You said on the phone you needed to know something. What can I help you with ma' dear?" Kindness radiated from him. If I had needed a kidney, he would have given me one without batting an eyelash. I was at a loss for words. I had thought Maxine to be a heartless thoughtless dictator. Speaking to the man who had her heart made me realize she had a whole different side. Maybe she wasn't perfect; maybe I was quick to judge. But Maxine and Bob Gilman were sharing and loving people.

"I just needed to see that you were okay," I managed. "You can finish your puzzle. I'll see myself out."

Tears were streaming down my face as I made my way out of the Gilman's house. A burst of wind from the dusk-dimmed streets enveloped me when I opened the door. A woman was mumbling to herself as she bustled up the walkway. It was Maxine.

"Sarah, it's so nice to see you! What gives us the pleasure?" She saw my tears. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I banged my elbow on the door." I wiped my tears with the tissue Maxine had given me. "I was just returning a pan you had lent me. I saw Mr. Gilman. He looks wonderful."

"Yes he does. You know he always took everything so seriously. I told him to enjoy life." I looked at her, trying to decipher if that was an innuendo. I saw her clearly innocent face. Age was starting to take hold there. Her eyes were puffy, and her chin was like a melting ice cream cone.

Silently I approached her, and gave her a mammoth hug. "Your advice is impeccable," I whispered.

It wasn't the right time to ask personal questions. So I went to my office finally ready to grade those papers.

Thanksgiving day, I walked into the dining room holding the serving tray above my head, like a trophy I had coveted for several months and finally earned. I wanted to take a picture of it: my perfect Thanksgiving dinner. Not only did the food look great, but the table had been strewn with orange, gold, and red leaves. I placed down the serving tray in the center of the table.

"It's not turkey," Maxine said in awe. "But it looks wonderful; I always get bored with turkey."

I served salmon for my Thanksgiving dinner, with side dishes of potatoes and candy-flavored carrots. And of course, wine.

"How'd you come up with the idea?" Helen asked. I hugged her because I hadn't seen her come in.

"I found it online," I said, winking at her.

After dinner, we transferred ourselves to the living room and sank into the couches around the fireplace. We were lulled into a sleep-like, peaceful state by the fire. Eric scooted close to me on the couch.

"A toast to my wife," he said. After he refreshed everyone's wine glasses, he raised his own, and I began to blush. "Sarah, I don't know what to say. You did more, so much more, than serve us a meal, a fantastic meal, at that. You brought us closer together as a family. And friends became family. Happy Thanksgiving!"

I should've been satisfied with my successful dinner, but the challenge to know the truth still burned inside. I cracked my knuckles as I stretched, hands clasped above my head.

"Maxine, can you help with coffee?" I asked. I sprang to my feet and led the way to the kitchen. I hid a grimace because the last thing I wanted to do was get Maxine riled up. I had come to admire and respect my mother-in-law. At the same time, I didn't want to admit to Helen that I'd gone soft-hearted, so I gave the thumbs up sign as I passed her. When Maxine and I were alone in the kitchen, I cleared my throat, ready to ask the big question. But Maxine started questioning me about school as if we were old friends catching up. She wanted to know when Thanksgiving break was over and how the semester was going. I saw my opening.

"Where did you go to college?"

"St. Mary's, that's pretty close to Northwestern."

"Majoring in domestic arts?"

"Believe it or not I majored in political science. No one can teach you how to keep house," she said getting the coffee beans out and putting them in the grinder. She moved around my kitchen with ease. I smiled because she knew the order of my kitchen better than I did. It's funny how I didn't resent that.

"Take cooking for example, no one can teach you how to cook," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. I was waiting for her to tell me cooking was instinctive. "It's basically trial and error. Trust me, I've erred plenty."

I was shocked. Maxine admitting she wasn't perfect. Before I knew what was happening, I had come into ask whether or not she'd gotten kicked out of school. I realized it didn't matter what she said. I accepted her regardless. I looked into her eyes and saw everything I needed to know.

**Homecoming**  
**By Nic Sebastian**

I will return one day a peddler  
all hung about with winking boxes  
in each a sweet thing will nestle -  
a fragrant salt color, a talking  
blue smell.

On Fourth and Main at Sarah's  
the neighbors will mutter  
we knew she would come to no good  
but my father will hire a brass band.  
Here is my daughter, he will announce  
in his purple bay leaf voice.

**Bathroom Visitor**  
**By Michael Lee Johnson**

A horsefly  
travels the world  
of my bathroom.  
Stops at the kitty litter box  
on occasion for refueling.  
One thousand round trips  
including the bathtub area,  
and buzzes past the toilet bowl.  
Steady pilot, good mileage.  
Frequent flier miles.  
I swat his journey to an  
abrupt end.

**Maple Syrup Emergency**  
**By Paul Carlino**

She carries a maple leaf of syrup  
in the glove box of her car.

In case I ever need it, she says.

I think of her like maple syrup  
and carry a picture of her  
blond-streaked hotel room hair  
in the album of my thoughts.

**Watch  
By**

**S.K.**

**Over  
Tatiner**

White light coiled outside the wall of glass, looking for a way to hurl L.A. into the hotel room. Dan Bracker and Minna Cohen stood in the pale-yellow carpet on opposite ends of the room, their luggage between them. Dan pulled open the sliding glass doors and stepped onto the balcony. He wondered if the surface was real marble or faux. Could real marble be so unblemished? Anyway, it was beautiful.

"It's too hot here," Minna called to him. "Get back inside so we can close the doors and windows and turn on the air." Minna uncoiled her red-and-tan plaid scarf from around her neck and threw it across a blonde plastic chair with slats, the only uncomfortable-looking chair in the room, claiming it for her own.

Dan watched a bikinied mother rub sunscreen on her little boy near the pool below the balcony. She didn't fit Dan's stereotype of a mother, formed long ago from fragments of popular culture and memories of his own mother (wavy hair parted in the middle, faded jeans, no makeup, hopeless eyes, barefoot usually), but the boy called the young woman mommy when she walked over to the deep end and stepped off the ledge into the pool, so there it was. Dan wondered if the unconscious of the little boy grown to manhood would think mother when he saw a hot woman in a bikini step into a pool. There were worse maternal memories, he knew. There were more dangerous places for mothers of little boys to step from.

His own mother had stepped out the kitchen window of their twelfth-floor apartment one night like she was stepping onto a subway train. She had asked Dan to stay up with her and watch TV. Begged more than asked, perhaps, but either way, he had fallen asleep, then opened his eyes, his head still on the sofa, and looked past the

food and newspaper debris on the coffee table, past the console TV light and laughter on the left, through the kitchen door, to watch her step out the window with care.

Recently, the sight of it had returned to him in dreams, in altered forms. A few nights before the trip, he dreamt of his mother stepping out through cracked glass onto a window sill of the 100th floor of the North Tower, holding on to something behind her, dangling her foot in the air, and filled with hope that she could survive the fall. She was troubled enough to have believed that, and Dan, in his own way, wanted to believe there was a sort of happiness out that window.

"Dan? Dan? Did you hear me? I'm hot. Put on the air."

He turned to Minna. She was a small, slender woman, wearing a tight red sweater over a red turtleneck. She looked even smaller here, almost childlike, as though she had lost three inches on the flight west, one for each time zone. Her curly hair was fractured today, but her lovely face, lovely even with the scar on her left cheek and the reproving eyes floating, still aroused in Dan feelings about which he had always understood only one thing with piercing clarity: they made him stay. When her eyes closed in sleep, he often fantasized about leaving her. He always had.

"You're still dressed for New York," he said. "Maybe we should both get naked and see what happens."

"Here?"

"It's our suite."

They were standing on the main level of the bi-level oval room. A super-king-size bed and a bathroom were off to one side and down five steps. Off to the other side and down another set of steps was a kitchenette, with a half

wall, presumably to hide your dirty dishes from yourself. Along about three fourths of the oval on the upper level were windows, floor to ceiling, interrupted by the glass doors and the balcony. "I can't imagine making love in this room," Minna said. "It would be like having sex in an operating room or in a spaceship after you were abducted and probed."

Dan engaged Minna in his kind gaze and held her there until he felt her disarm. No gaggle of girls back in high school had ever described Dan's small eyes as beautiful, but when they were in their kind state, he found that women appreciated them. The blue of these eyes was lovely, soft, almost baby shade, women said. They were in the park with Dan. Dogs were chasing Frisbees. Dan was smoothing out a blanket for them on the grass. In the other state, the intense one, his eyes were more gray than blue. He studied people with these eyes. Fixed in his intense stare, people felt like magazines rifled through but never brought home.

Dan peeled the layers of clothing off Minna, tossing each layer onto her blonde, slatted chair, and they lay down on the bed. He kissed and caressed her. She was slow to respond, and he felt distracted. Finally, though, Minna became excited and began to moan the words oh no, oh no. Dan was aroused by this, as usual, but it irritated and depressed him, as well. Why was it never, oh yes? What had it meant to be turned on by this inconsolable utterance for six years?

Afterward, Dan lay angry in Minna's arms. He kissed her eyelid, and then, on impulse, began to trace the top of her scar with his tongue. She moved her head away from him. He pulled his tongue back in retreat, and lay back on the bed. He heard her breathe, and remembered how she had heard the doctor tell her parents, through the half-opened door in the emergency

room, that the damage would have been minimal if only she had waited for help instead of struggling to free herself from the playground fence. "Why didn't you wait for us, sweetie?" one of the parents asked. "Why weren't you there?" Minna answered.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you tomorrow, Dan?" she said now.

"I don't think guests go to the luncheon for Oscar nominees."

"You could check with someone."

He stood up and turned around to look at her. The bed had been too big for the two of them. For her alone, it was absurd. What would happen to such a tiny woman alone in such a big bed? He resisted the urge to climb back in with her, instead covering her with the sheet.

"I'm sure," he said. "You should get out and see L.A." He gestured magnanimously at the light prowling behind the wall of glass as he headed for the bathroom.

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Dan hadn't known what to expect at the Oscar Nominees Luncheon, but the moment he walked past the flowing potted grasses on the steps of the Beverly Hilton Hotel, he felt like he had arrived. The overall impression was bright and golden. The lobby was lined with conical chandeliers hanging like full breasts above the creamy white marble floors. A stab of heartburn threatened to mar the whole experience, so Dan turned to the right to buy antacids in the crowded gift shop, formed by four glass panels.

Waiting to make his purchase, he heard a voice from behind his shoulder. "You're who I think you are, aren't you?"

Dan turned to see a chubby Asian teenager, with a woman, presumably the boy's mother, just back of his elbow. They were both about the same height and both had short, spiky hair. The boy had tattoos of earrings on his ears.

"I am," Dan said.

"I saw you on TV."

Dan winced. He remembered some of the interviews he had given when he was campaigning for a nomination. He had giggled at all the lame jokes of the TV personalities. The sound of his giggle was like something that had never come out of him before. High-pitched and terrified, if you heard it through Dan's ears. Dan had hoped only he and dogs could hear it.

"I hope you win," the boy said.

"Everybody wants you to win," the woman spoke up.

"O'Toole was a great movie," the boy said. "When you forced the twisted doors open after the plane hit and you looked down the elevator shaft?" The boy snarled and pulled at imaginary doors in the air. "The look on your face when you realized you had to climb down out of the North Tower? Man! Like the poster said ..." (he looked down and fanned his hands in front of his face) "What if this were the only way back home?" He dropped his hands to his side. "You were great."

"Thanks very much," Dan said.

"What's your name again, mister?" the woman said. The boy rolled his eyes.

"Dan Bracker," Dan said.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. Everybody wants you to win. Will you give me a hug?"

"Mom!"

"Shush, you!"

"Sure," Dan said.

The woman was at least ten inches shorter than Dan, so her mouth was somewhere on his chest when they embraced, but Dan could swear he heard her whisper, "Your energy will heal me." When she released him, he backed away toward the door. He couldn't resist asking her. "Heal you of what?"

"Huh?" she said, her face in a scrunch.

"Nothing." He half smiled, half waved, burped himself back into the lobby and moved quickly away from the gift shop. He saw perennial nominee Hank Mars walking toward him, smiling warmly with outstretched arms.

"Hank Mars," Hank said when he reached Dan, shaking with his right hand and taking ownership of Dan's elbow with his left.

"Dan Bracker."

"You must be excited, Dan."

"Yeah, just a little bit."

"Hungry, too?"

Hank led the way toward the dining room. "I'll tell you a true Hollywood secret," he said. "The Nominees Luncheon is the best thing about being nominated for an Oscar. I've been nominated four times ..."

Deserved it twice, Dan thought.

"...and I can tell you, this is the high point. It ain't the food, Mr. Bracker. It's the vibe. Everybody's happy because everybody's proud of themselves, proud of their work, proud that the folks back home get to say that old so and so was nominated for an Academy Award. Ever

notice how many people thank their mothers when they win an Oscar? There's just something about this award, makes us all revert to pure infantile, narcissistic pride. Like the first time we pooped in the potty. You remember that feeling?"

"Uh . . . ."

"You don't have to remember it, Dan. You're reliving it. You have made yourself one hell of a turd."

"Thanks. You, too."

"I know it."

After a surf and turf lunch that Dan hardly touched, and free-flowing wine that he did, an Academy executive lectured them all on their acceptance speeches.

"Don't come with a list of people to thank. Just don't! If you start listing people, I'll have to come out on the stage personally and drag you off, and all the guys here are stronger than me—and the women, too, if you count emotionally. You can be as grateful as you want to be. Go ahead. Who's stopping you? Your mother will be proud of how well she raised little grateful you. But keep it between you and your mother 'cause all the rest of us will be bored shitless."

Hank Mars leaned over and whispered to Dan, "It's a hopeless cause this. Ninety percent will rattle off a long list of thank-yous, ending tearfully with mom."

"Did you, when you won?"

"Thank-yous, yes. Mom, no. I forgot to mention her, actually. I have a complex relationship with my mother."

The luncheon speeches hummed from the dais, sometimes soft and low, sometimes rising in a rattle like a

swarm of cicadas. The rattle, the wine, the odd sensation, for a New Yorker, of being warm in February, all of it made Dan feel like he had landed in a rare summer afternoon of his life. He lay back in the hammock and amused himself by imagining giving engaging interviews on the craft of acting, the sort of thing he had heard on "Inside the Actors Studio." He worked out his answers to the ending questionnaire. Dan's favorite word was roar. He loved the simple, powerful, animal energy simmering in it. But he decided that roar wasn't good enough for a favorite word. Besides, James Lipton might expect him to actually roar after he said it, and he'd look like a damn fool. Maybe, he should say home. Home was his second favorite word. But, no, he shouldn't use home because of the O'Toole poster. He needed to differentiate himself from the film if he wanted to have a real career. Dan settled on authentic as his favorite word.

In the mingling after lunch, Hank introduced Dan to several groups of people and then drifted away. Dan was nervous on his own. He expected some resentment at the behind-the-scenes stretching of the rules that got O'Toole on the list of eligible films. It had opened in New York and L.A. for a week, as required, but jumped to DVD backlist quickly. Then something happened. The film received no more theatrical showings, few reviews, none of them great ones, but its popularity grew--furtive and powerful as an affair. By late summer, at gas pumps and cash registers, in swimming pools and kitchens, people were imitating Dan as Benedict O'Toole delivering the final line of the film. He walks through the apartment door. His wife sits on the blood-red sofa with the lights of disaster in downtown Manhattan flashing in the window behind her. He drops his right fist to his chest and says, "I wouldn't die."

The Academy made a tactical decision to side with the public and declare O'Toole eligible for voting. Maybe some of suits from the studios were pissed, but not the creative types. At least, not as far as Dan could tell. Everybody was nice. They welcomed him. Gave him career advice. Told him to call when he was ready to move to L.A. He was going to move, right? The window of opportunity is open. Jump.

On his way to the men's room, he felt someone's arm slip under his own. When he turned, he saw the other arm belonged to Amanda Pryce, who was smiling at him. She didn't look exactly like the Amanda Pryce from the movies, but Dan was used to that already. In person, no one looked quite like they did on screen. She looked softer, smaller; her skin was almost translucent. She had on very little makeup. Her hair was tousled in a perfectly familiar way. She stroked his arm with two of her fingers as she said, "Your performance was so pure. I hope you can hold on to that. I want to see it again and again." She slipped her arm out of his and wafted to the right. Dan watched her float. The bottom of her see-through peasant blouse rose and fell with the air around her, and her renowned breasts undulated just below the surface.

When this vision was about ten feet from him, she turned without warning. Arms on hips, head cocked to the right, she first regarded Dan with a curious, surprised look on her face and then returned.

"Want to be in a movie with me?"

"What?"

"I'm a teacher slash rape victim. You'd be the detective. We'd fall in love. Terrence Schwab was cast but dropped out because of scheduling. They're looking around for someone now, and I know they care what I think. I'm exec

producing, for one thing, and they were really happy to get me, for another." She moved closer and stood inches away from him, careful not to touch. "I think I want you," she whispered. "You know what I mean?" She rippled a laugh and walked away, calling back over her shoulder, "I guess their people will call your people, like they say in the movies. Oh ...we shoot in April."

Dan stood in place. He heard sounds. He saw people move around him. But he was in some kind of zone. Someone accidentally bumped into him, and brought him back. He went into the men's room and prepared to urinate. Making the physical connection with his own body unleashed a fire inside his head. Amanda Pryce. A 10! Wants me! A 10! A 10! A 10! A 10! And suddenly Dan knew that all his sexually conscious life—from the feeble stirrings at 9, to the initial masturbatory fantasy at 13; from getting to first base at 15 and second base at 16, to the interminable inning that kept him on second base until 18, to ...well, to now, damn it—he knew that all his sexually conscious life he had craved having a 10.

Neon numbers flashed all over his brain. He knew—flash!—that he thought of himself as a 4. He saw that his first girlfriend had been a 3, with her pimples and thick middle. Ever since then, he had been working his way up: girlfriend Lucie was a 4, maybe 4.5; Regina was a 6. He tried to stop himself before he got to Minna. What kind of man keeps this kind of secret numerical inventory of the women in his life? But he knew two things: without the scar, Minna was a solid 8, and with it, he wasn't sure. By the time Dan met Minna, she had defined so much of her self by the scar that it was hard to be attracted to one without the other. She flaunted it, daring people to attend to it and then shooting them a look of defiant shame when they did, demanding everything that scarred people are owed. He could see the look

now. It had always held an irresistible logic for him. If you look, you should pay. At some point, the scar had become Minna's main source of income and Dan her major customer.

Dan and Minna had been at home when the Oscar nominations were announced. He danced her around the room in a joyful movement that was part polka, part Twister. When they stopped, laughing, he took both her hands in his and asked her, "What kind of gown shall you wear to the ball, mademoiselle?"

Still laughing, she pulled her left hand away from him to touch her scar. "I don't know. What goes with this?"

They would all look. He would pay.

Dan put his penis back in his pants. Seeing that he was not alone in the men's room, he walked over and washed his hands.

\*\*

Four o'clock. Minna had left hours ago to go shopping. They'd been in L.A. for over a week, and she seemed really restless. Said she needed some underwear thing for her Oscar outfit. How long could it take to buy underwear? What if something had happened to her? He should call. He really should. She could have been hit by a car. A car ... or a bus. A bus, maybe. She'd be dead, then. For sure. Yeah, a bus.

Minna put her key card in the door slot and green-lighted her way out from under the bus.

"Hi, babe." He smiled. "Got what you needed?"

"Why don't you answer your phone? You have no idea what I have been through."

"You called?" Dan looked at his phone.

"Oh, God. I had it on silent. What happened?"

"The store clerks are all rude assholes who expect everyone to know everything. If you ask a question, they look at you like you're the asshole. The women are all anorexic or bulimic. I heard a woman vomiting in a stall next to mine in a ladies' room. One store had sizes I had never seen before. Minus sizes. And the light is so bright I had to wear my sunglasses inside the stores, and I got a screaming headache anyway. Then I got lost trying to get back here. Nobody knows how to get anywhere in this farkatke city. You should have come with me. I told you I needed you to come with me."

"I had to read ..." Dan had stayed at the hotel to read the teacher-and-detective script that had arrived by messenger, a few days after his agent had been contacted with preliminary feelers.

"I don't know why you have to read it again. You know you're going to do it. You've already made up your mind. Haven't you? Well? Well?"

"Yeah, Minna. I'm going to do it," he said, tired of her barking.

Minna placed her bottom on the slatted chair, still holding her shopping bag. "Where are they shooting it?" she said.

"Phoenix."

"You'll be gone a long time."

"Six weeks. Eight weeks. I don't know."

"Eight weeks."

"Could be six."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," Dan said. He kissed her on the forehead and walked down the steps behind the half wall of the

kitchenette to make coffee. When he came back, Minna had moved only one hand. It was in her lap now, and the shopping bag had fallen to one side on the floor. Her face was red and her eyes looked wet.

"You're crying," Dan said.

"No."

"Yes, you are."

"Stop."

"Minna, what's wrong now?"

"What do you mean now? Like there's always something wrong."

"Just tell me what's wrong, and not make me do this song and dance where I beg you to tell me, and you won't, and on and on. Please do me that favor."

Minna walked down the stairs and into the bathroom. In the mirror, Dan watched her sort through toiletries and read directions on the hotel shampoo. Then she turned back and stood in the bathroom doorway, with one hand on each post, like someone following earthquake instructions.

"Why did you bring me here? I don't fit in. It's too perfect. Does it ever rain here? Is there any cloud cover? I guess no one here needs to hide, but I do, Dan. I sure as hell do. And you used to, too."

Dan started to protest. Minna shot out of the doorway and nearly fell across the huge bed. "No! Don't say you didn't, because I know better. I hid you. I hid you in my heart when you needed a place. And now, you won't do anything with me. You just sit around making or taking phone calls and reading scripts. And then when I go out, you put your phone on goddamn silent!"

"I feel like I'm on a toll road that never

gets paid for with you."

"How long have you been preparing that line?" Minna asked.

"There's never going to be enough, is there?"

"Baby, there never has been yet."

"That's not fair. Play fair, Minna."

"I didn't know we were playing. I thought we were trying to find a way to love each other for good. I can love you forever."

"For good' and 'forever' shouldn't necessarily be allowed to mean the same thing."

"Fuck you," Minna said.

Dan saw that her hands were shaking. He looked down so he wouldn't have to watch, but he slouched toward her and took hold of both of them.

\*\*

When they said Dan's name in the Kodak Theatre, the place exploded. The crowd in the three levels of balconies surged from their seats and roared. For a second, Dan actually thought that a bomb had gone off at the exact time his name was read. Then Minna put her arm around him.

"You won, Dan. You won. Go."

He jumped up. He felt as though he were experiencing gravity for the first time. He concentrated on moving his newly heavy body, pushing it forward; past smiling, applauding people, up the stage steps, across the wide stage, into the arms of the winner of last year's best actress award. She placed the Oscar in his hands, along with the card that had his name on it. He read the card, just to be sure, and the audience laughed. The laughter relaxed him

enough that he began to remember parts of what he wanted to say.

"Thank you. Thank you. So much. I'm shocked, really. By your generosity to an actor who hasn't done much up till now except work his rear end off and get pretty much nowhere. [Laughter] Thank you for not, you know, voting on seniority or whatever. [Scattered applause and laughter] There are so many people I want to thank tonight ..." And Dan began to recite the names of the most important ones: the money people, first, because forgetting them would be a mistake he could not afford to make. Then the director ...

"You are going to hear more from Billy Flynn. He is a director with vision and style." Blah, blah, thank you, thank you. He saw Hank Mars in the second row, aisle seat, smiling at him.

"And, well, she's gone now, but I should say thanks to my mom. I always knew she loved me, no matter what. And speaking of love . . . ."

He was feeling a little lost, but he had gotten himself to the last line he had planned, which began And speaking of love.

And speaking of love, what? What? What?

Dan could not remember. He rocked like a little, wordless boat that had no business being out on the sea of faces in front of him.

"And speaking of love . . . I love all of you tonight!" he ad-libbed in panic, raising the statuette in the air.

The music swelled, last year's best actress took his arm and led him offstage.

It wasn't until he was in the velvet-lined elevator on the way down to the press room that he remembered what he had

planned to say: And speaking of love, I want to thank my sweetheart, Minna Cohen, for believing in me, when I had little else to hold onto. The realization of what he had done hit him like an airbag. And that's exactly what he said to Minna when he apologized, as soon as she caught up with him in the press room.

"Like an airbag?" Minna said.

"Yeah, those things are brutal, I've heard."

"They also save your life, don't they?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing, Dan. It doesn't matter."

"This happens all the time, you know. It's very common."

She put her hand over his mouth and closed her eyes.

He ran his tongue along the cup of her hand.

Academy personnel moved the winners through the press gauntlet with skill. The press conference was a scorching landscape of lights, but it was going reasonably well. Either Dan was getting better at this press stuff or he was so high from the excitement and the two shots of tequila he had belted from the sidebar that he couldn't tell how bad he was.

"Dan, how do you account for the enormous appeal of O'Toole?"

"I think people were ready to explore their feelings about 9/11 on a more universal level," Dan said. "O'Toole is about the courage it sometimes takes to truly live the very next moment in your life. That's a timeless theme."

"Did you have to rent that tux?"

"It's due back by noon tomorrow or I

owe another day." The press loved it.

Next up was a sit-down with the entertainment correspondent from the network that had aired the Oscar broadcast. They had rigged a half circle of taupe curtains to make a cozy spot for conversations with the big winners. Minna stood behind the curtain to wait for him, and Dan settled into one of the wing chairs on the other side.

Dan was comfortable. The press was pretty predictable, he decided. Many questions were very similar to ones he had been asked for a month now. His answers were getting better. The tequila helped, too.

The network correspondent began. "Well! Dan Bracker. Congratulations. What a wild ride this must be for you."

" 'Wild' is the word, man. Wild," Dan said.

"Best Actor in a Leading Role. That makes you Big Man on the Hollywood Campus. So . . . I guess you know what I have to ask you now . . .?"

Dan had no idea what was coming.

" . . . Tell us about your love life!" Dan stammered, smiled, emitted the high-pitched giggle. Could you really call what he had with Minna a love life?

"You're here tonight with a lovely lady as your date," the correspondent prompted. "Is she your wife? Girlfriend?"

"No!"

Dan heard his buried voice rise and had a mental image of himself stepping out a window. "Oh, no, oh, no," he repeated, shaking his head. His body turned upside down as gravity pulled the weight of his head downward. Where the hell did that come from?

"So you are still an eligible bachelor," the correspondent said.

"Yes, yes. Yes, I am," Dan said, with a determination to hit the ground on his feet that astounded him.

When Dan came around the taupe curtains, Minna was gone. On his phone, he found her text message: "Went home."

\*\*

A few days later, Dan returned home, too. Minna and her things were gone. He didn't know where. She hadn't responded to any of his calls or texts. He tried not to think about her, but couldn't be distracted because his arms literally ached for her. He hugged couch pillows to help him get through the first evening. He replayed the virtual breakup scene over and over again in his head, sometimes on his side of the taupe curtain, sometimes on Minna's.

He tried getting angry at her. How could she leave like that? Without letting him explain? He had to go to the Governor's Ball by himself. And the Vanity Fair thing, too. She really had let him down on one of the most important nights of his life. Screw her.

But anger didn't help with the guilt or the grief, so what was the point? Then, roaming like a lost boy among flashing police lights and adults too busy to see to him, he discovered the one thing that did help--the relief he felt to be free of her. He climbed inside the relief as though it were the ambulance they sent for his dead mother. He let it wrap a blanket around his shoulders and put a cup of hot chocolate in his hands. And though he was ashamed, he let it close the door and begin to drive him away.

It drove him to L.A.

He moved there right away. Hated it at first, for all the New York reasons (too

sunny, too plastic, too blonde), then loved it (the sun! the palm trees! the climate!), finally accepted it as home.

He made the movie in Phoenix with Amanda Pryce. A few weeks after filming ended, Amanda let him go gently like an underweight fish. He didn't complain. He'd had his 10, and he was grateful.

Grateful, even, for the aphorism she had given him on the sunny (of course) afternoon she left:

"Sweetheart, stop moping around feeling all guilty all the time. Relationships are like cars on life's road trip. You were using her to get some place. She was using you. You got there first. What were you supposed to do, wait around forever?"

Funny thing was, Dan had taken a little road trip when he and Amanda were in Phoenix. He had driven his rental car far out into the dessert just before dawn one morning, leaving Amanda sleeping on 1000-thread-count sheets. He stopped at an overlook and got out of the car. Rocks the color of wounds ringed the valley below him. Junipers, Arizona Sycamores, and Crucifixion Thorns stood around in clusters like neighbors after a tragedy.

He remembered the morning before his mother stepped out the window, when she suddenly pulled him close to her and whispered, "Oh, Danny. I wish someone could save me. I'm so sorry."

He remembered the morning of her funeral, when his father, only half as drunk as he would be by nightfall, told Dan, "Your fucking mother was a fucking fruitcake." And he remembered telling his father, "Maybe she just wanted a husband who would take care of her."

Or a son who would watch over her. Instead of what he was now—a man

whose watch was over, because it was time to forgive himself. He texted Minna for the last time: Thank you for leaving me.

Then he faced the dessert and began to roar. Not hesitantly. Not even the first time.

**A Job Well Done**  
**By Catherine Cheek**

Security will be tighter than a gnat's ass on account of our organization's last assassination attempt, but lucky for us, someone decided that the floor had to be refinished in the auditorium. We used our contacts to make sure that Desmond and I got the job. I hadn't actually done floor refinishing (explosives are my specialty) but Desmond has done just about every kind of woodworking there is to do. It's a two man job, so I'll have to fake it.

We'll find some place to stash the detonator and the explosives while we're doing the job. There will be guards there, so we have to be patient. They see us acting suspiciously, they're gonna fire us and then we'll lose this perfect assassination opportunity. The detonator and the explosives are hidden in the cans of varnish.

#

When Ray told me the organization needed my woodworking skills, I didn't know what to expect, but hey, I care about the revolution as much as anyone. Then I saw the audience hall and realized this would be the finest project I ever worked on. The whole place is an incredible piece of craftsmanship. They don't do carpentry like this anymore. All the moldings and finials are hand-carved. I got a look at the floor we're going to re-do, huge parquetry inlaid with rare woods, and I can tell the electric sander I brought is too rough. I'm going to have to get the variable-powered one from the shop.

Ray makes a mess of it, but he insists on helping. I used the finest grit sandpaper I had, but he still managed to sand gouges in it before I stopped him. This floor is really a masterpiece; it's got teak, ebony, mahogany, plus others I haven't been able to identify. It's a shame to refinish it when it

doesn't really need it, but that's the plan. I wish we had some decent varnish with us. Ray insisted on getting the cheapest stuff available, which, on a floor like this, is really a crime.

#

I thought we had all the props, but Desmond went back to get something. Then he said we should start by mopping the floor. That seemed like an unnecessary step, but he's the expert. I'm keeping a look out for the guards. They're watching us closely. We'll probably have to "work" on the floor for a while to ease their suspicions.

Desmond is getting on my nerves. He had me go back over a section three times until I got it "right" and even then he just took the sander away from me and had me do it by hand. I suppose he's doing it to buy us more time, but he's being overly picky about a floor that's just going to be blown up. I tried to tell him that, but he mumbled some nonsense about craftsmanship being sacred.

The guards are starting to relax. I still don't know where we're going to put the bomb. The assembly is in four days. I thought we would just leave the job unfinished and leave the cart with the bomb in a hallway someday, but when I suggested this to Desmond he looked at me like I'm stupid.

#

Ray keeps reminding me that the only reason we're here is to make sure the Chancellor dies. He keeps looking for shortcuts, like leaving the bomb on our cart. I told him we can't, because the job has to be finished several days before the Chancellor comes to visit so that the smell has a chance to dissipate. I do have an idea. Some of the inlay in the compass rose needs repairing. There are chips and large cracks. I'll shave off some wood from the backside

of other sections, and then carve them to fill in the gaps. It will mean taking up some other sections, but that's the only way to get the right color. You couldn't easily get rare woods like this, even before the Chancellor came to power. I think we can patch this part in time if we stay a few extra hours each day. (I wonder if it's too late to get the better varnish?)

Ray keeps telling me not to put so much work into it, but I can't help it. My grandpa taught me that we come from a long line of woodworkers, and that craftsmanship always comes first.

I found out that the border has some ivory in it as well. Ivory! Can you imagine? I really don't know how it will take this cheap varnish. I've never refinished ivory before. I may never get the chance again.

#

Desmond had me take up some sections to get wood for repairs. I was gonna argue, but now I realize that we can plant explosives underneath, and connect the different sections by wires to the detonator. It's really a brilliant plan. I'm surprised he thought of it.

We finally started the varnishing today. Desmond seems down. I suppose he's afraid innocent civilians will die. Our plan is working. The guards don't pay attention anymore. We laid the explosives and the detonator under the parquetry sections we took up and glued the wires down flush with the floors. Now that the first layer of varnish is on, you can't even see the wires unless you know where to look. It's looking pretty good. Desmond really knows what he's doing.

#

Ray and I put final coat of varnish on not a moment too soon. It's still going to smell when the assembly gets here.

They should have hired us sooner.

I'm glad I took the extra effort to fix the chips in the inlay. The real wood looks much better than a wood-filler paste would. The entire floor is gleaming under its new finish. I still wish we could have used the clearer high-grade varnish.

It's flawless. A job well done. Even Ray seems proud. I knew he'd come round to my way of thinking.

#

Desmond's gone, and the organization's furious. The Chancellor came for his speech, all right, but nothing blew up. Desmond must have sabotaged the bomb. I don't get why he screwed things up, after all the work we did. Some guys just don't have what it takes to do a job right.

**Animal  
By**

**R.B.**

**Man  
Trout**

Sure, I killed her. But it's been five decades. I tell myself I can't stand this stupid wallpaper.

People see what they want to see. That's how I strolled into hospitals with a white coat and clipboard and made my way to medical lockers and loaded up on lidocaine or bupivacain, or verset. I always had a huge supply of and need for pentobarbitone sodium. It euthanizes animals, you see. People see what they want, and I know how to play a part. That's how I walked into university biology departments dropping explosives in their places. That's how I charmed my way past receptionists, answering services, and personal assistants. I can be what you want me to be. I'm not proud of it, especially not now, not here in this storm. Appearance is nine-tenths of perception, and perception is nine-tenths of reality. Most guards are apathetic and lazy. I give them a "workin' hard?" or an "everybody behavin'?" and they nod and I walk right by. They smile at me. I'm one of them. Nothing ever happens, so they don't expect anything to happen. They don't even imagine I've got big blocks of thin explosives under my vest with its shiny badge. You don't need to be invisible; you just have to look the part. That's the only invisibility we can have. Countless speeders go about their day with no tickets because cops don't want any more paperwork. I do my research, I assume the part, I am a ghost.

I've been many people. I never got questioned, not even by the people who loved me, the people who had the right to question me. I can fool them all, men, women, old, young. People see what they want to see. It's been five decades, and there's no statute of limitations on guilt and remorse.

Tonight my old man eyes don't want to

see what the roaring plains electrical storm wants to show me. It's holding something up to the panes of the darkened window. I'm in my living room, all lights off, and I don't want to see what the storm, with its formless hands, is pressing to the thin glass. I feel faded.

Lightning climbs, blue and elastic, the walls of my living room. I pulled the chair up to the big picture window just after the storm started, and now it's roaring, the freight train two-thousand pounds of water per minute kind of roaring. The stupid wallpaper all over the walls with the flowers? - it was my wife's idea. She wanted it, and now after all these years, I've convinced myself to finally admit I like it too. She's dead. But I didn't kill her. Not her.

It seems like everybody I ever knew is dead. I think of what their bones must look like...smell like. I want to dig them up sometimes. It's late, and I should go to sleep, and I don't want to see. I can't sleep again.

Outside the window, in the fat pregnant dark, the rain that makes it across the covered porch sprays on the window, small streams are running downward in lighter branching tributaries like slow motion lightning strikes in liquid, to the ground, to the earth, to be welcomed back. I feel faded.

*jPor favor, no me mate!* This is what she had begged. *Don't kill me, please!* What did I know? It was fifty years ago, and I was only twenty-two. *jNo me mate!* Her accented English was like old music, like it was worth something. The room is darkened, but the phosphesent lightning paints the stupid flower wallpaper white and blue and gray. *jNo me mate!* The furniture looks like hulking cars seen from a quarter mile away. The maroon shag carpet is black and feels soft under my old man's feet. Lightning flashes again, and the big painting on the wall lights up and

vanishes. *No me mate!* I can close my eyes and I'm not old anymore. I can get out of this growing prison and go back to the days, the days of sun and sand. I used to be a marine biologist who bombed things for the environment and animals. Remember me? Once upon an ancient time, before the Internet and women's rights and veneer teeth, I was a twenty year old who picked up flamenco dancers in Spanish bars. Later I was even a minor celebrity who appeared on cable network talk shows, news shows, and in the New York Times. *Young, smart, pissed and influential* the magazines called me. People were concerned I was building an army.

No talk shows calling now. These days I know words like Melanoma. Carcinoma. Inoperable brain tumor. I know the cerebellum like the back of my hand. Did you know the Cerebellum is the second largest area of the brain and consists of two hemispheres connected by the vermis? I didn't either, for most of my life, when I was lucky like you. You see, the vermis connects the brain stem and together with the thalamus and cerebrum, it controls skilled muscular coordination, including gait and articulation. Isn't that nice? Look at those words. Gait and articulation. Very logical, clinical, and precise. It means fucking walking and talking, that's what it means. And those are some of the Cerebellum's big jobs. You see, now I know all kinds of things. I know I'm not twenty anymore, I know what *no me mate* means in Spanish, and I know that if you have to get a brain tumor, you really don't want to get a malignant astrocytoma. I've traded in youth for falling age and one of the perks that came in the bargain is the knowledge that high-grade astrocytomas have a tendency to spread into surrounding tissues (*invasiveness* is the clinical term) which makes them difficult to completely remove them during surgery. Of course, if yours has lodged deeply enough into the cerebellum,

right near the thalamus, like mine has, you know words like inoperable, and you don't even have to bother with the pesky surgery.

Lucky guy, I am. I see doctors who specialize in Neurological Oncology and their receptionists, as young as flowers in spring winds, give me glassy smiles and look away. I remember that C-4 feels like play dough that's been left out in the sun.

I remember my doctor.

"You really need to be seen weekly at this point. Or at least biweekly." His blond hair is lush and askew. "This progression is rapid, and you need to be seen by me."

"The outcome is fixed?" I asked.

"In the majority of these cases, when the tumor reaches..." I cocked my head and raised an eyebrow. "...yes, it's fixed." He said.

"There is no hope?" I asked. The clock ticked in the silence between our words and told all the story I needed.

"There is always hope," he said. I sat there on my frail bones and veiny skin with my ass on the rice paper and he stood there, just in from a run, veins standing out in the hairy forearms, whites of the eyes the perfect blue-white of perfect health.

"Now that, doctor, that's a breakthrough." I dressed and left. I haven't seen him in months. He's probably thirty-one. When I was thirty-one, I was visiting the finest schools in the world. Columbia University, Harvard, Yale Medical. We got them all, one way or the other. Like I said, you might have read about me in the papers, back when papers weren't bullshit. San Diego State University lost a few hundred thousand dollars in medical research equipment.

Cambridge, Oxford, I always liked the English countryside. Prague, Spain.

*Spain.*

More lightning comes in followed by a huge thunderclap. The house, my two-bedroom house in the middle of the Great American Plains, shakes like someone picks it up by the foundation and drops it.

*¡Por Favor! Necesito vivir. Tengo niños,* she had pleaded with me. It was the first time we had gone to Spain. I couldn't help her. There was no way, no time.

Time. What a joke.

But up here in the present, with the lightning and tumors, the rain and the waiting, the clock on the wall is drowned out by the steady roaring on the tin roof. Can't hear it, but I know it's there. It's always there. Outside, the rain falls on the sodden dirt and replenishes the cycle of the Earth. I know it's there, too.

Young men look to the sky and old men can't stop staring at the ground.

I take a sip of the chocolate milk, and it is tepid. Anything else makes me crap fire these days. Warm, thick milk runs down my old geezer's esophagus, and I think about the Spanish woman. She is what the storm is holding up to the thin, vibrating glass of my front windows. Doesn't this storm know I used to be practically famous? I used to inspire people? I see her at night during storms like this one. She flits around my room and won't leave me alone. *You could have done something,* she says in her old music accent, speaking English in death. *There was time to try something.* And then the sobbing.

Often, neurological tumors deep in the cerebellum can cause hallucinations. They told me this, but it doesn't help. I

don't feel better about it.

NYU medical school used to have a very active vivisection lab. Vivisection is when animals are butchered in experiments to get big fat government grants for academics to put on their resumes. They tell you it's for medical research, but surely you don't buy that. I didn't. That's why I went to Northwestern with our team. We went there with coils of wire and big putty blocks of C-4. And that's not all. There was UC Berkley, UC Irvine, and UC Santa Cruz. A veritable tour of California. The University of Georgia, Brown, Vermont, UMASS, Boston Fucking College. They all had their big ideas and stray cats and surrendered dogs. My last pet died two years ago, and I miss him like hell. I got him as a gift when he was a two-year-old mutt liberated from a fine New England private university's lab. When he died, he was almost sixteen.

More thunder, the rain increases, and great forks of lightning shoot deep into the earth, under the heavy silent brown world of worms, anaerobic bacteria, and graves. Ozone floats across the land and into my dark living room. Old Argos, sixteen years. Oh no, I quit firebombing labs a long time ago, after my several stints prison for ecoterrorism (remember my bearded face on Larry King Live?), but a young revolutionary gave Argos to me after they freed him from his fate. I'm well known in that certain circle. Like you've probably heard of me. My attention wavers back to the storm and the cascading whirlwinds and aquadervishes being enacted just out my window, on my roof, and my tumored mind. They say I won't notice serious motor impairment for another six months if I'm lucky. But imagine living with a little time bomb monster in your head. Imagine those horrible tentacles branching out from the tumor like some resilient moving octopus. Imagine them snaking in and out and through your one-of-a-kind,

precious, irreplaceable brain meat. You would be very aware of clocks, like the darkened one on my wall I can't hear but can hear. It took me precisely one month to come to terms with my inoperable friend. The truth is we all have our own little time bombs, ticking away. You have one too. Might not be a tumor, but the clock you can't hear is ticking.

That's what makes us live.

That's what makes us laugh.

The doctor says there's always hope.

Heavy rain is immediate; we all turn to face the wind. The rain in Spain was like this. *No me mate*. You see, our teams didn't only do the United States and England. We bombed our way through Europe's finest animal labs as well. The first and only time I was in Spain was on a mission. We had to go to a grand old school, the first school in Europe, and take care of some unchecked hatred. The rain is pouring off my porch in great white sheets reflecting light with no source. I hate to hear that school's name. It's where I picked up my Latina ghost that runs around my room at night. Its name even sounds the sibilant anthroporphism of rain.

### *Salamanca.*

Here in the darkness, approaching my mid-seventies and death at precisely the same rate of speed, it's easy to close the eyes and picture 1967. I see the mirrors of my youth. Mirrors on the wall and smaller mirrors on record jackets. If you could have seen my eyes back then, you would have seen someone who was pissed. Someone who had taken enough. Someone who was going to change the world. Fast forward twenty years and you would see someone who wanted the world to change him. My youth was spent in deep woods beside streams, outcroppings of rock, and the call of

birds. Things scurried through underbrush, I learned all about explosives in the Marine Corps, got out and learned about animal rights groups that actually did something *besides* talk, parade celebrities around, and raise money.

Action.

Animals were dying when I was young, and I did my part to even the score. Animals are dying now. The rain sounds like snakes on my roof, or maybe marbles, and a lightning volley brighter and longer than any before slides around my carpet, walls, and luminesces across the ceiling. The wind finds a loose shingle and starts pounding out uneven rhythms somewhere above my head and to the left. The clacking in the dark takes me there. *Clack*. The complicated rhythm of the loose shingle and the never-ending rain picks me up and I'm there. I don't want to be there. I've been trying to stay away for fifty years. The thin windows. My wife is gone. She used to help me. God we were young once. The last one, my old dog Argos is two years dead. I'm alone in the dark and that arrhythmic beating like a black heart takes me to the smoky air, the blue night, the Mediterranean. I shut my rheumy eyes and try to concentrate on the thunderstorm rolling across the plains outside my house like the ages. It doesn't work. That sound takes me there.

The bar was crowded, typical of a Salamanca flamenco bar on a Saturday night. The troupe was stomping through blazing guitar and dance numbers and suddenly the music stopped. After applause and moments of motionlessness, three, perfect, horrible notes on the Spanish guitar rang from the guitarist's fingers and slid down the walls signaling the beginning of the *petenera*. The dancer was lithe, dark, and covered in sweat. I felt anticipation, immediacy. I knew this was important.

Her gypsy clothes were clinging to her body. Three more notes, the last one lower this time. The singularity of time and space and eons of human dreams and those three notes. The bar was clogged with smoke and Spaniards and no one moved. We were too transfixed, too terrified by her *duende* to move, to breathe. The dancer glanced up on the last of three more, slower notes, and the world stopped. I was three tables back, and when she glanced up our stares fused. She pulled one arm skyward, slowly, like Michelangelo's ceiling, like Gauguin's insanity. Without dropping her gaze, she stomped her right foot. *Clack*. She blinked those huge war-like almond eyes. Again, *Clack*. Five notes in rapid succession from the seated guitarist. *Clack, Clack*. Faster. The complex rhythm with the counterpoint of the simple note processions and the stomps was mathematical and beyond me, beyond the stars, beyond everything. Three notes. *Clack*. Four notes, faster. *Clack-Clackity, Clack-Clackity*. Math being controlled and contained and unleashed on plywood Spanish floor. Same sequence again. Again. Faster. My colleagues and I were on business in Salamanca, Spain. The next night we were conducting a mission on the oldest university in Europe who harbored one of the most active animal experimentation programs in Europe. That was the next night, but that night, at that moment, the world was stopped and I was listening to the *Clack, Clackity-Clackity-Clack* of the dancer's mathematical *duende* and the particular tragedy of a lone flamenco guitar. Throughout the dance, our eyes would meet across the room, across the tops of the red-glass-sheathed table candles, across the thick smoke, and I would burn. As I watched the sinewy Spanish dancer, paradigms rearranged and I didn't imagine she would haunt my mind during thunderstorms. *No me mate*, she had said, the very next night.

A long time ago, just after I turned

twenty, I had one of those days. You know the ones, sixty degrees, breeze. Wind chimes. I rode my bike, way out in the trails near where I was living and sat on a stump. Behind me were deep woods heavy with coniferous cedars, hues of canoe birches and the human heart. Before me was a gently sloping hill with tall pines, maples, and low young saucer magnolias standing sentinel around an opening. The grey hills were in the distance getting greyer with distance. The sun illuminated the small triangle patterns that make up the skin of my left hand. Look close enough and you'll see yours. Leaves dangled in the steam engine wind and dropped sunlight off the undersides. It was one of those days. An unknown metallic banging in the distance reminding me progress wasn't too far away and something had to be done about it. This was one of those days. You know, days before brain tumors lodged deep in the cerebellum, days before the induction of "inoperable" to the daily vocabulary. My uncle had a brain tumor that changed his life forever, but at twenty I didn't think about my elliptical head ever playing host to one of those time bomb monsters. On this day, death and old man's aches were far away.

Then, I looked at the sky.

I sat on the stump and had no foreknowledge of my Latina ghost, my *fantasma español*. I was in college studying ecology and marine biology. My world was forest preserves, Eastern Spinner Dolphins, and Beluga Whales, not diseased brain meat under siege.

I had mountain biked up there in the spearmint mountain air to match my bike, sat on the stump, and took in the world. I could feel then. Now, I feel faded. I took in the trees and the left slanting spider webs of shadows across the brown, acorn-strewn ground. I could feel the dimes of white sunlight on the dark green leaves of low bushes. Heard the whippoorwill off to my right, other

bird calls and answers, the silent sunlight, the soft give of the sand-colored pine needle carpet the color of ancient Pylos. I could feel the swirling patterns of wind through boughs, branches, bending appendages of the great live oaks. I was just about to graduate from harmless PETA to a more "active" group, and I had never witnessed the isolated beauty of the dance of Andalusia. Nothing existed; all was now.

That was then. Now the rain is intensifying. Montana thunderstorms should have their own family and genus. The falling water mocks me and reminds me of the pain I've caused. "You had them all fooled," it says. "High and mighty liar," it howls from the sky, across Great Plains, over ponds with complete silence and dreaming coy fish only sixteen inches below the surface, across my property, up my stairs and through my eaves. I try to shut my eyes, but the thunder forces them open, pries them open with a cacophony of the end of time, or at least the end of mine. My retinas with their mild cataracts are stunned when a bolt hits my property a hundred feet from the house. "You can't run from me," the storm says.

The anger of Zeus. The wrath of Achilles.

Ball lightning skitters across the yard and I know if I keep thinking about it, those damn balls will hone in on my thoughts and explode through my window. But it ends before the thought does. I'll always be afraid of ball lightning. The shingle still clacks up there in the tempest and my black heart beats irregularly. "I'm coming for you," the darkness whispered through the blinds.

I hear it. Flamenco heels on plywood. The ticking of the clock. The rotting bones of Argos buried out near his beloved Douglas Fir. We prop our sanity

up on crutches of self-belief. Does it matter if that belief is a lie? Take the crutch of self-belief away and watch some old poor fool fall on his face. Watch him break, bleed, and sink into the floor. When something makes you peel off those ready made masks, the Prufrock good-time masks, you're left with what you really are. Maybe a liar, or a drug addict, or a date rapist.

Or a murderer.

The storm is out of control. I saw my face for the first time in years today, my real face minus the pretty mask. This storm is showing me with its blue energy and ululant thunder. Now it's pressing something else against the window. Maybe a silhouette? And that damn shingle. *Clackity-Clackity Clack*. Three somber nylon stringed notes packed with innocence, growth, lies, death, and rebirth. Three notes. *Clack*. My layers are pulled back, my disguises abandoned on the shag carpet in the dark. My real face, not the caring husband face, or the media darling hero for the animals face, or my nice, happy and adjusted face, is here in the dark. Exposed. Open. Being felt by inky blackness and sporadic blue light. Finally, after all these years, here I am.

I thought finding yourself was supposed to be a good thing.

I'm finally honest, and no one's left to see. Parents? Dead. Wife? Dead. Brother? Dead. Best friend? Worse than dead and rotting in a nursing home. Ever faithful pooch...dead. They say rebuilding is possible after revelation and coming clean. But here I am, in the wine-dark storm with mask after mask crumpled on the ground, real face with slightly protruding horns revealed, black heart laid bare, and no one is here to see. No one here to rebuild for. I think of their bones after all these years. How they must be so still.

I totter to the windows after getting up

and feeling my knees grind glass in the joints, intending to open both of the big tall windows. Before I do, I notice the ghost image of a person the night is pressing against the window. It's me. With its formless hands, the night is holding my reflection, horns and all, up to the windows. The windows are big and nice, and I throw them up in their frames. My dead wife liked a lot of light in the main room. I'm almost knocked back by the wind and spray that immediately roars in my living room with its stupid wallpaper. The wind rockets around the room and I feel spray on my face and chest. I don't feel much anymore. I thought finding yourself was supposed to be a good thing. The wind is howling. I sit back on the couch and see the dark curtains abandoning themselves to the wind, to the torment, not even thinking about what they might want to do. Good, bad, Hell or high water, they don't care. Those damn curtains! Amazed, I look at the curtains and laugh. It sounds like someone having their throat sawed open with a dull knife.

00:45

*No me mate.* Shock. Confusion. Is it the same girl from last night, I wondered. I was in black and running a final check on Salamanca's vivisection lab. I wired it myself and knew it would take at least two minutes to get back and stop the automated countdown. This wasn't simple plastics, this was fully funded state of the art, highly organized destruction. We had a team of thirty on this particular job, were past the point of return, and I knew it. Me, I used to walk through the labs until thirty seconds were left and then run the hell out of them. It was my way of courting death, my way of feeling alive with so many animals dying day after day after day.

I saw her tied to the far wall in complex, heavy chains. Her lab badge read "Dr. Elena Morealis, Directora." A vivisector,

and a very infamous one at that. She was on our top ten most cruel list so of course I knew the director's name, but I had never seen her. I also didn't know that Dr. Morealis earned spare money by pursuing her passion with a flamenco troupe about once a month. I read that later, after all this was over, in the papers. But it clicked in my then tumorless brain that I had watched her dance last night, even fell in love with her a little bit. This pondering brought the readout on my watch down to 00:30.

"You're the dancer." This wasn't a question.

She looked confused and then said, "Yes, flamenco is my pastime. Please. You have to stop this. That other man said he was doing this for the animals. I know of you and your people. We can reach a compromise."

I didn't say anything. Cedar or Ted or Al would have said something about no compromise and complete freedom for all animals, turned and walked out.

"I'll stop researching. I'll stop them." The whites of her eyes were lined with red, her collarbones desperate and thin. Her voice tighter. "Listen, I have children." Her voice sounded like it was shredding in her throat. She screamed, shaking in her chair, veins at the point of rupture. "I have children you monster. How can you take life to save life?" Her voice broke off into a shrill scream. Still, I stood there.

00:21

I got on the walkie and shouted, "Got a live one here. Kill the explosives," even though I knew there was no time. *Stay with her*, a voice said in my head. *Stay with the directora.*

The voice crackled back full of treble and the end. "No can do. That's Dr. Morealis, the Josef Mengele of

vivisectors. She's gotta go. Get the hell out," the British voice said. I protested. I was ignored.

00:15

"Do something," she said. She looked at me from dark brown eyes wide with the knowledge of her end. I thought about all that long, talented, sinewy flesh, that curvy girl shape and five hundred pounds of various explosives. I thought of her children playing in the sun or in day care.

"Do something!" The universe spiraled down, the walls started breathing, my vision reduced to a long tunnel fixed on her quivering form, the quivering small form of a Mother.

"Do something or you will always remember this." I was silent. "Murderer!" She spat at me, Latina spirit unbroken in the face of doom. Snot was running from her left nostril and her eyes were bloodshot. "*No... me... mate!*" She screamed. It sounded like she was dying. A scream like that can end the world. A good portion of the white of her left eye suddenly went bright red and she kept screaming.

I did something.

00:08

I turned and ran.

I was caught in the blast radius. I almost died because my coworkers refused to take me to a hospital until everyone got changed and we got to France. I was there for a week and it seemed to constantly rain. Like now. We never got caught for the Salamanca bombing, though everyone knew it was our organization. It made European headlines for weeks. She was so beautiful, young, and intelligent, various papers would say. The public wasn't used to the thought of a young woman, not even a young woman who tortured

animals to death, being reduced to flying shreds of blood, tissue and bone. It shook the continent. The public was outraged. I was never attached to that certain attack.

After Salamanca, I stopped caring about getting caught. I got bolder and more reckless and did a total of thirteen years in jail over four different stints. The day I got released after three years in prison I went to an upscale furrier in Manhattan and trashed his coats, his store, and his face. I broke both of his arms and went back to jail for another two years. I was on 20-20. You probably saw me. People called me, this mask-less failure in the dark storm, they called me a hero, an animal liberator, a kind-hearted idealist. Or they called me a naive utopist, whatever that means. People sent me cards and notes for decades. Some saw me as their partner, a co-conspirator and a like-minded mentor. They saw what they wanted to see. They sent me bombing plans, blue prints, and information on animal abuse. I was their symbol. That's the problem with being somebody's symbol; you can never live up to their idea, their perfect vision. You will always fall off that pedestal. Symbols get forgotten due to a lack of substance. Young men with beards tried to recruit me for projects. People wanted to meet me, marry me, or kill me. Death threats came too, by the truckload.

They think they know me.

Some see me as a leader, a beginning, an illuminated version of themselves. I went to jail, I freed animals, I brought the torture of animals into the public's frontal lobe. Fate brought an inoperable monster into my cerebellum. Some call me a beacon, a light, a savior even.

I am a killer of Mothers.

They invent me and want me to address them in the familiar. I am their

invention, and they need their invention to work. They know these ripped and torn masks of yesteryear lying on my floor with the lightning, wind, and rain. The one with the hero beard. The one with the white, straight teeth. They can't see my limited time, my dead dog under his big Fir, this stupid wallpaper. They can't see the Mother's small delicate collarbones under a thin veil of skin. Do they know there's no one left to rebuild for? I want to dig up all their bones, all those people I loved. I want all their bones so I can make a casket out of them. I want to lie inside them, let them cradle me, and laugh my slit-throat laugh. No, the people who admire me, they don't admire me. They can't feel the wind rushing through these windows or share my fear of ball lightning. They know what they saw on 60 minutes, 20-20, Oprah Winfrey. They can't see the parts of my body rotting with old age. History remembers Che in the beret with the determined look on his face. It doesn't remember him being tortured in the jungle, feet hacked off. They can't know I lie face down on my wife's grave and scream how sorry I am until my throat bleeds and I'm escorted out of the graveyard by police. They know what they saw in the papers, the beard, the tan lean body, the piercing blue eyes ready to change the world, ready to force the world to change. They don't feel this plains thunder storm or see these curtains silhouetted by the lightning and abandoning themselves to the will of the wind for better or worse, for salvation or damnation. Either one is fine. They can't see these eyes the color of  
of                      dead                      fish.

They can't see these horns.

## Contributors' Bios

**Elizabeth Murray** - Elizabeth Murray is a practicing Druid, and proud (if occasionally harried) mother of one 14 year-old daughter. She describes herself happily as, "What happens when a 'Goth' grows up." She lives in Erie, PA.

**Romella D. Kitchens** - Ms. Kitchens is a nationally and internationally published poet and Spoken Word artist. She has a chapbook published by *Main Street Rag* in Charlotte, North Carolina titled *HIPHOP WARRIOR*. She performs with an Avant Garde jazz band called "The Cap Gun Quartet" and led by Jeff Stringer and has a new CD scheduled to come out with them shortly. She had two chapbooks coming out from Pudding House Press in late 2007 or early 2008: *The Immortals* and *The Heaven of Elephants*. *The Immortals* is poetry for adults and *The Heaven of Elephants* is thematic poetry written for a child-audience. She has been performing poetry for over twenty years and has had poems published in numerous periodicals over the years, including *Iodine Press*, *Caprice*, *MudFish*, *5AM*, *Alpha Beat Soup*, *Philadelphia Poets*, *Hot Metal (on line)*, *Soul Pit (on line)*, *Paper Street Press*, *The California Quarterly* and many more. She reads on a regular basis in academic and Spoken Word settings interchangeably.

**Madonna Dries Christensen** - Madonna Dries Christensen's work has appeared in more than one hundred publications. Three times nominated for the Pushcart Prize, she writes a column for *Creativity Connection* and is on the editorial board of *Doorways*, a memoir writing project in Sarasota, Florida. She's the author of two books, *Swinging Sisters*, and *Masquerade: The Swindler Who Conned J. Edgar Hoover*.

**Nic Sebastian** - Nic Sebastian hails from Arlington, Virginia and travels

widely. Her work has appeared in publications such as *The Shit Creek Review*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Lily* and *The Adroitly Placed Word*. She blogs at *Very Like A Whale* (<http://verylikeawhale.wordpress.com>).

**Paul Carlino** - Paul lives in Northern Virginia with his wife and two young children.

**Michael Lee Johnson** - Mr. Michael Lee Johnson lives in Chicago, IL, after spending 10 years in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada during the Vietnam era. He is a freelance writer and poet. He is interested in social, religious topics, and the need for universal health care in the United States. He is presently self-employed, with a previous background in social service areas. He has a B.A. degree in sociology, worked on a Masters Program in Correctional Administration. Recent published poems: *The Orange Room Review*; *Bolts Of Silk*; *The Flask Review*; *Apollo's Lyre*; *Chantarelle's Notebook*; *Fresh! On Line Literary Magazine*. Mr. Johnson has several poems pending publication March through July, 2007.

**Catherine Cheek** - Catherine Cheek has a BA in Linguistics, a brown belt in karate, and a garden that doesn't yield nearly as much as she would like. When not writing, she sculpts and paints, but her full time job is that of mom. She lives in Tempe, Arizona, and is a graduate of Clarion San Diego, class of 2007. [www.cagedfaeries.com](http://www.cagedfaeries.com)  
[www.catherinecheek.com](http://www.catherinecheek.com)

**R.B. Trout**

**S.K. Tatiner** - S. K. Tatiner writes short stories and plays. Born and raised in New York City, Susan now lives, works, and writes in central New Jersey. She is a member of the Artsbridge Writers Group in the Lambertville-New Hope area and is grateful to the members of the group for their friendship and criticism. One of her short stories will be

published this October in the *Litchfield Review*.

**William R. Stoddart** - William R. Stoddart lives in Pennsylvania. He has fiction published in *The Pittsburgh Quarterly* online and more work in *Insolent Rudder*. His poetry has appeared in *The Adirondack Review* and *The Pedestal Magazine*.

**Rebecca Barbush** - Rebecca has been writing fiction for a couple years now, but hasn't had anything published until now. She belongs to a writers' group in Pittsburgh, Pa and works in the communications department at a local hospital.

**Dee Rimbaud** - Dee Rimbaud is an artist, poet, novelist and occasional new age gypsy. He is currently living in Isla Cristina, in the south of Spain, with his partner and child, after four months of travelling about in a Mercedes 609d van. He is author of two poetry collections, *The Bad Seed* (Stride, 1998) and *Dropping Ecstasy With The Angels* (Bluechrome, 2004); and one novel, *Stealing Heaven From The Lips Of God* (Bluechrome, 2004). He edited the charity poetry anthology, *The Book Of Hopes And Dreams* (Bluechrome, 2006). He also edits The AA Independent Press Guide, a free online directory of magazines and publishers, hosted on his website alongside a host of useful writers' resources, as well as a portfolio of his art and a selection of his writing. His art is frequently used in magazines and internet zines and has graced the book jackets of collections by Janet Buck, Rupert Loydell, Norman Jope and many others. Dee's art is now available on t-shirts, posters, cards and assorted gift items via his CafePress shop.