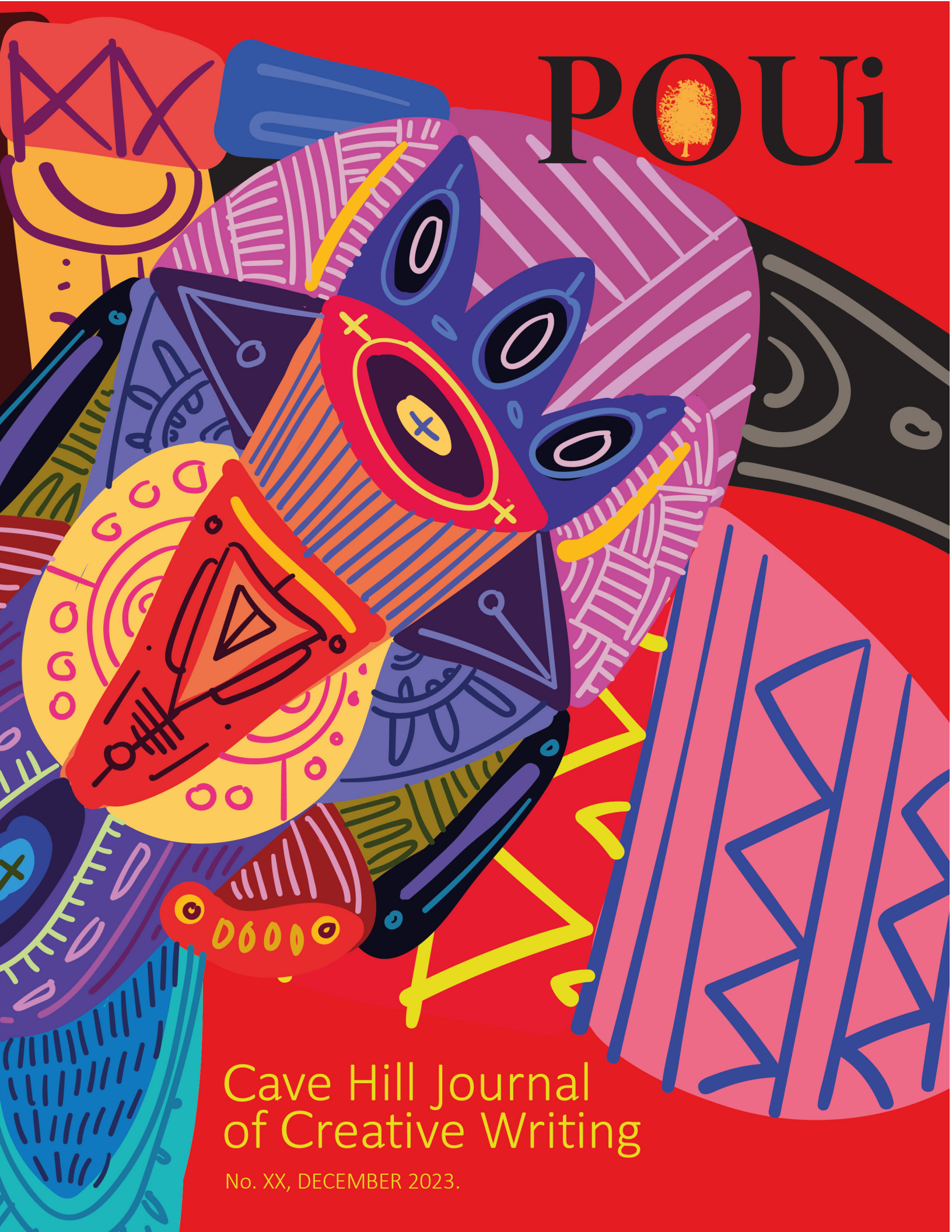




POUi

Cave Hill Journal
of Creative Writing

No. XX, DECEMBER 2023.

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Poui

*She don't put out for just anyone.
She waits for HIM
and in his high august heat
he takes her
and their celestial mating
is so intense
that for weeks her rose-gold dress
lies tangled around her feet
and she don't even notice.*

Lorna Goodison

FOREWORD

After an unexpected hiatus, *POUi* returns. This issue is figuratively and in a real sense, all about time. A lot has happened in the period between this issue and the last one: political, environmental, cultural changes that have created, in some cases, significant paradigm shifts in how we work, communicate, and create. Does this mean that the content of this issue shows the passage of time? Yes, very much so, as an essential backdrop to what helps us confront human existence as finite, dynamic and valuable. The poems and stories in this issue highlight how small but nonetheless crucial moments coexist alongside, and within, grander movements of time. It is those moments, in their complexity, sometimes out of startling simplicity, that are deftly captured in these pages. The theme of time and the changes it brings as well as those it witnesses is the thread that loosely draws together the work found here. From the transformations wrought by intimate relationships to the pursuit of closely held desires, time directly or indirectly has a role whether as an unavoidable constant or a surprising intervention. The works are grouped into further sections – each predictably partnered with time – but that is where the predictably ends. Any further connections, overlaps and delightfully unexpected insights, we leave the works to yield to each reader. Welcome to those for whom this will be a new encounter, welcome back to those who have patiently waited.

This issue is special not only because it is the quiet resumption of the journal, but it is also our twentieth publication. We therefore celebrate the fulfilment of this desire to provide a platform, from within the Caribbean, for creative writing from 1999 to 2018 and look forward to its future milestones. Speaking for the editorial board, we are happy to finally bring you *POUi* XX – it's about time we did.

From the editor:
Nicola Hunte

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I LOVE and TIME

Eugene Elira

Recollection

it takes years to learn how to forget,
train in the art of suppression,
draw blank
like the dead freshly resurrected

ancestors live on pages—
we are something else

it takes affirmation
peg with survival
to pattern archipelagoes:
a soak rag soothing lacerations
it takes time to create enough
distance
stumble upon your reflection,
gag it, coerce now

like all things discovered
we must name it,
amend it, claiming
this interpretation of ash

Evan Balkan

Every Way You Look at This You Lose

The nurse is at the end of his shift. That's obvious. A nest of purple wrinkles shades his eyes. His hair is greasy and unkempt. A yellow stain has long ago solidified on one of his sleeves.

When I tell him who I'm there to see, he raises an eyebrow before leading me to her room.

"You're her second visitor," he tells me when he lets me in. "She's been here a week."

“I ran into a mutual acquaintance,” I say. “He told me she was here.”

The nurse just looks at me before he heads back down the hall—he doesn’t give a damn. He just wants to go home.

When my eyes adjust to the room, I see her in the bed. What’s left of her hair lay in strings across her scalp and looks to be the texture of cotton candy. But cotton candy gone bad—grayed and left to molder in some unseen corner of neglect. Her eyes are closed and only the very faint rise and fall of her body under a thin white blanket tells me she’s breathing.

I turn away, orient myself. I need a second. I’m not even sure why I’m here.

The room is a nauseating pinkish color. I can’t imagine this engenders feelings of health or wellness in anyone. Aren’t these places supposed to be in shades of blue or green, like a sun-dappled pool or ocean? The view from the window is of a brick wall. If you crane yourself one way, you can just make out the edge of the parking lot. There’s a tree there. But you can only see a few branches of it and for only as long as you can stand to contort yourself in the uncomfortable position required to spot it.

When I turn back to her, I say her name. But she does not move.

I move closer to her, but I dare not touch her.

I used to touch her. I used to touch her all over and every which way. But that was long ago. Long before I reached middle age, a bit of a paunch around my waist and rather little hair on my head. The nubile youthfulness of my once nearly hairless body is now spotted with moles and scars, my flesh overrun with a coarse pelt as if all that left my head has migrated south and multiplied like C diff.

“Mrs. Flanagan,” I whisper. Still, she doesn’t move. I won’t press it.

To wake her up and reintroduce myself might be a cruel blow, designed to strip away any remaining vestiges of memory she may have of a time when she had been, well, not young exactly, but not old, either, and certainly not wasting away in a pink room in a dismal hospital in a nameless suburb.

I don't know why I remain here, why I take a seat next to her bed and watch her, stay with her, bear witness to a life slowly wasting away.

Maybe because I'm the only one who's here.

* * *

I lay on her bed, naked except my boxer shorts. I was nineteen. For reasons I don't remember, or never knew, that was the ritual: that I would remove my clothes only to my boxers and she would take care of the rest for me. She would run her hands and then her lips over my body. I was angular and hard and rangy, my ribs threatening my skin, wrists the diameter of young bamboo. She was thin, too, and perpetually tanned, her skin starting to show the wear of four decades. She, Mrs. Flanagan, was forty-six.

She had furrowed wrinkles around her eyes and a few deep bruises, almost like stains, on her shins and one on her lower thigh, but from mid-thigh up, at certain angles you'd be hard pressed to think she wasn't my age. But nothing about her or her nudity or her offering herself up to me so easily was ever very shocking. It seemed to just happen and it all seemed natural, a rite of passage for an otherwise bored kid who'd decided to stay in his off-campus apartment for summer break. It all seemed, somehow, normal. More shocking than anything else was seeing Mrs. Flanagan's eyes as we lay in bed. Seeing her face without her glasses; that made her appear to me far more naked than her actual nakedness did.

We met at her development's pool. She came almost every day, her eyes obscured behind gold-tinted reflective glasses, her hair short and dark with light brown highlights. She planted herself in a chaise and lay, almost entirely immobile, from mid-morning to early evening. I never saw her actually swim. Instead, every couple of hours she would raise herself off her chaise and tuck her pointer fingers under the scallop of her buttocks to extract her suit. Then she would lower herself into the deep end, ramrod straight without any splash at all, and linger underwater for twenty seconds or so before reemerging and settling herself back on her chaise.

Eventually, we engaged in small talk while I made my way around the pool's perimeter scrubbing tiles or while packing up the umbrellas if strong winds came and skies threatened. It was a tiny pool, a "one-guarder," and often it was just the two of us.

I think I knew why she invited me to come over after my shift one day. But I don't remember worrying or being scared or excited even when I locked up and walked over and she opened the door in civilian clothes, her hair smelling freshly shampooed. She kissed me and I don't think we even spoke as she led me to her bedroom. I pulled a condom out of my wallet; it had been in there since spring. But she told me I didn't need it and then, undressed, pointed to a scar across her abdomen. The whole thing was over in ten minutes and I ran out of there, sweating and short of breath. I left my whistle behind.

The next day, she met me at the pool's front gate. Spinning it around her finger, she handed me back my whistle.

"Thanks," I said.

She nodded.

"I'd like to come back today," I said. "If that would be okay."

“That would be fine.”

It became an almost everyday occurrence after that. At closing time, I would shutter the gate and jog across the grass. In case anyone was watching, I’d get in my car and pull out of the neighborhood, only to park on a side street in the adjoining neighborhood and then cut through a path in the woods that spilled out to her backyard. There, I would sneak across the lawn, yellowed with summer heat and drought, and descend to her basement door, which she left unlocked for me.

The ten minutes of our first session stretched to twenty and then thirty and then more than an hour. Eventually I knew how to control myself. I enjoyed it, though I’m not certain I considered it fun. More like an educational opportunity. My dad had urged me to get an internship that summer and not laze around a pool all day. “You should be learning something,” he said. “Something you can take with you, something that will help you later in life.” I figured I was mostly doing that.

Just seeing her in her house, watching how she lived—a person settled, a person no longer striving for anything, no longer envisioning a future with questions about what it held. Apart from my parents, she was the only person I ever interacted with who lived this way. And because of that, I never had to wrestle with the idea that what I was doing might have been wrong in any way. We got things from each other, a mutually beneficial arrangement with a very real and looming expiration date. And so we continued seeing each other and ignored everything else, playing dumb at the pool by day, waiting for after.

At one point, mid-July or so, we got the idea to make mix tapes for each other (or, in our case, mix burned CDs). She would teach me what real music was, “not the crap kids listen to today.” And I would give her an education, too, show her that there were some great

contemporary bands and she should give them a chance. But we acted as if it were a big joke, like we were being ironic. It was only much later that I began to see it for what it was, what she probably knew all along: that the ironic pose was a shield against actual feelings.

For her, that is. Not for me. I had a girlfriend.

Keeping it from Julie was easy. I think Mrs. Flanagan respected my relationship, or was at least clear-eyed enough to realize the impossibility of competing with a nineteen year old who went to school with me. The one time Julie was back in town for a few days, Mrs. Flanagan kept her distance. A rainy afternoon helped; I closed up and Julie and I ate sandwiches in the supply room while we waited out the storm. But even after the skies cleared, Mrs. Flanagan didn't come back.

After Julie went back to her job in New York, Mrs. Flanagan became especially aggressive, tearing off my clothes the moment I walked in her door. For the next week, every day, she would begin things by saying stuff like: "Does your girlfriend do *this*?" and then with a sly smile, she would engage in something that made me uncomfortable, like when she did a striptease, humming some tune I didn't recognize while I sat in a chair staring up at her.

It made me feel sorry for her. But I never said anything. She fascinated me. Like the fact that she smoked a lot and yet somehow managed to never smell like it. Instead, she smelled like chlorine and suntan lotion and something else indefinable, something I would come to understand in later years as the smell of someone who drank hard alcohol, a lot of it, and often in the morning.

One time, one of the neighborhood kids, an asshole named Greg, came by with a couple of his friends, home from college for a week before they headed out west on a road trip. They strode into the pool like they owned the place, like they owned the whole world, towels flung

casually across their shoulders, each of them far more toned and muscular than me. Their forms stretched across Mrs. Flanagan's gold-tinted reflective glasses as they walked by her, but her head never moved. If she tracked them as they passed, there was no way to tell. Her eyes could have been closed for all anyone knew, or they could have been shooting daggers of disdain.

Doug's feelings for her were clear enough. He said hello to her in a sing-songy way that shocked me. It was mocking, derisive, and no way I would ever speak to an elder. This went on every day until she finally rose to the bait.

"Hey, Greg," she cooed, raising her glasses to the top of her head.

"Yeah?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Then she lay back down on her chaise and repositioned her glasses while Greg's friends howled in delight.

When Mrs. Flanagan left, Greg turned to me. "Hey, you banging her, or what?" he asked.

"No."

"Yeah, sure. Just watch out for her. She's a tiger all right. But tigers have claws you know."

"Don't know what you're talking about," I said, fighting an impulse to defend her.

"Dig beyond the newspapers and magazines in her recycling bin. See what you find."

"What do you mean?"

"A lot of glass, my friend. A lot of glass."

That day, I made did my best to make love to Mrs. Flanagan. I didn't see it as fucking, or sex, or even the more clinical intercourse. It was love, or the best approximation of it I could muster at nineteen. She seemed suddenly fragile to me, no longer the domineering and indomitable woman who lay in the sun as if cast in marble. I did my best, but she kept telling me to "stop being so soft."

"What's with you?" she demanded.

I could only mumble, "Nothing," and say no more.

She shrugged a sheet around herself and lit a cigarette. She went to the window and stood there. Soon, I joined her. I stood behind her and we watched the neighbor teach his son how to box on the lawn in the rain.

"Kid's a psycho," she murmured. "I caught him cutting up worms once just so he could see the segments squirm."

"Well, maybe boxing is a good outlet then," I suggested.

"Or maybe it will turn him into an *unstoppable* psycho." She glared at the neighbor and exhaled her cigarette smoke loudly, shaking her head.

I guessed that look held a history and a weight that went beyond the neighbor and his kid in his shorts and oversized gloves and I had a feeling that I was in way over my head.

It was a relief when my buddy Rooster visited from Colorado and spent a week at my place. He'd been my freshman year roommate but he failed out and moved to Denver to start a jam band. Rooster and Mrs. Flanagan got along great; they mostly chatted and laughed while I twirled my whistle on the lifeguard chair. She would call out different dives while he bounced on the diving board, even though all he knew how to do were jackknives, flips, and belly flops.

One day, Mrs. Flanagan didn't show up.

“Dude, where’s that hot lady?” Rooster asked.

I shrugged. “How would I know?”

“I think she wants to do you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said.

“I’m serious, man. I see the way she stares at you.”

“Whatever.”

Rooster went back to Colorado and still Mrs. Flanagan didn’t come back for another three days. When she returned she told me that her mother-in-law had died.

“Sorry,” I said.

“I don’t give a shit. The worst part was seeing my a-hole ex-husband.”

The only thing she ever told me about her ex-husband was that he had a trick where he could twist his knuckles in such a way that they could almost line up flat on top of each other. I never really understood the logistics of it but after asking her several times to explain it, I just let it go. But not before adding that I didn’t see how that was such a trick. What was it good for? “He could never be properly handcuffed,” she said.

“Is that a necessary skill for people?”

“He was a true son of a bitch,” she said, as if that explained everything.

I had that feeling again, that the life she’d lived was something way beyond me, a thing I couldn’t hope to ever understand. An occasional conversation, hanging out at the pool, sex. That was all it would ever be. I still had my life to shape, everything was ahead of me. For her, everything looked backward.

“You coming over later?” she asked.

“I have something to do, actually.”

“We’ll make it quick.”

I hedged. I didn’t really want to—I didn’t know why; having a ready excuse with Rooster in town had been an unexpected relief. But I didn’t know how to say no to her.

“We’ll be quick,” she repeated, irritated.

When I got there, we skipped the chatting and got right to it. She was lifting my shirt over my head when we heard a loud squeal followed by a sickening smash of metal on metal.

“Oh my God,” I said and started for the door. But she grabbed my shirt and held me back.

“Where are you going?” she asked. “You told me you only have an hour.”

“What if someone’s hurt?”

“No one’s drowning. You’re a lifeguard, not an EMT.”

I extricated myself and flung open the front door. There was a young woman in a compact car which was crumpled against a light post. She pushed aside a deflated air bag and staggered out of the driver’s seat. She took a few steps, vomited, and then sat down heavily on the curb, where she began to wail.

“Oh, come on, I don’t need this now,” I heard Mrs. Flanagan say. I was shocked by her hostility, as if this poor woman had intentionally chosen the light post in front of Mrs. Flanagan’s house to crash into. “She was probably fiddling with the radio. I mean, who just plows into a lamppost?” she said.

It was awful. But Mrs. Flanagan’s irritation stopped me on the lawn, as if I owed my allegiance only to her and helping this woman was some kind of betrayal.

“You should have been paying attention,” Mrs. Flanagan yelled. The woman didn’t seem to hear, but rather moaned and slumped over onto the grass. I ran inside to call for an ambulance.

“*God*,” Mrs. Flanagan hissed.

From that point forward, she grew especially cruel and surly, as if she had no patience for me anymore. But I didn’t really care; summer was coming to an end and I would be locking up the pool for the season and heading back to classes. The last week we didn’t speak to each other very much. The final day dragged on forever; I had this heavy weighted feeling that we were building toward something inevitable, that we only had so much time left and it would all come to an unpleasant head. I worked around her and she didn’t move, didn’t speak—the hours dragged on. There were several other people at the pool that day and they stayed until closing time, so that may have saved me from a scene.

When I blew the summer’s final whistle, Mrs. Flanagan got up and collected her bag and towel. “I hope you enjoy yourself back at school,” she said as she walked past me. “Do well. Make your parents proud.”

“Okay,” I mumbled.

And then it was over. She was gone, and I didn’t watch her as she left.

I only saw her once after that, in the grocery store about three years later. I ducked into an aisle to avoid being seen and loitered at the frozen dessert case until she left. Then I watched her through the window, where she ordered an employee in that gruff, humorless way of hers to put the groceries in the trunk. Then she flicked on her sunglasses and was gone.

I moved away the next year. Eventually I got married—to Julie—and then divorced; turns out I was a lousy husband.

My current job sucks. It's the same one I've had since I graduated from college. These days I tend to look backward.

I ran into Rooster a few days ago. We literally bumped into each other at a Trader Joe's. I hadn't seen him in ages.

"Jesus," he said, pointing to my bald head. "It's been a long time. Hey, you remember that crazy woman from the pool, Mrs. Fletcher or something?"

"Flanagan?"

"Yeah, that's it. She's dying."

"What?"

"Yeah, it's the craziest thing. My mother, believe it or not, wound up buying a condo in that development after my dad died and they became good friends."

"Seriously?"

"Isn't that crazy? My mom used to tell me all the time about her friend and when they eventually realized they had a connection, well, Mrs. Fletcher—"

"Flanagan."

"Right. Well, she used to say all the time how much she thought you were great. Tell me, seriously, were you screwing around with her?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, anyway, she's dying. My mother went to see her the other day."

* * *

The sun is starting to set and the room is growing darker, the pink turning to red. I don't turn on the lights. Instead, I drag my chair closer to her bed. I study the lines on her face, the indentations from her pillow, the irritated skin where a thin tube lays across her lip and enters

her nostril. I can't locate any of the person I used to know in there. I don't dare pull back her blanket and check her body for some recognition.

"Mrs. Flanagan," I say. "I'm sure you don't remember me, but . . ."

I expect her eyes to flutter open and take me in, uncomprehending perhaps, searching my face for clues.

Or maybe she'll know exactly who I am and smile and thank me for coming. Maybe this visit will inject life into her and before we know it, to the stupefaction of the medical staff, she'll be sitting up, eating solid food, playing rounds of cards with me, and we'll walk out of here together.

But of course not. Her eyes remain closed. Only the softest whistle comes from her mouth—that alone to tell me she's even alive.

I'm still not sure I know exactly why I came, or why I stay.

Or why I climb into the bed and squeeze myself next to her. What I do know is that it feels right that I touch her again, that I hold her for the very first time.

Jody Rathgeb

Pawpaw Green

Nick showed up first, so he dragged the domino table out of the workshop, admiring it anew. Let others knock together a few boards and slap on the varnish; Joe made a table that was crafted as carefully as the tight wooden boats that made his living. Nick placed it in their

shady spot between the overhang and the guinep tree, then brought out the chairs and the box of dominoes. He was dumping them out when Joe finally came out of the house.

“Father Bolling.”

Nick straightened at the unfamiliar address and smiled at his friend. “That’s me? Why so formal?”

Joe shrugged, took his seat and began turning and mixing the tiles.

Nick sat. “Well, then, *Mister Parker*.” He lifted a domino. “Eight.”

Joe lifted another for a five. They mixed again. “I’m just messing with you,” Joe said. “You know you don’t have to be a priest here.”

“And you know I’m always a priest. I play dominoes just to save your soul.”

“The hell you do.”

Both men wore this conversation like favorite tattered hats, Joe’s a fraying straw with deep crown and broad rim, Nick’s the Toronto Blue Jays cap he’d brought to the island years ago. The weekly domino game allowed them their differences and found safe and easy talk among the pips. White, black, believer, skeptic ... but there were ends that matched. Nick slapped down his double five.

Joe quickly flipped out a tile and slid the matching side into position. Theirs was a simple and friendly game, unlike the serious competitions of the younger men at the bar. They didn’t bet or keep track of how many games each had won.

Old Wheeler ambled across the yard and wheezed himself under the domino table. The chunky mutt rarely missed a game.

“So you still believe in dog?” Nick asked.

Joe laughed, even though their joke was ancient. He had started it the first time they'd discussed religion, using it to stop Nick's prodding. Nick took the hint and quit trying outwardly to get Joe into church, any church.

But he hadn't quite given up. Someday Joe would need his friend to be a priest, just as Nick had needed a friend to shake him free from the loneliness of that first year on the island. The game kept them both in line. *Domino*: lord and master. God above, dog below.

They threw their tiles quickly and were halfway done with the first game before Flora appeared with beers for them. Nick smiled at Joe's wife. He liked her, even though he still didn't know her well after all these years. She was a quiet woman, the good island wife who ran an efficient household and had raised their two children with devout dignity. She balanced Joe, prone to diatribes against organized religion, by making the rounds of all the island churches. Nick couldn't tell which religion she favored, but he always enjoyed seeing her round, radiant face in his mostly Haitian congregation. Few of the native islanders were Catholic.

Nick took his beer. "You're all dressed up, Flora. What's the occasion?"

"I'm going to the First Baptist. I'll be back soon." She kissed Joe's cheek, and he turned his face to catch her by surprise with a full-on kiss. When they separated, she ducked her head and gave a shy glance at Nick. "Nice to see you, Father."

Joe watched her leave, gazing for so long that Nick cleared his throat for attention. "It's your turn." The game resumed. "What's going on at First Baptist? This isn't their prayer meeting day."

Joe swigged his beer before answering. "Memorial service. Her husband died, so they thought it would be nice."

“Whose husband?”

“Flora’s. Damn, you have me blocked. I have everything but twos.” Joe began drawing from the boneyard. Finally getting a match, he looked up at Nick. “You’re gonna catch flies with that open mouth,” he said.

“B-but, you’re here. Y-you’re her husband.”

Joe grunted. “You’ve lived on this island for how long?”

“Eight years.”

“And you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

Joe caught Nick’s eyes with a long gaze, then tipped his tiles face-down on the table and shifted his chair to face the sea. Nick did the same and waited for the story.

“Back long time, right after the Tides was built, this Frenchman came to the island. He was going to be the dive master. So he lived here while the hotel was getting up and running, and he met Flora. Really fell for her. Well, you can see why, even today.

“She was young, only seventeen, and swept off her feet. He married her before any of us island boys had a chance. But there it was.

“They weren’t married long before the accident. Jules—that was his name—went out to the reef for a dive. His boatman was this island kid, green as pawpaw. He didn’t know about the wreck out there, thought the dark area was just sea grass. They hit it hard.”

Nick crossed himself. A flicker of Joe’s eye acknowledged the gesture.

“The kid came out all right. But Jules—he was paralyzed. The kid got him to shore, and they took him to hospital, but that was it for him. The hotel owner called his family in France, and they insisted on taking him there.

“Flora, well she was just a kid herself, had never been off the island and was too scared to go. No one blamed her for that. So Jules, practically a vegetable, has been there all these years and she’s been here.

“Well, her family wasn’t too happy about that. Started treating her like a big burden. She was in a bad way. So that kid, that pawpaw green kid...”

Nick waited for the story to go on. When it didn’t, he took his eyes from the horizon and looked at Joe’s shining profile. “You were that kid?”

Joe nodded. “I know it looked bad. But I always liked Flora, and I wanted to help her, make it right. She needed a friend. And then we were more than friends.

“People talked. About her, about me. I wondered if maybe we should do something about it, but she said she wouldn’t divorce a man who couldn’t move, even if she couldn’t do anything for him. He was Catholic, you understand.”

Joe turned his eyes on Nick, lingering long enough to make the priest uncomfortable. Nick didn’t know if he should forgive the look or ask to be forgiven. He hunched forward in his chair, cradling the beer bottle. “How come I never heard any of this?”

Joe drained his beer and looked out to sea again. “Eventually we all got used to it. She and I went on, and folks stopped their whispering. The kids, the boats. We’ve been happy. Happier than I deserve to be.” Joe turned back to Nick and forced a smile. “Living in sin, I guess you’d call it. Come on, let’s finish this game. Want another beer?” He got up and disappeared into the house.

Nick stared at the game board until Joe returned, and they continued the game in silence, except for the slap of tiles. Only Nick’s triumphant “Domino!” set their tongues in motion again.

“You got me,” said Joe, turning over tiles for another mixing.

“So you gonna have a wedding now?”

Joe scoffed. “Not necessary. We’re married enough.”

“But in the eyes of the Lord...”

Joe closed his eyes and shook his head. “Nick. Just knowing that we’re free and clear is enough.” He shifted to look down at Wheeler. “You want to see us married, old boy?”

Nick knew better than to argue, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it as they slapped into the next game and the next.

He could understand Joe’s resistance, he thought. There had been too many hypocrites here—preachers who stole, babies passed off on husbands who weren’t the fathers—for a humanist to bear. Nick could even agree with much of Joe’s scorn for organized religion. And yet there was the missing core that he believed Joe needed. He was a good man. All his actions over the years showed it, from his honest work, to his quiet word that saved Nick from alcoholic descent, to this story of stepping up to help Flora.

As soon as Nick’s mind formed Flora’s name, she appeared around the side of the workshop. “Welcome back,” he said, rising. “Here, Flora, sit a while. I need to get something from my van.”

He shuffled away before Joe could register surprise, leaving husband and wife—well, almost—looking at each other over the half-done game. He hopped in the passenger side of the church van and opened the glove box for *The Roman Missal*. What else? A small vial of holy water. His head snapped up. People. He looked around, and saw Alpheus scraping his yard next door. Gathering his things, Nick walked over and hailed the old man.

“You got time to visit Joe and Flora right now?”

Alpheus threw down his rake. “Time for anything but work.”

“Your girl in the house?” Alpheus nodded. “Bring her.” He bustled away, full of a purpose he hadn’t felt in years.

He led them to the domino table, where Joe and Flora had obediently remained. Seeing him, they rose, knowing.

After the ceremony, Alpheus and his maid went home, and the three remaining looked at each other awkwardly. Nick finally reached over and rearranged the domino tiles, leaving a two at each end of the train.

“Block game,” he said. “No getting out of it now. This will be registered in the diocese. Flora, against all odds, it looks like you’ve married yourself another Catholic.”

Joe shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Old Wheeler here doesn’t seem to care either way. And you can have the block. You need a win more’n I do, I guess.”

The old friends locked eyes. Then Nick bent down and chucked Wheeler’s ears. “You know, Joe, for an atheist you sure do like to play dog.”

II

POWER and TIME

Megan Elmendorf

Your ego dealt you a playing card

That's left
 you
bleeding in
 the
 schoolyard.

Robert Knox

Love and War

I pull Penny close and whisper very loudly, timing the words between the hammer-head drumbeats of the band's endless cover of Looey-Loo-ay, "Let's go back to the room!" Maybe Miles and the Wellesley girl won't still be there; maybe they will have withdrawn to his bedroom. Penny hears enough to nod and yells something back that I don't catch. I take her hand and turn, but find myself confronting a blocking presence, his too-familiar face regarding me with an expression I don't care for.

"Pardon me, friend," he shouts.

He looks from me to Penny and wiggles an up-and-down motion with his index finger, some sort of sign from the preppy guys' codebook I'm supposed to understand.

"Can I dance with your pretty lady?" he says, loud enough to be heard over the band.

He is not my "friend." He is the privileged character from a celebrity family, whom I observed checking out Penny in the dining hall in the company of his boozier cronies. Up close this prince of the legacies is average height, about my own size, and perfectly ordinary in appearance, his features suggesting neither beauty nor intelligence, although radiating a palpable sense of self-regard.

Penny looks at the floor. She gets along well with men, but is self-conscious about being inspected. It's clear to her that something's happening here. And that I am discomfited. However important his family may be, Famous Name and I have never truly spoken before. Why *my* pretty lady? A part of me senses he's messing with me now, after years of a mutually satisfactory avoidance, because he senses that Penny's presence makes me vulnerable.

I decide I'm not playing his game. "Sorry," I say. "We're splitting."

I take a half step toward him on the crowded floor, expecting him to give way so we can get by, but he doesn't.

"Splitting?"

The band has collapsed into silence, having temporarily run short of loud. We can hear each other without shouting.

"Going."

"Going where?"

"Leaving *here*."

"You're leaving the *dance*? Already? Why?"

I can't think of an answer to this question (aside from 'none of your business'). Is he for real? I start to smolder.

"It's much too early to leave," Famous Name says, as if all we need is a little persuasion, a few words from him to help us see reason. "The band is playing till midnight. It's the *best band* in New Haven."

Next time get the worst one. Can't say this either.

The stranger smiles his practiced smile at Penny, then looks at me as if to signal that it's my move to make an introduction. It's a message I don't wish to receive.

“Look, I don’t mean to be unfriendly,” I say.

But the look in his eye tells me even saying this much is a mistake. It’s also a lie because what I truly wish is for us to remain complete and utter strangers.

“Let me introduce myself,” he says. “My name is Joe Rush. I’m in my last year here.”

It’s a chess move. He knows I know who he is. I stonewall.

He extends a hand; I ignore that too.

“Look, man,” I say, “we really are on our way out.”

“What’s the hurry?”

He glances at his own hand, then withdraws it with a smile and without comment, as if refusing to take offense. He waits, a picture of patience, like something out the I Ching: The superior man is not offended.

“We don’t like the band.”

I’m groping for a way out of this unlooked-for encounter. If anybody embodies the 'other side,' it's Joe Rush. His family is Washington establishment: the war-makers. They're the people Miles and I, and the Wellesley girl, marched to the Pentagon (along with a hundred thousand others) to confront. And here I am trying to make it about the band.

“You don’t like the band?” He’s smiling still, but his voice takes on a hurt intonation.

“We paid good money for that band. I’m on the Master’s Council. It’s the best band in New Haven.”

He insists on this point; a provocation. Something knots up inside me. I realize, sickeningly, that I don't know how to escape the clutches of this phony 'friend,' this ambassador of mock good will. Somebody from his own background would know how to do it. Even some

of my preppy friends. But me? My peasant emotions will soon get the better of me: Out of my way, asshole. Where I come from, people like you get the pitchfork.

Unless, of course, I just let him win.

Joe Rush glances away and bestows his smile on Penny. Don't worry, the smile says, in a moment or two your boyfriend will give way and we'll have our little get-together.

Penny looks at the band, then at her feet.

But I cannot help reading his expression like a neon sign. *You can't ignore me. You guys with your beads and your long hair think you can just waltz around people like me, the people who own this place, and go hide in your dope dens. But me and my people aren't going away. We're still here. Deal with me.*

I glance at Penny. Her bright blue eyes have the look of an animal about to flee or scratch your face. She blushes easily, but recovers quickly. I'm the opposite. When I lose my cool, I stay miserably mad for hours. If this goes on I'll do something boorish, or overtly hostile, and end up looking like the bad guy.

"Look, man." I try for apologetic, but fail. "Why don't you just find someone else to enjoy the best band in New Haven with? We're splitting this scene."

Rush's smile darkens.

"You *don't* want me to dance with your girl?"

Such incivility; the words pain him.

"What's wrong with being sociable?"

I have no answer.

"Is there *something* wrong with me?"

It's a dare, extending the hand of candor, of frank disputation. But if I take it, things will escalate.

"I've already extended the hand of friendship," Rush says, wagging his naked fingers. "We can start being friends right now."

What is the point, I ask myself, of majoring in philosophy, of studying the art of rhetoric and its brilliant dissection by the founders of the Western intellectual tradition, if I am flummoxed by a schoolboy sophist?

"One dance."

I hear her words and turn to look at my 'date,' my high school girlfriend, as she carves a path for herself among the Ivies.

Her face is reddened, determined. I have seen this look. Among the possible next moves are burst into tears or bite your head off. Or a return to civility if you just do exactly what she wants. She speaks these words to Rush, not to me.

"One dance," she repeats, letting him know that she is not intimidated by guys who like to play head games, however important their families are. "And no bullshit."

These few words perfectly sum up her conflict resolution proposal. You get what you say you want, but no more games. It's brilliant. I should be content, but in fact, I'm screaming inside.

It doesn't help that Rush grins at me, letting me know that by his rules he's won the point, then turns to Penny and says, "Call me Joe."

Penny steps between us, forcing me to look at her and murmurs, "It's just a dance, Jon. Don't make such a big deal out of it."

The band is back at it, covering her words with their noise.

Rush puts his hand on Penny's wrist to lead her away. She holds her arms out to the side, a posture making it impossible to touch any other part of her. They move half a dozen feet away to find wiggle room as the band launches into something fast -- no reason, then, for the dancers to touch or even look at one another. Rush pumps his torso like the graceless frat boy he is. I pretend I'm not watching and shoot furtive glances at the disconnected partners, still boiling. When the three minutes of sloppy rock are over, Rush nods and says something to Penny, and she gives him a stiff smile, then comes back to reclaim me.

"He can't dance," she whispers in my ear, with a giggle.

I grab Penny's hand and lead us out of the hall and straight back to my dorm room. Nothing happened when other-sider Joe Rush got his dance with my 'pretty lady.' Nothing real-world consequential has happened at all, but I'm still swallowing bile. Slimy Joe Rush proved he could get his way. My resistance was futile, naive. And somehow, I fear, predictive.

III

TRAVEL and TIME

Megan Elmendorf

Acquainted with Departing

I am a fish that has been told “grow legs and walk away.”
I am a spirit that found its kindred but who must now move far from it.
I am a heart that has grown to love this myriad cultural bouquet.

I was taught to “dream big” and “go far” and always fully commit.
I was brought into one family though I am from some other
And I was included—embraced—with affection never counterfeit.

I will find again a home, a place, a family: one after another
To overcome the storms in my soul until there is a cessation
I will not lose the hope that innately sings within my wonder.

My heart struggles to pump within the vice grip of obligation;
My tongue forms the words “I’m sorry” and “Goodbye” as a holy writ
And my mind is an LED sign flashing memories like a flirtation.

Émigré that I am, my heart aches beyond what I should permit.
But as I look beyond the sea and see the new isle, I know I’ll recommit.

Althea Romeo-Mark

Bargain Hunt

The place isn’t fancy,
but bargains are great.
It’s members only,
a decadent man’s *Sotheby*.

Objects of desire: some second hand,
tried out once or twice in a weak moment,
discarded like green, sour mangoes,
or mangoes, bruised, overripe.
They come from every continent.

The bidders are mostly men
and a few hard-faced women
as tough-knuckled as their counterparts.

They prod and poke
as though in a market
testing the freshness of fruit.

The cargo, women
wearing subdued faces, startled eyes;
their clothes rumpled
from drawn-out journeys in containers
and rides in stuffy long-haul trucks.

None will have a say in their destination.
There are women here by chance;
and women, who in seeking freedom,
found their hell; women pawned off
to pay a debt. All enslaved by greed and lust.
They, losing dignity, descending
down the ladder of the inhumane.

The bidding begins after inspection
of teeth, bone structure, height,
weight and projected potential
for turning a profit.

There are long-necked Nubians,
leggy blonds, the doe-eyed brown-haired,
some barely budding breasts—
someone for every customer's taste.

The flawed are kept as servants,
prisoners in private homes,
workers in smoky whore houses and
walkers on street corners
in Red Light Districts.

Althea Romeo-Mark

II. Pockets Empty, Head full of Stories

Old Man Ronald used to go away
on seasonal journeys
to fulfill his dream
of streets paved with gold.

He dreamed of pockets filled with greenbacks
And saving money for a Cadillac.

The streets not so golden,

he brought back stories
about wearing two pairs of trousers
two sweaters to warm his bones
while harvesting cranberries
and cherries in Wisconsin
and stripping down to
his brown, muscled frame
to pick oranges in Florida's fields
that spread way beyond his eyes' reach.

But Old Man Ronald is remembered
for people lining up on his front stoop,
the village theater, to pay
to watch pictures of snow falling,
and places he claimed he had been to—
the Empire State building, the White House,
the Grand Canyon....

The picking season became history,
became part of our memory,
the Cadillac remained his dream,
and the view-master a past sensation.

Later, like his neighbors,
Old Man Ronald paid a dollar
to watch black and white movies on TV
in someone else's house,
paid a dollar to live
in other people's dreams.

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Althea Romeo-Mark

Island Stories

I. Force Ripe

We always said Aunty Nelly
was *force ripe**,
fell off the family tree too soon,
went her own way,
disappeared out of our sight,
off the island's horizon,
until her return
from *Santo Domingo*.

Aunty Nelly reappeared,
like a rare moon one night,
looking as thin as a broomstick
from years of sugar-cane harvests.
Following her— a string of children,
she had dropped
like mangoes after storms.

We look past her failings,
her fallen, bruised life,
happy she's still living,
because *she's one of us.*

We welcomed back
our wayward one
who had left because
village life stifling.

She knew then she was wise
beyond her teenage years,
was ready to go her own way,
and had shouted as she left,
me na one for classroom an' ting,
me no need de book dem,
me go follow me heart, see weh it go.

And we, seeing where
her heart went
restrained our tongues.

IV

LOSS and TIME

Eugene Elira

From ashes

I come from the dirt
and I'll return to the dirt.
Worms fat from my flesh
will die themselves and go back.
The dirt is a womb craving

all life and often
we labor with dirt, we feel
connections with dirt—
maggots and fire quickens
the realization that dirt

is everything. Time
raises civilization
and turns it to dust.
We gather the dust—we reign
gestating we are more than dust:

minerals and stones—
everything we call precious
has foot prints in dirt
God made us from dirt.
Scoured the earth for substance
and mold us from dirt—
I accept when I am treated
like dirt—they see all its strength

Jim Piatt

The Burdens of Life

In a graveyard where the moon can only
frown, birds eschew the crumbs of dry
bones of the dead, dogs curve around the
boundaries as they sense the odor of death,
and humans oblivious of these things place
flowers on tombstones to celebrate life: A
blind silhouette of that which was slithers
in and out of graves, searching for itself,

and an elderly homeless woman covered with rusted years, seeks a tombstone with her name etched in marble, in which to rest from the onerous burdens of her life.

V
FAMILY and TIME

Oral History

I wish I could take my teeth from my mouth
the way my father could--when I was young
he'd frighten me by pushing his upper
plate forward with his tongue, then dislodging
the lower with his tongue arched like a cat.
He'd always smile. I think he was smiling
but it also looked like physical pain,
embarrassment, and some desire to scare.
He did with his dentures what some folks do

with their eyes and what he spoke he never

uttered. He'd take out his teeth and brush them
and leave them in a glass on the mantle.
There they waited at night, underwater,
like twin fetuses, and they floated, two
perfect sets of molars and bicuspid
and incisors, of a piece with the hard
pink gums. Near the end they were useless--he'd
lost a lot of weight so they didn't fit
so he couldn't chew. But his appetite
was still strong, so we fed him through a straw

what he liked best--corned beef and potatoes,
masticated in a grinder. I get

religion thinking about it, how one
can still eat but the mouthfuls won't digest.
When we found him his mouth was open. I've
seen babies that way, toothless but prepared,
so quiet they seem like dolls, and their eyes gone

wide as if looking forward to what's next.
I closed them with my index finger. It
wasn't easy--not that he resisted
but that he didn't flinch. I didn't try
my luck with his jaws. I still have his teeth

wrapped in one of his handkerchiefs. They're in
a box in the top of the hall closet
or are they in the attic? I forget.
Or perhaps I shared them with my sister.

She has the upper, I have the lower.
Or perhaps he was buried with them still.
I never thought to ask. I'd like to see
him again—I never saw him with his
real teeth. But he couldn't frighten me
again, now, could he? Death should be that place

where you can do anything you want to

do. He might scare me when I see him, as
a sign that he remembers. I love you,
Boy, he would be saying, without words. Then

he'd bare them so I could know that they're the
real thing as well as artificial but
both because they're neither. We'll talk about

how far I've come. Look, Father, I'll say—no
cavities. That's my boy, he'll say. Ice cream.

Samuel Cronin

The Story of Forbes' Low Green Tent

Forbes buried his hand into the Kansas earth where it hadn't rained at all and searched for the seeds waiting to sprout into the sky. It had been thirty years since his son's death. The morning that it had happened was the only thing that had grown from the soil. He remembered his cowlick and his freckles and how he had limped out to the field, one leg longer than the other, his enthusiasm for the harvesting, his uneven smile, his love for the promised thundershower. It was hard to think about anything else but the drought. Today would have been his 41st birthday.

These days Forbes was so hungry that a belt tasted good. A plastic sack tasted good if you sucked the sugar out of it. The dirt was something to mix in your teeth to pass the time.

And you get angry like this. You feel the whole sweltering earth humming shame beneath your feet.

He had smashed the mirrors in his two-story farm house. Boarded the windows. Broken the dishware. His wife had suffered a breakdown, and now his neighbors and the community as a whole treated him as an outcast. He was living now in a low green tent in the shade of a sycamore, next to the porch, struggling at night to keep the wind-blown canvas from caving. McCole had once told him that a low green tent was a metaphor for a coffin, but when Forbes heard this, he hit him with a clod of dirt.

The sunlight was so bright this September afternoon that he hadn't seen from behind the tall cottonwoods in the distance McCole, his wealthiest of neighbors, approaching. Suddenly his massive face and body blotted out the sun. Forbes blinked up at him, feeling naked in the surprising coolness of his shadow.

McCole pointed at him, scrutinizing him and his sunstraw eyes, and said in a pitying tone, "Forbes. Those look like my suspenders. Are you wearing my old suspenders? The ones I threw out last summer?"

"I was out of belts." He rolled his tongue against his cheek, weak and breathless in the sweltering heat. He was aware of how his own ribs bulged through his work shirt, splintering out from his spine like crab legs. His faded shirt reeked, stinking underneath his oil-stained shredded bib overalls, and his feet were so callous and tan that neighbors like McCole had a hard time distinguishing them from the soil.

McCole snorted. "You can have 'em." He set a thermos at his hip. "I brought you some ice water. You look like you need a tub of ice to cool you off. You look a little flushed." He squinted at Forbes' house shimmering in the distance, the large blots of paint chipped away

and the serpentine holes in the roof and the weeds growing up against the porch. He dabbed his thick neck, removed his recently purchased red and white Conoco baseball cap and pulled out a fresh handkerchief from his back pocket. He dabbed his forehead. “Damn if it ain’t hot.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“My lady won’t leave the basement.”

“You shouldn’t leave the basement either, McCole.”

McCole picked up the thermos and thought about it. “I hear yours is cooler. I’ll buy it from you.”

Forbes squinted at him—his new pair of bib overalls handmaided by his wife, his new leather boots and glasses, his cap, pink pinstriped dress shirt without a single sweat spot. It angered him that McCole lived so abundantly and still wanted to rake his neighbors off their land—a man who lusted after the crop of crops. A man like himself.

“I have plenty of water,” he said, eyes like dark swipes of ink.

“The hell you do. The water you have is a far off land and it won’t ever come.”

“The rain’ll come,” he said. “And it’ll be good for everybody. You’ll take your little chicks into the river again, McCole, and fish.” He shut his mouth. The lines on his cheeks and cloven chin looked like they had been scarred by a dull plow. He rubbed his stump hand. His white, prickly stubble begged for lightning and for the storm that would stir up the community to compassion—for a bumper crop, so lush it’d fill barns.

“Well if it does, you won’t need your combine. I’ll rent it from you.”

“I’m not renting my combine.”

“I wanted to know if you’d let me borrow it for my crop.”

“I’m not renting it.”

“I didn’t say rent it. I meant borrow it. Like you borrowed mine.” He swallowed and looked away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. That wasn’t a good thing to say.”

Forbes glared at McCole’s corn in the ripening distance. All the farms in the region were suffering from the drought, some worse than others. Some out of wisdom and hard work had stored crops for themselves to weather them through this terrible time. McCole was one of these.

But Forbes had done nothing. His combines were rusting. Weeds ruled his fields. It angered them that even in this drought, other farmers were experiencing the joy that he had lost. It was as if a scythe had come along out of the ground and wacked off the first half of his face. He walked now with a soul and a limp and a lost hand that sucked at the air like a dying fish for the food of the rain that had never shaken down.

“You’re dreaming the impossible dream,” went McCole. “The rain comes never the way you want it. That thundershower didn’t come then, and it ain’t comin’ now. It moved on out west. You were so sure it’d come before. You were so sure you were going to raise the greatest crop this area of country had ever seen. But it came like you never thought it would, didn’t you Forbes?” He looped his thumbs around his overalls. Kicked a clod of dirt that rolled into Forbes’ bare ankle. He spit. “That’s about as much rain as you’ll ever see.”

He turned to the vast land of Forbes’ place, much bigger and better than his own, stretching far to the west. He became angry. “I mean look at this ground. You’ve got the most fertile soil in the valley, and you’re pissing it away. The best land this side of the river and nothin’s on it. If you ain’t gonna work it, sell off! I’ll pay.” He folded his arms self-consciously and studied the sky and pumped his jaw, searching for words. “It’s like you’re already dead. Let him go.”

Forbes retreated into the deep hatred of his dream: the field stretching over the hills with soil so rich you could brew it for a dollar. “I don’t know how to let him go. He’s the only thing I have left.”

A score of birds scattered for the horizon toward a faint line of clouds, or away from them. He could not forget that morning thirty years ago. Something was stirring. Something deep. Torrential. An atonement....

The sky a slaughter. The morning birds in riot. Forbes and his son Dylan, fresh from a night of stargazing, awake in Dylan’s birthday present—a green A-frame tent given to him because he loves to camp. They had set it up in the front yard and left the rain fly off all night and listened to the wind swaying through the cottonwoods while they studied the stars.

Forbes steps outside into the cool morning. He thinks of an adage he had read in sailing stories as a child, and then dismisses it: *Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky at morning, sailor take warning.*

The summer rains had come hard, and in this relatively dry window, they had to get as much corn harvested as they could before another storm came. If everything went right, they’d have more corn than they’d ever dreamed.

There is so much corn, in fact, that he’d never harvest it all with his own faulty combine. McCole had promised to help in his own state-of-the-art machine, but days before, he had suffered a mild heart attack and was too sick to drive. So Forbes employs Dylan. His plan is to drive McCole’s while Dylan drives theirs, which the boy had driven before.

As they walk into the field together, smelling the cool earth and eying those black-bellied thunderheads forming in the distance, he imagines driving through the middle of the

corn while the rain smacks the glass cab of the combine. Dylan keeps asking what to do in case the combine gets stuck. He tells him not to worry. He assures him it'd be worth it, even if things go badly, because they'd finally be able to fix the dishwasher for mother.

The dark clouds are imminent. They set to work. Forbes takes the lead in McCole's combine. Every minute or so he looks back to check on Dylan. And at the outset everything is going well. But then the clouds boil over them bringing rain that strikes the soil hard, and harder. Mud clogs in the throat of Forbes' unfamiliar machine. He keeps having to stop to clean it out. While he does, Dylan applies the brake and lets his antiquated motor idle at too rapid a rate.

As Forbes sticks his hand deep into the machine, the gears suddenly suck it off. As if he had accidentally touched a burner on a stove, he jerks his arm back and stares at it curiously. His severed wrist looks like a hideous sculpture. Out of the stump wrist blood begins to spurt. He falls to the ground.

Dylan, panicking, revs the motor too high. The combine catches fire.... He tries to get out but the cab door is stuck. Forbes goes into shock and passes out as the black smoke engulfs his only child....

McCole buried his hands into his pockets. "I just came over to invite you to Charles's birthday party. It's today. You heard about him?"

Forbes dug absently into the soil. "I can't move on if the rain won't come," he said.

"You still have the green tent, don't you?"

Forbes pulled from his pocket a 4x6 inch corner of the green tent. It was powdery, frayed.

“You gotta let that go. Let the rain wash it away.”

Forbes wiped the sweat off his brow with his stump hand. He dumped the contents of the thermos on it. Ice water soaked into the cloth and soil. It began to evaporate. “If it aint gonna wash away, then maybe somethin’ll grow,” he said in a futile, gasping anger. “Now go on.” He felt a gnawing to get away from his field.

He went into the Burlap Tongue. When things had been good it had been his watering hole—a throne room in a way, where he crowned himself illegally for his mastery at manipulating the heavens. But he hadn’t been back for many years. He sat at the end of the bar where it hooked toward a wood carving of a seedless watermelon. Adam Lancaster, in his fifties, was in the corner alone trying to make peanuts stick on a dart board; Nick, his uncle, read the newspaper. There was no one else in the bar. Nick looked up.

“Well well. If it aint good ol’ farmer Forbes. Good to see you!” He reached to shake his hand but when Forbes’ extended his stump wrist, he pulled back, blushing. “I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“What happened to the juke box?”

“Had to sell it.” He fetched a glass and began pouring him a drink. He set the drink before him. “Frothing, for you. One Rain Catcher.”

“Just give me water.”

He hated this place. It wasn’t like those times long ago when you had to stand in line for a drink and get spilled on while you waited, when you couldn’t hear your wife talking in your ear about what she thirsted for, when there were three of them behind the bar working quick to pour your drink. Most of them had moved away, somehow shriveling up with the hard

years. Forbes' tongue went dry with disgust for the people of the town who couldn't make it stick.

"Going to the birthday party for that little boy they pulled out of the dry well?"

"Wasn't he lookin for water?" He lifted his glass to drink.

"Same as you."

Nick dropped the paper in front of him. On the front page of the *Lawrence Journal-World* was the story about Charles Rasmussen, a four-year-old boy who had become lodged in a dried-up well while his cousin had tried to lower him on a rope. It had taken a team of firefighters a whole evening to dislodge him. Now he was safe. Today the community was going to throw a birthday party for him. It had rallied around this little hero who had risked his life in blind faith believing in something that the community was desperately searching for. Rain.

Forbes flinched. "He found a water that's too deep to find the light. That's what he found." His words took on an arid feel. "This whole summer is crushing me. *We're* being crushed. All hope. All dream. It's one defeat after another." He tried to wipe his eyes on his shirt sleeve, consumed by the shame of his place—the fields blighted with weeds, the broken combines, the rats in the kitchen, the withered flowers in the front yard, his wife in the hospital—and the years long ago when everything was fresh and new: the tall, burgeoning cornstalks from his youth, the swollen years when Ma would step off the porch and mosey to the field to break off dinner. It had been a long time. It had been several years from then, and the sun had been angry, and now the field and all her relic had dusted over.

"You could start over again, Forbes. You've got your heart."

"No, I don't have my heart. But you think Adam is immune to being crushed?"

Nick looked at him with caution.

“Adam,” said Forbes. “Come here.” He welcomed him over with his stump wrist.

“Adam, why don’t you set those peanuts on the floor. Go on. I’ve got a bright idea. Put the peanuts down and cluster ‘em together.”

Adam followed his directions.

“You do anything to that boy and I’ll destroy you.”

“Already been destroyed, Nick. Adam, I said it once a long time ago, and I’ll say it again. Your dreams are gonna come true. Better than you hoped.” He stepped off his stool and raised his foot. Nick raised his fist. Forbes poured his beer over their little cluster to a shocked but animated Adam. “They’ll grow, Adam,” he said. “Just plant em.”

As he approached Hollyspring Park, he passed truck after truck parked alongside the shoulder. Men and their wives walked with their children hand-in-hand between them, carrying blankets and picnic baskets. The men had large sweat spots underneath their armpits, while women fanned their ruddy faces. Children lay on their picnic blankets, too limp to play on the swings. Forbes squinted hard from the glare off the hood of a red ’91 Ford F-150.

Hung from two cottonwoods was a banner for the focus of the day’s festivity: “HAPPY BIRTHDAY CHARLES!!! WE LOVE YOU!!!” Forbes wiped his brow and inadvertently placed his hand on a sideview mirror. Before he had time to pull it away, the metal seared his flesh. He sucked it to cool it down. Limping into the park he sat on a vacant swing in the shade. This was the swing. He remembered the sweat spots from his little thighs when he had picked him up. Now, his own clothes clung to him like soiled skin that he couldn’t rid himself of, and the stench of himself seared his nostrils.

The child was sitting at a picnic table about thirty feet away underneath an awning next to the dried-up riverbed. His blue denim pants and yellow-and-red plaid dress shirt made him seem older than his years.

Forbes scrolled his eyes over the people in attendance. There must be a thousand. Maybe two thousand. The whole community. McCole was there. Coming up behind was Nick guiding Adam.

He studied the boy hard, the people—all of them without any water, any crops, any hope of wealth, all given to celebrating the life of this young boy who was stirring in them the promise of a deeper hope. Their fallow fields and dried up wells and shrinking bank accounts. The hopelessness and the heartless prayers. All these people waiting for the rain to fall. This boy meant everything to them. If he was brave enough to go for the water that wasn't there, and by a miracle survive, then what else was possible?

Charles opened a football and a Dr. Seuss book. And he opened a bear with a small green tent.

It was the green tent that struck Forbes, remembering Dylan inside a tent like it in shape and color the night before it had happened. The memory of his palm pounding on the glass cut his mind like a sharp knife.

Then the boy noticed Forbes. He studied him with a ghostly fascination—how the sun had chewed his face and how the cracks had cut back his chin into his neck and cut the fallow lines in his cheeks. The boy held up a glass for him to take, but Forbes didn't see it.

The mother touched his arm. "Forbes, would you like a drink?"

He jolted. He became conscious of his shell and of his past that the people still seethingly remembered. The sweltering afternoon was baking his odor into them.

The boy got down from the table and waddled to him. He took his hand and led him to the picnic table while a reporter for the *Journal-World* with his digital camera snapped picture after picture. Charles led him to the cake with four candles on it, which the grandmother was lighting.

Forbes stood in the center of the community. He felt the eyes of the people scaling back his skin. He scratched the crust of salt on the back of his neck. It was hard to breathe.

“Ready, everyone....” said the mother. And she led the whole community in singing happy birthday to Charles while the cameraman took pictures.

While they sang, Forbes noted how their hope was brimming up and impossible to conceal with the victory which Charles represented to them.

The wind picked up and blew under a dress of one of the elderly women. She caught the hem before it flipped up. The adults laughed. Then a stronger wind followed and blew over the stack of paper plates waiting to be used to dole out the slices. It was a warm wind and it meant things were stirring.

“Can you make a wish, Charles?” said his grandmother.

Charles shut tight his almond eyes. “I wish it would rain!”

Forbes felt his heart thumping. He brought the punch over the cake. He poured the punch over the four candles, extinguishing them.

Charles opened his eyes. When he saw that his candles had been extinguished, and that the frosting was covered with punch, he looked at his mother, dumbfounded.

The mother in horror glared at Forbes. This appalling, godless scheming. The community didn’t know what to think, too numb to make sense of the soaking cake and the extinguished candles and the stinking farmer.

The father barreled in and grabbed his shirt collar. “Get out of here, Forbes, you stupid drunken sot! Get back to where you belong! Boy killer! Man who kills his own damn son!”

He jerked Forbes’ body away from the table. He hooked his arm around his elbow and led him through the now glaring and hateful people who were plotting to avenge the boy.

But before they could act, the boy’s face, near tears, suddenly changed to delight. He jumped off the picnic table screaming at the top of his lungs, “It rained! It rained! It rained! It rained on my cake!”

Forbes was walking awkwardly down the road, joints glued thinly together, feeling his stump, evidence of the greed which had taken his life from him, proof that he could now do only harm to himself and to the people. But was it possible, somewhere deep inside, that he had he meant something else with the punch?

Charles ran to Forbes and took his hand and pulled him back through the astonished community, back to the table. “It rained, Momma! It rained!”

“Charles,” she said, stroking his burlap colored hair. “Honey, it didn’t rain; it was the pu—”

“Shhh, Clara,” said the father.

“Cut the cake!” cried Charles. “It rained!”

The cameraman, grinning, snapped pictures at a feverish rate.

The mother picked up the knife but held it loosely. Her eyes went from Charles to the cake to the candles to Forbes, and none of it went together. Finally the grandmother pulled the knife out of her hand and cut up the now sopping wet peanut butter cake. She handed the first slice to Forbes.

Forbes was more astonished than any of them. With trembling hands he took the paper plate and glanced wild-eyed to the grandmother and the mother and the boy, to the father and to the people. What tremendous hatred had just a moment ago been focused on banishing him from their community permanently, had now swayed to the other side and was gaining momentum. What he thought he had meant for destruction became, unintentionally, the platform for something good. It smelled like rain.

And then gradually, as if summoned out of a long, distant nap, an armada of clouds moved over the park. They were big clouds, with muscle and texture and real thought, the kind that meant truth—clouds that knew your secrets and still rumbled anywhere they wanted following any and every succulent wish until it was the right time to make them real, those perfect moments to drench the dreamers hard.

As the boy handed Forbes his bear and green tent, a thunderclap jolted the community. While the others rocked back and forth, singing out into the greatly marled and dark and imminent sky, Forbes buried into the tent all his fear, his hatred, his insecurity and loss, his jealousy and maliciousness, his harsh words and the pain, the slow, agonizing torture of a man who had lost his hope. Raindrops smacked the picnic table, lifted the powdery earth.

Forbes breathed in the fragrance of the rain. The strange freedom of the air in his body made his spine tingle. It was as if a white cloud had descended upon him and drew out the poison in his blood, the poison in his bones and in his skin and mind. His eyes became soft again—like they had in the old years when the rain came every day. His tongue softened. His jaw loosened and began to work through the old words, the generous words, the words of kindness and beauty.

Suddenly a wall of rain drenched the park, falling into the soil and into the seeds, into the deep earth, into the cool darkness where he had lived his life for so many years. As thunder peeled through the clouds, and as the deep fields flooded with rain, Forbes laughed with the people, and with the boy whose simple faith had given him his life.

VI

DESIRE and TIME

Cordelia Hanemann

Saved by Cezanne's Apples

The apples lie there, larger than life,
apples, leaping from the canvas, so many
canvases, so many apples—tempting;
you paint them, those apples, over and over,
like real apples you eat and eat again,
each bite of apple bursting anew in your mouth;
each brush stroke creating anew your artful apple,
each dab of color, an apple mood; motion of heart,
hand, arm, eye-to-apple, you paint them
--apples--forever, until you are surrounded:
apples that squat—stolid and bold—in bowls,
on tables, apples suspended in air, hung on walls
—there they all are: watchful apples, apples poised,
permanent, hungry, between you and the door.

Cordelia Hanemann

**Black Woman Poet Visits Dead White Woman Writer's House in Georgia:
A Found Poem *Reading Alice Walker***

Andalusia* is a large white house
at the top of a hill with a view.

It is a kept house, and there are,
indeed, peacocks strutting about.

Behind, an unpainted house within
calling distance of the back door....

No one lives there now.

I go up to the porch and knock.

That her house still stands while mine,
which, of course, we never owned,
is slowly rotting into dust....

But, I am here, and rage dissipates
into the hot humid air of a Georgia day
and the hollow sound of my shoes
down the worn wooden steps.

*Andalusia: the name of Flannery O'Connor's home in Milledgeville, Georgia

Stephen Mead

Each Year

The sky is an incredible diamond
for the first rain of spring-----
Sky, amethyst facets in warm shades
of grey & turquoise...

All day my windows blue with this,
the curtains, the beads, shell lustres
of dawn & the lawns turn purple
with star clusters, little flowers,
those anemone *hellos*'...

Here I forget the atrocious & am parasol
only of a geisha in marketplace gardens
empty of all other beings-----
Imagine it, the street a ribbon of wet black
through jungle parrot blossoms &
all-the-way green lights...

No, there is no stopping this exciting
stillness, seed-hinting.
Even these wintry dry bushes
rustle with sparrows,
whispers, intimations, the promise of time
waiting tender & bright as the spikes
Of my lover's silver hair-----

He was such a surprise, as are these days
of jeweled nights bringing summer steep
in their steed's promise...

Listen. Hear the faith of horses galloping
in the heart of this descent.
So may your pulse bloom:

Instinct, wonder, wildness, knowing.

Cordelia Hanemann

Abstraction: Geometry of an Odalisk

Frantisek Kupka's studies of "Girl with a Ball" for "Fugue"

the girl plays with the ball until she doesn't;
the ball is a ball until it isn't; disappearing
into circles and spheres, a fugal defiguration
--her body shrinks to the flatness of lines
on a page, a girl still, flat-chested, virginal,
untested, approached, broached by the artist's eye,
--until she isn't, until she's curved shapes,
a geometry of lines, swaths of nude-blue
color--appropriated--carved by a vital pulse
of orange, colors drawn from a palette
of repressed urgencies-- no one need know
about the girl or the ball or the breath;
what can we know of a young
girl's playing naked in the summer air?

Althea Romeo-Mark

Lord, Take the Rein

They sit in the first pew
in the row on the right—
young women whose skin
are shades of dark fudge,
caramel, pale brown sugar.

Their dresses bright as sunrise,
the orange glow of sunset,
verdant tropical grass and lime,
sky and ocean-blue, and teal.

Their tiny hats contrast
with barely restrained breasts.
Short skirts must now and then
be pulled down after riding high
on glistening, vaselined
or cocoa-buttered thighs.

One would think
they had come to a theater

to audition for the role of seductress.
Had they taken a wrong turn?

The church is packed
this Easter Sunday.
Colorful-wide-brimmed hats
hide the narrowing eyes
of older women
whose straight faces
mask horror and disdain.

The preacher at the pulpit
prays, "Lord take the rein,"
before announcing
an unplanned opening hymn.
"We shall overcome."

Gale Acuff

As Seen on TV

After Sunday School I walk home the same
way I walk to it but in reverse of
course not that I mean that I was walking
backwards but maybe I'll try that next week
but anyway on the way about half
-way that is I thought again of what I
thought of before, I mean on the way here,
I mean to Sunday School--seems that I took
it away with me--of Miss Hooker, my
teacher there and one day to be my wife
and in reality not just in dreams
and I have 'em, about us, together,
married that is and doing every night
what married people do, watching TV
and holding hands and munching popcorn though
not while holding hands but on the other
hand maybe so, why not, adults do all
kinds of crazy crap that kids can't do and
get away with it but anyway when
we run out of popcorn and are down to
kernels that never got ripe, so to speak,
I mean they never popped (I'm bad about

not saying what I mean), then we're off to
bed and that's where our children will happen
in whatever ways they do, I'm only
10, what do I know about life much less
birth, the way of coming into it, she'll
show me will Miss Hooker, she's one Hell of
a good teacher but anyway after
Sunday School today I dropped down to one
knee as seen on TV and proposed to
her or was about to when suddenly
she dropped to one of *hers*, it's bonier
than I guessed it would be and before I
could ask her to make me the happiest
guy in the world she said *You read my mind*
and *Let us pray* and before I could close
my eyes she started into the Lord's Prayer
so I joined in and after *Amen*-ing
together we opened our eyes and there
we were, divorced and rising, rising to
our feet and then she said *Gale, go home* so
I tried. I'll never get married again.

J. B. Toner

The Key of the Khazilim

We are not elves. Small, bearded craftsmen who dwell in the Arctic mountains. How you people mistake us for the long-ears, I cannot say. It may be that the man Moore could find no better rhyme to precede “And I laughed when I saw him in spite of myself,” and so it began. But there was no need for slanders. We have rhymes. “Wharf.” No others, perhaps. But “wharf” is a good word. A strong word. Though not the right word, for the Red One is not fully of our blood. Of *his* kind, there is only one.

I am Groth. I came to your lands because a grave dishonor was done. Not by mortal men. I sorrow that your people suffered for dwarven transgression, but in all worlds justice is in scant

supply. I sorrow that by my hand Dino's Diner was offered to the flames of oblivion, and that nevermore shall the shake of milk nor the dog of chili be tasted there.

From the North I came riding, mounted on a reindeer, to the town of Montreal. You wonder, perhaps, how I could ride so far unseen by your camera machines; and as I do not seek to offend, I will not mention that your people are ignorant fools. Our world, juxtaposed on yours, belongs to another plane. You cannot perceive us, nor we you, without passing the Deepling Gates. Unless, of course, one holds the Key.

To the fogbound Fourteenth Gate I swiftly came. There the Keeper waited. Nine feet tall he stood: twice my height and one foot more. His cloak was grey, his sword was flame. I have battled ogres in the frozen steppes, and fear no stature. But the Keeper was a Cherub, powerful enough to turn cities to salt. I once heard a drunken tale that humans picture Cherubim as chubby winged infants, but I know it to be false. Surely *some* wisdom still abides in the mortal world.

"Peace be to you," said the Keeper.

I dismounted and bowed low. "And to your spirit. I am Groth, on direst errand from the very Claus. I must pass into the lands of Men."

"Wait."

"Wait, you say? My business will not do so."

He spoke no further word.

"Friend Keeper, I seek no quarrel, but I must and shall pass through."

A looming silence.

"Know that fifty-seven have been pulped upon this hammer." I raised my father's weapon. "I have no wish to make it fifty-eight."

A voice rang out: "Stay your hand, dear fellow, lovely bearded scion of the snows!"

“Oh, no.”

“Peace be to you,” the Keeper said again.

“And to you and all your numerous family, honorable Keeper, and to you, Master Dwarf, and all the cavern-carving folk of your acquaintance!” A dark-haired slender form came bounding toward us. Its eyes sparkled like cheap fake gems; its ears rose like antennae above its idiot head. “Vissarion Tuluieth, I. Urgent business calls me to the smoky realm of man and all man’s sons. May I pass the Deepling Gate, good Keeper, friend of Elves?”

The burning sword lowered. “You shall pass together.”

“How pleasant, a new partnership!”

“. . . What?”

*

So drolly dour, these mountain folk! When I first met red-bearded Groth son of Grath, he was a dove’s feather away from matching his (no doubt weighty and worthy) hammer against an angel’s blazing glaive, and as marvelous a tale as it might have made, I thank the Mightiness that my scuffle with the Dark Frog of Malgothron took not a moment longer than it did. But it seemed the far-seeing Keeper knew my quest—nay, both our quests—and had been in wait of my coming, for I no sooner came than he welcomed us both together.

I bowed to my new friend and ally, and said, “Vissarion Tuluieth, son of Quistilith Zelenorm, soldier of Favenheld Dale and bearer of a sacred trust. I greet you in the Name of the Mightiness, good Master Dwarf, and welcome our new comradeship with greatest joy!”

He glared at me, then up at the Keeper, then back at me. “Groth.”

“Come, friend Groth, for time grows short and our courtesies must yield to exigency. You too, I guess, are bound for Montreal?”

“Aye.”

“Then let us be off at once!”

“Hold,” he growled, and his hammer slightly rose. “Your quest, elf—is it for the Key of the Khazilim? For I am bound to return it to the Pole, at peril to any who would hinder me.”

“No indeed, good friend, but I see now that our missions are as one, for I am bound to ensnare and incarcerate the lawless one who seeks possession of that very Key.”

His eyes narrowed. “You come for Gar son of Thrug? That is not well. He shall face dwarven justice, and none of yours.”

I laughed merrily, knowing his belligerence was merely a sign of gruff affection. “Nor would we tread upon your right to discipline your own! Nay, my dear fellow, I seek not the thief but the one to whom he’d sell his stolen goods. To speak in all verity, ’twas not till this moment that I knew the stealer’s name.”

Groth opened his mouth to retort, then closed it again to ruminate. “I had not known that he sought to sell it.”

“The buyer is of elven kind, long since exiled to the mortal world.”

“His name?”

“Well, well.” I smiled. “It seems we both must keep our little secrets. It would not do if I returned to my masters with news that my new swordfellow had let his sense of justice get the better of both him and my quarry’s skull, hey?”

He scowled but acquiesced, like the fair-minded fighter I could so clearly see him to be. “Enough talk, then.”

“As you say, friend Groth! How now, noble Keeper, may we not pass?”

Wordless, the towering Cherub stood aside, and the Gate

began

to

said Groth “hate this part” said Groth

strange things to one’s perception of time and space
ception of time and space
ception of time and
space

time

space

into great silence

heart of light

sinking, stars like mud

box of aeons

(the universe is in here with me)

chasm

infinity, filled with emptiness

then wind

leaves and planets swirling

A world, a face

Red beard—stone underfoot—pulse in the palms of my hands.

I drew in a deep breath through my nose, like one awakening from long reverie.

“Friend Groth. . . welcome to Earth.”

*

Hear my jest. An elf, a dwarf, and a nephilim walk into a bar. The bartender says, “What is this? Some kinda joke?”

A few notes. Primarily: this is no joke but the mere quotidian, the daily bread if you will, at Dill’s, the old-world nook of a tavern of which I am the happy proprietor. Mystical folk of every stripe congregate under my roof. Secondly: “Nephilim” is a plural noun; the singular form is “a Nephil,” the favored offspring of angels and men. And tertiarily: I rarely walk into this bar. I live here.

Now, all that being said, an elf and a dwarf did walk into my bar on the evening under discussion. In point of fact, two elves and two dwarves walked in—or so I thought at the time. The first was a lovely blonde with grey eyes, her ears hidden by one of the purple shawls that were fashionable amongst Canadian elves that century. I didn’t recognize her, which was unusual. I’ve been here a very long time, you see. She ordered an exceptional silver wine and went to sit in a shadowed corner.

Not long after that, two old customers entered together. One looked characteristically cantankerous—“Groth son of Grath!”—and the other characteristically jolly—“And Vissarion Tulurieth, son of Quistilith Zelenorm! Welcome back to Dill’s.”

(You wonder, perhaps, why Vissarion’s last name was different from his father’s? In elvish nomenclature, the second name is an epithet. “Tulurieth” means “Wingfoot”; and although I had not seen this fellow in action before, I could imagine how quick he must be to earn such a title from his own people. The slowest elf is still faster than a man.)

“Ho, Dill.”

“Many greetings, Dill old friend, purveyor of the choicest ales and tender of the warmest hearth this side of the Fourteenth Gate! What cheer on this autumn eventide?”

“Another day, another night, my friend. Things change, and nothing changes. How is your lovely mother?”

“Well indeed, I thank you, and will surely tell her you inquired! Business is brisk, I trust?”

“Quite so, quite so. Better than ever since the mortals invented this live-action role-playing. Mind you, I have to keep an eye out for underage human drinkers now.”

He frowned. “There are vampires about the place?”

“No, friend, I mean drinkers who are human, and who are under the legal age for—”

“Dill,” said Groth. “I seek my old compatriot, Gar son of Thrug, and heard tell that he was hither bound. Have you seen him, perchance?”

“Thrugson? Nay, not these nine winters past.”

“What of the Lady Elladonna Mirielavay?” asked Vissarion.

I frowned. “Don’t know the name. New to town, is she?”

“After a fashion.”

I never forget a name, or a face. At the moment there were perhaps two dozen stories scattered about the common room, both mystics and mortals, drinking earthly and otherworldly drinks. A small fire crackled in the corner and the lights were dim, but the chatter and the fiddles were lively. Every denizen of the higher realms who came to the eastern coast knew to seek out Dill’s for company and cheer. Even as we spoke, the door swung open once again, and in clomped a scowling greybeard dwarf.

Groth turned, and his face turned grimmer than before. “Gar.”

The newcomer froze, and then produced two tomahawks. “Groth.”

Quick footfalls from behind me, and the click of a well-oiled Glock nine-millimeter. My bouncer, Violence Jones. “All right now, boys. Whatever this’s about, y’all take it outside.”

Gar turned his snarl toward Jones. “Be off to the ever-flames, pig-dog human!” And he raised an arm to hurl a weapon.

“Dwarf, no!” The cry came from the corner of the room where the elf maiden sat with her wine; but it was already too late. I don’t retain Jones for his restraint. Three gunshots—a golden blur—and the she-elf stood in front of Gar with her arms outstretched and three red holes in her belly.

“The hell’d she do that for?” said Jones. For him, that bordered on remorse. But before anyone else could speak, the lady gave a wry grimace and the smoking lumps of lead popped out of her slender midriff and clattered to the oaken floorboards.

“Oh, no,” I said aloud. “She’s one of the Lyrilim.”

*

Name’s Violence Jones. Yeah, that’s my real name. Mama’s a tough old bat. I’m full-blood human, just like you, but I been bouncing at Dill’s for quite awhile now and I’ve gotten used to some unusual things.

Now I’m a lean drink of water and Dill’s a big barrel-chested fella, but mark my words, I could put him on his butt except for one thing: nephilim regenerate like God don’t want ’em back. You could drop a house on one of those suckers, wait five seconds, and watch him mosey out the front door. So when these weirdos take to fighting, it’s like a big game of rock-paper-scissors: elves are fast, dwarfs are strong, nephilim’re tough.

Never heard of no lyrilim before that night, but I can add two and two. Saw her move, saw her heal. And we already know angels misbehave with humans now and then, so why not with elves.

The patrons was on their feet, some ready to rabbit, some ready to jump in the scrap. The dark-haired elf, Vassilyvich or whatever, jumped on a table and shouted, “Hold fast, good friends! I represent Favenheld Dale, and come with peace to halt a grave injustice!”

“What injustice?” called some schmoe.

He jabbed a finger. “This lady, Elladonna, was rightly banished from the Mystic Realms. She stole from the Dragons, and by that stealing nearly brought about a war between our peoples.”

“Which I stopped,” the elf-chick said, examining her fingernails.

“By making the Dragons look like idiots. The balance of peace is now tenuous at best, and you know the terms of your exile. You shall return when the political maelstrom you’ve engendered is resolved. It may take many hundred summers, but such is the judgment of the Council.”

“Hold up a sec,” I said. “How exactly do you stop a dragon war?”

She glanced over at me. “By paying the Flame Tribute.”

“The what now?”

“For a cessation of hostilities, I let their chieftain bathe me in his fiercest fires.”

“Oh, I see. And then you healed up on the spot and danced away.”

“I most certainly did not dance in front of those reptiles. I was entirely naked, for one thing.”

“Sorry I missed that.”

“Such gallantry, sir.”

“Well heck, I done shot ya already, I figure we can skip the pleasantries. Violence Jones, by the way.”

“Son of Thrug,” Dill said suddenly. “Your ill-gotten Key will not work in my establishment. The doors are warded here.”

The dwarf with the tomahawks was jiggering around with our front door. Obviously I was keeping half an eye on the guy, but I reckoned he was just trying to slip out, which suited me fine. I guess he was up to something else.

“Craven filth,” said the red-beard. “You would slink away from honored combat?”

“I have no quarrel with these long-ears and wingless mongrels. You and I can settle our affairs another day.”

“Nay!” said Vissary-whatever. “This ends here and now, for justice and serenity.”

I gotta tell ya, folks. They’re an odd bunch, these mystics, that’s for sure. But I *love* the way these people talk.

*

I am Gar. I serve the Red One with fealty, and have done throughout these many Yules—nigh on two hundred now. But I grow old. I have no mate, no offspring; I seek only to live out my days in comfort ’neath the Easterly crags of the polar sea. And so, when I heard tell that some fairy lass was offering raw diamond for the Key, I bided my time and I filched it from the Claus.

’Tisn’t easy, see, to slip between the worlds. Over all the vasty globe, there are only nineteen Gates, all Cherub-held. If they decide you oughtn’t pass, then pass you surely won’t. But the one we serve forged an item, long and long ago, with dwarvish skill and angelic power.

With that item, you can turn any door in any world into a portal to any other door. All that's needed is to put in the Key (it fits any lock, you know) and think of a door near your destination, and you can walk through a doorway in Qaanaaq of Greenland and emerge from an ivory shed in the flower-meads of the High Elves if you like.

But apparently it doesn't work at Dill's.

"Keep your justice," I told the long-ears. "And stuff your serenity. All I want is a bit of windfall, it's no concern of yours."

"You shall not sail by this wind, bearded one."

"Enough! Mirielavay, we'll meet some other time." I turned and bolted for a squat glass-walled building across the street. Upon the door was "Dino's Diner" writ. All I needed was to reach the knob and I was free.

But I underrated Groth Grathson. From the doorway of Dill's he hurled a Dire Coal with the mighty arm of our race, and the whole diner erupted in flames. "Ha! No escape that way now, eh?"

"Groth," Vissarion said mildly, "I could have caught him."

"Aw, no!" Jones mourned. "That place had the best cheese fries."

The tavern's patrons were swirling into the street to see the inferno; the diner's, to escape it. Flashing lights and banshee wails were converging on us—the gendarmerie, no doubt. Two of the folk from Dill's abruptly split their shirts and began to sprout fur and fangs: startled werewolves in the moonlight. This was looking grim.

Then—I was distracted, or he would never—Groth tackled me to the hard black stone. "The Key!" he roared, digging at my coat. "Where is it?"

“Be off!” I howled. “Be off with you!” But he was strong, Groth, even for our kind. He pinned me and he searched me, and he found the Khazil-Key.

“Dill,” he panted. “Can you drop the wards upon your door for the nonce?”

“Of course,” said Dill, and made a gesture.

Groth slammed the door, plunged the Key into the lock, and opened it again.

And out stepped Santa Claus.

*

Hello, child. Do you remember me? It’s years now since you last hung a stocking, but I haven’t forgotten. Nor failed to keep you in my heart.

As you’ve heard, I am the ancient son of Angel and Dwarf—the only one of my kind, the Khazilim. Long and strange was my quest to find life’s purpose; long and strange, the days since I found it and was charged with the keeping of Christmas. I have forged many items of power in furtherance of that charge, the Key by no means least among them.

When I passed through the door of Dill (good fellow), I saw fear and sorrow in the streets. It was not well. Ere aught else, I drew forth a Snow Sphere and flung it into the blazing diner. An argent detonation, and the flames were quelled.

“Chief Braddock,” I called.

The firefighters’ leader, a kindly woman, stepped forward and removed her hat. “It’s you!”

“It is. I commend you for your duties, and I think your boy will soon recover from his flu.”

She opened her mouth and closed it again. Then she said, “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re very welcome. Groth, my friend! While you have the Key, please open that door upon the Fields of Cormorath.”

“Done, sir.”

“Charles, Danton—go and run to your hearts’ content.” The half-turned werewolves snarled their gratitude and went loping through the doorway to the endless moonlit grasslands beyond. “Dino?”

A gruff, good-hearted man. He approached, and he was miserable. “They burned my place.”

“Be at peace. The dwarves will toil swiftly. In three days’ time, your diner will be better than new, and stocked with knives that will never dull.”

In his ruddy face, hope dawned. “Thank you, sir!”

“Nay, friend, I beg you to take our apologies. This fight was not yours, and we of dwarven kind regret that you should suffer for it.”

“Well—well, merry Christmas!”

I smiled. “A bit early, Dino. But likewise to you, when comes the season. Chief Braddock, I sense a smoke upon the air, and not from tended chimneys. I fear you’re needed.”

Their radios crackled, and they headed for their vehicles. Some looked like men awakening from dream; others, like men returning to it. Like all mortals who encounter the mystical, they would remember just as much as they chose.

Dill grinned at me. “A well-timed entrance, old friend. I fear even Jones here would have been hard put to contain such chaos.”

“Nephil, please. I had it under control.” Jones glanced at me. “But I mean, uh—thanks for your help and everything. Sir.”

“You’re very welcome, Violence. I believe your mother’s eyesight will be improving this year.”

“I—hey—thanks, Santa.”

I nodded. “Now for sterner matters. Gar. My friend.”

He came forth, and his beard was low.

“Gar, why have you done this thing?”

“Sir, my bones have grown weary with the labor that was once my delight. I craved—” his gaze lowered further still “—I coveted a place of ease in which to live out my days. Now they will end in shame.”

“Perhaps. And yet, the weresharks on our Eastern front grow bolder. I have not yet asked for volunteers, because the post is one of deepest solitude and cold; but I need a scout to dwell by the polar sea. He would be entrusted with a Seal of Warding, and admonished that if his watch upon the waves grew slothful, then he would indeed be shamed.”

His head rose slowly, and his eyes kindled. “My vigilance will never sleep. This I vow by the strong right arm of the Mightiness.”

“That is well. Now: Elladonna Fargazer, daughter of Nathanael.”

She smiled coolly. “Father Christmas.”

“I strive in all ways to be a giver of gifts. But you laid claim for selfish cause to that which is mine, made at great cost, for the protection of innocent life.”

“I myself am innocent, unjustly banished. And my claim to items made with angel’s power is no less than your own. My father too is of that kind.”

“Small remorse, child. I am hard-pressed to see why you should not be taken back to elven lands and locked away in dungeon deep.”

Then Groth, honorable son of Grath, heaved a sigh. “Sir, I must speak. You know I hold no great love for the long-ears.” Vissarion chuckled and slapped him on the back. Groth ignored him. “But this Elladonna—the mischief that befell here is not truly of her making. ’Twas my battle-mongering led to the man Jones firing his weapon, and to the conflagration of Dino’s Diner.”

“His mongering and mine,” said Gar. “And I—I cannot accept mercy for seeking to sell the Key if she receives none for seeking to buy it. Especially when she saved my imbecile life.”

At no cost to herself, I thought, noting the three red holes. *Still, the deed was good*. I saw no malice in her, only a wildness untempered by maturity. And I have known lyrilim to learn wisdom through the burdens of responsibility. “Vissarion Wingfoot?”

“Sir!”

“It is no place of mine to meddle in elvish affairs. However, I beg to claim kinship with this maiden by reason of our paternities, and to offer a suggestion to the Council, if they will hear it.”

“As their representative, sir, I hear it gladly.”

“The Goblins encroach on my Western borders. I need a spy who can tell me of their movements.”

She clapped her hands. “Oh, what fun! Vissarion, old friend, *do* let me spy on the Goblins!”

“Hush, hush. I can hear for the Council, but I cannot speak for them. All the same, I do not doubt they will accept. Better, surely, to make use of your talents than to vex our jailers

forever with keeping you. But Ella, if you still call me your friend, then I pray you to show respect to Master Claus.”

“Of course. I beg your pardon, sir.”

“I gladly give it,” I said. “And now, I fear Master Dill would take great offense if we departed with dry throats.”

“Depend upon it,” said he. “Let the red wines flow!”

“Yeah, I wanna see if this Gar fella can throw a dart any better’n he throws a tomahawk.”

“By Hell’s donkeys, Master Jones, I once threw a dart up a wyvern’s fiery nostril.”

“And Groth and I must toast our fruitful partnership!”

“We’re not partners, you blithering ninny.”

“Ha! You dwarves and your thorny exteriors.”

Our weird and merry party went inside, and the red wines flowed indeed. The ales and whiskeys too. It did my old heart good to see new fellowships coming to be, and I knew it was not without the hand of the Mightiness that all this had transpired. For in all lands justice is in scant supply, and the Dark grows ever bolder.

But so do we.

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