Westview is published semiannually by the Department of Language & Literature of Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

Westview publishes fiction, poetry, prose poems, drama, nonfiction, book reviews, literary criticism, and artwork. Westview holds first rights for all works published. Send submissions and SASE to James Silver, Editor: Westview; 100 Campus Drive; Weatherford, OK 73096.

Subscription for two years (four issues): $15 in United States; $25 out of country. Single issues: $6 including postage; $5 if not mailed. Checks are to be made payable to Westview; 100 Campus Drive; Weatherford, OK 73096.

Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5” x 11” white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5” x 14”. However, photographs or slides of larger works may be submitted.

3. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors’ notes.

4. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to:
   James Silver
   Editor, Westview
   100 Campus Drive
   Southwestern Oklahoma State University
   Weatherford, OK 73096

Please visit our website at:
http://www.swosu.edu/resources/publications/westview

Cover artwork by Kevin Collins
Contents

George Young ___________________ Nature Trail, Saguaro National Monument page 4

George Young ___________________ Poem on a Mountain Bluebird page 5

Maxima Kahn ___________________ Sonata page 6

Stephen Bracco __________________ Fool’s Mate page 7

Gerald Zipper __________________ Wanting Too Much page 13

Marilyn Ringer __________________ Why Rats Make Perfect Subjects page 14

Stanley M. Noah __________________ black birds in the tree house saloons page 15

Rainbow Shultz __________________ Harold Goes to Math Camp page 16

Matthew Brennan __________________ Girl in Dressing Gown page 21

Shavawn M. Berry __________________ Descent into Madness page 22

Shavawn M. Berry __________________ Feral Child page 23

William J. Rushton __________________ Talking to God page 24

Matthew Muresan __________________ Life Science page 25

Amy Spade ______________________ Eight page 30

Amy Spade ______________________ Conveyed page 31

Kevin Collins ____________________ Under the Tree page 32

Thomas Robert Barnes ____________ Cigarettes After Church page 48

David Rogers ____________________ Penelope’s Lover page 49

Molly Lynn Watt __________________ Cerulean Passion page 50

Robin Reinach __________________ Wrong page 51

Anni Macht Gibson _________________ The Ticket page 54
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Nau</td>
<td><strong>Just So</strong></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trina Baker</td>
<td><strong>Hunger Moon</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret H. Brooks</td>
<td><strong>Reflections</strong></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John G. Morris</td>
<td><strong>The Speed of Desire</strong></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kymberli Ward</td>
<td><strong>Undefeated</strong></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel R. Schwarz</td>
<td><strong>Moon Blue</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank De Canio</td>
<td><strong>Botched Robbery</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Cooperman</td>
<td><strong>William Eagle Feather, Impatient for an Answer</strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Cooperman</td>
<td><strong>The Widow Burden Meets William Eagle Feather Outside of Gold Creek</strong></td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Cooperman</td>
<td><strong>Lavinia Burden Risks Everything</strong></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Cooperman</td>
<td><strong>William Eagle Feather Flees Gold Creek with the Widow Burden</strong></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Cooperman</td>
<td><strong>Sheriff Dennehy Discovers the Widow Burden Gone</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denis Saleh</td>
<td><strong>Stars</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nature Trail, Saguaro National Monument

by George Young

Out here at sunset—
utter silence
and dusk, that eraser.
Old stars arriving in the blue above the sooty mountains.
Sun dumping its magma in the west.
And the tall guardians, maybe 200 years now, bearing witness
to what?—
a certain stillness
beyond chattering atoms, beyond the spinning universe, beyond
even death—
something
only the heart can hear, the heart of sound itself.

Photograph by J. Nallon
Poem on a Mountain Bluebird

by George Young

The Navajo stones never managed such a blue as you,
nor the lips of the man
pulled from an icy river last winter.

You are a grace
never mastered by earth's bluest eye
at the foot of the glacier, open to a cloudless sky—

nor recognized by idle schoolchildren
staring out the window at what appears to be a blue ribbon
tied to a telephone wire.

You are a flash of living, breathing blue.
And Lord what am I
that such a bird can escape from the cage of my skull and fly.
Sonata

by Maxima Kahn

Feast
your eyes on the gold
and silver of the morning
light in these trees,
your ears
on the rhythmic drumming
of the woodpecker, the funny laughter
of some little bird
snickering like a mischievous boy.

This is the balm of morning,
its healing salve,
everything in cahoots:
the dark purple
petunias shuddering
to the same pulse
as the clack of insects,
a persistent cheep
from the canyon below
punctuating at
precise intervals,

and when the leaf lets go
the branch, when the neighbor
sings out to his dog, the way
someone’s radio makes
a low undertone, or a cloud drifts
like a high soprano
over the whole arrangement,
even the infinitely slow
bass carillon of new
growing trees is part
of this harmony; nothing mars
the perfection
of the score, nothing
dampens the day.
Fool’s Mate

As the chess match commenced, my maladjusted and rat-faced manservant, Inchwing, slouched against a bust of my great-grandfather, Beauregard St. Fustian, who’d grown rich providing pastries to both Union and Confederate soldiers. Inchwing’s family had for generations worked for the Fustian clan until he’d been caught regularly exporting dessert spoons from the premises in his socks. He’d been placed in my care in the hopes of a transformation. Tightening my smoking jacket over my expansive belly—raised in the family business of Fustee Pastries had enlarged not only my bank account but also my girth—I swore I once again heard derisive snickering coming from the framed portraits of my ancestors. Orrick St. Fustian, they said from beyond the grave, you’ll always be the family fool. I’d tried in vain to instill in Inchwing a sensitivity to proper servility, but he was an unrepentant lowbrow, and in his butler’s tails resembled a shaved hyena entangled in an unfortunate traveler’s luggage.

“Odds are ten to one for the hometown guy,” Inchwing whispered as the players took their seats in Fustian Manor’s library. “Already put down a wad of green on Snodgrass. He’s had a rough year, but he’ll slaughter the Russian kid.”

Snodgrass was a brooding scarecrow with bony wrists sticking out from his jacket sleeves. Despite his success as a chess master, Snodgrass’s reputation was that of a petulant loner, and indeed the gossip was that his marriage was on the rocks. His young Russian opponent, Blochenko, was a pale specimen of sickly boyhood in his gray V-neck sweater and strangling necktie. He flinched as his grandfather, a cigar-chomping bulldog plucked whole from the streets of old Moscow, commanded him to achieve nothing less than total victory.

Snodgrass’s manager, Dreeser, had oiled coils of black hair slicked back to show a shiny melon of a forehead and jughead ears. He was behind his charge, rubbing Snodgrass’s bony shoulders and providing encouragement:

“Snoddy, old b-b-boy, you’re going to blaze like a ph-ph-phoenix today.”

Inchwing poked me in the belly. “That’s no lie, B-b-boss. And I’m going to make a b-b-bundle.”

I frowned at my manservant, and not only due to his the cruel jest. “Really, Inchwing. Gambling on a chess game? And at ten to one? Quite a risk. If Snodgrass doesn’t win—”

Inchwing’s coattails flared out as he shoved both hands into his trouser pockets, a gesture I’d repeatedly discouraged in him. “Guy’s deep in debt, Boss. He’s gotta win. Plus, the Russian kid’s out of his league. It’s a cakewalk.”

My stomach grumbled, and I had to concur. The Blochenko boy was but a sapling, and as my family history proved, pecuniary greed forced people into ethical compromises. I said, “The wife undoubtedly has expensive tastes.”

Inchwing jerked his bushy brows, proud of his inside knowledge of the ugly specifics.

“Ain’t the wife, Boss.” He chucked his chin up at a young blonde woman in a red leather skirt and chalky white blouse, whom gossip claimed to be Snodgrass’s mistress.

“Babs Elori,” said Inchwing. “Dumb as a sock, and with a bottomless purse.”

She was picking from a plate of complimentary Fustee Pastries and squinted at the upright demo board displaying a chess grid with magnetized pieces propped up, to allow the audience a view of the players’ moves. She looked as lost as I did in my few games of chess with Inchwing. The display grid had a nearly military aspect to it with its number-and-letter coordinates, an irritating system for me, and apparently for her, to comprehend.

Across the aisle from Babs Elori, Mrs. Snodgrass sat in a boxy brown pantsuit with close-cropped platinum hair, showing off diamond
earrings and a face that looked chipped out of oak.

Everyone knew her story: a Russian gymnast who'd defected in her heyday to marry the up-and-coming American chess genius. Although she was still muscular, Mrs. Snodgrass had bulked out since her days on the pommel horse, the languid life of a chess widow providing her with a taste for the glittering things in life.

I was relieved when Inchwing turned from gossip to the strategies displayed on the demo board. A dozen moves in, Blochenko shyly brought out his red queen. The boy played tightly with skeptical caution while his grandfather’s cigar blew fumes upon my library’s rare editions. Snodgrass’s play was looser, advancing with one piece while withdrawing with another, only to reveal the hidden attack by a third piece. His was a reckless yet aggressive strategy. By middlegame he had blocked all of Blochenko’s pawns, claiming piece after piece and forcing the Russian boy into a consistent defense. Snodgrass checked, and two moves later the boy counterchecked.

“Spite check,” said Inchwing, sucking on his teeth. “He plays like you.”

I felt sorry for the boy hunched over the board with his grandfather glaring at his back. Dreeser watched coolly, his legs in silk trousers crossed, one suede shoe bobbing. His forehead was inexplicably shiny with sweat; Snodgrass was winning, but Dreeser looked nervous.

Blochenko lost his beloved red queen and all his other essential pieces as Snodgrass bounded toward the conclusion; he slid his rook up to Blochenko’s back row for a check and as a second pincer with his other rook, already in a protected third row position. The audience murmured, and I looked to my manservant for explanation.

Inchwing leaned over to me, his cheap cologne tickling my nostrils. “All over for Russia. His pawn is blocked at c7, and Snodgrass is going to move his queen to h4 to get the king in a diagonal check, and then he’ll move his knight to e5 for the mate.”

He blinked at me, delighting in the confounded look on my face at the game’s jargon. “A child could see it, Boss.”

Miffed by Inchwing’s critique, I slid a chocolate-covered strawberry between my lips and looked to Snodgrass’s party: his wife was pleased, a smile hacked into her severe face. Coach Dreeser’s forehead gleamed with beads of sweat, his sugar-bowl ears reddening; beside him, Babs Elori traced a crimson fingernail back and forth on his thigh as she squinted at the notation running down the side of the board.

When he finally reached up to the board, Snodgrass closed his fingers around not the queen, but the knight. Inchwing gasped, along with others in the crowd. Blochenko straightened in his chair, and his gruff grandpa, upon seeing the move displayed on the board, rose to his feet. Incredulous voices rose up, yet the judges remained calm while they examined the board. Dreeser, too, finally stood.

“It’s a stalemate!” Inchwing yelped, flinging up his arms, his jacket riding up on him.

“The jerk played it in the exact wrong order. Now the Russian, he can’t make any move without putting himself in check.” He threw his hands to his face. “Even you could have seen that, Boss!”

I cast aside the sting of my servant’s critique as the judge addressed the crowd and, as anticipated, announced the stalemate. Dreeser went up to Snodgrass and patted him on the back; Snodgrass shrugged him off, sending his water glass crashing to the floor and the hundred-year-old wood planks of my forefathers. With a broad smile, young Blochenko looked stunned to have been retrieved from the brink of failure, and he faced his grandfather, arms upraised for a hug. The old man swung his hand back and slapped the boy across the face. The crowd hushed, and the old man hustled the boy away.

For the rest of that day and evening, a shaken Inchwing returned to his own chessboard to replay the entire game, thanks to the printout of moves supplied by the judges. It was well known that his
ex-hero Snodgrass did that very thing at the end of every match: replayed both sides of the game to catch subtleties missed the first time around. As I was hosting the players and their families for an overnight stay in Fustian Manor’s many guest rooms, I felt sure that Snodgrass was torturing himself with that very ritual, wishing to rewrite history while stinking up his guest room with the smell of his cigarettes. I fell asleep in my own quarters contemplating the day’s unfortunate events—the shocking upset, an old man’s cruelty to his grandson, the stained wood floor—and after a night of fitful chessboard phantoms was awakened at dawn by Inchwing. Delivering breakfast to our guest, he had found the fallen chess champion, Cecil Snodgrass, dead in his room.

The body lay face down on the carpet, the back of its head impolitely dented in by the apple-shaped lead ashtray I’d purchased some years back as a memento of my trip to Sir Isaac Newton’s home in England. The ashtray lay on the floor, its cheery souvenir inscription grimly inapt.

Inchwing said, “He was clobbered by the apple, and gravity took over.”

On the bedside table sat Snodgrass’s chessboard and a full glass of water. To my eyes, the board was set up as an exact replica of the previous day’s match at the stalemate. No doubt the victim had finished replaying the game when he’d been hit from behind. Yet Inchwing was puzzled. “Them last pieces,” he said and got out his own stained and wrinkled notation of the game. “They’re wrong. The king’s already moved away from the queen, but she hasn’t moved yet. Why’d he do that?”

As if the corpse would provide an answer, he crouched down in front of the body, his arms hanging between his knees the way monkeys are known to squat. I wished to lock up the room immediately for the police, but I pressed my foot down onto a patch of spilled water in the carpet. I lowered my bulk with a grunt for inspection and sensed an odor that had followed me since I’d awakened. Years of training in the pastry business had sensitized my nose to the slightest variation, and I sniffed thrice. Besides the smell of cigarette butts scattered on the carpet, there was also the unmistakable stench of a cheap cigar.

I was about to pursue that mystery when something caught my eye. From this low angle, I had a view of Snodgrass’s face in one-quarter profile: in death his sallow visage looked just slightly more forlorn than in life. Blood lined the inside of his mouth just behind the teeth, a pitiful sight, and I was about to stand to get away from the grotesquerie when I found myself peering closer at the corpse’s grim rictus. Ordering Inchwing to fetch me a fountain pen from the desk drawer, I tapped at the teeth with the impromptu probe, and I opened the jaw a fraction to make a discovery of which Newton would have been proud: the red behind the teeth was not blood at all but became clear once the item slid loose of the incisors.

“Jeez,” Inchwing whispered. “The red queen. He’s bit into it with his teeth—” He stared bug-eyed as I handed him back the befouled pen, which he slid into his breast pocket, to my disgust, “—just like it were an apple.”

The guests were gathering about a pastry table which had been set up with plates of warmed sweet rolls, urns of coffee, and an array of pots steeping with select teas. I’d instructed Inchwing to reveal nothing of the calamity upstairs. For once, he obeyed me without question, no doubt eager to catch the one among them who was the killer.

“Snoddy is on a d-d-downward s-s-slope,” said Dreeser. He wore a royal blue terrycloth robe that ended at thin yet hirsute calves. “Yesterday’s game was just the culmination of t-t-two years of losses.”

“You made him take a dive,” said Inchwing as he presented a tray of cubed cantaloupe. He narrowed his eyes at Dreeser, almost as if admiring the other man’s criminality. “It’s the only explanation for Snodgrass’s final move.”
Dreeser threw his head back and spread his lips in a confident grin. "Ridiculous," he said.

"Fustian, your servant is a real fabulist." He was relaxed, his voice free of all stutter, as if empowered by the accusation. "When Snoddy comes down, we'll straighten that out."

Inchwing refilled the cup in my outstretched arm. "That s-s-stutter," he whispered with a nasty smirk, "it comes and goes, don't it?"

He was right: Dreeser's affliction resembled the manner in which some singers are golden-voiced in performance yet reduced to gibberish when speaking. I could not help, however, giving Inchwing a chastising look for his nasty humor.

He acted no better toward Mrs. Snodgrass, throwing her a snarl as she held out her teacup and saucer. Her hair was still sleep-squashed, and she was in a plain dressing gown with shoulder pads that added a militaristic touch. Her words bore the frost of a Russian accent tracing her words: "Stop lying, Dreeser. We all know it. You made a bundle fixing the game."

"You and that silly slut who doesn't know a queen's side from a fool's mate." She regained her steely composure and coldly ordered Inchwing to fetch her a sticky bun.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Snodgrass," I said, "but I sense my employee's offended you in some way."

Inchwing was reduced to a sheepish hunch as he brought me a warmed croissant on which he'd melted a pat of butter. "Lady gave me hell last night, Boss."

She tightened the belt of her robe. "Oh, please! Something woke me up, and I rung your man for a whiskey. When he brought it to me with ice, I was a bit short with him because I'd ordered it straight up." She shrugged and looked about the room. "He'd botched it. It was 2 a.m., and I was exhausted."

Inchwing said, "You're right, except for one thing." He appealed to me. "She asked for her booze on the rocks the first time, because I remember thinking as I went down to the bar, 'A rich dame like that, she's got plenty of rocks to wear, what does she need more for?'"

I raised one hand to prevent her rejoinder. "What is that, Mrs. Snodgrass, 'a fool's mate'?"

"A mate which traps a fool." She dabbed at her lips with a napkin as she glanced at the Blochen-
Fool’s Mate

kos, who were only then joining us in the dining room. Young Blochenko wore a purple bruise under his eye, and as I buttered my croissant—Inchwing being notoriously skimpy in a misguided attempt to force me to diet—I recalled his grandfather’s cruel slap but was unsure if it had been on that side of the face. The poor boy was in powder-blue pajamas dotted with a chess-piece design, which Inchwing could not help but admire. He ignored the young man’s injury—for streetwise Inchwing, black eyes and split lips were as common as paper cuts were for the rest of us. Grandpa Blochenko furiously puffed on a cigar in mere undershirt and trousers, suspenders loose at his sides. “That whole game was for fools!”

“Hey, Gramps,” said Inchwing, “that stalemate saved your kid from a loss.” He snapped his fingers at the sulking young Russian. “Hey, Boyo, how many rubles for the jammies?”

Dreeser said, “St. Fustian, can’t you c-c-control your butler? It’s too early for these sh-sh-shenanigans.”

I said, “Forgive me, Mr. Dreeser, if I retort with my own intrusion into your personal life. Have you always had this affliction of speech? Or is it an expression of guilt over your money-making scheme with Snodgrass?”

Dreeser sighed, “Fustian, I told you, such a scheme was entirely in your servant’s tiny mind. And as for the stutter, it is imperceptible if I can c-c-control it. And where is S-s-snoddy? He’s going to miss the cheesecake if you inhale all of it.”

Inchwing haw-hawed in my face, a subversion of my authority I ignored for a greater discovery: “Inchwing,” I said, “perhaps you could come clean as to why your jacket has smelled of Mr. Blochenko’s cigar since the moment you awoke me.”

He looked down sheepishly and held the silver tray before him like a pathetic shield.

“Jeez,” my butler said. “Well, it was like this. The old man, I could hear him screaming at the nephew when I passed their room around ten last night. I didn’t like him bullying his grandson, so I forced him out of his room to the servant’s quarters. His ashes got all over my jacket.” He looked at the old man as if he’d like to arrange a hit through past mob acquaintances. “Hey, right is right, and the way he treated that kid wasn’t.”

As the tumult of facts, truths, and lies roiled in my Fustian brain, I stirred the turmoil in my teacup. The liquid swirled with tiny leaves, and I craved a piece of cake sprinkled with chocolate shavings. “You’re right, Inchwing: right is indeed right. And, my dear friends, dead is dead, and so is Snodgrass.”

As anticipated, my guests stood with loud ejaculations of shock at my dramatic announcement, all seemingly genuine and impossible to discern from the fakery. I continued: “If I seem to forego mourning, my friends, it is only due to my fervor in exacting justice for the crime committed in my home. I propose that Mr. Snodgrass tried to provide us with the identity of his killer, and out of respect for the dead, I will pursue that line of inquiry.”

I stood and paced, my cashmere slippers whispering on the Oriental carpet’s dizzying designs.

“The killer enters Snodgrass’s room, and they get into an unexpected argument. Which of you was it, and what was it about? Was it over money, Mr. Dreeser? Or love and betrayal, my dear ladies? Or vengeance for the game, Messrs. Blochenko? In the heat of the moment, Snodgrass is felled with a blow to the head. The chessboard and water glass are upended. In a panic, our killer tries to replace the chess pieces by following the notation, but he gets it wrong. An understandable weakness, Miss Elori, with which I identify.”

The young woman grabbed at a nearby bear claw, either as weapon or for oral comfort. Dreeser tightened his arm around her shoulders. He said, “You c-c-can’t be s-s-serious.”

I continued: “Or perhaps Mr. Dreeser is the guilty party and sought to frame you, Miss Elori, with that obvious mistake. Or maybe it is Mrs.
Snodgrass, with that bit of whiskey business concerning my servant. Yes, Mrs. Snodgrass, I could not help being skeptical at your convenient alibi. "Something" awoke you—no doubt the crash of the blow—and there you are innocently in your room all but assured of my servant's collaboration. Unless of course you did the deed earlier, before even calling Inchwing, and merely conjured the alibi."

I looked to the younger Blochenko, who was slurping a spoonful of rice pudding. "Yet perhaps our young visitor committed the act in vengeance for the humiliation of a deliberate stalemate. When your grandfather had been taken away to the servants' quarters, maybe you received that shiner from Snodgrass in the struggle. Or indeed, sir—"

I extended an opened hand at the old man, "—you might have killed Snodgrass when no one would see you leaving the servants' quarters."

I stood before them all, teacup and saucer cradled at my chest, regal in my purple dressing gown. "Indeed, any one of you might have framed any of the others, and we'd be—forgive me—in a stalemate, were it not for the true chess master among us."

Inchwing blushed and ran his scuffed shoes on the carpet. "Aw, Boss."

"I refer to Snodgrass, Inchwing, not you. And please keep your shoes in a lustrous condition, as I've repeatedly told you."

I moved about the weighty silence until I was sure I held all present in the palm of my hand as sweetly as a sugar-dusted Fustee mini-muffin. I told them of the red queen gripped in Snodgrass's teeth, in Inchwing's words, "as if it were an apple." I'd obviously stunned them with my acumen, as my words were greeted with silence.

I continued: "Yes, an apple. The verboten fruit of Eden and also the shape of my ashtray with an inscription from Sir Isaac Newton's manor in England. Visitors there can stand before a plaque which claims to be the location of the very tree through which he was quite rudely reminded of the law of gravity."

Inchwing pointed to Babs Elori. "So it's the babe—her red hair."

"But Inchwing, couldn't Mrs. Snodgrass, the former queen of Mr. Snodgrass's life, also be indicted by that logic?"

He pointed at the Russians: "It was the kid, Blochenko. He played red in the match."

I said, "You only say that in order to more easily secure his prized pajamas. Perhaps in chomping on the chess piece, Snodgrass was even more subtly imitating the grandfather and his ubiquitous cigar."

I gave the old man a tight smile, eager to soon be rid of him and his stench. "Snodgrass obviously had noticed the ashtray's souvenir inscription before he filled it up with his cigarette butts, and so in his last moments bit down upon that symbolic apple of the red queen with an infinitely more clever message. Justice reaches out its inflexible hand, ladies and gentlemen. For you see, as Snodgrass knew, and as I do, and as any other well-read student of history knows, Sir Isaac Newton is doubly admired not only for his scientific brilliance but because he struggled with the common lingual difficulty of—"

"Stuttering!" Inchwing cried, extending a finger to the ceiling, and I swore to my Fustian ancestors that I could have lowered my own heavy object upon his skull in that moment. I'd no time for that, however, as Dreeser, finding all accusing eyes upon him, could no longer maintain the lie and ran for the exit. Inchwing tackled him at the pastry table, however, toppling it all with a wincing crack of wood. Dreeser was disoriented and pastry-covered long enough for the elder Blochenko to drop his full weight onto him and squat there smoking until the police arrived. The two women commenced reconciling on the couch.

"Fool's mate," I pronounced, my coda lost in the congratulations being showered upon Inchwing. He had no use for such glory, however, as he was too busy haggling with young Blochenko for the sale of his pajamas.
Wanting Too Much

by Gerald Zipper

Nobody admits it
but it hurts
like a stabbing cavity in a tooth
most of us want to be someone else
or something else
or somewhere else
we know we’re being foolish
but we crave it
many play at sleight of hand
waving wands and conjuring illusions
expecting something to appear out of nothing
many hunger for acclaim
dig about in vacant soil
scratch for shiny bones
demand their places in the sun
refuse to abide ordinariness
ignore the stiff price to be paid
after all it’s not a crime
wanting too much is not a punishable offense
or is it?
Why Rats Make Perfect Subjects

by Marilyn Ringer

Sometimes we know we are wrong.
The motions we make
suddenly hurtful, our shoulders,
our hips, become painful hinges
that beg to be oiled, but we go on
as we always have, unable to change
the arcs of our rotations.

Something is truculent in the brain
of slow ramp movements,
something dark in the heart
that can’t eat change,
something vulnerable
to anesthetic’s allure, a falling fog
that wraps us in cool cotton.

If you train a rat over time to push a lever
for a pellet, and then all it gets is shocking pain,
it will still take innumerable trials to extinguish
the memory of its pleasure. In this way,
we, too, hold on to what was,
our rat brains in charge
despite the unpleasant tingle.
black birds in the tree house saloons

by Stanley M. Noah

in dallas city parks
in deep summer days
the trees' red berries begin
fermenting like free fat
grapes and homemade wine

joyful birds swirl,
get noisy and fly in
flocks aimlessly like
drunken cars above trees
and buildings every

afternoon as if happy hour
was meant for them too, and
round twilight people migrate
home while dizzy birds hush up
in tall trees twenty to a branch
Harold Goes to Math Camp

by Rainbow Shultz

My husband’s got no mouth, but he eats through his nose and yells through his ears. He’s mostly got his bases covered—his eyes can whisper and kiss. At baseball games, I try to sit on the bleachers above or below him because those ears can make some noise. There are small obstacles, like driving. If he’s whispering sweet nothings to me, we practically go off the road, so I usually drive, unless we’ve come from a party. He doesn’t drink much because beer bubbles, and wine stings his nose. Things are usually good. We’re casual, simple really. He reupholsters furniture and does a fine job. When it’s time to put on those upholstery tacks, watch out—I’d like to put some earmuffs on him.

We’ve got a dog without a tail and a cat without stripes. Sometimes I imagine there are a mouth and a tail and stripes somewhere, in the neighbor’s garage, borrowed, or blown with newspapers and trash into the alley. But we manage. I suppose people probably laugh at the cat, but plain grey is what she is, and we love her anyway.

Our favorite activity is spelunking. We go every other Saturday with our spelunking club, and it’s downright amazing, the stalactites we’ve seen. I know that they take hundreds of years to form, but sometimes I yank one off the ceiling because I’ve got a collection going in the bathroom. A long, steamy mineral bath can grow a stalactite by one nanometer a day.

I haven’t told you about our son Harold yet because I guess it’s hard for me to talk about him. You just think that when you love somebody and you are loved back, and you are both so perfect, that a child that you create together should be perfect, too. It turns out that you don’t really have a choice. Your children are priceless gifts sent to you, but as I’ve heard folks say, there was no catalog to order them from. Our Harold is seven, and he is still unable to multiply, divide, subtract, or even add. He is mathematically inept, although his father and I consider ourselves above average in that department.

Sometimes, late at night, when I am out of sleepy tea and the moon is too bright to sleep to, I imagine strands of DNA turning and twisting, a slow-motion tango. They are looking for their partners, feeling around for matches, and clicking into place. And then I imagine my husband’s and my math genes, and I play out different scenarios. In some dreams, the chromosome containing my math gene shrivels up and dies. It looks like a twig on fire, curling up into itself. In other scenarios, my chromosome rejects my husband’s. She simply refuses to click. I have rented science videos. I have watched pink and blue strands of spaghetti move slowly toward one another. I want to see them just one time reject one another, or be blown apart by rebellious, fast-moving cells traveling out of control. In the videos, this never happens. I am left to imagine in the silver darkness of my bed. Maybe our strands clung to one another too tightly in an instant of microscopic lust. In my more optimistic half-wakefulness, they have sought each other out and embraced in a violent ecstasy. The math gene is broken off its chromosome in a fit of delight, the half-noodle spiraling away into the abyss of red and white cells, a forgotten soldier in our bodies’ chaotic battleground. Whether this tiny piece of math is eaten, unknowingly or unfavorably, by a white cell, I am unsure. It is possible that it floats alone, up and down the long stretches of blood- and-lymph highway that make up my husband or myself. An extra heartbeat or a sudden neck pain, even an unexplained throb in my wrist or finger, and I wonder for a brief second if it is that gene traveling through my body, the eternal hitchhiker, wandering through a landscape with no escape.

Despite my early-morning explanations, the math gene is lost, we believe for good, from my
son, Harold. I am confident, however, that like so many other families that I have seen on TV, we will find a way to cope.

It was on a family spelunking trip when we first realized Harold’s deficiency. The members of the club on the trip that day were Grace and Mr. Ogglebean, as usual, and two families with children both a bit younger and a bit older than Harold. Grace and Mr. Ogglebean are two of the three founding members of the club, and they rarely miss an expedition. Grace is blind but luckily can hear color, and she “oohs” and “ahhs” often. She is always struck by what she calls the svelte melody of glass and velveteen. These are the colors that dance between black and grey.

The darkest stalactites in the darkest caverns are the most spectacular to Grace, and thus our trips are mapped accordingly. Mr. Ogglebean is, I believe, in love with Grace, but my husband disagrees. Mr. Ogglebean speaks when spoken to, or when absolutely necessary, but is otherwise silent. The wispy, grey, cloud-like hair that starts halfway down his head floats around him like a protective cushion around an otherwise sharp and tightly-skinned man. Through his clothing one can see the knuckles of his spine where the slump that is his posture begins. Because of his constant hunch, Mr. Ogglebean is unable to look up at the stalactites that the rest of us seek out so enthusiastically, and yet he is always there, a founding member of the club.

We were in two boats on that trip. A mother and her son in our boat, along with the two regulars and ourselves. Two fathers and a mother manned the other boat with four other children. I am unsure as to who belonged to whom. These parents were proud and excited about whatever this group of children did, whether it was pushing one another or just vacantly staring and sitting. At one point, one of the larger children pointed out a small group of stalactites that hung together like a group of bats from a cave wall. “Look, Ma,” he gasped, “nine pointy sticks together on the ceiling.”

“Nine!” she exclaimed. “How did you count so quickly? Dan! Did you hear that? Anthony counted to nine in his head! And so quickly! I hadn’t even seen them yet!”

“Is that right?” the husband, Dan, called back to the amazed mother in our boat. “Fantastic work, Tony! What does nine come before?”

“Ten, Dad,” little Anthony answered, and before you knew it, our quiet outing had become something of a game show, with each child seeking out groups of stalactites desperately, as far as

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
the lanterns would shine, and screaming numbers louder and more quickly than the last. I was certain that this maniacal mob of children began making up numbers entirely, but their parents continued to gush. They seemed nearly to faint in their enormous admiration for their children’s counting skills. By halfway through the trip, the number one was sufficient for a mother to “ooh” or a father to pat his kid’s knee enthusiastically. We had reached a point of frenzy, which I was sure we would not be returning from until this expedition had ended.

Meanwhile, Harold sat quietly between Grace and Mr. Ogglebean. He quietly murmured agreement with Grace’s assessment of colors, or passed Mr. Ogglebean a tissue when asked. He looked intently at the ancient, salty history above and around him and in his apparent wonder seemed deaf to the chaotic game of numbers.

I decided at the time not to engage him in the asinine competition that had developed, but I watched him, and I wondered whether he, in his reverie, silently counted stalactites as well. As I later found, and as you already know, he did not. He pondered the strength of gravity upon the different weights of slowly-forming liquids. He marveled at the low yet intense roar of the stream pushing away rock that had once, at the earth’s inception, been liquid itself. He studied the organic blackness that grew along the waterline and thought of ways to transform energy without photosynthesis. But he never once counted the stalactites. “Count?” he asked me, puzzled at my insistence on examining his thoughts during the trip. “Would that not be making an innate presupposition of the absence of an infinite body of movement growing toward form?”

That’s when I knew, and the struggle for my husband and me began. Of course we tested him again. And again. Apples, people in a family, dogs in a cage. Elemental concepts in arithmetic. And we became increasingly crushed at the realization of his disability. For instance, we might ask what even most four-year-olds could answer: Harold, how much does two plus two equal? And he would answer, “‘Equal’? That’s an interesting concept, isn’t it? To presume ‘equal,’ might we also be presuming stasis in the conjunction of the — what do you call them — ‘two’s’?” Or he might say, “How can you mandate these ‘pluses’ when our sovereignty and connectivity have been proven prior to determining labels for the classes of matter just described?” You get the idea. Basically, Harold is dumb as nails, and even though he’s in second grade, he still can’t even add or subtract at a kindergarten level.

His father and I had to discuss what this would mean for his future—and ours. Without numbers, there are no bills, no rent, no television channels, no shoe sizes, no addresses, no prices on a menu. Basically there is nothing available that he would ever need, and we could not accept that.

We sent Harold to math camp.

We tried on the drive there to save him. We quizzed him over and over. How many stop signs is that? How many cows there? How many fingers am I holding up? How many restaurants are right there, advertising baked cod? If only he’d answered “one” instead of “And again we return to the concept of ‘many,’ which I agree is a wonderful little measuring cup pouring and filling up with little specks of infinity; and when does this pouring stop, and when is this ‘many’?”

We dropped him off at a little green cabin called “Multiple Moose” and drove away quickly. I didn’t let my husband see me cry. We waited two weeks. He made more noise than usual in the shop, and we skipped a spelunking trip that weekend. I started a bunny and rose garden, and the roses kept getting away. We tiptoed through our tension, and when we made love, I cringed, imagining what other chromosomes might never find one another.

When we drove to pick him up, we were both filled with excitement and gloom. We were mostly silent. When my husband blew his nose, I think he was counting fence posts aloud just to reassure himself that he was still unbroken, but he used a
tissue, and I can rarely understand him through a two-ply sheet.

The children were lined up by size when we arrived. They stood next to suitcases and macramé pot holders and held balsa wood boats and framed report cards. Harold was standing toward the middle of the line, but we didn’t mind. We’ve never been ashamed of his average stature. As we approached, I became aware of an expression of bewilderment on Harold’s face. He looked as if a fast-moving thunderstorm had passed over him without warning. He was both wet and stirred. He was a cocktail poured from a briskly-handled shaker. His report card hung limply from his hands. I picked it up, smiling gingerly, and read it while resting my hand on Harold’s poor slumped shoulders. On the line where a grade should have been, there was a blank left in the typed proclamation: “This student has graduated successfully from Evergreen Mathematics Camping School with the significant grade of ___ on this day in June, blah blah and blah....” I didn’t need to read on. Where a grade should have been, instead, in small eight-point font, Times New Roman, I believe, was a note: “Parents, please see supervisory staff, thank you.” Now Harold, as I’ve told you, is only seven, but his reading skills are excellent, so I knew he was already aware of the bad news. I bent over to hug him and quietly asked how he was. He answered that he was fine. I asked him what he thought of his report card, and he shrugged. “They spelled significant wrong,” he said without emotion. I had to acknowledge that he was right, but this small fact did nothing to stop the feeling of hopelessness that was pouring over me like a washing machine filling up over a tired pair of dirty socks. I passed the report card listlessly to my husband, who wheezed through his ears and gently held me. I thought I might faint. We told Harold to stay put and to sit on his suitcase if he liked, and we went to find the supervisory staff. Inside the large log-cabin-style building in the middle of the camp, we were directed down sterile halls covered with D-grade nubby grey carpet and murals of cartooned wild animals with simple algebraic equations coming out of their mouths in cartoon bubbles. I held my husband’s hand, as we were both feeling dreadful, although it is true that during those last moments walking down that hall, a strand of hope lingered, connecting us more than our hands ever could have.

When we entered the office labeled “Director,” as we had been instructed to do, I believe that we both felt a little bit worse. A man and woman sat before us in one of the tackiest rooms that, still to this day, I have ever been in. As you know, my husband upholsters furniture, and so I know that for him as well, the décor was almost belligerent. There was something so trite and so obnoxious about the junior-high-school-principal’s-office look, mixed with outdoor camp widgets and sprinkled with “I’m so smart at math” gadgets, that I almost threw up. Smokey the Bear was painted on the wall holding a calculator and scratching his head, presumably over a tough math problem he’d found in the woods. The couple stood up after slowly closing the books of paperwork they had been working on, and they asked us to be seated. They introduced themselves as Reginold and Charlene Dashwick. “Yes,” the woman specified, “Miss Dashwick,” which I took to be her way of telling us that they were siblings rather than married, and I did begin to notice quite a resemblance. They were both missing noses, which must have just run in the family, as they say. In any case, I murmured a hello, my husband winked, and we waited for the verdict.

“Well,” Reginold began, “there is, as they say, good news, and there’s bad news. I’m afraid.”

“Yes,” Charlene continued, “and we would prefer to begin with the good news, although we do realize that many people, maybe even two-thirds of people, prefer it in the opposite order.”

“Somewhat of a dessert after a terrible meal, if you will,” Reginold said, smiling. I began to think of the terrible meal I’d had on the drive to camp. I felt quite certain that I was about to vomit
that terrible meal right then. As I sat concentrat-
ing on pushing the baked cod back down from
where it rose, they continued. “Your son, Harold,
has re-solved, as I like to phrase it, the theory of
relativity.”

“Yes,” Reginold chuckled, “one-upped old
Albert, if you will. It seems that Einstein forgot
one variable in his famous little equation, and your
Harold has pointed that out.” Reginold smiled
warmly. “To us and the international community,
that is. Apparently, time is relative to lightness,
in that it moves more slowly through it. Time, as
Harold pointed out, moves more quickly through
darkness, which you may not notice, of course, as
the speed is relative in the same amount to all of us.
Energy is light, you know, and lightness does vary.
Anyhoo—very interesting stuff—death and dark-
ness and infinite speed and all. Everyone from the
theologians to the black-hole aficionados are pretty
excited about this. Yes, your son, Harold, came up
with the theorem for the ever-changing variable
placed before the E when equaling MC squared,
and got himself a most definite Nobel Prize.”

Charlene was beaming as well. “I believe that
the prize is worth two point eight million these
days, but it does vary due to inflation, of course.
That’s something I’m sure you will look into in
any case.”

Neither my husband nor I moved. I believe his
ears were fogging. After a moment of silence, with
them smiling and us stunned, the sort of silence one
might hear before a standing ovation, my husband
turned to me, and before I could stop myself, the
words that we all knew were coming fell into their
eternal position. “And the bad news?”

The smiles on the faces of Reginold and Char-
lene shifted into sympathetic mode. Their heads
tilted slightly. “Well,” Reginold began, “your son
did technically fail camp. I’m afraid that he is in a
group of very few persons unable to pass even the
Counting Coyotes level. It’s very unusual. Usually
no more than one child every year or two is quite
this inept.” Charlene nodded mournfully and passed
a pamphlet across the desk with both hands. “This
could help all of you,” she said. “Grandwood is a
wonderful institution, very beautiful grounds.”

“Yes, they do keep them up quite nicely,”
Reginold agreed. “When we encounter the rare
child who isn’t able to be remediated whatsoever,
we truly believe that Grandwood is the best op-
tion.” Charlene continued, agreeing, “It’s just too
hard, as you know, for families to try to educate
their children mathematically forever. It’s ineffec-
tive and it’s painful. You two know that as well as
anybody does.” We nodded. It was painful. We
were in pain. It’s like I’ve already mentioned. An
imperfect child is like a magnifying glass on your
own imperfections.

when—” Charlene interrupted me then and spoke
calmly. “It’s a wonderful place, you’ll see. It’s an
hour west of here, and there’s open enrollment. It
really is the best, and with the prize money, you
won’t have trouble supporting Harold for a very
long time.”

My husband reached again for my hand, and
I held his tightly. We thanked them quietly and
returned to the bright sunshine that filled the path
back to the parking lot where Harold waited. I let
my tears fall, but neither my husband nor I said
a word. Inside my head, although the wind blew
through the leaves throughout the camp with the
intense crashing of buildings falling, I steadied
myself by watching each step that my feet took,
and counting them one, two, three, four....
Behind the girl in the dressing gown, the sun is going down. Across the room, a dress outspreads against the door, the way it did in the downtown shop where, blue and luminous, it hung untouched by human hands, until she tried it on.

The girl’s hands are crumpling, gently, a small piece of paper—an emblem of her heart, squeezed like a sponge flush with sorrow, but one that can spring back if she wrings it dry. It’s a birthday note whose words she’d yearned for and has read again to test their worth. She’s holding back the tears; shoulders hunched, eyes open but glazed, she stares into a murky space somewhere out of focus, the habitation of her past, which just won’t move away:

it’s where her father’s lived since she was eight when after lunch and a late matinée he drove her home, too drunk to keep the wheel straight, swerving side to side, the Packard steered by his wobbly knees and her wide-eyed, fine-boned help. The next two times he stood her up. Sitting again in her ruined glory, the girl in the dressing gown keeps her curved back to the window and averts the light so bright with promise that it places her face into a folded page of the old, familiar shadows until she also disappears.
Descent into Madness

For Hart

by Shavawn M. Berry

I have to get through to God.
His number's right here. Can't you see it?
I keep dialing and dialing but there's no answer...
Just the sound of a thousand bees
Buzzing like jack saws in my elephant ear,
Instructing me from the cone of an ocean wave:
"Please hang up and try your call again."

To pass the time between conversations
I jot words upon words—
Floor-snot-cot-make-
door-root-roof-open-cave—
Pages and pages of random knots and lines
Heaped in my ink-soaked notebooks.
I sit on the curb; talk myself out of the sky,
Talk myself down off a telephone wire
dancing with drunken ravens.

My brain is a luminous substation,
Full of intricate gridlines and magnetic ribbons,
blinking off and on, beneath the surface of this city.
As I pass a tree with five blazing eyes,
I scale the fence and grab hold
of 150,000 volts of pure blue-green transcendence.

God himself tells me:
You are the Christ.
You are the Resurrection.
You are the Holy Ghost.
Feral Child
For Sabrina, at 13

by Shavawn M. Berry

The thistles are crackling in their coats
Calling you with the wind toward the Witch-
Woman’s cabin and this hilltop’s sharp peak.
Up here, you can see miles of Puget Sound
Curling around the green carcass of San Juan Island.
Up here, the sky lifts for leagues above your eyes,
Opening your chest, burning your senses

Like the sunflowers growing wild on Hannah Road.
The strong basket you carry on your arm
Slowly fills with brown eggs, a fallen bird’s nest,
Blackberries and salmonberries.
You watch hawks circle, wing patterns
a languid oval in the azure sky.
Your face, a book of secret wishes.

You have fallen into a place I cannot follow.
As you climb, I see more clearly
The child being overtaken by the young woman...
You turn to me, the sun catching
Rivers of color in your long blond braid,
Wholly unaware of the light that spills from you,
Your dusky face an unfettered tangle of morning glory
Pale and lovely in the salty, still air.
Talking to God

Talking to God can be amusing—
that funny mirror in outer space,
everyone's dad with whipped cream and cherries.
Waah waah waah, please don't let me die, etc.

A better bet's to make the silent treatment just what you want,
like the trick of getting your dog to perform math for guests:
"Bowser, what's six minus six?" Dead silence, nothing.

Or like having desire stretched so tight
rainbows shoot out the end of it.

Appetizers can satisfy just about everything, trust me,
while dessert is never as good as you're hoping.
Life Science

by Matthew Muresan

As he looked around the autumn-colored park, the man felt a tremor begin to move through his aging body. He could blame only some of the chill on the weather. When it passed, he righted his underwear, spat, and lowered himself onto a bench. From within his jacket, he produced a bag containing something heavy that pulled and deformed the sack that held it. His arthritic hands shook as he tried to set it at his side. The shaking caused several false landings before the bag came to rest next to his gray wool pant leg. Then, from under his left arm, he produced an unwrinkled newspaper. His feet twisted in the wet leaf-covered ground below him. He slowly began to open the newspaper, and as he felt it between his fingers, they seemed to uncurl, and his limbs steadied. His feet found the friction of the asphalt beneath the leaves, and his body was finally still. Sullivan always started with the comics.

Smelling the autumn air, he was reminded of the Life Science classes he’d enjoyed so much in high school, and he remembered that the season was a showcase of entropy. He could remember it as clearly now as the day it was taught to him, though he’d held the lesson in him for more than sixty years. Plant decay, he recalled, was the slow process of energy release. Cell walls broke inward like doomed buildings at the moment of their demolition; the relative destruction was comparable, but the organic version happened in perfect silence. What once was sunlight became methane. What once was solid and flush with veins of green chlorophyll became more and more like water and earth. Energy abandoned the plant and made its way back to the ground.

Then something moved. From the corner of his eye, Sullivan saw a figure begin to travel from right to left in front of him, disappearing behind his paper. He frantically widened the shaking daily to cover even the outermost edges of his world. When he heard a pubescent voice call to some friends, he let some air escape his lungs. Only children. Young children, he thought, and he worked the paper between his fingers. The digits gradually relaxed as if the paper held a liniment. He was finally still again. It wasn’t often that he found himself so far from home.

The page started with Andy Capp. It surprised him that a comic he had once enjoyed so much had become so awkward. There was a time when he could laugh along with their squabbles and apparent alcoholism, but now the only word that came to him was “dysfunctional,” and how had he been trained to notice that? At least Blondie’s pinup body had held up with time. His wife Judy had loved Ziggy, with his world-positive insights. When Sullivan had asked her how it was possible to “actually like Ziggy of all comics,” she’d just stuck out her tongue and said she liked a lot of unlikely characters. His favorite was Peanuts. After fifty-one years of marriage, their feelings on the comics had been as true as anything else.

Back on the page, Dennis the Menace was still a kid and, Sullivan guessed, always would be. He read to the bottom until all that remained to see on the page were his own hands. The tendons in his fingers were blue and twiny beneath thin skin. He winced. He thought of skin’s transparency. He thought of Judy. His hand still wanted to rest on her next to him on the bench; like a phantom limb, he could still feel her shoulder there. Then he sniffed and turned to the front page, as a high-pitched buzzing filled his ears. He tried to believe it was just insects. He shooed around his head and the buzzing slowly passed.

He heard another noise beyond his paper screen. This time it came from his left. It was the sound of something rolling across the asphalt path that had brought him to the bench. A breeze began to blow toward him, bowing the paper
inward. The rolling sound became louder. Then the breeze became a gust, and the paper flew from his left hand with an eruption of color, opening the full park scene to him. A gray-haired woman was pushing a stroller. She stopped and turned to face him. His eyes darted to brittle trees, to the flapping newspaper just out of reach, to dying leaves on branches, and then finally settled on the face of the child in the stroller. He breathed and held his eyes on the infant. Safe. He almost smiled at the beautiful young face, and his free hand reached and finally retrieved the paper and resurrected his
curtain. Was that a "hello" he heard spoken to him in a raspy voice? He locked his gaze back on the center crease and didn't reply. Too old to be pushing that baby around, he murmured. This time he pulled the paper nearly around his head. His eyes resumed their walk down the safe, boxed aisles. The sound of the stroller finally restarted and then faded away to his right.

The top story was international: old wars, alive and well. Young people, dying with lungs full of air. In the middle of the page a delivery address label was stuck to the margin. It read: "Stuart Sullivan, 127 Atticus, Apt. 3." Inches from it and his bifocals was the lead local story: the murders. A rash of killings had the city holding its breath for the past few weeks. He smelled the decay of the leaf-covered ground. How many years had Judy lay in their apartment before dying? Before she slowly started losing air? The article said the victims were all found within a two-block radius of the first death, and that they all had been "shot in the back of the head (continued on page four)." Sullivan pictured the base of the skull and felt the hairs on his begin to rise. Letting the paper float, he brought one hand up and felt his own head. He thought about the beautiful puncture of the human shell, and how the bullet had started everything. The word for this, he recalled, was "catalyst." Then he smelled something sour. Inches from his right ear a loud cough barked into the silence. Hoarse. Close. It filled him and rang in his brittle frame. Too close. He was no longer alone on the bench.

The presence left him weak. His body jerked, and the paper crackled loudly, calling attention to his panic like a bully once had in school. The scent began to settle around him. His left foot slipped in the leafy mash, and he felt that he might vomit. He pushed the newsprint shield outward and, without turning his head, noticed the blurry edge of a man to his right, on the same bench. The smell was the acrid essence of the disregarded. Of things left at the curb. It blanketed Sullivan. He leaned his hip slightly and was reassured when he felt the brown paper bag still between him and the stranger. Then the buzzing noise returned, now as a mechanical wail, louder and almost from above, filling and shaking his head. The sound, now more familiar, grew insistent before gradually, finally fading.

Pulling it nearly to his nose, Sullivan could only breathe the smell of newsprint. Only by doing so was he able to continue reading. It seems all the murders had taken place in daylight and only in the past three weeks. The killer was able to cover the sound of the gunshots with the periodic roar of airplanes taking off and landing just next to the park. Each bullet was booked; a one-way direct flight to within someone's head, flying in air drenched with sound. Sullivan remembered how Death had come to live at his house. It had arrived with a green suitcase, like Judy's mother once had, and it stayed for nearly two years. It was soon after that Judy began to melt into her bed even as Sullivan watched. Every day microscopically less herself, the only audible memory of the decline was an occasional moan, the only personal account was his, formed from hours of quiet vigil.

All three murders took place at Airport Park. The police had the description of their only suspect from an eyewitness. The witness was homeless, one of the shopping cart-pushing people who lived around the park. Sullivan, still unsteady, turned his head right until from the aching corner of his vision, he could just make out his bench companion, also reading a newspaper. The indistinct figure turned to him, and again he fled to his newsprint asylum.

After Judy left, her exit preoccupied him. Weren't couples supposed to follow one another into death? Wasn't the strength of their bond what had opened their eyes in the morning? Hadn't he loved her enough to follow? He thought about the slow arrogance of Death in their home. How it had toyed with him in its pace. He remembered Life Science and thought about cells, how they could divide from one into millions in the first nine months: Zero-to-life. Then, from millions of cells,
it took a slow lifetime until the last one died: Life-back-to-zero. At times he thought he could hear the failing cells pop like carbonation. Yet, with the exception of the occasional moan, Judy had faded in total silence. One night, after she’d gone, he even found himself crawling on her old mattress, looking for molecular traces where she had been. He rarely slept. The paper mentioned that all of the park victims had been older than eighty. For this reason — and since the killer struck just under the flight path — the paper, the one with huge black headlines, had named him the Runway Reaper.

There was movement to his right. Through his blurry half-sight he could tell that the man had bent over. Sullivan took this opportunity, finally, to feast, turning with a snap and drinking him in with both eyes. The muscles in his neck and eyes were relieved at last. The man was reading the same paper and the same article. Bent over as he was, though, Sullivan could not see his face, just a collection of bags and a loaded shopping cart a few yards away. He identified the smell as urine. Then the man creaked upright, and Sullivan was back to the article.

Judy had never liked for him to travel very far from home, let alone to a place across town like the now-infamous Airport Park. When Sullivan mentioned to her that he might like to watch the airplanes take off, she’d told him that it was too noisy and just not safe for a man his age, alone in that neighborhood. She said he’d “get bonked on the head and then what?” He never had an answer until recently. A person needn’t be alone, he thought, as he remembered the brown bag. The “bonk on the head” or the bullet that entered through the back door, “make way!” These things were not decay. These things didn’t wait around for cells to get so tired of splitting that they mutated, just for fun, into cancers.

Even in disintegration, Judy had been his security. In losing sight of her, he believed he’d gained sight of truth. And the truth was that everything was dying. If he looked closely, he could see doomed cells, their membranes and nuclei, as they quivered and let go of life. Quietly. His own cells, too, were well along their way. He even likened the approaching autumn hues to the colorful bloated swell of human decomposition. He spent hours on his knees scrubbing the floors of the apartment, trying to clean away the evidence of death. But there was always something left. A hair. A nail clip. Some cellular record. He finally threw down a few pieces of newspaper on the kitchen floor. What worked even better, though, was to leave the apartment. He found himself in the new train station and in the hotel and office lobbies of the revitalized portion.
of his neighborhood. Shiny places.

One rare evening spent in his apartment, he found himself trying to catch a fly that had been buzzing over his head. He caught it and threw it on his table. Then, while carefully watching the captured insect's cellular life pass, the idea came with a loud smash of his hand. The sound rang through the room as the realization rang in his mind. After the deathblow, all the insect's cells began to fall at a consistent and controlled pace, a pace he had initiated, and with a sound. Sullivan, the catalyst. After that, for a little while, he could sleep.

He continued reading the article. The paper started to crinkle in his now-clutching hands, and he stared into the fibers. How he loved its daily arrival at his door. Delivered by a young boy, it was the one thing that he owned that was reborn every day. The newly-bound lattices still in rows, like incubators. Crisp and young. Still in the fresh beginning of its form. He smiled at the thought.

He read the description the homeless witness had given of the Runway Reaper's clothes. Did the clothes make the reaper? He looked at his own gray wool pants, his heavy winter coat, and his worn walking shoes. They made him sick. What was the difference between the clothes of a killer and the clothes that were in the green suitcase Judy had used at the hospital, before they told him there was nothing else they could do and sent her home. Would a killer dress in clothes from a green suitcase? Or maybe more like the man to his right? Sullivan had slowly dressed in these clothes this morning mostly for warmth. Airport Park was far from his home anyway. You needed to take the 86 bus line all the way across town. Nothing but old, polluting gray buses could take you there until three weeks ago, when a new electric series started.

The smell on the bench became unbearable. A chill like cold electricity entered him. Fighting the aching pull on his neck too long, he gave in completely. He turned to the stranger. Eyes met tired eyes. Fearful recognition was realized and mutual. He heard urine drip through the slats of the bench. Then, as if on cue, the mechanical wail returned, its loudest yet.

The air vibrated. Sullivan shook, now hot. The paper rattled, and he dropped it like a curtain to face a universe of decay. His ragged, destitute partner on the bench, well beyond eighty years old, got to his feet.

In the apartment, after Judy was gone, something had changed. He had laughed when it occurred to him. He had done a jerking dance, realizing he, Sullivan, could steer the slow rot of life. He could hit the accelerator. He looked around him. Every inch of the apartment was covered in newsprint. Pieces were torn to fit in odd corners; they were on the couches, countertops, his bed, and even on the tops of lamps. He shouted the words "death" and "catalyst" over and over and finally gave it the dignity of a sound. Death, who was sitting in the den with his feet on the newspaper-covered coffee table, looked up at the shouts. Sullivan asked permission, opened the green suitcase, and filled the brown bag. He said good-bye and resolutely left the apartment with the bag and today's newspaper, the Runway Reaper headline showing under his arm. He had waited for five buses until a new electric one stopped. Then he was here in the noisy park. On this bench. And now, finally, he rose from it. Upright now, with his pitiful palsied hand, he grabbed the bag from his side. The whining turned into a screech and grew louder. The dignity to end with a roar. Entropy. Catalyst. Sullivan opened the bag. He saw the man, older than he should be, smelling of death, falling apart as he walked. Cells abandoning ship. And his hand became steady, the fingers smoothly opening. He stalked in the direction of the fleeing witness, who'd so long been a blur in his periphery, and finally, with a roar, the plane was overhead, screaming as the landing gear unfolded from beneath.

*****
Eight

by Amy Spade

Leaning back against the white aluminum
garage door, the sun glinting off rocks
in the alley, noises of the summer
halting, I stood and waited: Tony

from across Elm, freckled and dirty-kneed,
had pulled me back there, grinning, my sweaty
hand in his, my breath coming fast and hard
after our dizzy ride through the August streets.

I felt a kiss, wet and gentle, salty,
land on the bridge of my sunburned nose.
Eyes flew open, we looked at each other
and laughed, ran back to pedals, sweet motion.
Conveyed

by Amy Spade

In the crowded morning car, my daughter leans against my shoulder and whispers in my ear that the woman directly across the aisle is staring at her, but I look up and the woman in fact is staring at me, searching my face for some kind of explanation, the way some people stare in New York without remorse, steadfast and strong. I realize that her eyes first fell on my daughter, on her sunken cheeks carefully concealed with pink blush, on the bone of her shoulders showing through her thin, navy school sweater, on her dull brown, thinning hair pulled back smoothly into a ponytail, on her knuckles protruding like marled knots on twigs, then fell onto me—probing, judgmental, fascinated, repulsed.

I check my wince and lean my head into hers, hoping to protect her with this closeness, this conspiracy, but know that I can’t, can’t save her from what she’s already done to herself. I’m too conscious of the losing, the more-than-typical teenage parting. The woman gets off at Seventy-ninth and saves us both the agony of sight.
Under the Tree
A serious family comedy for mature audiences
by Kevin Collins

CHARACTERS
Mrs. Moroski
Mr. Moroski
Sally Moroski
Billy Moroski
Sig
Thad
Rupe
Gaspar
Melchior
Balthazaar
Mary
Joseph

Baby Jesus should be played by a rag doll. His one line ("ai") and the sheep’s lines (all "baaa") should be delivered electronically.

SCENE ONE
Beneath the Christmas tree in the Moroskis’ living room. In tableau, Mary, Joseph, three wise men, three shepherds, and two sheep focus upon Baby Jesus sleeping in the manger. No one moves. Above the nativity scene, huge tree limbs taper toward the ceiling, and a few ornaments—including a very large red one—dangle above the living-room floor. Surrounding the nativity scene, only partially lit, are several large, neatly-wrapped Christmas presents. The sixty-foot shadows of the Moroskis flit across the scene, and their voices boom.

MRS. MOROSKI: Alright, you two, that’s enough for tonight.

BILLY: Aww, Mom!

SALLY: It’s early!

MR. MOROSKI: You heard what your mother said. Now, both of you... (A stooping shadow covers the nativity scene.)

BILLY: Just a few more—

MRS. MOROSKI: Billy Moroski, you get away from that nativity scene!

BILLY: Okay.

MRS. MOROSKI: Your father and I spent half an hour getting it right after you messed it up last time.

BILLY: I did not!

SALLY: You did too. Liar!

BILLY: Mom! I didn’t. Really! Sally must’ve.

SALLY: Ooh, you liar!

MRS. MOROSKI: It doesn’t matter. As long as neither of you touches it before Aunt Jessie comes tomorrow. Okay? Promise?

SALLY: I promise.

BILLY: Me too.

MR. MOROSKI: Say it, Son.


MRS. MOROSKI: Good. Now go to bed. I’ll be up in a minute.
SALLY: Alright. G’night, Daddy.

BILLY: 'night, Dad.

MR. MOROSKI: Good night, kids. Merry Christmas.

THE KIDS (in unison): Merry Christmas! (Their shadows exit.)

MRS. MOROSKI: Are you going to stay up and finish wrapping?
MR. MOROSKI: No, I’m beat. I’ll set the alarm and get up early.

MRS. MOROSKI: Okay.

MR. MOROSKI: You want to hit the lights? (Living room lights go down, and the shadows disappear.) What about the Christmas tree lights?

MRS. MOROSKI: I thought we’d leave them on. And leave the drapes open.

MR. MOROSKI: What? Is the Christmas spirit making you feel charitable toward the electric company?

MRS. MOROSKI: It’s Christmas Eve! If we can brighten up the lives of any passing strangers tonight, it’s worth a couple of pennies to—

MR. MOROSKI: Okay! Okay! We’ll leave them on. I just hope it doesn’t give those passing strangers the notion to break in and steal presents. Let’s go to bed.

MRS. MOROSKI: You have no Christmas spirit.

MR. MOROSKI: That’s why I have you: to provide it. (Shadows exit. There is the amplified sound of a wet, sixty-foot kiss. The statues begin to move about in place.)

MARY: I thought they’d never leave. I had a terrible itch in my neck from the second they came into the room.

JOSEPH: Get the hay out of the kid’s mouth, will you? Why did you do a thing like that?

MARY: I was afraid he’d start to cry. I didn’t want to—

JOSEPH: You know what kind of kid we’re dealing with here. If he wants to cry, it’s only right—in the divine scheme of things—that he should—

MARY: But he’s only a baby. He can’t judge things like—

JOSEPH: Sure he’s a baby, but make no mistake about it: if he wanted to fly around this barn a few times, he wouldn’t so much as have to furrow his brow....

MARY: That’s not right, Joe. The angel Gabriel explained it to me. Yes, he’s a divine child, but in human form. He’s as powerless as any other infant.

PUG (at Thad’s knee): Baaa.

JOSEPH: Hey, can we get the sheep out of here, please?

THAD: But they came to see their savior.

JOSEPH: Oh, they did not!

RUPE: They did too! Didn’t you?

MARNIE (on Rupe’s neck): Baaa.

JOSEPH: They came because you brought them. Now, I have to insist. I’m letting you guys stay. But put the sheep outside.

THAD: But we can’t do that.

JOSEPH: Why not?

THAD: Well, you see, Pug here is welded to my ankle.

RUPE: And Marnie is grafted to my neck.
SIG: They can't be separated.

JOSEPH: Then I'm sorry. You'll have to leave for a while. It's my duty to protect my...stepson from the elements. And I consider sheep to be the elements.

THAD: But he wants to play.

JOSEPH: Who?

THAD: Little Jesus. He wants to play with Pug.

JOSEPH: This child is less than a day old. Playing with sheep is the furthest thing from his mind. Please.

RUPE: Well...Alright...

SIG: Can I stay? I've just got a crook.

JOSEPH: Well, alright, but you...No! Could you leave too, please? Just for a while. I'll let you know.

SIG: Oh...well...okay, sir. (The shepherds exit.)

JOSEPH (to wise men): You guys too, huh? I want to be alone with my family for a minute.

GASPAR: Very well, sir. We will be right outside.

JOSEPH: Thanks.

GASPAR: And, while we will make the formal presentations later, I want you to know that we have brought with us gifts for the child. From the East.

JOSEPH: Oh, really? What'd you bring?

GASPAR: My gift is gold. Gold, that most precious of all—

JOSEPH: Gold!! Way to go, Pal! Where is it?

MELCHIOR: Frankincense is my gift, in order that—

JOSEPH: Incense...You know, actually, as long as we're in the barn here, that may come in handy. Now, where's that gold? (GASPAR hands him the gift.) Thanks. And yours?

BALTHAZAAR: Myrrh.

JOSEPH: Myrrh?

BALTHAZAAR: Yes, myrrh.

JOSEPH: What's that?

BALTHAZAAR (singing in a deep bass): Myrrh is mine, a bitter perfume, Breathes a life of gathering gloom, Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, Sealed in a stone-cold tomb.

JOSEPH: Yeah...I...I bet you're a laugh a minute back east. Not my idea of the perfect baby gift, but...You know? That's the great thing about diversity: everybody has...different ideas about...It's the thought that counts, right? It's the...You guys are all heart. All of you. Really. Thank you very much. We'll make the formal presentations later. Meanwhile, if it's okay with you, I'll hang onto the gold, huh?

GASPAR: Very well, sir.
JOSEPH: I'll see you in a while. *(Wise men exit.)* Ugh. The guy with the myrrh gives me the creeps. Now, what were we talking about? Oh, right, the kid.

MARY: You said it yourself, Joe: the child is less than a day old. Playing with sheep is the furthest thing from his mind.

JOSEPH: Oh, sure! But not because he can't! He's just got bigger fish to fry than sheep.

MARY: He doesn't have any "fish to fry" for a while, Joe. Listen to me. I told you about my visitation. The archangel Gabriel revealed to me the nature of this child. I mean, I hate to pull rank, but I was—

JOSEPH: So! It's come to this! Okay, I'll admit it: you're the Mother of God. But you're not the only one to have visitations. I told you about mine, remember? The guy with the wings who told me that I should marry you even though you were pregnant? Even though I wasn't the father? Remember?

MARY: Is that story true, Joe?

JOSEPH: What do you mean by that?

MARY: I don't know. That story always struck me as a bit...convenient. I mean, I have a visitation and, sure enough, a couple of months later, you have a—

JOSEPH: Mary, I'm shocked! If you thought that I was lying to you...

MARY: Not lying...

JOSEPH: ...why is this the first I've heard of your doubts?

MARY: Oh, Joe. You've been so good. But that story about your angel...I just had a hard time with it. You were so noble in accepting me as I was. It's only normal for you to...to find some way to save face with the boys. When you told me that story and I seemed to accept it, it was only because I didn't want to interfere with your...machismo, or whatever.

JOSEPH: Well, Mary, it's about this simple: I saw the angel. He told me to marry you. He told me that the child would have a divine plan from the moment he was born. I saw the guy's wings. I asked him to take off his robe, and they were embedded into his back: bone structure, muscle-lature, everything. Now, I'm your husband, and I stand here sane and sober and say this to you. If you can't believe every word of it, then there's no trust in this marriage.

MARY: I'm beginning to worry about this marriage, too.

JOSEPH: What?

MARY: You were so supportive of me for a while. But for the last couple of months, you've been nervous. And—I don't know!—just not yourself.

JOSEPH: Why shouldn't I be nervous?

MARY: But you've been so zealous and single-minded in trying to convince me of things, even things that contradict what I was told by the angel Gabriel. You shouldn't try to do that.

JOSEPH: Mary, whether you can believe it or not, I also had a revelation. It assigned me responsibility for this child. And if an element of what I saw conflicts with something from your vision, well...I think it's at least a fit topic for discussion.
MARY: There can be no discussion. The child and I are in the hands of God, and...

JOSEPH: The child is God!

MARY: ...it was revealed to me that I must care for him like he was any other child.

JOSEPH: Of course we must. But that doesn’t mean that he couldn’t make it without us. Not necessarily...

MARY: You’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, trying to support us.

JOSEPH: There’s no work for me here. I’ll be okay once we get back to Nazareth.

MARY: I hope so. Honey, try not to contradict what the angel told me. That’s very important to me.

JOSEPH: But isn’t it more important to know the truth for sure?

MARY: I know the truth for sure.

JOSEPH: Well, look: I have a plan to prove it one way or another.

MARY: What?

JOSEPH: And if your vision is the unalterable truth, my plan will make all that perfectly clear.

MARY: What?

JOSEPH: I needed some capital for the plan, but I knew that we should try it sooner or—

MARY: What plan?!

JOSEPH: And when this wise man came across with the gold, we got our chance. Listen. This is it.

MARY: I’m listening.

JOSEPH: Okay, we...And listen to the whole thing before you—

MARY: Tell me the plan!

JOSEPH: I’m going to show Jesus a racing form and ask him to pick a winner.

MARY: The races?!

JOSEPH: And if he points one out...

MARY: Joe...

JOSEPH: ...only if he’s very clear about it—

MARY: Listen to me, Joe! We had nothing! Now we have a little gold...

JOSEPH: We have a gold mine, Mary. And if he doesn’t want to pick anything, he doesn’t have to. But if he unmistakably does, I’m going to bet this gold. That’s the only way I can prove that I’m right about him. That’s the only way I can support him in style.

MARY: I forbid it, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Just look. We don’t even know if he’ll pick one.

MARY: I don’t care if he names one, I—

JOSEPH (holding sheet before the baby): Here, Baby, what do you think?...Huh?...Have any hunches?
KEVIN COLLINS

JESUS: Ai!

JOSEPH: Five! He said "five"!

MARY: He said "Ai"!

JOSEPH: What do you mean? Fifth race? Or the five horse in the first race?

MARY: Joseph, I beg you....

JOSEPH: Here. Look at the fifth race, Jeez. Hey look, Mary! Look! He's pointing with one finger! It's a miracle! He couldn't even unroll his little fist, and he's pointing! Huh? Dancing Lady. He's keeping his finger on Dancing Lady. See? Even when I move the paper.

MARY: Joseph, I'm asking you to hand me that gold. It was provided by God to the child and me.

JOSEPH: Correction: Provided by the wise men to only the child. And as his guardian, it is my duty to make it grow for him. I need to do this. You'll see when I come back. Look. She's listed as nine-to-one on the morning line. We can give Jesus the life he deserves. And we can know for sure about his abilities.

MARY: Joe, I never minded the fact that you haven't been working. But it's getting to you. You're not the man I married. Now, I can't forcibly take that gold from you, but if you go out to gamble it, I don't want you to come back.

JOSEPH: I will come back, Mary, and with ten times this much. You'll see.

MARY: Even if you win: once you leave, you're gone.

JOSEPH: You'll see! Everything will be better.

MARY: Can't you see, Joseph? Your mind isn't working as it used to.

JOSEPH: Mary, I have to do this thing.

MARY: Uh-huh. And where do you intend to place your bet?

JOSEPH: At Bethlehem Downs.

MARY: Okay. And where are we now?

JOSEPH: What do you mean?

MARY: Where are we? Are we anyplace but under the tree in the Moroskis' living room in Milwaukee, Wisconsin? Try to see. You can't go to the racetrack. You can't leave this stable until January, when you'll go back into the attic with the rest of us. You're a statue from a nativity scene, Joe!

JOSEPH (exiting): I'm going out there! You'll see!

MARY: I mean it, Joe. I don't want you around us anymore.

JOSEPH (offstage): You'll see. (Mary stares down at the baby and begins to weep gently.)

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

Later the same night, under the same tree. The shepherds and sheep are back in the stable, joking, drinking, and laughing too hard at each other's stories.

RUPE: So, did I ever tell you about the bully ram that was terrorizing the flock?

THAD: No. What happened?
RUPE: He was an outsider. He just sort of showed up and started in on the howdy-do’s with some of the ladies in the flock. He had taken a fancy to a ripe little two-year-old and was about to have his way with her when Marnie and I happened by.

THAD: Just in time.

RUPE: Tell me! So we asked him—nicely, now—to leave.

SIG: Oh! I bet he didn’t like that.

RUPE: He did not. He rammed me in my knee. He was backing up to ram me again, and he must’ve gotten a whiff of Marnie here, ’cause he lost all his will to fight. He started to climb up my legs to get to her.

THAD: Sounds like an anxious little bugger.

RUPE: Snorting like a hog.

SIG: So, what’d you do?

RUPE: Well, I wasn’t about to just surrender Marnie’s honor.

SIG: I should hope not.

RUPE: That old boy had the whole field to choose from and he just had to go and pick the lamb that was grafted to my neck.

SIG: They’ll do that sometimes, you know; just insist on challenging the boss of the flock. And that’s you, Rupe.

THAD: So did you fight the ram?

SIG: Did you do battle for your mate?

RUPE: Well, I...You know, she’s not exactly my mate, Sig.

SIG: Oh. Of course not. Just a figure of speech.

THAD: Litotes.

SIG: Right.

RUPE: So, I decided...You know, I’m not sure that “litotes” is quite right. That would be something like, “Well, she’s not not my mate,” wouldn’t it?

SIG: Oh, right. No, that’s not—

THAD: Anyway, they’re just very good friends.

SIG: Right.

MARNIE: Baaa.

THAD: Very, very good friends.

RUPE: That’s fair. But anyway, he outfoxed me at first by lunging at my legs. I bent down to cover them up without even thinking, and the weight of old Marnie knocked me over flat on my face. I must’ve been out a while, ’cause when I came to, the ram, he was balanced on my neck. On Marnie! He was moving around a bit, but I couldn’t tell what he was doing. I tried to shake him, but he wouldn’t get off. Then I hauled them both over to the pond, and I saw in the reflection that he was about to fulfill his sordid intentions while riding on my neck. So I jumped into the pond, held the ram under, and drowned him.

SIG: You upheld your dignity.

RUPE: And Marnie’s.

SIG: Well done!
THAD: Did you have to drown the ram?

RUPE: Oh, Thad, he was crazy. If you saw the look in his eye, you’d know that I really had no choice. He taught me a lesson, alright: you must never underestimate the ardor of rutting animals. (Mary enters with the child and the wise men.)

SIG: I'll try to remember that.

THAD: I don't think that you had to drown him. You could have let him up. Imagine how heavy your horns must feel when you're drowning.

RUPE: You weren't there to see the evil in his eye, Thad. Why...

MELCHIOR: Pardon me, fellows, but the little mother is putting the baby to bed now. Can we go outside?

RUPE: Doesn't the baby want to play with the sheep yet?

MELCHIOR: No, he’s very tired.

THAD: Well, if he wants to play when he’s rested, he can play with Pug.

RUPE: Or Marnie.

MELCHIOR: Yes. I’ll pass along the word.

SIG: Okay. (Shepherds exit.)

MARY: Thank all of you for your help, your concern, and your counsel.

GASPAR: Any way that we can be of service, Madam. Just remember what I said: "When you know yourself, your inner voices will guide you. You will need no external advice."

MARY: Thank you. (She puts the baby into the manger then lies down next to it. Joseph enters and watches them in silence.) I hope I’ve done the right thing, O Lord and Baby. I know that Joseph was meant to be part of this family, and I worry that I’ve made a mistake. But the word that the angel used was “helper.” And Joe was helpful for a while. But for months now, he has been nothing but a drain. He feels so guilty because he hasn’t been working. So he does insane things. He tears down my every effort to keep the promises I made at the Annunciation. I can’t have him around us anymore...

JOSEPH: Mary?...Mary?

MARY: Leave, Joe.
JOSEPH: You should know, first of all, that—

MARY: No, Joe! It's true that we probably have to talk some time. But not right now. The baby's sleeping. I'm trying to sleep. Go.

JOSEPH: You should know, first of all, that I lost all the gold at the track. Dancing Lady finished twelfth.

MARY: Go.

JOSEPH: She broke strong out of the gate, but she saw a patch of clover on the infield, and she slowed down to—

MARY: Leave. Forget about it.

JOSEPH: I can't leave.

MARY: You can leave, and you will leave. I thought you might try to return, so I asked those shepherds if they'd...assist me in—

JOSEPH: Hear me out, Mary. We have no choice.

MARY: I'll hear you out another day. Not now!

JOSEPH: We don't have time.

MARY: I don't have time to listen to your ravings! Your mind is damaged somehow...

JOSEPH: No.

MARY: ...and I feel sorry for you, but I have a mission. I can't take care of you.

JOSEPH: We have a mission. And there's nothing wrong with my mind.

MARY: No?

JOSEPH: No.

MARY: Joe, you said you lost the gold at the track, right?

JOSEPH: Right. I was wrong. I'm sor—

MARY: Which track was it, Joe?

JOSEPH: Bethlehem Downs.

MARY: And you say there's nothing wrong with your mind?

JOSEPH: Absolutely nothing.

MARY: Joe, we're in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And even if you went to the track in Milwaukee, you'd be five feet too short to reach the window. Your universe is under this tree. Beyond it is only darkness and immense living-room furniture. You're operating under a delusion, Joe, and I won't...I can't....

JOSEPH: Yes, we're in Milwaukee. But we're in Bethlehem too. I recognize the existence of the Moroskis, just as they recognize mine, but they can't stop me from living my life. Now we have to go away from here—yourself, the baby, and I. Jesus is in danger.

MARY: What sort of "danger"?

JOSEPH: King Herod. I don't know if he's done it yet, but very soon he will order the death of all male infants.

MARY: That's insane!
JOSEPH: We might save a lot of time if we'd limit the discussion to just those things that you don't find insane.

MARY: Ha-ha. Sarcasm isn't helping your case, Joe, and the king would never do something like that.

JOSEPH: He's doing it now.

MARY: I don't believe you. Where did you hear this?

JOSEPH: Well, this probably won't help my case either, but...an...angel...the same guy who came to me before....He...came again. He said we have to leave tonight and go into the land of Egypt. I saw him at the track. He lost a fin on Dancing Lady, too. Said he'd seen Jesus pick him out and figured it was a sure thing.

MARY: Your fantasies are getting bizarre.

JOSEPH: It's not a fantasy. I'm taking you to Egypt tonight if I have to drag you kicking and screaming.

MARY: Don't you threaten me, you—

JOSEPH: We're going, Mary. That's all there is to it. Now pack up. If you want to leave me in Egypt....well...we'll talk about it in Egypt. Maybe I should ask the angel....

MARY (calling offstage): Oh, shepherds! Oh, fellas!

SIG (offstage): Yes?

MARY: Could you all please come here in a hurry?

RUPE (offstage): Right away.

MARY (as shepherds enter): For the last time, Joe, leave me alone!

SIG: What is it?

THAD: Does Jesus want to play with the sheep-ies?

MARY: No, fellas. It's Joseph.

THAD: Joseph? Well, that's fine. I'd recommend that you play with Pug for starters. She's a very nice—

MARY: No, boys. He came back threatening me, and I'm worried. I'd like you to stick around, just in case.

RUPE: You have nothing to worry about, Madam.

THAD: We're shepherds.

SIG: My good man,...

RUPE: We'll protect you from this heel.

SIG: ...have you ever seen the damage that a crook can do to the human head?

JOSEPH: No.

SIG: Well,...neither have I. But I have seen what it can do to a wolf's head, and let me tell you, it's not a pretty sight.

THAD: Did you hit a wolf with that thing?

MARY: Go, Joe. Now.

JOSEPH: Not without the two of you.

SIG: You heard what the little lady said.
JOSEPH: Can't we talk? Can't you call off these clowns?

RUPE: Clowns, eh?

MARY: We'll talk some other time.

JOSEPH: We're out of time. We have to go.

SIG: Alright, Mister, you asked for it. (Takes a broad swing at Joseph with the crook. Everyone ducks to miss it. The wise men enter.)

THAD: Watch out!

GASPAR: Mission accomplished!

RUPE: I've got him coming this way.

MARY: No! Don't catch him! Let him get away!

SIG: I've got him.

MELCHIOR: Please! Stop this!

MARY: You don't understand. They were helping me. Joseph was threatening me.

BALTHAZAAR: That doesn't matter. You're safe now. Violence is not the best solution.

JOSEPH: I concur.

BALTHAZAAR: Of course. Now, what's all this about threats?

JOSEPH: Oh, that was nothing. All I said is that we were leaving. Even if I had to drag her.

MELCHIOR: Hmm.

MARY: Kicking and screaming!

JOSEPH: Kicking and...um...screaming.

GASPAR: Yes. Well, that does certainly sound like a threat to me.

JOSEPH: She wasn't listening to reason.

MARY: I wasn't hearing any!

MELCHIOR: Young man, why is it so important that you all leave tonight?

JOSEPH: I...I had a vision.

MELCHIOR: Yes. Mary has told us about your...visions.

JOSEPH: It was real!

GASPAR: Of course it was, Son. To you.

JOSEPH: I tell you, I was visited by an angel at the racetrack!

MELCHIOR: Stay calm, young man.

JOSEPH: You call yourselves wise men, and you've never heard of a real visit from the beyond?!

BALTHAZAAR: Of course there are such things. But for every one, there are thousands of cases of mistaken identity.

MELCHIOR: And thousands of hoaxes.

GASPAR: And thousands of lunatics.

JOSEPH: The same angel told me about the child before he was born. Ask her! I knew everything before it happened.

MARY: He did know...some things.
JOSEPH: And why have you three traveled so far to be here? You know about this child. Why does it seem so strange that the earthly protector of such a child should have an agent of God about him?

MELCHIOR: Oh, don’t get me wrong. I don’t necessarily doubt your story.

JOSEPH: What do you mean, “necessarily”?

GASPAR: Well, it does seem a bit...superfluous that two different angels should visit you when one could do the job just as well, and without causing so much trouble.

BALTHAZAAR: Fine. Assume for the moment that both of you received messages from beyond. The question remains, though, if Mary doesn’t want Joseph around, should any vision he sees force her to allow him to stay?

JOSEPH: That’s none of your business. It’s my vision.

MARY: It is their business. They’re wise men, and they mean to protect me.

JOSEPH: I’m the one who means to protect you, to save your son from Herod’s sword.

GASPAR: Herod’s sword?

JOSEPH: That’s what the angel at the race track told me. Herod means to kill all newborn male babies.

MELCHIOR: Oh, no.

JOSEPH: So I must take Mary and the child to the land of—

BALTHAZAAR: Pack, Mary. Get the child ready for the journey.

MARY: What! What are you saying?

GASPAR: Balthazaar had a feeling....

MELCHIOR: We had spoken to King Herod. We told him that the child we were seeking would be the king of the Jews. I didn’t even notice Herod’s reaction....

GASPAR: Me neither.

MELCHIOR: ...but Balthazaar told us later that he seemed to be upset at the news: gnashing his teeth and subtly smiting his breast and such.

BALTHAZAAR: I tried to explain that he wouldn’t be an earthly king, but something different. I thought I had calmed his fears.

GASPAR: But apparently he didn’t.

JOSEPH: Don’t you see? We have to leave right now.

BALTHAZAAR: Go, Madam. Go with him. You must act to save the child’s life.

MARY: The king is sending soldiers?

MELCHIOR: They mean to kill him.

JOSEPH: And tell her about the way to get into Bethlehem. She thought I was crazy because I claimed that I could leave Milwaukee.

GASPAR: Oh yes, Madam. Around these presents and behind the big couch, you’ll find a mouse hole. Go through the hole, and you’re in Bethlehem.

JOSEPH: I’ve been trying to tell you. I’m not crazy. You’ve just been too caught up in your own vision to consider anyone else’s.
BALTHAZAAR: You must go! All of you!

JOSEPH: Come with me only as far as the mouse hole. If you can’t see Bethlehem on the other side, I’ll go on without you.

MARY: Are there big mice in the hole?

GASPAR: No. The Moroskis had the exterminator out in September. Now, go.

MELCHIOR: Please go, Madam.

MARY: Okay...at least as far as the mouse hole.

BALTHAZAAR: Hurry!

MARY (dressing the child): Even if you’re right, we still have a lot of talking to do in Egypt.

JOSEPH: Fine. Let’s go.

MARY: If I can’t see Bethlehem on the other side of that hole, Joe....

JOSEPH: Don’t worry.

MELCHIOR: Wait! We almost forgot. We cashed in the other gifts. We’ve got some money for you. The first stranger we saw asked us if we had any frankincense and myrrh to sell him.

JOSEPH (taking money): Thanks, guys. You’re gentlemen.

MARY: I think that I should take care of the money from now on, Joseph.

JOSEPH: I guess I can’t argue with that. (Gives her the money. They exit with the baby.)

BALTHAZAAR: I hope they make it.

GASPAR: The stars are in their favor.

MELCHIOR: And I’ve charted their biorhythms; they’re looking good, too. (Takes out chart. All three study it as they walk offstage.) This is Mary’s romance line. See how it keeps going up? Joseph’s money line, too.

GASPAR: These things are so cool. (They exit.)

RUPE: So. You proved pretty handy with that thing.

SIG: All in a day’s work. A good shepherd’s got to be ready at all times. I mean, when I saw the desperate look in that bully’s eye, I knew I had to act fast. So I wound up my crook, and I gave it to him. (He swings the crook, smashing the big red tree ornament noisily.) Uh-oh.

RUPE: Now you’ve done it.

THAD: Hey wise men! (The wise men re-enter.)

RUPE: Sig did it.

GASPAR: The Moroskis are going to have a fit.

MR. MOROSKI (in the distance): What the hell was that?

MRS. MOROSKI: Sounded like a light bulb.

MR. MOROSKI: Or an ornament.

MELCHIOR: Everybody find your marks. (They scramble into the positions in which they began, staring down into the now-empty manger. “Living room lights” come on. Moroski shadows move about the stage.)
MRS. MOROSKI: It's an ornament, alright. The big red one.

MR. MOROSKI: How's a thing like that happen?

MRS. MOROSKI: How should I know? Hey! Where's the holy family?

MR. MOROSKI: Huh?

MRS. MOROSKI: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The manger is empty.

MR. MOROSKI: Well! I think that answers our question.

MRS. MOROSKI: What?

MR. MOROSKI: I'll lay you dollars to doughnuts that William Junior is pretending to sleep right now, with his heart beating a mile a minute.

MRS. MOROSKI: You think so?

MR. MOROSKI: That's really disappointing. He gave me his promise just before bedtime. We might as well get him down here and get it over with.

MRS. MOROSKI: Please, Bill, let it wait 'til morning.

MR. MOROSKI: For his own good, I think we should do it now.

MRS. MOROSKI: Christmas morning, Bill! It's not the time for one of your inquisitions.

MR. MOROSKI: To hell with Christmas!

MRS. MOROSKI: I won't have you saying that in my house!

MR. MOROSKI: Okay, I'm sorry. But to heck with Christmas. The boy gave me his solemn word. I expect you to back me up on this. You're always taking his side when there are important lessons to be learned.

MRS. MOROSKI: Please! Can't it wait? I'll back you up tomorrow. I promise.

MR. MOROSKI: Swift, sure justice. It's the only way. Get William down here.

MRS. MOROSKI: No, Bill....

MR. MOROSKI (Shadow exits, voice gets distant): Fine! I'll get him myself.
MRS. MOROSKI (Shadow exits): Okay, okay, I’ll get him.

(For the remainder of the play, two separate threads of dialogue—under the tree and among the Moroskis—are spoken simultaneously, the Moroskis “distant” voices at a lower volume than the characters under the tree. The Wise men and the shepherds sing the “Myrrh is Mine” song from SCENE ONE very slowly, as a dirge. Gaspar pulls from his robe a book with gilded pages, opens it, and reads aloud over the song. When he finishes, Melchior pulls from his robe a 9” x 12” magazine with a flashy cover photo, opens it, and reads aloud.)

MR. MOROSKI: Bring him into the kitchen. And back me up on this.

MRS. MOROSKI: Please go easy, Bill; it’s Christmas.

GASPAR: “Joseph got up and took the child and his mother. And left that night for EGYPT. He stayed there until the death of Herod, to fulfill what The Lord said through the prophet: Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

MELCHIOR: “You’ve just been too caught up in your own vision to consider anyone else’s.”

MR. MOROSKI (distant, but screaming): Don’t you lie to me!

MRS. MOROSKI (waking the neighbors): Bill! You’ll wake the neighbors!

BILLY: Dad! I swear! I didn’t!

SALLY: Quiet! I’m trying to sleep!

MR. MOROSKI: Get smart with me, Missy, and I’ll come up there.

MRS. MOROSKI: Bill! It’s Christmas Day!

BILLY: It wasn’t me!

MR. MOROSKI: The truth, Billy!

MARNIE: Baaa.

PUG: Baaa.

****
Cigarettes After Church

by Thomas Robert Barnes

They file out
as they had come in,
each to his own skin,
thought hovering
above them like wisps,
a reflection of their clasped hands,
what trifle that can be held.

With bristly hair, dark eyes,
noses, and ears, and stature,
each bears the culture,
two kisses for a stalwart widow.

Outside, they huddle like sheep,
uttering Basque and French.
Smatters of laughter sparkle
beneath the smoke of their cigarettes.
Then slowly, then more quickly,
they dissipate into its fabric,
the streets, the night.
She told me Odysseus would kill us both
if he ever found out. That didn’t discourage me.
To the contrary, it honed desire
with the edge of danger:
no fruit’s as sweet as what’s forbidden.
Twenty years she was faithful
to a memory, impervious to my appeals,
my assurances he wasn’t coming back. Then the man himself washed up
on the beach; a legend already, he was in the flesh
a disappointment: no man
could live up to his reputation,
not even him. Oh, we’d gotten reports,
rumors from travelers, vagabonds
and runaway sailors, deserters from the war itself,
but there had to be some truth to them:
*Odysseus is clever, saves day again
for Greeks; Odysseus escapes beautiful singing women; Odysseus outsmarts one-eyed, dull-witted giant.*
Well, he was just an ordinary-looking man
when he got here — ragged tunic, worn sandals,
gray in the beard and hair.
He always looked as if he were listening
for some distant song or squinting
across a horizon no one else could see.
Even when he looked at her, she told me,
she felt as if he saw Athena, Cassandra,
maybe some nameless, faceless
camp girl less desirable than Briseis.
With no chance to be clever, he was nothing.
*I’ve waited twenty years for a stranger,* she said.
*What a fool I’ve been!* I led her inside
then and sent the servants away, and gave her
wine and comfort. I watched her lips touch
the cup and wondered, *are there any songs not sung by sirens?* It seemed best
to wait to remind her we all become strangers
sooner or later — it’s only a question
of when our ship sets sail, how long
until it doesn’t come home.
Cerulean Passion

by Molly Lynn Watt

Since first I glimpsed Cerulean
more than all colors bluish
she is my fickle mistress

Fanning across the skies
dancing with the Northern Lights
she eludes me in the mists of clouds

I seek her in the laundry mix of Denim
or keeping company in my patchwork quilt
with Wisteria  Cornflower  Violet

Perhaps she masquerades with Lapis
Lazuli  Lavender  Dresden
or plain old Blue

But she remains aloof
from ordinary azure tints
a glint like sea foam flashing in the sun

Shunning love’s ache
making do with lesser hues
I dress in Madder Blue as blue jays do
Wrong

by Robin Reinach

Dr. Irwin Grossman—wasn’t that the stupid­est name? The psychiatrist looked stupid, too. I wanted to throw darts at his bulbous nose beneath his black-framed glasses. It was 1970 and I was 14, a savvy New York teen. Following Dr. Grossman into his office, I loathed his pointy brown shoes. The old-fashioned wooden desk he led me to was another turn-off. Sitting behind it, he looked like the principal from Archie Comics.

Not that I was the queen of first impressions in my rumpled Lenox School skirt. The gray tweed—hemmed to bare my pale, plump thighs—hiked up as I sat down. Across the desk from Dr. Grossman, my thighs spread on the seat. Embarrassment flushed my face, but bravado tossed my head, bouncing my frizzy red hair. I saw Dr. Grossman’s fleshy hands fold on his desktop. His furry eyebrows and thick glasses formed a Groucho mask; his doughy lips gave a smile that was too much to bear.

I glanced away from the therapist and looked around his room at the bookshelves and dirty Venetian blinds. The psychiatrist’s casual ugliness disturbed me, and the rest of his office provided no relief. The toys scattered on Grossman’s gray carpet made me cringe with shame. What pathetic kid had tossed that ragged teddy bear into a corner? Who’d played with the battered dollhouse and the little figurines? Eyeing a battalion of miniature soldiers, clutching their tiny guns, I recalled the creepy kid...

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
who’d exited before me—a skinny middle-school boy with buck teeth. Talk about uncool!

During the session, I did my best to avoid Grossman’s face as well as his questions. On my way out, I passed his next patient, a pimply blond who weighed about a thousand pounds. How had I ended up sandwiched between these two weirdos?

Exiting onto Madison Avenue, I cursed my parents for insisting I see Grossman. Therapy wasn’t a punishment exactly, but it had been the consequence of admitting I smoked pot. Of course, I could have lied when Dad asked me. But I’d read *Steal This Book* by Abbie Hoffman, and I’d watched people eat blotter acid and trip out in Central Park. Pot was nothing compared with LSD; was it my fault my parents had flipped out?

Pulling out my bus pass, heading for the 70th Street stop, I wondered what was the matter with Grossman. Of course, I was no beauty with my freckles, frizz, and flab, but I knew enough to steer clear of orthopedic-looking shoes. In Grossman’s place, I’d have avoided the Groucho glasses. I almost felt sorry for him, lacking any sense of how to present himself.

Grossman probably never looked in the mirror, I thought, because he didn’t seem self-conscious at all. This last idea very nearly made me jealous. For me, mirror-gazing had become an obsession. As a teenager, I was desperate to be conventionally attractive, and improving appearances was a preoccupation that I assumed any intelligent person shared. Except, of course, for the naturally good-looking, a category from which both the psychiatrist and I were clearly disqualified.

Over our next few sessions, I found Dr. Grossman grosser and grosser. I could barely sit across the desk from him, averting my eyes from his bloated face. There was no way a person who looked like him could understand a thing about me. But I had to do something during those 45-minute sessions, so I made a game of resistance.

“I wrote a poem,” I announced one day.

From across his desk the psychiatrist replied, “I’d like to see it.”

“I only show my poems to people I like.”

How clever I felt compared to Grossman when he made no reply. I wasn’t pretty but at least I was smart. And I knew how to insulate myself from the stolid psychiatrist with an attitude both merciless and smug.


“Yep,” I answered, flicking my long, red hair. “Like?” he prompted when I didn’t continue. “Like...” I pretended to consider, then shrugged. “Something.”


Session after session, month after month, Dr. Grossman tolerated my mocking, and I thought he was a nerd. The psychiatrist didn’t object when I brought friends to his office, chewed bubble gum, or giggled uncontrollably. He let me snack on potato chips, crackling the plastic bag, littering his floor with crumbs. Once I brought an ice cream cone and licked it elaborately. Cigarettes, however, he banned.

“My parents let me smoke, so why do you care?”

“Why don’t you tell me how you feel when you can’t have a cigarette?” he asked when we’d been meeting about a year.

“Because that’s dumb.” I twisted a lock of hair around my finger, refusing to look at his face.

“Why do you think you started smoking?”

Despite my policy of never giving Grossman any satisfaction, I warmed to telling him the anecdote that I guessed would bother him in an
entertaining way. "I smoked my first cigarette at the foot of Mom’s bed."

"Really?"

"Yup." I smiled. "Mom and Dad smoke three packs a day—each," I added, shooting a look at Grossman. "When I was little, Mom always said to tell her if I ever started smoking, instead of hiding it, you know?"

Behind his glasses, the therapist’s eyes were attentive.

"Mom said she wouldn’t punish me because it would be too hypocritical."

His head inclined, not exactly in agreement, I thought, but wanting me to go on.

"So I figured there’d be no problem when I needed smoking permission for a teen tour. But Mom said no way. She wouldn’t give me permission to start smoking," my voice went shrill, "far away from home with a bunch of teenagers." I dropped back to my normal tone. "She said it would be different if I were already a smoker," So, I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs in their Lenox School skirt, "I called her bluff!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I took a Kent from the pack on her bed." This was my favorite part of the story, and I let out a laugh.

Enjoying the look on Grossman’s face, I explained how Mom had watched me smoke that first cigarette. Chortling, I told him how I now shared my parents’ Kents, stacked in cartons in our den closet. Then I took out my Zippo lighter, flicked open the silver cap, and struck the flint wheel until a flame leapt up.

"You like risk," he offered, what I considered a lame interpretation, as I ran my finger through the flame.

"I don’t think we’re getting anywhere." I shut the Zippo with a click.

Grossman’s face was sad but earnest. After a long moment, he said, "I have to agree."

"I want you to tell my parents that therapy’s not working." For once I looked him straight in the face. Steeling myself against his saggy cheeks, I continued, making sure to sound confident and grown-up. "It doesn’t make sense, my coming here, week after week."

The doctor’s eyes regarded me steadily through the lenses of his black glasses. "All right," he said at last.

Surprise and gratitude flared up in my chest. "Thank you," I breathed.

"I’ll tell them there’s nothing more we can do for now," he emphasized. "I’ll tell them therapy doesn’t make sense for you at this time." Dr. Irwin Grossman spoke with obvious regret.

Grossman’s gray eyes were washed-out and tired, but they held my gaze. What kind of mother names their kid Irwin, I wondered, as something like sympathy stirred in my chest. Behind his thick glasses, the psychiatrist’s eyes held defeat, but they didn’t shy away from me. For a moment, I almost liked him.

But liking Dr. Grossman was a risk I didn’t intend to take. My eyes dropped to his scarred wooden desktop, although my face still felt his stare. Contact between us was broken, but I sensed a residue. It was a bit like touching a spider web, feeling the filmy threads cling to my skin after I’d brushed them off.

Yes, there was something contagious about Dr. Grossman, something exactly wrong. When the psychiatrist and I connected, too much awkwardness and disgust moved into focus. Even at 14, I knew it was safer—and more fun—to stand outside those dangerous feelings and laugh at the therapist who personified them.
The Ticket

You see it’s like this,  
we should not have  
parked there, in the spot  
with the royal blue sign,  
wheelchair beckoning  
my weary father,  
eighty-three. We were only  
going to lunch, when he barked  
he’d forgotten his gimpy sign  
that hangs from the rearview mirror  
like those domino dice  
on hot rods with younger drivers,  
or the rosary, protecting Theresa  
as she tools around town.

Patience scarcer than hen’s teeth,  
fireworks rang out when we found  
the ticket on the windshield.  
Two hundred and fifty dollars.  
A king’s ransom.  
One to fight.  
In traffic court.  
Room three-fourteen  
of the county courthouse.  
Seven p.m. Monday next.

A calico cloth of humanity,  
no distinction between  
rich or poor; educated, not;  
right or wrong side of the tracks.  
All equal before the law.

The magistrate’s weary gaze testified  
she’d seen and heard it all and more:  
the scofflaw, nabbed, spewing excuses.  
The frightened seventeen-year-old,  
lead foot stamped on four tickets, one too  
many to keep his license, mom by his side.

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
Papa stepped up to the rickety podium,
tweed jacket, felted English vest,
bow tie, and carefully trimmed mustache,
still dapper and dignified, his few white
hairs neatly in place, Italian leather shoes shined.

The hard eyes softened as he spoke.
Confidently, we handed her the placard.

"Sir, this expired on your birthday in August."
Defeated, I prepared to pay our due, when
Her Honor spoke: "No, don't. Renew the sign,
I'll call the officer involved. Come back on the twenty-fourth."

On the twenty-fourth, Papa had quadruple bypass surgery.
He never recovered. At seven that night
a different magistrate, not so kind,
hard-pressed to buy my story.
She let it go, but not without a scolding.

And me wishing Papa were still here
for more lunches, to get more tickets.
Just So

by Dennis Nau

I always did like things perfectly, laid out correctly. I was born that way, I suppose. We were all prepared that morning for the tour bus at the restaurant: all the silverware polished, the bacon cooked, muffins and sweet rolls all laid out, forks, knives and spoons wrapped in linen. Six of us waited, and we waited. I finally called. "Oh, didn’t anyone let you know?" The tour had been cancelled. What the hell was I supposed to do with all of that food? Day-old sweet rolls are an insult to the human palate. I finally decided to give the bakery goods away to the local merchants as a goodwill gesture. They were very pleased.

In so doing, I discovered a basic law of nature: Bad luck begets more bad luck. It reproduces, asexually, like an amoeba. I gave away this food, and everyone said thanks. They ate their fill, and then they weren’t hungry at lunch and didn’t come over to my restaurant to eat.

I discovered months later that the tour buses weren’t stopping by anymore because they were too embarrassed about their screwup to call for any more reservations.

The tour bus business was big. There were archeological tours of the area, traversing all of the southwestern Native American ancient sites. The people on board all had money, read National Geographic, and loved our restaurant. When I lost the tour bus business, I had to let one of my waitresses go. She was quite upset. She knew things were bad, but she thought I’d get rid of a different waitress, and she took it personally. Unfortunately, she was related to half the town.

Her relatives stopped coming in.

Yes, I learned something about life that summer. It was a hard lesson, and I wasn’t sure what the moral was. I was used to more conventional wisdom—a penny saved is a penny earned, idle hands are the devil’s workshop, and stuff like that. He who is careless in large matters will be careless in large matters. I grew up with that type of wisdom.

When I was young, my father used to disassemble old toys that were broken, take out the nails and screws, and put them in a drawer. He’d save the eyes from dolls, buttons from worn-out shirts, zippers from pants.

“You never know.”

In my young mind, I came to believe that the wonders of the world were reserved for those who prepared, who saved, who were careful with their money and their time. Those who squandered what they had deserved their fate. I never squandered.

I made my up bed in the morning and made it well, tight enough to make an army drill sergeant proud. I did it because I was a perfectionist. At one time, I considered it a badge of honor to be considered such a person. I know now that it’s a curse.

I had an essay to write in college, 300 words, a short essay. I worked on it forever, and it was perfect, absolutely perfect. The instructor said, “This is very good.”

“It better be,” I said, “I spent sixty hours on it. I’m a perfectionist.”

“So am I,” he said. “May God have mercy on your soul.” He looked at me with pity, actual pity. “There is no such thing as perfection in this world. You will be miserable your entire life.”

What did he know? He was an instructor, not a full professor.

At one time in my life, I wanted to be a cabinetmaker. To this day, in the evening, I sit at my desk beside the grandfather clock that I made when I was in high school. I polish it every other night. The woodworking is flawless. I spent 500 hours making it.

“I can’t hire you, kid,” the foreman said. “I can see that you’ve got talent, but we’d go bankrupt. We have to make this in less than six hours.”

“I don’t understand.”
“Tell you what: This is really nice, the work that you’ve done. If you wanted to be a 1099 employee, an independent contractor, we’d pay you $183 for every clock body like this you supply us. Work at your own pace.”

They were willing to pay me less than 40 cents an hour for my work, I calculated, which they regarded highly. I passed.

I knew early on that I had to own my own business, any business. I stumbled into food service. The restaurant was for sale cheap—too cheap, I thought. I talked to the owner.

“We had one case of food poisoning. I don’t know how. Everything had been going well—at least as well as could be expected. After that, everything collapsed. People just quit coming in.”

I inspected the rest rooms, and I was appalled. I checked behind the grills. I was surprised they had had only one case of food poisoning. I thought that maybe 200 or 300 hundred people would have died. I bought the place, cheap. I cleaned it, repainted, installed better lighting, and the public collectively said, “That’s what we needed, a perfectionist.”

I should have known.

Two years later, I sold the place at a handsome profit and bought a bigger place.

When you’re a perfectionist, you have trouble finding women. You can find them easily enough, but can you live with them? I had moved in with Angie when I was 22. She was polite, with a sweet, down-home smile, but she couldn’t wash a dish or sweep a floor properly to save her soul. I’d come home at night and she’d be on the sofa, sipping beer and reading magazines.

“I’ve cleaned the house, Johnny,” she’d say.

I’m not a horse’s ass. If she would have said that she hadn’t been feeling well or that, for some reason, she had decided to clean tomorrow, I could have lived with that. But Angie actually thought she had cleaned.

I wiped my finger across the top of the cabinet. The dust was an eighth-inch thick. Our bed looked like a crumpled newspaper. I didn’t yell. I just took out some rags and started cleaning. I could detect indignation simmering in the next room. Angie was an attractive woman, but we were two human beings whose destinies were at cross-purposes. I was headed one way. She was headed another. Angie was gone within a week.

I met Deirdre. She came into the restaurant, looking for a job. I needed a waitress. She complained that our toilets were not clean enough, and I fell in love with her on the spot. She had auburn hair, impeccably curled. There was not a hair—not a hair—out of place. I hired her as a waitress. A year later, I married her.

The wedding was a small, discreet, perfectly-managed affair. The food looked so good that people were afraid to eat it, but they did, of course,
and talked about it for weeks. We were both proud, enormously so.

Deirdre and I argued about small things the first year of our marriage. Should this room be painted in a pale pink or in a very pale pink? Deirdre usually won the argument. Usually, she was right. She’d check along the molding after the painter left to make certain that he hadn’t allowed any of the paint to seep past the masking tape. Sometimes she found some. At times I thought that she was more of a perfectionist than I was.

There was no dust in the house that Deirdre ruled. There were no spiderwebs hanging from the corner of the ceiling. If I walked in on her unexpectedly, she was always cleaning. God bless her soul. We were a match made in heaven, a heaven with no dust on the floor or on the tabletops. One perfectionist had married another.

“Johnny, Johnny,” she’d sometimes say as I walked into the house, “I know that we both agreed that we should take our shoes off before walking on the carpet, but don’t you think it would be better if you took off your shoes outside, before you came into the house?”

You had to love a woman like that.

Deirdre didn’t become pregnant for quite some time. There was all kind of talk among the staff at the restaurant: maybe she’s infertile; maybe they don’t really have sex together—it’s messy, and you know how those two are; maybe before she became so prim and proper she did drugs on a regular basis—that kind of talk. I heard it second- or third-hand.

“Those two—they shouldn’t be allowed to reproduce themselves. Just imagine what their offspring would be like.”

Oh, I heard things like that too. I laughed. The world needed more people who were perfectionists. There wouldn’t be as many juvenile delinquents or teenagers who wrote graffiti with spray paint on the sides of buildings or men who urinated in public.

And you wouldn’t worry, when you were in a restaurant, whether your water glass had been cleaned properly. When you were in my restaurant, you didn’t worry about such things.

We named the baby Prudence. It seemed the perfect name. She would have it made, we figured. We’d raise her in a thoughtful, careful, prudent manner, and she’d learn early on that there is a right way and a wrong way to do things.

The poor kid, she didn’t learn all that fast, if at all, and by the time she was three, I feared that the only thing she’d ever do with a fork was stab her mother. For Prudence, there wasn’t a right and wrong way. There was her way. We wondered what we had done wrong.

When she turned seven, Prudence looked like a little princess. Deirdre and I knew better. We took her out in public, but we did so with caution. For Prudence was a work in progress. Good fortune in life is like a brick wall, built step-by-step. Built properly, it will last centuries. One screwup on the second row of bricks, and all walls will crumble.

Deirdre would sometimes blame herself when something went wrong. More likely, she would blame someone else. I remember when poor Prudence caught chicken pox. She was probably five or six. Deirdre sniffed at everything in the refrigerator and turned her wrath on the milk. “I think it’s bad.” She poured it down the sink. There was none left. I couldn’t smell anything wrong with that milk, but Deirdre was convinced that the milk was bad and somehow it had given our daughter chicken pox. She reamed out the milkman so severely he never returned.

Prudence recovered.

I never really did, since I had to go to the store every other day to buy fresh milk.

I began to think that Deirdre and I were not made for this world. Or maybe the world was not made for us. There’s chicken pox in this world. There’s cancer. There’s malaria and VD and psoriasis. They infect perfectionists and slobs alike. Why do we attempt to build these perfectly constructed brick walls? It seemed a question of
some importance.

We couldn’t get Prudence to make her bed properly, even though she was cute and had learned how to say thank you, ma’am; thank you, sir; yes, Father; no, Mother. She made her bed, but she always did a sloppy job. A sloppy job? How could that be? We had gone over bed-making procedures 10,000 times.

In February, there was a break-in at the restaurant. This was four months after the tour bus company screwed us. We found a broken lock and pointless vandalism. I can understand theft. Somebody wants something for nothing. It’s detestable behavior, but a person can understand it. Vandalism is something beyond my comprehension.

It couldn’t be connected to that waitress I had to lay off, could it? That thought crossed my mind. More bad luck.

Deirdre was still beautiful, but she seemed to have aged faster than normal people. A wrinkle here, a wrinkle there. Life and Prudence had taken their toll.

“What do you mean, heart palpitations?”

“I can feel it, Johnny. Heart palpitations.”

She was serious. The doctors put her on blood pressure medication, and she started to feel better. She cleaned and she dusted. She cleaned some more. She felt better.

Prudence would take wrappers from all of the candy bars she smuggled into the house and stuff
them under her mattress.

“Johnny, she’s eating candy bars. There’s processed sugar in candy bars.”

“It’s just a phase they go through, Deirdre. She’ll be all right. They’re only candy bars. She’s not smoking dope.”

“What do you mean, ‘smoking dope’?”

“There are some kids out there smoking dope. She’s just eating candy bars. It could be worse.”

“Oh, my God. Do you think she could be smoking dope?”

The doctor had to increase Deirdre’s medication.

One Thursday at noon, it was dead at the restaurant, and I decided to drive down to Buffalo Jack’s and see if they were any busier. Buffalo Jack’s was our primary competitor—maybe a mile away—although their rest rooms were terrible; they should have been closed down years ago by the health department. I know. I tried to urinate there one time, and I couldn’t.

As I was driving down the street, I looked and noticed that their parking lot was empty. Then I saw that damn tour bus pull in, and I almost got sick. Well, actually, I felt somewhat faint and disoriented, and I hit a car parked on the street.

“Officer, I was just driving by and the sun’s reflections off that bus in the parking lot there blinded me. I hit the brakes, but....”

It wasn’t a serious accident.

We had more bad luck. It just kept multiplying. One of our commercial ovens actually blew up. No one was hurt.

“When was this oven purchased?”

“Six years ago. We have the sales receipt right here, stapled to the invoice. The salesman’s name was Alan. It’s written right there.”

“We have a five-year warranty.”

“What are you saying?”

“Well, ma’am, we would accept this oven as a trade-in on one of our new models. They have electronic ignition. We now have a year-end sale going on. So there would be additional savings as well.”

The ice machine went out a month later.

Prudence, the poor kid, didn’t know what dirt was. She didn’t know what soap was. We taught her these things. I remember very clearly that we taught her. I was upset with my daughter’s behavior, but it almost killed poor Deirdre. I was at the hospital during my daughter’s birth, and I know she is my wife’s daughter. I witnessed the delivery, hospital gown and surgical mask (or some sort of mask) on my face. There was a little red birthmark on Prudence’s back. She still has this birthmark. The kid looks a little bit like me, so I’m sure, relatively sure, that I’m her father. How can these things happen? Did Prudence get nothing of either of our DNA? Can an apple fall that far from the tree? Prudence makes dripping water look neat and tidy by comparison. By seventh grade, when Prudence walked out of the house in the morning to go to school, Deirdre would smile and wave and clean up with Clorox the footprints left on the floor. She did it on her hands and knees. I think that’s the very definition of a mother’s love.

When we failed to make the top five restaurants list in the city for the first time in fifteen years, Deirdre got ill and went to bed for a week. She wouldn’t let me call the doctor. I don’t want him to see me like this, she said—my hair’s not done, things like that. She’d throw up on occasion, but always get up to clean up the mess herself. It was just her way.

We laid off two more waitresses the year Prudence reached puberty. It was a bad year. The walk-in cooler crapped out. Prudence found a boyfriend with a nose ring and a tongue ring. Deirdre gagged and couldn’t speak for three days. There was an ugly scene, and things went downhill after that, crumbling quickly.

Deirdre broke into little pieces. She did worse things than wipe up Prudence’s footsteps. She would hold a handkerchief up to her nose when she spoke to people who didn’t have the same standards of cleanliness that we did. That included almost
everyone. It became embarrassing when she’d go out to customers and show them the proper way to hold their forks and spoons. She’d correct a customer’s grammar in public. We didn’t make the top five restaurant list the next year either. Deirdre threatened to kill the editor of the newspaper, though she did so in perfectly-phrased English.

I started to go the other way. One day, I had to attend a meeting with a funeral home customer about upcoming deliveries. The funeral home was an important customer. The batteries on the alarm clock I was using died during the night, and I woke up ten minutes before the meeting. I threw clothes on and didn’t have time to shave. I was in the car, racing to the meeting, rubbing my hand over my chin. I felt like a homeless person. I made the meeting. Everything went fine. Nobody said, “Johnny, you look like crap.” Of course, Deirdre did, later that day.

“Johnny, you look like crap.”

I looked at myself in the mirror when I got home that night. I didn’t look that bad. A month later, I missed shaving again. I began to miss it every two or three days. Some mornings I would decide not to check the chairs around the tables to see if they were properly aligned. Ninety-eight percent of the time they were properly aligned. One day I said to myself, “I don’t care if the saltshakers are all completely full today.”

“I don’t think we’ve got the meals placed upon the plate in exactly the right order—you know, the prime rib, the carrots, the mashed potatoes, the three green broccoli spears swirled with melted cheese. Deirdre likes it just so, for the color, you know. The carrots and the broccoli spears are reversed.” A waitress told me that.

“It’s good enough,” I said.

When I called the tour bus operators, they said that, yes, they always liked our place. “We used to go to Buffalo Jack’s for a while. Everyone complained about their rest rooms. They had good ribs; that was about it. We went to Emily’s for a while, but that got to be old hat.”

“Why don’t you come back?” I asked.

“We don’t do those tours anymore. They haven’t made us money for years.”

Well, the tour bus business was out. Deirdre was so angry when she heard my story that she would have thrown something on the floor, but it would’ve broken and made a mess. She couldn’t abide that. I myself had gotten so bad that I had quit flossing and rotating my tires at the prescribed intervals.

“It’s good enough,” I would say. I would have a beer, lie on the bed, and look at the ceiling. Paint was peeling. That would have killed me a few years back. It would still kill Deirdre, but she took her contacts out before she went to bed. How could I sink so low? I remembered the old days, the first years of our marriage. Life looked so bright. We faithfully mailed in every warranty card, read all of the directions, and set our VCR clock properly.

How had life gotten to this point? Maybe I could adapt. If I didn’t check the windshield washer fluid for three weeks, life would probably still go on. Maybe I won’t wash the car for a month, I thought. It would almost kill me, but I’d survive. Let it go another month, and the pain wouldn’t be nearly as great. I’ve seen people driving cars that have never been washed. They survive. It doesn’t seem to affect their driving habits.

Would life be different if I weren’t a perfectionist? Would I become like some piece of roadkill on the side of the road, annoying any person who passed by, as I sat there, squashed down by some tire on some passing vehicle, just waiting to dry up and be blown into oblivion by the southwestern winds, where I could quit irritating humanity? Or would I just feel better and not care if I didn’t make my bed?

When the health inspector closed up Buffalo Jack’s, we held a party. We had hors d’oeuvres and wine. We invited our employees and their husbands. Deirdre beamed, actually glittered. Her eyes looked as bright as the night I married her. That was some evening. The food was fabulous. Our life would get better, our standards would return.
and Prudence would finally mature and become a human being. Business surged for a while, though the tour buses didn’t come back. Prudence left with a guy who drove a Harley. I was saddened, but I had expected it. Deirdre cried for a week. I didn’t know what to do for her. I’d take her hot chocolate in bed, which she had always loved, but it did no good. It was either too hot or too cold, or the nuts in the brownies that I baked for her weren’t ground finely enough. The low sobbing at night broke my heart. I quit shaving altogether.

“She’ll come back, Deirdre; you’ll see,” I said.

“You don’t understand, Johnny,” she said, facing the other side of the bed. She couldn’t bring herself to look at me. “I can’t bear the thought of her leaving. I can’t bear the thought of her coming back.”

I understood Deirdre at last. We went to work together the next day. We went to work together for another three months. The restaurant was going to survive, but in order to do so it needed to change. I started changing things. I had to. I wore flannel gray shirts. People told me they went together nicely with my beard. We got bikers at the restaurant. We got new tour buses, but they were full of old folks going to casinos. Those people ate differently. We became a good restaurant, not a great one. We lost our perfect customers, but they were replaced by lots of good customers. Deirdre left me. She had no choice. I know that. I had quit shining my shoes months before.

I made Deirdre promise to write me when she left. She didn’t want to, I know that, but a person who is a perfectionist doesn’t renege on promises. She ended up at Florence’s, a famous French restaurant in Houston that still has linen tablecloths, and she is doing well. A good waitress there can make eighty grand a year, I’m told. Deirdre’s good. But she won’t find perfection there, or anywhere, poor woman.

I miss her. Prudence came back, somewhat wiser. I wanted to slap her, but I didn’t. She met another boy, whom she moved in with immediately, of course, but he seems all right. They plan to be married in the fall. I’m making a living, and my standards have declined considerably.

I don’t even take a shower every day. I don’t change my oil at the proper intervals. I’m lonely. I think I am a little happier, in some ways, but I still long for the days when Deirdre and I were young and perfect and the rest of the world stood under our feet—just so, completely scrubbed, organized—when every note was sung in absolute harmony.

****
Hunger Moon

by Trina Baker

This morning, that full Hunger Moon still low on the horizon, a corpse curled up in the park across the street from my house. She rested on a bench in the playground, where mothers watch their children swing on monkey bars above the sand.

When she was lifted onto the gurney, the rising sun highlighted gray hair among the brown, like mine, falling to her shoulders.

Did the policemen blame me for the body almost on my doorstep? I heard nothing in the night. Can they blame me? Talking to them made me want to run away. Standing there, I couldn't look into her face.

I don't want to know how you die when you die alone.
Reflections

by Margaret H. Brooks

Following an unfamiliar path, we came upon a mountain pool where both sun and moon had found haven and where the shadows of long branches had rippled the fluid mirror.

Reflections shimmered on the surface but seemed to come from some depth, and as we rested on the banks, images followed one upon another, abducting fragments of thought into the still waters.

Drowning one’s unfinished thoughts in an infinite mirror from which retrieval in time is possible grants a certain temporary peace, and we reluctantly departed the pool, carrying incentive for the new path we had found.
The Speed of Desire

by John G. Morris

The Electric Cowboy, 1998-2004, R.I.P.

Perhaps the $5 cover charge makes the palms sweat and the heart pick up its bump as if this were a big gamble, but, with the bass kick of state-of-the-art woofers swelling into digital tumescence, neon lights begin to spin, and the thick air—hazy with cologne, cigarettes, pheromones, and appetite—moves with the speed of desire. One kind of wagering is moving to the pool's deep end, and this club shimmers most in its deepest water. With eyes dilated by the dark and inhibitions liquified by beer and exotic shots, size and shape and looks do matter. Here everyone knows this truth; I have entered with a large stack of need piled up inside, joining the other men circling the dance floor in the middle, the low-cut halters, bare midriffs, fine cleavage, and firm thighs all rising into the middle of my best dreams. We pay for the kind of danger the women have dressed to become, and they, standing or sitting in groups of two or three, do their version of the same,
don’t let anyone kid you. 
It’s too loud to do anything 
but shout my voice raw, 
but who cares? All I need 
to do is gauge the time, 
jerf my head toward the floor, 
grab a hand, and let the 
bass and swirling lights 
pull me in the direction 
my heart has given itself 
up to: beautiful bodies 
bobbing alongside, sweat 
glistening, the allure 
of a steamy tangle later 
for those with the looks, 
the only currency that matters, 
for whom getting lucky 
over Friday and Saturday night 
is the best game around. 
Swigging on beer after beer, 
punctuated by jello shots, 
as I wait for the courage 
to place my bet in time, 
I continue to circle, 
the pulse and the light 
and the smell having rushed 
into my blood, a better, 
more honest heartbeat, 
the nagging in my head bound, 
gagged, and held for a ransom 
I will not be able to pay tonight.
Undefeated

by Kymberli Ward

When you no longer dread the God you’re told
sees love as sin,
when you grow weary, wandering white shores
seeking something sacred
but so alone—
I will be here.

When crimson fires of love’s perfect passion
are allowed to burn,
to fan your heart to flame, and your fears
are burnished clean,
in your solitude—
I will be here.

When you see heaven, not hell, in tender
touch of enjoined flesh
fashioned together by beloved Hands, held holy
and you trust delight,
in your loneliness—
I will be here.

You will find me, spinning in a wheat field
or weeping, among wildflowers and windmills.
Perhaps you will find me praying, singing softly,
listening for your laughter, yearning for you...
waiting.

When mortal-threatened terrors turn to teachings
that do not torment
but ply tenderness to your wounded soul,
and lend you a lullaby,
when your hurt heart weeps—
I will be here.

When your tears cry out to be dried by hands that care
and do not demand
conditions of brimstone and piercing of purgatory,
when demons are but sad memory,
you need only dream me—

And I will be here.
Moon Blue

by Daniel R. Schwarz

Huge brilliant gold disc
against sable night,
its phosphorescent brightness
walking on rocky edge.
Fat moon crouches heavily
over mountain backwoods;
snowdrifts touch its fullness
swelling like pregnant woman.

Moonlight crystals burst flaming on white evergreens,
as if winking at snow's abstract patterns,
Etched by winnowing wind and snowshoes;
winking, too, at the aspen—scarred,
mottled (with deadly red blight),
dappled grey, umber.
Moon blue seemed to bide its time
as if it were this once, this very once,
not to set, to recede, be overtaken
but rather stop us in our hurry
to watch its lighting, its birthing.
Botched Robbery

by Frank De Canio

The lass observes my oldster’s unarmed heist
but browses through the store with mock aplomb.
She seems more piqued that goods are overpriced
than troubled as to where I’m coming from.
No patronizing smiles to mask her fear
or keep me busy while she makes a dash
to her beloved should the coast be clear.
Enriched by passion’s sureties of cash,
she doesn’t even try to call police
who earnestly patrol the street beside
the candy counter. Neither does she cease
to look at sweets as other patrons bide
my raid on bankrupt hearts. For nothing’s won
from pricey stores without a loaded gun.

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
“Wait,” she begged me; but her heart sings for me, like mine for her. I’ve lived too long with only the company of the wind that used to be enough.

Now, there’s Lavinia, a name as hard for me to say as white men stumble over the name my Ute mother gave me.

It’s the first step away that scares Hair Filled With Sun; but in this town—as mad with gold fever as a frothing fox with the biting sickness—there’s only gossip sharp as a lance, men that’ll use her hard as a lathered pony.

When she poured out how her husband tried to have her killed, I held her; she shook like she’d break apart. I’d have butchered the bastard Apache-slow: lucky for him he’s already dead.

Life’s too short and mean for her and me to wait.
I searched for William’s campfire, seeking a scrap of solace from the man I can’t help loving, but whose life in the woods is so strange and wild.

Each tree loomed identical, each crackling twig a cougar. Desperate and despairing, I cast about for the dim path back to town: vanished in that dark, magic-wood.

In dusk mist, a great owl swooped like Thomas’ ghost. “You adulterous hypocrite!” I shrieked. A rough hand stifled my mouth, lungs filling with terror’s silent music.

William! I kissed him fierce, tore at his clothes, like women who risk all, in novels.

“Come away with me now,” he caressed me after we had dressed again. I took one step with him, one back to town—the path suddenly as clearly marked as the boulevards of my Boston girlhood.
Lavinia Burden Risks Everything

by Robert Cooperman

I'd decided life
with William was impossible.
But just as I was packing,
resigned to a Boston widow's
lonely drizzle of years,
William appeared, and led me
into the moonless night.

When my husband had been alive,
that cottage was my prison,
especially when he led "Revelation
Sessions," the only revealing
his and Mary LaFrance's
naked flesh.

Now, with each step away,
I felt William and I could fly.
That night we lit no fires,
shared jerked venison and huddled
in each other's arms, knowing
the Sheriff would lead a posse,
his vanity tormented,
like a wolf caught in a steel trap,
that I'd chosen another.

With the first gray of dawn,
we were off, a biting rain
devouring our footprints
as if swallowed by a tide,
like that childhood holiday
when I danced among Cape Cod
fairy-waves.

No less an elfin maiden now,
soaring to wherever the wind,
and William, might lead me.
William Eagle Feather Flees Gold Creek
with the Widow Burden

by Robert Cooperman

I crept up to her cottage,
saw her lantered-silhouette,
packing for a widow’s lonely life
Back East, leaving us both empty
as a medicine bag white soldiers spill,
laughing at Ute superstitions.

Panther silent, I stole in;
one look and she was in my arms,
then we were away, her stooping
for a sack under a floorboard.

Safely up the mountain,
she showed me that pouch.
“My husband’s ghost,” she whispered,
letting wind scatter the gold dust
like his soul that’ll never find
the Land of Plentiful Game.

We couldn’t stop laughing:
joy pure as spring winds blowing
the last winter snows away.
She kissed me, again and again,
night shimmering in the emerald robes
whites call “Northern Lights.”

We were snug in that hideout:
between kissing and loving,
we ciphered our path away
from her white life, forever.
Sheriff Dennehy Discovers the Widow Burden Gone

by Robert Cooperman

I’d come courting all proper,  
with picked mountain flowers,  
hair pomaded, the shirt and jacket  
I wear for burying town officials.  
But when I saw no chimney smoke,  
I drew my gun, nudged open her door—  
hearth cold as a buzzard-picked carcass,  
armoire gaping like a shotgun wound.

But no sign of a struggle,  
even I could tell that:  
always that half-breed Eagle Feather  
to whistle up like my hound,  
when we had to hunt a man down.  
Him and Lavinia took off together,  
the rumors and gossip all true.

She made a fool of me,  
er and that half-breed cur  
that hated me for snapping  
my fingers to make him track  
long riders or reservation jumpers.  
But he never flung away  
the coin or two I’d toss him.

So now my duty’s clear:  
form a posse and jerk him  
to Jesus, for stealing the gal  
I’d cut out from the herd.  
Her, I’ll sell to Miss Jezebel,  
forced to do the nasty with me  
and every three-fingered prospector  
with brimstone breath,  
so she won’t get tossed out  
with the slops, to die in the snow.
Stars

by Denis Saleh

Salt in
the sky

Preserves
the night

The delight
of minutes

to become
hours

Photo courtesy of Francesco Ferraro & the European Southern Observatory
Contributors

Trina Baker earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of San Francisco, and she currently lives in Los Angeles. Her recent work has appeared in MO, Absonomy, Poetry East, In the Teeth of the Wind, and Slant.

Thomas Robert Barnes is a poet from Tahoe Paradise, CA who gives readings—as well as conducting a seminar entitled “Ritual of Success”—both in the US and abroad. His hobbies include skiing, rowing, and flyfishing.

Shavawn M. Berry is a freelance writer concerned with the spiritual and psychological questions that define human experience. Her work has appeared in such venues as North Atlantic Review, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, addictionsolution.com, and Living Buddhism.

Stephen Bracco is a Brooklyn, New York writer. He has received a MacArthur Scholarship in fiction from Brooklyn College and a fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center, and he was a semifinalist in the Heekin Group Foundation’s Novel-in-Progress competition.

Matthew Brennan teaches poetry writing and literature at Indiana State University in Terre Haute. His third and fourth books of poetry will be released in 2008, The House with the Mansard Roof (The Backwaters Press) and The Sea-Crossing of Saint Brendan (Birch Brook Press).

Margaret H. Brooks was born to missionary parents in Turkey in 1913. Her granddaughter uses passages of her poetry to create works of fiber art. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Blue Unicorn, CQ, Slant, and other journals, and she has published a collection of her works, Shatter of Weeds. She currently lives in Memphis.

Kevin Collins is an English professor in Weatherford, OK. His one-act plays, “Teary Farewells” and “Performance,” were produced in San Francisco, and he has adapted for the stage William Gilmore Simms’s short story, “How Sharp Snaffles Got His Capital and Wife.”

Robert Cooperman's third collection, The Widow's Burden, is available from Western Reflections Publishing Co., PO Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647. His first book, In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley, was published by the University Press of Florida, and his work has appeared in The Centennial Review and Cimarron Review.

Frank De Canio of Union City, NJ has written over 1000 poems, most of them sonnets. His work has appeared in such journals as Danger, Pleides, Nuthouse, and Words of Wisdom. He also has work on websites such as POETZ and Thick with Conviction.

Anni Macht Gibson published her first collection of poetry, Unfinished, with Woven Word Press in May 2007. She is a teacher and board member with the Women Writing for (a) Change School in the Cincinnati area.

Maxima Kahn is an editor, writing coach, and poetry teacher from Grass Valley, CA. She was a 2001 fellow at the Vermont Studio Center, and her work has appeared in Hardpan, Rattlesnake, The Union, and the Nevada County Poetry Series Anthology.

John G. Morris teaches literature and writing at Cameron University in Lawton, OK. He has had poems published in several journals, including Westview, Chardon Review, and Poetry Motel.

Matthew Muresan is a recovering electrical engineer from Somerville, MA. His novel, Predictability, is the product of a journey through 11,000 miles and 26 cities during which he invited people to become his characters. It has inspired the production of a documentary film.

Dennis Nau is the mayor of Gibbon, MN as well as a writer and businessman. Though the real world kept him from his dream of being an English teacher and musician, his daughter teaches English and his son is a musician. His work is forthcoming in Arable, Big Muddy, and Heartlands.

Stanley M. Noah of Dallas, TX is a member of the Academy of American Poets. His work has been published in Poesy, Old Red Kimono, Lynx Eye, Red River Review, The Pikeville Review, Eclectica.org and other journals in four nations.

Robin Reinach of New York City has an MFA from Columbia University, and her work was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in The Texas Review, Lynx Eye, Phoebe: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Feminine Scholarship, and RiverSedge.

Marilyn Ringer is an Oklahoma native currently living in Northern California. She spends much of her time on Monhegan Island in Maine, working with a group of female artists, teachers, Gestalt therapists, gardeners, and writers. Her work has appeared in Watershed, The Art of Monhegan Island, and Chico Poets: A Calendar for 2005.

David Rogers is a Horse Cave, KY poet whose works have appeared in Atlanta Review, The Comstock Review, and Nimrod. He is the editor and publisher of Wavelength: Poems in Prose and Verse.
William J. Rushton is a scholar specializing in the poetry of A. R. Ammons, and he teaches at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His work has appeared in a large number of literary journals, including Berkeley Poetry Review, Cimarron Review, RE:AL, Red Rock Review, and The Writer's Eye.

Denis Saleh is a Seaside, CA writer and artist whose works have appeared in Blackbird, Earth's Daughters, Terra Incognita, and other journals. He has read poetry—as well as passages from a novel-in-progress set in ancient Egypt—at the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, CA.

Daniel R. Schwarz is the Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow at Cornell University. His major field is the British novel with a strong focus on works from the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He has published numerous scholarly articles and several books. Recent books include Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel 1890-1930 (Blackwell 2005), Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture (Palgrave Macmillan 2003), and Reading Conrad (University of Missouri Press 2001). His poems have appeared in Ithaca Times, Westview, Southern Humanities Review, Rattle, The Hawaii Pacific Review, and others.

Rainbow Shultz is a social worker and chef from Jamestown, CO. She has a BFA in film production, a master's degree in social work, and extensive culinary course work in Europe and Asia.


Kymberli Ward is a teacher of adult literacy and ESL. She holds an M.Ed from SWOSU and is pursuing an MFA through Naropa University. Her work has appeared in Westview, Bellevue Literary Review, and two anthologies. She plans to die before her student loans are paid off.

Molly Lynn Watt is a writer and editor from Cambridge, MA. Her collection of poetry, Shadow People, was published this year by Ibbetson Street Press, and her work has appeared in such journals as Chicken Soup, Pig Iron Press, Spare Change, and Teachers and Writers Collaborative.

George Young is a retired physician living in Boulder, CO. His poems have appeared in The Aurorean, Chaffin Journal, and Willow Review. His collection, Spinoza's Mouse, was published by World Works in 1996 and was awarded the Washington Prize.

Gerald Zipper's poetry appears in over 200 publications in the U.S. and Canada. A collection of his poetry, Wounded Hopes, was published by Rivercross Publishing. His play, A Little Madness, was produced at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. He is married and lives in Manhattan.

Illustrations
4 Photograph by J. Nallon, Saguaro National Monument
10 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
17 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
21 Photograph courtesy wpamurals.com
26 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
28 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
33 Photo courtesy Fontanini® nativity sets.
49 Photograph by Maicar Forlag, Sculpture by Jens Adolph Jerichau 1816-1883. Penelope.
51 Photograph (detail) by Matt Reid
54 Photograph by Joel Kendall
57 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
59 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
65 Photograph courtesy National Park Service. Photo of Hidden Lake near Mount Oberlin in Glacier National Park, Montana
66 Photograph courtesy osu.edu. Picture of western dance class at Tumbleweed, a dance club and bar outside Stillwater, Oklahoma
70 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
77 Photograph courtesy Francesco Ferraro & the European Southern Observatory
107 West Main • P.O. Box 689 • Weatherford, Oklahoma 73096
1-800-533-4380 • 1-580-772-3113 • fax: 580-772-8705

DAVID D. DUNCAN
LAWYER

305 FIRST NATIONAL CENTER
11 EAST MAIN STREET
P.O. BOX 1648
WEATHERFORD, OK 73096

ED BERRONG
Insurance & Real Estate

"THE AGENCY
SERVICE BUILT"

520 E. Main
Weatherford
Phone 580-772-3329

"Your Community Owned Bank"

4 ATM Locations
• Student Union Area
•More Areas
•United Supermarket
100 E. Main
•Move Up 4th
Barrington & Adams
•Move Up 4th
120 S. Market
Cordell, OK

National Bank and Trust Company
Weatherford
1100 E. Main
(405) 772-5575

Cordell
120 S. Market
(405) 832-3352

WESTVIEW 79
Don't miss an issue! **WESTVIEW**

MAIL THIS SUBSCRIPTION FORM ALONG WITH A CHECK OR MONEY ORDER PAYABLE TO: WESTVIEW
100 CAMPUS DRIVE
WEATHERFORD, OKLAHOMA 73096

**SUBSCRIPTION FORM**
(PUBLISHED SEMIANNUALLY)

NAME ____________________________________________

ADDRESS ____________________________________________

CITY ____________________________________________ STATE _______ ZIP _______

(CHECK ONE) □ $6/ISSUE □ $15/4 ISSUE □ $25/4 ISSUES (OUT OF COUNTRY)