The Lost Country

A Literary Journal of The Exiles

Fall 2013

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Back Cover: Murrary, Gilbert. *The Rise of the Greek Epic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924. p. 22.

The Editors of *The Lost Country* are pleased to present the following awards for excellence in literary achievement

The Harry Hoyt Lacey Prize in Poetry

is awarded to

Sarah Brown Weitzman

for the poems

October Valley Journey & Looking Back

The James Patrick Prize in Fiction

is awarded to

Gene Hines

for the story

The Benevolent Providence of God

The Judith Stewart Shank Prize in Criticism

is awarded to

Maria Stromberg

for the essay

The Test of the Ideal in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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Miller Moth

by DAVID HARDIN

Promises were made
that dress of yours
yellow as a Miller moth
batting about the bulb
of a painted porch light
yearning on hanger
to caress a slope of shoulder
ride a swell of hip
bell the well-turned ankle
pleat and dart pooled about
first one foot
then the other
rose to lip
a halting smile of neckline
assumed an aspect
of sail gathered wind
sung vows in the rigging
where I madly batted
drawn, ensnared.

Anniversary Prayer

by Ron Ledek

Bind our hearts with hoops of steel.
Suture our souls together.
Let her face alone
enchant my eyes.

Her solitary grace,
my desire flame up.

Let her happiness be my consolation;
my joys, her pleasures.
May no anger
splinter our peace.
No pride seal
our hearts like tombs.

Grant we may bear each other up,
two in one flesh,
stragglers into eternity.

Still Life with Earthenware, Bottle and Clogs

by SHARON MOONEY

Vincent Van Gogh
oil on panel, 1885

No crystal glassware here, no fragile vase,
No linen, just a wooden table, bare
Of ostentation. Common earthenware
Instead, brick-red and rounded at its base
Stands by a crumpled cotton cloth. No lace,
No crocheted doily mats, but just one pair
Of wooden clogs carved from a tree. No chair
Is seen in this still life, yet there's a place
For wine to sit and gladden weary hearts
After the day is through and land is tilled.
Outside this frame a fire blazes bright.
A kettle boils. A wife waits to impart
Her simple gift of bread from flour milled
From grain her husband brings home every night.

The Return of the Prodigal Son

by SHARON MOONEY

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
oil on canvas, c. 1667–1670

With face upturned he stares into the eyes
of one he turned his back on years ago.
His clothing tattered, braggadocio
has disappeared, and now before him lies
new understanding of his father's wise
advice and peace that he chose to forego
for poverty, debauchery and woe,
a past he wishes he could exorcise.

A father's love, though, is a wondrous thing;
it reaches out, forgives all that is past,
offering mercy, blessing, tears and grace,
new sandals for soiled calloused feet, a ring,
silk garments blue and white, a fatted calf,
enfolding the prodigal in its embrace.

Fable

by JIM MURDOCH

There was once a bird, a fish and a pond.
"I love you," said the bird to the fish.

"I love you too," said the fish in the pond,
"but I can see no future in it."

True, thought the bird. "Grant me, please, one last thing:
a good bye peck–one kiss and I'll go."

"One kiss," she said. Just then the bird plucked her
from the pond and swallowed her whole.

"But you love me," she cried from inside him.
"I do," he smiled, "just not in that way."

That said, the bird sat for the longest time
till the ripples had all vanished

and the fish had become a memory.
Then he flew away.

Notes on a Neglected House

by JOHN STOCKS

I could have lived here
Taken this old pile for my shell—
Turned a heavy key in the oak door
And dreamed, as others must have dreamed
Of love by a smouldering fireside.

I could have been the ghost
Who rises up to greet you
Having little else to do.
The solitary man who trudged
Through a cobwebbed garden of dead trees
The desultory remnants of orchard
Feeling the soft crackle of dry leaves
A pardon of frosty silences.

I too could have seen the mist
Miasmic in late autumn gloom
Merge with the rain in synthesis
Then rise from the rotting earth—
Like smoke
From a stubbed candle

First Dance

by JOHN STOCKS

There is always the last kiss
The final parting,
Already distant, the body cold;
The 'Palais' lights have dimmed.

He would have held her close
Less nimble than his brothers,
But ever smiling; more verbose.
His brown eyes steady and warm,
Gaze through wistful clouds
Of cigarette smoke.

She would glide effortlessly,
Lead him through the more complex moves,
Discreetly push the chairs aside,
Through the evenings slow eclipse
The one long, lingering kiss.

She would feel the contours of his shoulders
His strong forearms,
Note the confidence in his slow smile.

Weeks later they would slip
Between cool linen sheets,
Exploring for the first time

The flesh that would soon be wholly known,
His scent as familiar as her own.

For now they stand in silence
As the streamers begin to fall
And factory hooters blast away the old year.
They gaze curiously
Into each others eyes, wondering what to wish for,
From the other side of Paradise.

October Valley Journey

by SARAH BROWN WEITZMAN

The creek swept cold
and straight

where I turned
to mount the hill path

running all the way
to reach the crest
and take sudden

the whole shock
of that autumn valley
in one surprise
of sight

the dogwood's scarlet spread
to maples
the singed ash

elms exactly orange
fire

among the paper birch
one golden oak
now coin silver

apples ruby late
upon the branch

pines that do no turning
as though this quarter meant to hold
all hues of man's seasons
from green

to full fruit and in between

in this last flamboyant protest
against dying

but brought to me stealing
from homework

and after-school chores

that bond all may share
through beauty.

But then running through fields
of weeds
tingling my town legs

past flurries of bees
and brown butterflies

all wooing and winged
like myself I fling
down the hill into apple air

and musk of old baywood
some hand had sawed
not far
from potatoes unearthed
to dry to where

straining against the fence
there
are the farmer's four horses.

Not the first untouched crystal
of winter
nor spring's green sameness

nor even summer's academic freedom
ever pleased me
so as that October valley journey

in memory now become not journey
but an end.

The farmer died.
His family moved to the city.

That ground soon grew nothing
humans eat.

The horses were sold
for glue.

Looking Back

by SARAH BROWN WEITZMAN

I meant to return long before this
but in looking back we learn too much
of loss and I dreaded that.

Now going through the house
and my parents' lives
too revealed by what they saved

and what they left behind
for me to find, I feel nothing
but pain for the past

trying to understand
how I fell so short of what I intended
to do with my life.

How life twists and turns
against us. How a childhood
is not really understood

until it is lived a second time
in memory. How wonderful
and how terrible

it seems now
because it is gone
and because it was mine.

Black Coffee

by JAKE H. GUY

The bullet shredded into his arm like a fox going into the bushes to kill its prey. He quickly ran behind a wall and fumbled to reload his small pistol. They were getting closer, he could feel the vibrations of their heavy footsteps coming through the walls. He grimaced at his arm, turned out of the room and fired as an armada of other bullets went through his body, maliciously destroying his organs.

This is how many books start. Most of the time because the plot is so terrible they need something to immediately hook the reader, like violence. Whether people care to admit it or not, we are generally interested, if not acquainted, with violence. Unfortunately (fortunately?) I really can't start off in this direction, for that would be a little misleading. There won't be much violence; hopefully, at least, a little black humor.

Instead of starting in a dilapidated building with something trying to kill the protagonist, I will start in a train with nothing trying to kill the protagonist. This train was moving along at a steadily fast pace through the light night which was beautifully illuminated in small places by the snow-covered brick buildings. The soft light played along the interior of the train, creating rich tones of red and gold and resting gently on the dark wood finish of the seats. A man of average height, light blonde hair, and in his mid-twenties sat drowsily on these

wood seats feeling the sharp rocking back and forth movement of the train.

This man, Moses Reinhartt, for that was his name, sat slumped in his seat with his eyelids half closed, eyes half seeing. He had dreary gray eyes that didn't quite go well with his thin wispy blonde hair, although the rest of him would've been handsome if not for the lines of sleepless nights crisscrossing his face. His hands were in the pockets of his brown ratty mud-stained overcoat, relaxed except for the occasional twitch. His boots and slacks complemented the under-kept coat by being faithfully in the same condition; in fact, they acted almost as if they were trying to outdo the coat.

While his apparel clung to him unwanted but necessary, like a politician, his eyes focused and unfocused on the cabin. The rich tones of gold would suddenly take the form of the lights lining the car and then spill out onto the velvet red walls, only to disappear completely into the windows. But then the gold took the form of a mountain and the shadows gallantly became men climbing it. The men began to argue and fade into the color of the red velvet walls. He blinked and then peered at the phantasmagoria. It was a scene from the new moving picture, "The Fountain of Youth," which he had just seen. Unfortunately, it was obviously illogical that he could see it playing out on the walls of a train, so he sighed and shifted his gaze elsewhere. The rows of seats came swiftly at him to where it seemed as if they passed through his body and into his clouded mind until the stained brown wood was indistinguishable from his thoughts. His whole world seemed

as if it was trying to slip away, or was he trying to slip away from the world? His eyes roamed aimlessly around the room trying to stay awake (or trying to fall asleep? He never could decide) until they settled on the only other passenger in the car.

This man was in many ways the opposite of Moses; they were like black and white squares on a chessboard. His hair was ink black and pushed back from his round face. Despite his round face, his features were remarkably sharp, same with the rest of his body, round but sharp. A rare breed for sure. This man's clothes were clean and well-kept, all-though his white shirt was wrinkled and unbuttoned at the top and one of the legs on his black slacks was stuffed into a sock. His left hand rested on a large black suitcase, so black it seemed, that it wasn't even there, just a dark void where something should be, but wasn't. Reinhartt's eyes went up his arm from the suitcase to his face. Not only was his face round while Moses' was thin, but it had no wrinkles, and a healthy color. Then he realized, with black jealousy, that he was sleeping soundly, a smile of boyish contentment on his face.

Reinhartt had not slept for a week and a half. He had been working long shifts at work, making twice as much money, but spending it all seeing moving pictures at the theater.

One day, in fact yesterday, after the day shift at work, one of his co-workers, Shirley, turned to him as she was putting her coat on, "You know, it must be grand being an insomniac. It's like your some sort of superman. You can work twice as many

shifts and make twice as much money," she said with a laugh. "Well, good night."

It is not so simple.

Contrary to what some people like Shirley may think, having an inability to sleep is not a superpower, or even close. First of all, just because he didn't sleep, doesn't mean he *could* sleep. And, moreover, just because he couldn't sleep, doesn't mean he didn't *need* sleep. For these reasons he was always, always tired. Think about how, at the end of the day, the human machine gets tired, therefore it shuts down, wakes up in the morning and is not tired. For Moses he got tired but had no way to replenish his valuable stores of stamina. Consequently what stamina he had was constantly being hacked away with every action. Minutes would blend into hours, hours into days, days weeks, until objects places and ideas, like the cabin, would meld together into one stream of thought. And that thought was the thought of a lonely soul looking for relief. Occasionally, he would receive relief, when his blended thoughts, world and vision, would cumulate into a great dark black wave that would rush against him, leaving him unconscious. Much like being knocked unconscious, but more of an enveloping wrap than a penetrating rap.

It was because of this that he looked with such envy on the passenger's sleeping face. Then he began to think, *but I shouldn't blame him for this gift that's been given to him.* He paused. *It is not even a gift, it is a right! God's the one who has taken this away from me! Of all the little children in the world, he*

decided one day to just take sleep away from me! Me! Of all people, me! Whatever had I done to deserve this?

A little exhausted after this mental rant he let out a tense breath and looked at the ceiling. A sigh of contentment passed the passenger's lips as Moses's own tightened. His anger immediately switched back to the passenger. *Yes, why me? More importantly, why you? Of all the—*

His thoughts were cut short as his car jumped and rocked up and down, finally settling down with a few sharp jolts.

Moses jumped up, *What was that?* He then looked at the Passenger, *Still sleeping?* Passenger was still sleeping albeit in an odd position, *STILL sleeping? Why, of all the—*

Another jolt hit the car, sending Moses sprawling on the floor. He jumped up once again and ran to the back door, looked out, saw nothing and then ran to the front. Out the front window he saw that the train was making a wide right turn and would be to its destination, a city, soon. It was because of this turn that he saw two of the cars behind the first alight in a roaring passion. Just then, the next one blew up and went into euphoric flames. Moses stared in stupid shock for a few moments but was then knocked out of it by an explosion from the next car.

Maybe it was one of the terrorist attacks he had been hearing about in the papers or maybe it was mechanical failure. He did not know. What he did know was that there were only three cars between him and an explosion.

He was, honestly, too tired for an explosion today. His nerves just wouldn't, just couldn't, take all that stress.

Moses ran to his satchel and slung it around his shoulder as another group of jolts sent him tumbling over the next bench. He ran to the back door and struggled to open it. Just as he heard it click he saw in the reflection in the window of the Passenger, hand on suitcase, head on floor, sleeping.

Reinhartt walked hurriedly towards him, *Why, of all the*— the car rocked about so angrily this time that Moses was thrown around like a squirrel in a dog's mouth. When it stopped, he was next to the Passenger.

He shook him, "Hey!" (another shake) "Wake up!" (shakes again) "Your going to die you arrogant sleeping man!"

He paused.

"Why, of all the—"

We all know what cut him off mid-sentence and so did he. The next car to be baptized in fire would be his. He grabbed Passenger around the middle and hauled him to the door. Out he went with Passenger in tow onto the outside platform. The chill wind woke him up more than the explosions, which he didn't quite think was possible. He looked at the blur that was the snow, took a frightened breath, and jumped.

Suitcase laughed, Moses yelped, Passenger slept, and they all landed safely in a drift of snow.

Reinhartt popped his head out of the snow. All of his limbs were there except—he gasped—wait. He pulled his leg out of the blank snow which had been hidden from his view and breathed a sigh of relief. He looked around, suitcase was still giggling and Passenger was still—

"Why, of all the—" the next car, his car, leaped into flames and threw a party to rival that of a New Year's Eve celebration.

Moses lowered his arms back down from over his head and slowly reopened his eyes. That was the most exciting thing he had ever done, besides sleeping that is. He stared in disbelief, who could have done this?

"I did it! Yes! Haha! This is it! Now nothing can stop me!"

Moses turned around.

Passenger was sitting upright in the snow, hands in the air, a grin of pure bliss on his face. He was a full head shorter than Moses and with his round body and hands in the air he made a comic sight.

"Y-you're awake." Moses stammered.

Passenger's eyes widened and he turned slowly to look at Moses. His eyes were black.

"Did I just say something about nothing? Nothing being able to stop me?"

"Um, yes. Yes, you did."

"Forget about it. Must've been my dream."

Passenger looked around at the snow, then the city, a half a mile off.

He then said desperately, "Where's my suitcase?"

"It's, it's behind you." Moses said pointing.

Passenger gratefully turned around and scrambled to his luggage. He clutched the suitcase to his heart and looked around once more. He stood up respectably, suitcase in his hand at his side. He gazed at the train trundling into the city, fire attacking its back.

"What happened to the train?" he said absentmindedly.

Moses scrambled up, "The cars were exploding, one after the other. You were sleeping so I grabbed you and jumped into a snowdrift. Our car exploded just after."

"Ah yes, well. Thank you, thank you very much." His voice was not high-pitched, but there was definitely something high about it. It was awfully energetic, saying words like a typewriter.

They stood in the blue gray snow staring at the train, the moon staring at them. The wind blew their clothes around and their gaze blew back at the wind. Their luggage sat there forlornly, but not as forlornly as the white gown that was the snow that held it. The train went on into the city, but not as much as the silence that went on in their conversation. The silence was becoming unbearable, more unbearable than Moses' insomnia.

Reinhartt waited. He did not know how long he could stand it, the silence. Longer than the passenger at least.

What do you do when your train spontaneously combusts with out warning?

What do you do when you're a half mile out of town at dawn in the windblown snow?

What do you do when you've just saved someone's life?

"Do you want to go get coffee?" Said Passenger.

"Sure."

* * *

Color is important. It is the beautiful unnecessary clothing the Earth has donned on her already beautiful form. The prize the sun flaunts so magnificently, the gift the stars present so modestly. It can be subtle like the white of a coffee mug, or stunning like a marriage proposal or a tropical bird's plumage. It can be dead like a dead man's pale face, or alive like newlyweds, or the green of spring.

The color this morning was very much alive. Everything was clear and alert. Or maybe the world just seemed this way because Moses felt clear and alert, felt the sharp wind pierce his lungs, felt the ground with every attentive footstep.

Reinhartt and Passenger trudged through the blue-gray snow peering at the winking blinking world. But the snow was not quite blue-gray anymore. It was a gelid clear white, although still retaining the light blue. This blue, though, came out of the snow itself, was a frozen glow emanating from the innermost places, the type of which can only be seen on clear cloudy mornings. The morning was cloudy, full of thick billowy clouds that hung suspended in the air watching curiously the stirring landscape. The clouds, too, had the odd emerging light. They were a definite gray but they swelled in places like a wave at its fullest. And in these bulging areas, a white luminescence tumbled out, the lights way of saying, 'I'll stay under the covers today thank you very much.' The landscape was clear but not bright, one was able to look at it without having to squint ones eyes. Since the origin of the somnolent light could not be found, the world seemed as if it could only be seen because of the world itself, it did not seem illuminated by

any outside force. It stood on its own. Like the city. The city, it seemed, was isolated because it rested at the base of a very small mountain range in a snowy landscape, but it was these very mountains that were blocking the view of another city on the other side. The mountains hovered over the buildings, the two saw it rising above the city as they were approaching. Alongside them the railroad track flew behind them in a futile attempt to pierce through the snow, for it was swallowed up like a stick thrown into a chasm full of flailing white blankets.

As they walked through the foot of snow they felt the cold wind bite their faces and heard the snow crunch underfoot as the city became more prominent. They could see the smoke rising from the chimneys of the bakeries and early risers. Then the duo began to pass buildings, until all at once they were in the city. This change was like passing a few trees then suddenly finding yourself in a forest with trees rising and passing about you. The city was a forest, a man-made one that housed humankind rather than animal kind.

These buildings were made of humble brick that was a duller form of venetian red. The doors were red, blue, green, yellow, of all sorts, the important thing is that these colors were very dark and resonant, not bright or brilliant. They did not stand out. The paint was peeling off the doors and window frames in the way that only old houses or weather worn wood can accomplish, in this case, probably both. These buildings were mostly three to five stories tall, although the rest reached ten. Occasionally they would be wider than tall, but on the whole they were thin.

The fact that it was a city did not stop the buildings being used as homes as well as for shops and businesses: most of the population lived in the city. There were hardly any neighborhoods. A building where one man might work to support his family would house another man's own, and it was perfectly natural. The city had many factories—the wider than tall buildings. They were primarily used for metal products but most of the rest were used for the clothing trade. Everybody else earned a living by a trade, and these ones were just as many as the factory workers. This kind owned family-run businesses, kept alive generation after generation. The shops were almost always on the bottom of the buildings, the owners living a floor above. This was not always the way the citizens made their living though. Around a hundred and fifty years ago it was a colony started by a mining expedition for the silver in the very mountains that loomed above the city. They were, in their day, one of the largest suppliers of the country's currency, but the silver had long since been exhausted leaving a small city that the good people decided to remain in.

The denizens of the current city were not in any way different from any other large city. They were predominantly middle class, the lower class following, and the upper class last, sticking their hands into the other twos' pockets. Each person was different but there were two definite types of people. First there was the town icon, the people who grew up in the city, those whose ancestors grew up in the old town. They were the kind of people that owned the many shops that not only helped the city be self-sustaining, but to make it what it was. It

would be a completely different city without them. These people, almost all of them, wore an apron, whether a shoe-maker, tailor, baker, smith, artist etc. etc., that had many pockets on the front for holding all sorts of things. When they walked their leather shoes tapped out a satisfied homely tune. They almost always could be seen with a jovial smile on their face, on the men, a curled mustache was often seen above. These were the specimens the people of power wanted the tourists to see.

The next type was the factory worker, or the "soots" as they were derogatorily called. They often had clean faces on the way to work, but came home with soot or grease covering them like some hilariously deceitful propaganda. After their wives made their lunches this kind hurried out the door in the morning, rolled up their sleeves and went resolutely to work. They wore mostly button up shirts with overalls that were black and blue, like a few of their faces. Their overalls were mostly a dark blue, but that didn't matter much because at the end of the day they were permanently pitch black. This kind of man took no pleasure in his work but took a great deal of pride in it, and it was with this and his meager salary that he returned home to his family. They didn't have the jovial smile of the others, but they had a composed, competent determined look. At the end of the day their boots dragged along the ground and their heads hung doggedly down, soot on their visages and driving caps.

Moses bumped into one of these as he was looking at a baker switching his sign from closed to open. He looked after

him as he hurried off to a factory, and then back to the baker who hurried back to the oven. They had now gotten far enough into the city that they began to walk on cobbled streets instead of snow. These thin streets curved around the city the way veins wind through our bodies. Moses thought it was interesting how we unintentionally mold almost everything after ourselves.

"Welcome to Joachimstal!" Passenger finally said the name of the city that was taking the writer so long to think up. "Have you ever been here before?"

"Yes, several times actually."

"Well, then, do you know of any good coffee shops?"

"Oh! Yes. There is Vera's Coffee Shop..."

"What about Adelaida's Coffee House?"

"They don't open for another hour or so."

"Really? Vera's it is then!" he said in his energetic lively way.

"Vera's is much better anyway."

They continued walking.

After several turns the thin street opened up into a square. There were metal tables and chairs to the right, the snow gathered around their legs. Behind these chairs, in the middle of a building, a sign jutted out that said in purple letters: "Vera's Coffee Shop."

Passenger said "I'll get the food, you find a seat. What do you want?"

Moses replied and moved towards a seat. He picked one facing Vera's and sat down as if he was having a perfectly nor-

mal day. The fact is, though, he wasn't having a normal day. If you consider spontaneously combusting trains, arrogantly sleeping men and oddly beautiful mornings a regular thing, you either have an awfully good life, or a God with an awfully bad sense of humor.

Reinhartt felt that, if there really was a God, he must have an awfully bad sense of humor. Why give men nipples? Why make an awfully cute creature like a raccoon prone to rabies? Why make us the most abusive, lustful, hostile, and violent creatures on the planet and then give us a conscience and tendency to guilt? Why give us a tremendous intellect and then a puny body that could be mauled by a bobcat? Is it really that funny that more people die from coconuts than sharks each year?

Excuse me. Where was I? Ah, yes. Moses saw passenger coming back with the coffee and steaming pastries. He set the plates down and dropped into his seat.

Passenger peered at him queerly for a minute and then said "I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Smith John."

Moses stumbled, "Nice to meet you John. I'm Reinhartt, Moses."

"Oh please Reinhartt, just call me by my first name I really don't care."

"…I thought I did."

"Well, my last name is John, but my parents decided to name me Smith, they gave me the most generic name backwards. Isn't it somewhat the same with you Reinhartt?"

"Well actually my first name is Moses and my last is Reinhartt."

"Then why did you say it 'Reinhartt Moses'?"

"Well I thought I would say it the same way you were…" Moses said a little confused.

Smith, abruptly went to his coffee and cinnamon scone. Moses took a bite of his blueberry muffin feeling the warm bready substance and tasting the sweet-sour of the blueberries as he stirred sugar into his coffee. Smith swallowed.

"This is good! Very good!"

Moses smiled as most people often do when receiving a compliment for merely supporting and enjoying something, "See? I told you. I really do love this place."

"It is a wonderful square. I love the seats, the snow, the cobbles, and the shops."

"Mm-hmm" Moses agreed.

He sipped his excellent coffee and looked at the square, starting at Vera's and panning to the right. Next to Vera's was a tailor's business, next to that a building for apartments and offices and along that, an alley disappeared behind a building. This building was very large and on the side a large sign read in faded letters, "Parfyons Powder". Several groups of large barrels were in the alley.

"Black coffee is like black humor," Smith stated putting down his black coffee. "It's bitter, but we like it, and for some reason we keep coming back for more."

Moses paused, "You're saying that we like sarcastic, ironic, dark things for the fact that—" he halted, then continued—"for the fact that it is sarcastic ironic and dark."

"Exactly! We enjoy bad things, or, actually, not always, not just, bad things. Unaccepted things. Nobody really cares if it's bad, they just want to see people cross boundaries! For instance, say a homeless man went to a funeral just for the food later at the reception. Bad? Maybe. Unaccepted? Sure. Comic? Absolutely!"

"That's terrible."

"Yes!" He exclaimed. "But funny?"

"I suppose so."

"See, bitter. But deep down, we like it!" He punctuated these last three words with gusto, tapping his chest where his heart was. Moses assented.

Another break in their conversation occurred. Moses found it funny they were sitting outside. It was a bitter, but humorously cold morning in winter. Funnily enough, he and Smith didn't seem to care. In fact, they both enjoyed that they were sitting in the cold, calmly enjoying their breakfast. Strange mornings call for strange dining locations I suppose. Moses felt obliged to start the next string of conversation.

"Have you seen The Fountain of Youth?"

"I saw it recently."

"What did you think?"

"I thought it was funny how the heroes were old men, trying not to be old men. A sort of Don Quixote theme on a grander scale."

"I liked that." He speculated. "If you could drink out of the fountain of youth and gain eternal life, would you do it?"

Smith took a sip of his coffee and set it down, "Absolutely."

"Why?"

"It's eternal life. Why wouldn't I do it? I wouldn't have to worry about sickness or old age, most importantly, imminent death."

"But what would you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"With all that time?"

"Take over the world. Explore the world. Once I've taken over the world, do odd things to satisfy odd questions I have. After that, explore the universe. What could you lose? What would *you* choose?"

"I wouldn't drink it."

"Why?" Smith blurted emphatically.

"Because I want to see what happens when I die."

"Ah. But what if *nothing* happens when you die?" He said this next word strongly, "nothing."

"But what *if* something happens. Then you'd be barred from it with one sip. Barred from the one thing nobody knows."

"Well, you see. With dying you don't know what happens. But living, now there's certainty."

"In life though, there are not endless possibilities. There may be millions, there may be billions, and there may be trillions. You may do all of them a trillion times, but eventually

you'll run out. You'll be stuck in this place like an adult in a room full of toys you've outgrown."

Moses leaned back satisfied and took a large bite out of his excellent blueberry muffin. Smith was leaning forward, his chin on the palm of his fist. His black eyes stared blankly at the table, then speculatively.

"Regardless of the Evil of all evils: Boredom, when you die there's still the possibility of non-existence. Better to suffer than to be non-existent."

Now Smith took a bite of his scone and leaned back contentedly. Moses slumped forward, letting his head be held up by the cold fingers of his right hand. His gray eyes stared intently at the meal. Then he put his left hand on the table like some triumphant spider.

"I am an insomniac. I've way too much time on my hands to try *everything*. I've tried falling back asleep, it's nearly impossible. It's like running away from something when there's really nothing chasing you. That's what eternal life would be like, running from nothing towards somewhere you can't get, death. Just running. Running from nothing, towards nothing, until finally you just sit down. You don't move in any direction, you don't think about anything because there's nothing left to think about. You're non-existent. Dead you're non-existent. Alive you're non-existent but alive you know it, you know your non-existent, you know your nothing. You're stuck in the paradox of life without death."

Moses let out a slow breath. Smith smiled smugly but truthfully, still leaned back in his silver faded chair. He tapped two fingers on the armrest.

"I am a narcoleptic." Moses looked up in surprise. "I have had thousands of seconds taken away from me by sleep, temporary non-existence if you will, and I didn't even know it. I will hungrily devour up any bit of time I can get. If it's just sitting, and I know I'm sitting, so be it. It's better than not knowing and not even being able to know. It's being and that's enough."

This was not the response Moses was expecting, although it might have been the one he was suspecting. They sat in silence again, Smith staring at Moses. Moses was still slumped forward head on hand staring at his coffee. He flipped the spoon up and down in his drink.

"That's why you wouldn't wake up." He said matter-of-factly.

"Probably, sorry about that."

Moses shifted to where he was facing Vera's and squinted.

"You've got it much easier that me."

"You mean being an insomniac is harder than being a narcoleptic?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"You have energy, you can think clearly, you can rest."

"But great portions of my life can be taken away from me like that!" (He snaps his fingers) "I took a girl out to dinner once, she never stopped talking. Gorgeous redhead with the

greenest eyes ever. I fell asleep in the middle of her talking about how her beloved parents just drowned at a dog food factory. When I woke up I was surrounded with every type of Italian food imaginable, six different types of pizza, spaghetti, gelato and this giant, unnerving meatball-looking thing. I'm sitting here with food piled up to my nose when I realize she's gone. The waiter walks up, and tells me she left and hands me a six hundred and four taler bill. I ask him if she left her address or some way to contact her. He says she told him to tell me when I woke up that *I* should go drown in a vat of boiling dog food and see if it's boring enough to fall asleep in."

"That's hilarious."

"It's terrible!" Smith said exasperated.

"Ah yes!" Moses smirked, "But funny?"

Smith shifted in his seat and grumbled, "…I suppose so." he said quickly.

"You see?" He bantered. "Well, being an insomniac I can hardly even get to the point of *asking* a girl to dinner. I'm just too tired most of the time. Once a girl even came up to me and asked me to dinner. I was so tired (I hadn't slept for a month) that I just stared at her like some petrified zombie who had just seen someone with two heads. And I was a zombie! And she did have two heads! My lack of sleep affected my vision that much! Finally she got sick of me staring at her with that confused look on my face and left."

"That's pathetic."

"It's ridiculous!"

"But, you see. Regardless of whether you have the energy or not, you have all the time in the world. And you don't need to rush just because you may, occasionally, pass out."

"But, because of my lack of sleep I don't have the mental energy to even decide what to do with all that time. Once, on a saturday, I just sat on a bench at the park for twelve hours, doing absolutely nothing."

"Once I was about to make a lot of money, and I was sitting on a bench going over my notes. I fell asleep for twelve hours and woke up at eleven o' clock in the morning with some kids throwing acorns at my head."

"What were you doing in the park at eleven at night, about to make a lot of money?"

His eyes got that wide look when he first saw Moses, "That's not the point."

"Your right. The point is, quantity over quality."

"What?"

"Quantity over quality: My life is quantity, yours is quality. I want quality you want quantity."

"So it's a matter of opinion."

"I guess so." Moses said matter-of-factly.

"Your awfully philosophical aren't you?"

"Like I said, I've way too much time on my hands."

Smith decided to leave it at that. He finished his coffee and scarfed down his cinnamon scone. He then lifted his black-hole suitcase onto the silver table.

"I suppose I should give you some sort of reward for saving my life." He said clicking the latches and smoothly opening the suitcase.

Moses said uncomfortably, "Oh, no. It was the least I could do. You already bought me lunch and gave me some entertaining conversation."

"You saved my life at the risk of your own and I'm going to pay you a good amount. I insist."

He shuffled around in his suitcase. Moses couldn't see what was on the other side, but he could hear. There was a great deal of clicking and whirring and he could see Smith lifting up another lid. He heard him sliding metal as if on a safe and then he pulled his hand out.

In his hand he held a hefty sum of bills. Moses, even though he couldn't see the numbers, could tell it was a lot of money. The coffee stain colored paper fluttered like a rare breed of butterfly in the wind.

"If you insist…" Moses said reaching for the money.

His pale spindly hand reached out for that ridiculous sum. But the money exploded in Smiths hand with the sound of a gunshot into a million pieces, like a puff of smoke. They fluttered off in the wind like several breeds of butterflies. Dancing in the wind they gaily enacted some ballet Moses was sure he'd seen before. He smiled blissfully and blinked slowly watching them wander off in the cold wind. He couldn't explain why that particular stack of money had exploded like that, and he didn't care—the motion of the whole ballet was beautiful.

All this happened in an instant. In the next instant Smith kicked the table over dashing the dishes on the cobbles and pulled Moses behind it. He pulled two revolvers out of his suitcase and handed one to Reinhartt.

"Just stick close to me and you'll be okay."

Stick close to him? He just handed me a revolver, what's that supposed to mean? Moses thought.

Then he heard several more gunshots. Instantly he felt bumps spring up in the metal table bruising his back and causing him to cry out. Smith whirled around and unloaded his gun. He flipped nimbly back behind the table and reloaded bullets from somewhere in his shirt.

Stick close to him? Moses continued. *Stick close to him against what?*

He peeked out from behind the table and in that peek two things happened. First he saw five or six men crouching behind tables identical to their own. They had on beige trench-coats and gray fedoras. The fedoras shadowed their eyes making them look very sinister. Sinister is probably the best word to describe them. The way they fired their pistols, the way they hid in their coats like some unknown pack of something in a cave. The next thing that happened was a bullet grazed the left side of his head and another clipped some of his wispy hair off.

He pulled his head back behind the table as his fair hair floated towards the ground and was then shot again dispersing it into the air. He looked at the man he just met.

Stick close to him? Against whom? I just met this man.

"I know I'm a man you just met, but if you don't follow me you'll get killed." Smith yelled. "On the count of three, we're going to make a run for that alley. One, two, three!"

Smith burst out of hiding firing at the enemy with his right, carrying his suitcase with his left. Reinhartt scampered afterwards, firing a few shots of his own at the unidentifiable men. They retreated momentarily behind their tables as Smith and Reinhartt wound their way through the tables knocking them down harum-scarum. The pack of men in trench coats and fedoras then jumped out simultaneously and began a renewed assault. Smith kicked another faded silver table over and they jumped behind it. Their attack did not seem to be letting up for the bumps shot up as rapidly as bamboo shoots (ok, which in plant growth-rate terms is as fast as it gets). As soon as one would run out of ammo and have to reload the next one would have just finished and resumed shooting.

"They're getting closer." Smith said.

Moses didn't check and he didn't question Smiths deduction, but he did question how they were going to get out of this predicament. There was still a steady stream of fire manifested by the bamboo shoot table and the white powder and red dust that came out of the snow and bricks.

They needed a god-send and Smith saw one, although it was unclear whether or not it was from God. Walking out of the street next to the alley was a factory worker, covered in ash and absorbed in himself. This man had black boots, black slacks and a heavy black coat. Did I mention his hair was black too? His listless hair did not go over his eyes but the way his

head bowed down it covered them. All that could be seen was his pointed nose and his mouth set in a grim line on his young face. His whole head was tucked into his coat, because of the cold, like some odd turtle, although his heavy dark clothing would have been enough to keep out the prying fingers of winter. He was walking towards them oblivious of the high speed pointed cylinders of lead hitting the town. He did cause the fire to let up a little.

And it let up enough for Smith to jump out, grab the young man, press his revolver against his temples and say, "Stop! I will shoot!"

All action in that little square ceased. The pack lowered their arms and stood straight, Moses shuffled to Smith's side and warily raised his gun, trying to look like a dangerous man who meant business, but only succeeding in causing the pack to wonder if they even had guns on the planet he came from, or 'meant business' for that matter. They stood there staring at each other. All that could be heard was the windblown powder sifting through the bitter air. The packs eyes couldn't be seen under their fedoras and their faces were expressionless, but their guns slowly lowered to their sides. They shifted eerily together towards the three like a field with some sinister intent.

"Get back!" Smiths voice carried across the still square. "I will shoot this innocent civilian!"

The pack halted but did not move back. Smith slowly stepped backwards into the alley next to Parfyon's powder barrels, pulling the hostage with him.

"You had better stay back!" Smith threatened "This man's brains wouldn't look good on your record, would it!?"

Moses was confused: What kind of gun-carrying men dicker with a random civilian? While Smith was talking he looked at the hostage whose eyes were still hungrily looking at the ground. In his hands he held a lit match. To Moses greater confusion, he flicked it into the air.

"I'm going to count to three and by then your guns had better be on the ground and your backs turned around!"

The match rotated in the air flying like a determined free faller.

"One!"

The flame billowed in the air like a dead superheroes cape falling out of the sky.

"Two!"

The burning twig of wood landed on a spilled trail of Parfyon's powder. It ignited with fury and sprinted towards the barrels and crates. They exploded with such stunning magnificence that the entrance to the alleyway was completely covered, blocking the square and beige trench-coated pack. The force of it blew Smith, Reinhartt, and the hostage backwards into the snow with a shower of white powder.

In an instant Smith was on his feet and sprinting through the city, pressing the revolver to the hostage's back. Moses ran after them as the explosion grew with more window shattering booms. The building would not survive anymore than snow falling in a forest fire.

Moses ran after Smith, it was the only thing he could think about. He kept his eyes fixed on the back of his thin black hair, now all over his head like a crazed spider or some dramatic orchestra conductors hands. The venetian red brick began to blur as they wound through the city turning every which way. The red, yellow, blue and green of the doors leapt into the venetian red and mingled entirely as they knocked over a bakers stand. The snow and cobbles were a treadmill of flashing white, blue and gray. The only thing that stayed fixed in Moses' vision was the clouds with their white luminescence tumbling out and it was only with this parallel landscape that he had any idea of what direction they were going as he bumped into yet another person.

They then came into an alley where a truck sat, black smoke puttering out of the exhaust. They hopped into the back of it, climbed over some wooden crates to get to the back and sat there, breathing heavily. They stared at the light coming out of the entrance and waited, Smith's barrel pressed against the hostage's right temple. All that could be heard was the engine tottering like an old man and their breath rasping like a young smoker. Then they heard two sets of heavy footsteps crunching through the snow and approaching the back of the truck. Moses clutched his pistol in both hands and took one last sharp breath of the bitter cold air as the door slid down and slammed shut.

The Benevolent Providence of God

by GENE HINES

I began to question the justice of God the day Robert Toomey brought a ball of clay to seventh grade study hall and sat kneading it with his fingers, making something.

"What's that?" I said.

"It's a pussy, you little toad," he said. He was sixteen years old and mean. This was his third try at the seventh grade.

The thing Robert Toomey made was anatomically correct, but, of course, I didn't know that yet.

Robert Toomey's hair hung unwashed down to his shoulders and two of his teeth were missing. I, on the other hand, took a bath every day, was a nice kid, had all my teeth, and breezed through school with little more effort than Robert Toomey himself put into it. But soon none of that would matter anymore…

"Have you—?" I said.

"More times than you got fingers and toes," he said, and his cruel lips parted to show the holes in his mouth. A lump rose in my throat at this injustice and the benevolent providence of God began to fade.

Robert Toomey gave me the thing he made, or rather cast it aside and I took it. I kept it hidden in our basement until it was brittle and broke into pieces when I dropped it on the floor one day, holding it in my hand again, examining it from every angle.

Robert Toomey finished the seventh grade on that third try but never got past the eighth. He spent most of that year smoking cigarettes behind the school gym, smoke drifting with lazy contentment from behind the building. And one day he came from the gym, his pack of Luckies tucked under the shoulder of his tee-shirt, Marlon Brando style, and said,

"Hiya, turd."

He flipped a cigarette butt in a beautiful arch toward the school flagpole.

I wasn't a nice kid anymore, I was a clueless virgin turd and it was no longer possible to believe without question that God counted all the hairs on my well-shampooed head. I was no longer a God-favored-middle-class-Alabama-white-kid; I was a gutless turd who wouldn't dare smoke a cigarette behind the school gym.

It turned my world inside out. I quit watching Lawrence Welk with my parents because I couldn't cope with the idea that Janet Lennon actually had one of those things Robert Toomey made with his clay. Ditto for Annette Funicello. I woke up one morning from a dream where Davy Crockett looked more like Robert Toomey than Fess Parker. It was a desperate situation.

My grandmother came to visit.

"What's wrong with that boy, Louise?" she said to my mother. "He just mopes around the house and he isn't eating either," she said.

I was in acute crisis. And there was nowhere to turn. Except…

I stole a pack of Winstons from my father. That took real courage. I was sure he counted the packs on the closet shelf in my parent's bedroom. Going into my parent's bedroom and into that closet was enough by itself to dangerously raise my heart rate.

I smoked in the basement and it made me sick, of course, but it was a start. I practiced rolling up the pack of Winstons in my t-shirt sleeve. I smoked another one. Sick again. They were all acquired skills. Then, I went back to Janet Lennon and Annette Funicello. I had to make myself deal with it.

I spent a month in this intense preparation; smoking cigarettes in the basement and imagining Janet and Annette naked, I even did that in church. It took time, but it was working. I could handle it. And Robert Toomey would be there when my training was complete; I knew where to find him.

At least I thought I did. But it was summer when I finished my training and Robert Toomey wouldn't be smoking behind the school gym. I would have to go to Muleshoe to find him.

When we had to go through Muleshoe—and we always went through Muleshoe—we rolled up the car windows and locked the doors. My father said it smelled like Korea during the war. It took another week, smoking my father's Winstons in the basement to work up enough nerve (he didn't, it turned out, keep count). When I rode my bicycle, four miles across town, the sight of Muleshoe was like the first time Peter Cushing saw Dracula's castle looming through the fog. My mother would have died on the spot.

Muleshoe was a foreign country; it didn't look the same, it didn't sound the same, and it didn't smell the same—and maybe it did smell like Korea during the war. It was where the poor people lived, the real poor people. They had privies in their backyards, some leaning over like neglected tombstones in a graveyard.

The place was so poor the whites lived with the blacks. But at least, my father said, the white trash had enough pride to have their own church—they went to a Holy Roller cinder block church on one side of Muleshoe and the blacks went to an identical cinder block church on the other side. You could drive your car into the middle of Muleshoe on Sunday morning, roll down your window, and hear the singing, shouting, and clapping coming from both sides.

Muleshoe had other consolations too. It had a whorehouse, everybody knew it was a whorehouse; no attempt was made to disguise it. As I said, my mother would have died on the spot.

I rolled up on my bicycle at an Esso station. Junk cars all around the station (one on cinder blocks probably left over from building the churches). Used car tires propped against the walls and crates everywhere, one with an old black man sitting on it.

I did my best to keep my voice from quivering; this was not Leave it to Beaver country.

"Hi," I said, and took a deep swallow. "You know Robert Toomey?" I said.

The sound of my voice was strange to me.

"Who you, boy?" he said.

I swallowed again.

"I'm looking for Robert Toomey," I said, my hands clammy on the handlebars.

"That so?" the old man said.

"Yes sir," I said.

Now the old man looked at me like I had green skin and horns, I doubt he ever heard a white person call him sir in his life.

"I suppose you'll find him over to his place," he said.

Robert Toomey's place was not a place at all. It wasn't a house. It was across the street from the church the white people went to. It was a beat-up old Airstream, one of those round silver ones, and it looked like it had been hauled from hell-to-Texas a hundred times. Every one of the tires was flat and it looked like a buffet line for rust. I knew it was supposed to be a house because there was a mailbox in front of it. There was dead space all around the trailer. Nothing breathed and nothing moved. There weren't even any birds. There wasn't a car or pickup in the yard. I sat on my bicycle across the street in front of the church. I thought I would wait until something moved, something came alive; maybe until Robert Toomey came out of the trailer or back from somewhere.

I waited for a long time, until I had to pee. Now what? I had about decided to go back to the Esso station when the door of the trailer opened, just enough to throw out a cat. The cat flew out of the trailer, screeching and clawing, followed by obscenities in a young feminine voice. Some of the words I hadn't even heard before.

The cat came halfway across the street, stopped in the middle, looked at me, screeched again and went the other way. Not a good sign.

I waited some more, but I really did have to pee. Now, I wasn't sure I could make it to the Esso. Necessity drove me across the street and to the front door of the trailer. I gave it some timid I-hope-they're-not-home knocks. I looked up and down the street for Robert Toomey, at least I knew him; instead of facing the cat tosser behind the door. There was a window by the door but a black shade covered it, a dark eye against the silver of the rest of the trailer.

The door opened again, but whoever was on the other side of the crack didn't say anything. The only thing I knew for sure was behind that door was the smell. It was the smell of medicine, the unwashed, and something else I couldn't name. It wasn't Korea.

"What do you want?" a female voice said.

The smell kept me from answering right away; I didn't want to draw in the air that I needed to speak.

"What do you want?" the voice said again, insisting.

All I saw was a shadow-blur of movement in the crack of the door, and all I could get out was,

"Robert…Robert Toomey?"

"No."

The crack started to close.

"When…?"

"Soon, maybe."

The door closed.

It was time to leave, and I would have left, too, but I saw Robert Toomey coming down the street. I watched him like a mouse staring at a snake he knows is going to eat him. When he got close enough to recognize me, he stopped.

"Well, if I ain't damned," he said. "You lost, boy?"

At least he didn't call me turd again.

There he was, nothing changed since he quit the eighth grade three months before. A cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth and jerking up and down when he talked, the pack of Luckies bulging under this tee shirt sleeve, and sucking at the cigarette through the gap of one of his missing teeth. Nothing changed.

"Come on," he said, and I followed him into the Airstream.

It was dark and the smell again, only stronger, inside the trailer. The cat-tosser, she, was sitting on the end of one of two cots side-by-side in the back end of the Airstream.

Robert Toomey introduced us,

"This is Woody," he said. "His real name is Woodrow, but everybody calls him Woody, Woody Grant."

No, you call me turd, I thought. He actually knew my name.

"Hi," I said, timid and whispering.

The thing, she, said nothing. If it/she was capable of speech, beyond cussing cats, it/she didn't show it. She sat on the end of her cot without moving.

Robert Toomey held out his pack of Luckies. I took one. He passed me a match, but I made sure I didn't look at her when I lit it; the cigarette covered the stink a little.

"This is Melody," Robert Toomey said. "She's my sister," he said.

I looked at her and wanted to run out of the Airstream.

"She's sick," he said.

Black curtains covered all the windows in the trailer, but there was a small lamp shinning, and I could see her well enough.

I stepped away.

The only normal thing about her face was the eyes. They were big, they shined like liquid black, and they stared at me. The glow of the one small lamp haloed the black of her eyes. She still didn't say anything or acknowledge me except by her stare.

I knew she was pleading, the eyes were pleading. I knew she was pleading for one gesture, one word, one expression on my face that would let her know for the one moment of that gesture, word, or expression that she was human. I couldn't give it. I took another half step back.

"She's sick," Robert Toomey said again.

Her face was encrusted with brown and red bumps. They were on her lips, too, misshaping them and fattening them like slugs. But they weren't just bumps; you knew that if you broke one open it would spill white and yellow pus down her face. The rest of her skin, you could even see it in the lamplight, was like the skin of a snake.

"What's she got?" I said, timid and whispering again.

"I can't say it," Robert Toomey said. "But she can't go outside, ever," he said. "We just call it sunshine sickness, that's what it is. It starts with an X. It's like cancer. She's going to die." This wasn't cruel, it was just the truth, and when Robert Toomey said it, she smiled a little.

There was nobody living in the trailer but the two of them, brother and sister; and the cat too, I guess. I could tell that when I looked around. The two cots side-by-side, and no other beds, almost no other furniture at all; no table for eating, a little electric thing for cooking.

"Where's your…?"

"Ain't got any," Robert Toomey said. "Pop run off to the oilfields in Oklahoma and mama's dead," he said.

I don't know why nobody ever took her away or put Robert Toomey in some juvenile place either. I guess things like that could happen in Muleshoe.

We stood in the silence of the trailer; she sat on the end of the cot. I forgot why I came looking for Robert Toomey.

"I've got to go to the bathroom"—I did remember that.

The tiny bathroom in the trailer didn't work, but they had a privy in the back lot. When I came back in, Robert Toomey was changing his clothes. His sister – Melody – was standing next to him, handing him a shirt stiff and ironed. He put it on.

"Got to look spiffy for work," he said, "even if it is a whorehouse."

Robert Toomey worked at the whorehouse in Muleshoe every day except Sunday. He was the bouncer, he kept out the

riffraff (most of which came, he said, from the other part of town—my part of town—they didn't know how to behave in a whorehouse.)

"You come with me," he said.

I felt a blue electric chill go through my whole body. It was going to happen—the hope and yearnings of all those daydreams and cigarettes in the basement. My escape from turddom.

"Sure," I said. I tried to be confident and manly but it came out in a quiver.

"Won't be anybody there yet, really. Too early. But a couple of the girls will show you around," Robert Toomey smiled, gaps in his teeth.

It was a little while before we went to the whorehouse, long enough for Robert Toomey to give me some instructions on how to behave.

"We'll walk, like I always do," he said. "I can't have no kid come up on a bicycle."

"Sure," I said. Another quiver.

"And don't stare," he said. "Try to act like you've seen a naked woman before. Have you seen a naked woman before?"

"No."

"Well shit. Act like you have."

Oh God! I thought.

Then Robert Toomey cooked a beef patty on the little electric burner for his sister and got her a Coke from a beat-up refrigerator.

"Maybe be home a little early tonight," he told her. He was going to send me back before dark to get my bicycle and head for home. Melody looked at me and smiled a little, again.

We walked to the whorehouse.

"Like I said, won't be but a couple of girls there this early," he said. "But they'll think you're cute. You could have yourself a real good time if you half act like you got some sense," he said.

It all ran through my mind; the clay thing Robert Toomey made, Janet and Annette, stealing cigarettes and smoking in the basement—all passing before my eyes. All that training was about to pay off. But, there was something else too that passed before my eyes and ran through my mind, at the same time.

Robert Toomey was still talking, telling me about how he took care of Melody in the daytime and worked at the whorehouse at night,

"It's easier now," he said, "that I don't try to go to school anymore."

He saw that I was watching something in my head.

"Hey!" he said.

"What?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Sure, I did."

"Ok, one last thing. Listen to this; if I tell you to head out the back door and hightail for home, you do it. The Muleshoe cops, all three of them, come around once in a while for their cut, if you know what I mean," he said.

"Oh, sure," I said, not sure at all. Then I said, "When's your sister going to…?"

"Die?"

"Yeah."

"Probably not for a while. At least that's what some doctor said, but that was a long time ago. It's like a cancer, so it's coming."

"Why doesn't she go to a hospital?"

"Lots of reason; doesn't want to, no money, wouldn't do any good, nobody gives a shit. That's not all the reasons but it'll do."

"Don't you have any other family?"

"Nope, just me."

"You going to stay with her?"

"Yep."

I forgot again why I came looking for Robert Toomey.

We were in the parking lot of the whorehouse. It was an old motel, rooms by the hour. We walked toward the office.

I stopped and Robert Toomey stopped too.

"No," I said.

Robert Toomey flicked a cigarette into the parking lot, aiming at nothing.

"I'll stay with Melody for a while," I said. "If it's ok with you."

Robert Toomey looked at me. He wasn't surprised at all. He took his pack of Luckies out of his freshly ironed shirt pocket.

"Take this," he said. "Tell her I'll be back early," he said.

She wouldn't talk to me much, at first. Maybe it was because it was only the two of us and she didn't have Robert Toomey there with her. She sat on the end of her cot, like before.

"You can turn off the lamp, if you want to," she said.

"No, it's all right," I said.

"I stay by myself a lot," she said. "Bobby has to work."

"Bobby?"

"My brother."

"Oh," I said, trying to imagine calling Robert Toomey, Bobby.

We were silent for a while. But there was nothing wrong about that; it was okay. We would talk again when we needed to.

I looked at her now. Not like I had to, or was afraid to. Maybe you could, after a while, look at her without noticing.

"Woody," she said. "I like that name. It's nice," she was looking at me too, now, without lowering her eyes.

"It's kind of a kid's name," I said.

"What's wrong with that?" she said. "What's wrong with being a kid?"

Yeah, what was wrong with that? There were worse things.

"Nothing," I said.

She said she was tired, she got tired easily, she said, and so she lay down on the cot and I helped her with the blanket.

"How long you and Robert…Bobby…been living by yourselves?" I asked her.

Since she was eleven, she said. I didn't ask her how long that was, she seemed so tired, but she was at least fourteen, I thought. She fell asleep. I turned off the lamp. There was no need for it. We both waited for something in the semi-dark. She slept and I smoked a cigarette every once in a while. I stayed with her as long as I could, before I had to get back home.

When I went to high school, I got an old '49 Ford and could go see her more and stay later. Most of the time she slept, she slept more and more, and I smoked and maybe read some of my schoolbooks.

She didn't die until after I graduated from high school and went to college. I got a letter from Robert Toomey that said Melody was dead and he was in the Army in Kansas. The Army gave him some false teeth, he took a course to finish as much school as he could, and they were teaching him to be a supply sergeant. He was going to stay in it. I don't know where they sent him after that.

They buried Melody behind the cinder block church; the Airstream, empty and with the black curtains in the windows, still sits across the street and seems to be sinking slowly into the ground.

Once, some time back, I was flicking through the channels and I saw a rerun of Lawrence Welk. I watched for a while, until the Lennon Sisters came on, then I turned it off. I couldn't deal with it.

A Last Cigarette

by Emily Lie

The man was twenty-eight and his father's death a tragedy of twenty-three years' standing before he realized it had been a suicide. In the mind of a boy of five the loss of his father was less of a single significant event and more of a series of images swirling around a palpable, ever-growing, but nameless void. Day-to-day encounters with the images and the void bred a casual familiarity. Even as the void grew he accepted it as a man accepts the face in the mirror as his own even as it ages—he sees the changes without registering what they are or even that they are, until perhaps he comes across an old picture of himself and makes a comparison: a tan, a wrinkle, a larger nose, sunken eyes, the odd gray hair. So the boy became the man, carrying the void and the swirling images though instinctively shying away from true intimacy with them, and so the man never questioned the circumstances of his father's death until assaulted by déjà vu in his living room one day.

He remembered walking by slow, tentative steps into the family room while hushed voices spilled from the parlor. A stale, bitter odor hung in the dark room so he held his nose. His breath felt hot and moist on the heel of his hand. He flipped the light switch he was just tall enough to reach and the fan overhead began to spin slowly. A kitchen chair had been set by the far wall next to the television set. Walking forward, he crushed the brown end of a cold cigarette butt beneath his sock. When he picked it up black ash smeared his

fingertip. At a sharp sound he turned to find his hard-eyed mother in the doorway. "Throw that away. Wash your hands." He threw the butt away and washed his hands with lavender soap.

Then there was the service: the tight-fitting dark suit, and pinching Sunday shoes, the wet-combed hair, the white flakes clinging to his mother's black dress as her hands and nails worried an endless supply of tissue to bits before the large, gilt-framed photograph of the boy's smiling father. Her hands twisted and her nails tore until an older woman, the boy's grandmother, pressed a linen handkerchief to them. She squeezed his mother's shoulders, her arms, then her hands, and said, "You mustn't, dear. You mustn't."

His mother spoke at last. Her voice was a growl. "I'd have wrung his neck myself if I'd known what he was doing. And now see what he's done to me. I'd have done it for him."

"You mustn't. You mustn't."

"I'd wring his neck."

"You mustn't. You mustn't."

"And him… He's the spitting image. How can I…?"

"You mustn't. You mustn't."

A California-dwelling cousin, two years older than the boy, whispered, "Did Uncle Michael choke to death?"

"Hush!" hissed an aunt.

His mother's hands wound the dry handkerchief around and around her fingers. They wrung it as they'd wring out a rag. They wrung it as they'd wring a chicken's neck. They plucked at it as they'd pluck a chicken's feathers.

Then there were cakes and cold ham sandwiches with the wrong kind of mustard and raw vegetables with dips and dripping pitchers of clinking ice water next to tall thermoses of coffee all set on a long, covered table. The boy's grandfather placed his gnarled hand on the boy's head and led him to a chair. As the boy waited for his food he swung his legs for the pleasure of it, listening to the swish of his pants against the cheap upholstery. When his grandfather returned they shared a large slice of cake. The boy was given all the frosting. It was the wrong kind of frosting, but the boy ate it anyway. He licked the tines of the clear plastic fork until they were clean again.

"Mikey, you're going to come and live with your grandmother and me for a while. What do you think of that?"

The man licked his lips as though the flavor of the blue buttercream flowers still lingered on them, but instead he felt the sting of tobacco on his tongue. Yes, tobacco. That was it—tobacco in the air. He slid his body forward on the seat of the chair and tipped his head to rest it along the rail on the back. His eyes shut instinctively against the hot glare of the bulbs in the light fixture overhead but he forced them open again. The blades of the fan hung perfectly still above, the rope dangling like a python from the center. He closed his eyes again to take another drag from his cigarette. Spots of light quivered in the dark. Michael choked to death. A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face.

He stood up and tugged on the beaded cord to set the fan turning. As the blades began to spin, the hanging rope

whipped around and around, snapping wildly against the blades. He swore and stumbled backward, tipping the chair and tripping over it, dropping his cigarette to the floor beneath his hand and crushing it under his palm with a hiss.

The fan didn't fall, but the fan kicked the end of the noose up out of standing reach. He took a deep breath and inspected the seared flesh of his hand. It wasn't a serious burn, but would require some attention.

Scrambling to his feet and cradling his wounded hand in the other, he made his way to the kitchen with a rueful chuckle at his clumsiness. Cool water from the tap soothed the burn. The sound of the running faucet seemed to run over and across his mind. Then the thought came: "Does a dead man tend to a burn?" He'd smoked his last cigarette. The chair was kicked over, the noose still attached to the fan. It only required the final resolution, the final courage.

Or was it courage?

Does a dead man tend to a burn?

He was a dead man, but he was alive. He could die or he could live. But could he live?

"Are you afraid, Grandpa?"

"Naw, dying's not so hard."

"Is there anything you want? Anything I can do?"

"You still smoke, don't you?"

"…"

"I know you do, and for God's sake I'm dying—much good a lie'll do you now!"

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

"I know that… Be a good man, a brave man, and I'll never be disappointed. But even if I am disappointed I'll always love you."

"I know that. I love you, too, Grandpa."

"Good lad. And as you love me, you can hand over one of those cigarettes."

"You don't smoke!"

"Not in thirty years, but that doesn't mean I can't now."

"Why, you old hypocrite. All the trouble I've been in for smoking…"

"If I'm an old hypocrite, you're a young fool. Quit to oblige me…after this."

"We'll see."

The boy-man of eighteen dug into the inner pocket of his jacket to pull out his half-empty pack and lighter. With trembling hands he removed two cigarettes, placed them in his mouth, and lit both. He slipped one between his grandfather's cracked, parted lips.

"I'm not so feeble yet," growled the old man, taking the lit cigarette between two thin fingers and resting his hand on the bed. A thin tendril of smoke rose up from the glowing ember. "Open the window then, lad, or your grandmother'll have a fit."

The boy did so, sitting on the sill and leaning out slightly to blow the smoke into the chill night air. "You're not cold?" he asked.

"Not yet," chuckled the old man.

The boy chuckled, too. "She'd have a fit if she heard you say that."

"That she would."

They smoked silently for a few moments.

"Give me that bedpan."

"You have to…?"

"I need an ashtray."

They chuckled again.

"So is this your 'last cigarette?' Like the man up against the wall facing the firing squad? A bit of courage to face death?"

"Not as bad as all that, is it?"

"Is it?"

"There's nothing too fearsome about death…death doesn't require courage. It can come at any moment, and it takes you either way."

"Then what is this, after thirty years?"

"What is this," mused the old man, holding the cigarette before his face and considering it for a moment. "It's one of life's little joys, I suppose. A little comfort, a little courage—but courage for living. Every living moment calls for courage."

"…"

"Fear is a black hole, Michael Davis. But it's conquered in a moment, every moment."

"…"

"Will you read that again…'Come in under the shadow of this red rock?'"

Come in under the shadow of this red rock.

Michael Davis lit another cigarette, another moment's courage.

The Black River

by G. D. McFetridge

Early that morning a mile downstream from the town of Bridgeport we launched the kayaks. The past was behind me now and I felt relieved that my wife and I had reconciled. Last April, after she took off with an old boyfriend, I was completely undone. Betrayed, eviscerated, and so depressed that I lived inside a vodka bottle for weeks—or maybe it was months. When I finally emerged from my stupor and from the darkness that had enveloped me, I felt other emotions. My life was a nightmare swirling around me.

The sun rose above the high cliffs and the river turned glassy and deep, at first because the channel narrowed, later because the convergence of two smaller tributaries had doubled the flow. Beyond the floodplain, the canyon walls rose into blue sky and broad streaks of gray and black cut through the red sandstone. The region had formed at the close of the Cretaceous, after the deadly Chicxulub meteor impact changed the world forever.

A week after the fun was over and the boyfriend had moved on, Nancee begged my forgiveness. She said the affair was an impulsive and dreadful mistake. So I forgave her, out of desperation or weakness perhaps, and I hoped it would never happen again. Although the painful memory lingered.

It was midmorning when we hit the first roiling whitewater. Nancee was ahead by twenty or so yards. She disappeared into a deep trough before shooting up and over the next wave.

I was apprehensive because she hadn't mentioned we would encounter this level of difficulty. The important part was to make it through without losing my kayak, without losing control. Then no sooner had I made the worst of the run, the rapids flattened and the river widened. Nancee paused and tightened her helmet strap. I paddled passed without saying anything.

The river remained flat and placid for almost an hour and then after a series of smaller rapids the canyon changed, closing to a narrow gorge, a gash between the sheer cliffs and an embankment of broken rock and half-submerged boulders. The boulders looked battered and scarred as if freshly unearthed by a landslide.

The last of the fast-moving rapids spilled into a stretch of still water. Heavy mist rose from the river and I wondered if another set of heavy rapids might lie ahead. I drifted for a moment. The bright sunlight reflected off the smooth surface nearly blinding me, so I looked over my shoulder to check on Nancee. When I turned back, the current was suddenly moving faster toward a gap, gaining force. I tried back paddling but the pull was too strong. I heard the sudden roar of water and my kayak lunged forward. For an instant it seemed everything had stopped—suspended in midair—and the only thing I could do was take a deep breath and hope for the best.

The next thing I knew, my face and body slammed into the cold water, dazing me, as if my brain was jarred loose from my skull and sloshing around like a lump of Jell-O. There was no way to know how deep under I was or which way was up. The force of the fall had wrenched the twin-bladed paddle from my hands. I knew it was crucial to stay inside the kayak until the churning water released me.

I recall thinking that if I survived the ordeal, I would wring Nancee's neck. The previous day after reading the kayaker guidebook, she'd reported there were good runs on this stretch of the Black River. But no mention of a waterfall. Something wasn't right.

Then the water suddenly released my kayak and I fought to catch a glimpse of the surface. What little light there was seemed sourceless and indistinct. I tore loose the nylon waist skirt and pushed free. My lungs burned for a breath but the aerated water lacked buoyancy and no matter how hard I kicked and pulled with my arms, I couldn't make the surface. Just as I was about to give up, everything became brighter and I broke through and saw blue sky. Beautiful life-saving sky. I gasped for air. My kayak popped up, swamped, upside down, and I reached for the bowline and dog-paddled toward the bank. The river was calmer now and slow moving.

I hauled the kayak to a sandbar and looked for my paddle. It had drifted a ways and caught on snag close to shore and I waded downstream and grabbed it. When I returned to the sandbar, a strange dizzy spell weakened my legs and blurred my

eyes, like a blackout, and everything seemed unreal and confusing. Then I realized I had forgotten Nancee.

Had she escaped the falls? Or was she trapped underwater?

I removed my helmet and swam toward the falls but as I got closer, the power of plummeting water frightened me. Even if I managed to dive under and reach her, there was a chance the river would trap me again, so I returned to the sandbar to think things through. This was how I figured it: if the back suction had her in its deadly grip, it was too late, and if with luck she had avoided the falls, the steep cliffs and boulders made an impassible barrier. Either way I couldn't reach her. Returning to my van near the town of Thayne was the only logical choice.

The last time I'd seen Nancee she was fifty yards behind me, and I assured myself she'd had enough time to escape the waterfall. Probably everything would be fine—at least that's what I thought as I paddled downriver.

An hour later, I hit another run of rapids and worried a second unreported waterfall might lurk ahead. I was still very angry. How could she have put me through something like that? How could she have misread the guidebook and not known the river held treacherous possibilities? She was meticulous about details, never careless, and it seemed odd she would have made such foolish mistake.

It was late afternoon when I made the boat launching area outside Thayne. I was exhausted and drenched in sweat. Upstream the river had widened for several miles, like a narrow

lake, and the wind had grown stronger. For the last hour I had paddled furiously to make better time.

After pulling my kayak out of the water, I hurried to the van. There was a payphone next to the public restrooms but I didn't know what to do, whether I should drive to Nancee's truck or call for help. I decided to go with 911. A man's voice answered and I explained everything. He wanted details.

"Goddamnit," I shouted. "I need help. My wife may have drowned. Or at the very least she's lost somewhere on the river."

He told me to take a deep breath and stay put and a sheriff's deputy would arrive soon. Thirty minutes later a black and white pulled off the highway and headed down the road to the parking area in front of the restrooms.

"Tell me what happened," he said. He had a bored expression, the tone of someone with better things to do, and his short hair and dark sunglasses made him seem hard and impersonal. I offered a condensed recounting of what had transpired and suggested we drive to Bridgeport.

"Hold on now, let's get all the facts," he insisted. "What time did you say you encountered the waterfall?"

"Around noon," I said. "Or maybe a little later…I don't know. Don't remember for sure."

"You did get a park permit to be on the river, didn't you?" he asked, in a colorless tone.

Nancee always handled those sorts of details. Truth was I didn't recall her saying anything about a permit. The deputy took off the sunglasses and tucked them in his shirt pocket. His

gaze seemed uncertain, as if he thought I wasn't telling the entire story.

"Well, Mr. Moffet," he said. "Apparently your wife forgot. Because had she paid for a permit, she'd have known about the landslide. It blocked the river channel three weeks ago."

An expression that was difficult to decode flickered across his face and he kept his eyes fixed on mine. I pictured the clog of boulders and remembered thinking that something wasn't right, the way the water had backed up and then swept downward to the falls. The deputy looked at me and the furrow in his brow deepened.

"Maybe she made a mistake or forgot about permits," I said. "We should drive back to Bridgeport. Maybe she'll be there."

He gestured toward his car. Once seated he took the handset from the radio and reported to headquarters. Much of what he said was police code numbers and military-type jargon, so I didn't fully understand. We pulled onto the highway and headed toward Bridgeport.

"I see this sort of thing," he said, breaking the silence. "People get lost or separated in the wilderness. But before you know it everything works out just fine."

"Sure. She's probably waiting for me…at her truck," I said. "It's a yellow Ford Ranger."

The sun was just above the ridge. It would be dark in an hour. When we finally arrived at the dirt access road where Nancee and I had unloaded the kayaks, I spotted her pickup. I could hear blood churning in my ears and my stomach felt constricted and jittery.

"We'd better check for a note," he said.

I got out and trotted to the truck. In some sort of self-deluding way, I guess I was hoping to see a piece of paper tucked under the wiper. I turned toward the deputy's black and white cruiser. He was on the radio. The bottom fell out of my insides and I was afraid I might lose it, but I fought the feeling—had to stay in control, had to keep it all inside. The deputy walked over and wanted to know was there any chance Nancee might have headed downstream. I said I didn't think so because I was certain there was no way around the falls.

"I radioed the fire department's search and rescue team," he said. "They'll send a couple guys down from Riverside. You stay here. It'll be at least thirty minutes. I'm driving back to your van to wait, just in case she's heading downriver. When the rescue unit arrives, stay with your wife's truck. Let them handle the search. We don't need another missing person on our hands."

I nodded wearily and watched him speed off, the bright blue and red lights flashing. The gravity of the situation had coalesced into something ominous. It would be dark soon and I couldn't think straight and knew my life had gone very wrong. A nightmare was out of control, gaining momentum, trapping me in the middle of a swirling vortex.

When the rescue team arrived, one of them was a woman in her twenties, tall and athletically built. A lot like Nancee. The other was an older man and he told her to unload the equipment. He also wanted me to explain details.

"And you're certain she didn't go over the falls?"

"No. I'm not certain…I'm hoping."

I couldn't make out his expression—his back was to the headlights—yet I somehow knew it had changed.

"Knowing your wife, are you sure she would have returned to her truck?"

"Yes," I insisted. "I'm sure she realized she couldn't make it around the falls and the steep canyon. I thought it through a dozen times. Logic dictated we both return to our vehicles. What I mean is, even if she'd assumed the worst for me, she still would have returned to her truck."

"So that means she's had six or seven hours. Right?"

"Something like that. Depending on how long she waited…but yes, about that long."

"We'll find her. She's probably hiking upriver."

The woman dropped two backpacks and returned with a coil of nylon rope and two large box-shaped flashlights. The man patted my shoulder and they started toward the river. The bright flashlights stabbing into the darkness. After I grew tired of pacing in circles, I used Nancee's key to open the pickup truck. Inside I caught a familiar scent and breathed deeply, as if to hold on to her. I remembered the first time we met. It was five years ago in an Irish pub in the neighborhood where we lived. I was on a date with another girl and Nancee was waiting tables.

"Two black and tans," I said, and turned my head. Nancee was wearing a short skirt and stockings that came only a couple inches above her knees, so there was a bit of shapely thigh

showing between the skirt and the stockings. There was also a nice display of cleavage.

"You know that's very discourteous," my date said.

"What?"

"It's rude to look at other women when you're on a date."

"I handed her money," I said, at a loss.

"It was her breasts, wasn't it? You like girls who show it off."

"You noticed her breasts?"

"No…I saw you noticing her breasts." Her voice was louder and resentment reshaped the features of her face.

"This is only our second date. Where exactly are we going with this?"

"I forgot how thoughtless men can be. I haven't dated since my divorce."

She got up and walked out without another word. I was embarrassed and glanced around to see if anyone had overheard the little soap opera. Nancee stood at her duty station at the end of the bar, waiting as the bartender filled an order. She looked at me and smiled mischievously. Then the bartender set four tall glasses of beer on her tray and she walked by me and winked.

"Troubles in paradise?" she said in a loud whisper.

Her shift ended at eight-thirty. I invited her to join me for a drink. I had already downed three black and tans and the combination of ale and Guinness had gotten to my head. She wanted a glass of red wine. We talked for a while and everything fell into place.

She finished her wine and I bought her another. The pub was dimly lit. Under the fuzzy spell of alcohol—or the pretext of it—I leaned forward and kissed her. Her tongue tasted of red grapes, grapes with a little bite to them, and I enjoyed that and was glad she didn't smoke. Cigarettes and wine make a nasty combination.

We were so hot for each other, by the time we got to her place we didn't bother undressing. My pants were around my ankles and I lifted her skirt and pulled off her panties. We were rolling on the living room floor. She moaned with her mouth open, showing her white teeth. Then she bit my neck. I pulled her hair to make her stop. She dug her fingernails into my ribs and bit harder.

Our lovemaking was more like a reckless collision, an undercurrent of aggression beneath the heat and desire. "I like it rough," she whispered in my ear. She was very strong and I struggled to keep her pinned. I'd never been with anyone like Nancee.

The day we got married she took me aside, aglow and beautiful in her wedding dress, and put her arms around my neck and kissed me. "See? Who says a great marriage can't be conceived in animal lust?" We both laughed.

Headlights appeared and the deputy's cruiser pulled beside the pickup. I got out and waited as he rolled his window down.

"How long ago did the rescue people get here?" he asked.

"Not long."

"I went off duty a half-hour ago. Here's a number to call if the search turns up negative." His voice was more businesslike. It made me feel uneasy.

"What about my van?"

"They'll take you to Thayne. Just sit tight. You'll want to be here when they bring your wife back safe and sound… right?"

There was something oxymoronic about his comment. If they brought her back, I wouldn't need a ride to Thayne. A wrenching sensation knotted my stomach but I didn't say anything. I watched the deputy pull onto the road and drive away.

The temperature was dropping. I got out of Nancee's truck and walked to where we'd launched the kayaks that morning, where moonlight reflected off ripples and the river made low murmuring sounds. Frogs and crickets were in full concert, weaving a strange orchestration over the moving water. A haunting sound. It was almost nine and I couldn't get the image of Nancee out of my head. Like an apparition, half-real yet impossible.

It would likely take the rescue team all night and half the morning, so I left the river's edge to rest in the front seat of the pickup. I was hungry and drained. The day had taken everything out of me. Sleep would be a welcome relief.

Somehow I drifted off curled awkwardly in the fetal position on the truck's reclining seat, and when I woke, my neck ached and my hand tingled with needles. My cheeks were wet and I'd had the eeriest dream:

Nancee was floundering in a dark pool of water, dogpaddling in circles as if desperately confused. I dove in and swam to her. Taking her in my arms, swimming her toward shore. Frantic to save her and undo everything that had happened. When we reached the sandbar, I held her in my arms and knelt over her sobbing uncontrollably.

It was almost dawn. A vague grayness on the horizon seemed faraway and very cold. Out of the corner of my eye there were lights, two bright beams coming from the deep shadows of the riverbed. The man tapped the window and I opened the door. His face was as gray as the distant morning light, creased from tiredness and sunken in a way that told me nothing good had happened. He gently patted my shoulder and shook his head.

"We came to the landslide but it was too dangerous to try at night. I'll radio for a full search party and a helicopter. Don't worry. I know we'll find her."

The woman volunteered to drive me to my van. Although I don't know why she bothered, or what difference it could have made. I was a hundred-plus miles from home with two vehicles. Why would it matter whether they were parked thirty miles apart or together? Nothing made any sense. I told her not to bother.

"But you need to get something to eat," she said. Her tone seemed more maternal than her years. She was pretty in a strong way. A lot like Nancee. "If you don't want to drive to your van, why don't you drive the pickup to Bridgeport," she continued. "There's a café a couple blocks from the first turnoff

on the right. The helicopter will take two hours to get here. They're flying in from Gasser County."

I was only half listening. Rescue people train themselves to keep people like me distracted, preoccupied, doing anything other than doing nothing. Waiting and worrying.

I took her advice. I drove Nancee's truck to the café and ate scrambled eggs, hash browns, toast, and three pork sausages. I rarely ate real sausage, only turkey links, but the self-indulgence seemed appropriate. And I drank too much coffee, drove around town in circles, around and around for what seemed like hours. I knew if I kept moving, kept a constant flow of stimuli coming at my brain, reality would remain suspended. Nothing coalesces when in motion. That was the key. Keep moving and the truth never catches up.

When I drove back to the river, there was a pair of rescue vans, two sheriff cars, and a group of uniformed men. One man was talking on a radio. As the truck's brakes softly squealed, they all looked in my direction. I saw it in their eyes, sensed what I already knew. They'd found the body. One man walked toward the van; he was older and graying at the temples, wearing a brown blazer and gray tie. I got out of the van. His eyes were dark and serious and he looked at me for a moment but didn't say anything. I sensed his discomfort and decided to help him through it.

"I know…I know already."

"Some anglers found her a few miles down from the falls, Mr. Moffet," he said, avoiding my eyes. "They reported it two hours ago. There was an ID and two twenty-dollar bills zipped

inside her pocket. I'd guess the body surfaced after you'd paddled downstream."

Nancee always did that. Kept her driver's license, car keys, and money in a windbreaker she wore underneath her orange life vest. I imagined her limp body floating facedown, her auburn hair splayed about her head, the coldness of her flesh. Skin bluer than ice and her eyes with the vacant stare of death.

A summer storm was gathering and the northwestern sky was darkening. I shrugged the man's arm from my shoulder and drove to an old church I had seen in Bridgeport. The front doors were locked but someone had left a side window open and so I removed the screen.

At the altar I lit a dozen white candles and watched the flickering light make shadows on the walls. "Tell me it isn't true," I whispered.

On a golden cross behind the pulpit the unwavering gaze of Jesus stayed with me, His forgiving eyes bluer than turquoise. A door creaked opened and a white haired little man appeared in the candlelight.

"What is it that you need my son?" he asked. His reedy voice was apprehensive, as if doubting my intentions.

I told him about all the bad judgments I had made in my life and all the times I'd lost my head, the mistakes I'd made and the things I regretted. He looked at me through hesitant, watery eyes. There was something beckoning in his gaze. I explained the thoughts running through my head, the ones that wouldn't go away.

"What are these thoughts?" he asked.

"It's so difficult to say…"

He gazed at me in a curious manner, his frail hand trembling slightly. "It is always good to unburden oneself in truth before the Lord."

A long moment passed. "Can you imagine a life without consequences?"

"Truth has its own consequences."

"Life is a rotten tragedy. People betray you and things happen that were never meant to happen. Bad things. Sometimes you do things you never meant to do…"

"The Lord allows us to make our own choices."

"But deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. And I don't understand choices. I'm confused."

"He forgives our confusion and all our sins."

"All our sins?"

"Yes, my son, all our sins. Perhaps we should pray together."

We knelt before Jesus. He began the Lord's Prayer in a low, meditative voice.

* * *

A torrent of water pummels her body, her hair floating like seaweed in the cold water, her eyes like cut glass. I see my hands. My two hands grasping her neck. But there is no sanctuary, no salvation, only the naked truth.

The old man reaches for my hand but it does not help, for there is nothing beneath me now. His skin is clammy and cold

like something from the river bottom. Red and blue lights flash in the window and I hear loud voices outside. Angry voices and someone at the door.

Time has stopped and everything is suspended in midair and then I'm falling into oblivion, praying for refuge and an unlikely redemption. Praying for a patch of blue sky and a last breath of untainted air.

Mini Fables

Translated *by* L. A. NICHOLAS

From *El Emperador de la China y otros cuentos*, by Marco Denevi. Buenos Aires: Librería Huemul, 1970.

A Fairy Tale

"Once there was a featherless biped[1]..." the Nightingale recounted.

"Enough with the fairy tales!" the Goose interrupted. "Featherless bipeds don't exist. Let's talk about reality. Let's talk about us. Listen to this: once there was a goose…"

Just then, in the distance, the hunter's shotgun came into view.

The Guardian of the Kingdom

The Monkey said, "Who could be better to watch for approaching enemies than the Giraffe?"

So they named her guardian of the kingdom.

By nightfall, all the Monkeys were dead, poisoned by the scorpions, bitten by the vipers, devoured by the chinch bugs, assassinated by the spiders, eaten up by the fleas.

Meanwhile, the Giraffe continued to watch the distant horizon.

The Wolves

"Wolf! Wolf!" cried the Shepherd the first night.

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[1] This is what Plato called Man. (Author's Note)

Everyone heard his cries, but they remained snug in their houses, thinking, "It's no business of mine." And the Wolf ate up the Shepherd's sheep.

"Wolf! Wolf!" the Shepherd cried again the second night. But, accustomed to the cries, everyone kept sleeping. And the Wolf ate up the Shepherd.

The third night, no one shouted, "Wolf! Wolf!"

And that night they all had a Wolf in their houses.

Evil Spreads

Apparently for no reason (except the chain around his neck all day and an occasional whipping), one night the Dog said, "That's it!"

And he changed into a Wolf.

Upon seeing a wild animal among its tender flowers, the garden, having caught the contagion, or perhaps to defend itself against the Wolf, changed into a jungle.

The Wolf, licking his chops, thought, "Now that despot, that bully, that Man will see. I'll wait for him here, and as soon as he comes into view, I'll sink my teeth into him."

At dawn he heard footsteps and prepared for the attach. But what came into view was the Orangutan.

A Time for Everything

All the animals devoutly attended the Lion's funeral services. All of them, even the Snails. But the Snails arrived last.

"What's the hurry?" they said on the road to anyone who went faster than they did.

When they finally arrived, they made a big show, crying, offering condolences left and right, asking everyone how such a terrible misfortune had occurred.

Until the Lion smashed them to a pulp with a ferocious swipe of his paw.

"I won't tolerate waterworks at my coronation ceremony," said the new King of the Jungle.

Immolation for the Sake of Beauty

The Hedgehog was ugly and he knew it. That is why he lived in out-of-the-way places, in the shadowy underbrush, never speaking to anyone, always solitary and taciturn, always gloomy, he who in reality had a lively disposition and enjoyed the company of others. He dared go out only in the wee hours of the night, and then if he heard footsteps he would quickly bristle his quills and roll into a ball to hide his embarrassment.

One time someone found this prickly sphere, this enormous pincushion. Instead of sprinkling it with water or blowing smoke on it (as zoology books advise), the person took a string of pearls, a cluster of grapes, precious stones, or perhaps false ones, little bells, two or three sequins, several fireflies, a gold charm, some flowers made of mother of pearl and velvet, artificial butterflies, a piece of coral, a feather, and a button, and threaded them onto each one of the hedgehog's quills, transforming him from an unpleasant creature into a fabulous animal.

Everyone came to gaze on him. Depending on who beheld him, he might resemble the crown of a Byzantine emperor, a fragment from the tail of the Roc bird[2],

or, if the fireflies were lit up, the lantern of a gondola decked out for the festival of the Bucentaur or, should an envious person look on him, a buffoon.

The Hedgehog heard the cries, the exclamations, the applause, and wept with happiness. But he dared not move, for fear of disturbing that fabulous raiment. Thus he remained throughout the whole summer. By the time the first cold weather arrived, he had died of hunger and thirst. But he remained beautiful.

The Truth About the Canary

In its wild state, it was green and did not sing. Domesticated, imprisoned in a cage, it has turned yellow and warbles like a soprano.

If anyone should attribute these changes to its sadness at being cooped up and longing for its freedom – what a lie!

I know that the great coward used be green and mute so that no one could find it among the foliage, and now it is yellow so that it will blend in with the walls and the gold bars of the cage. And it sings as a way to play on the sympathy of its owner.

I, the Cat, know it.

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[2] Fabled bird of the *Arabian Nights*. (Author's Note)

The Test of the Ideal in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

by MARIA STROMBERG

Critics who read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* find themselves in disagreement on nearly every possible object of interpretation. This is partly because the poem itself is a combination of so many elements. William Vantuono observes that "[i]n combining fantasy and realism, *Gawain* is a romance with anti-romantic elements, it praises court life with an undercurrent of satire against a declining chivalric ideal, it calls up from the mythic past the shadows of archetypal figures, yet inspires modern psychoanalytic interpretations, and it entertains while teaching a moral-religious lesson.[1]" The characters in the poem have been interpreted in wildly opposite ways, either lauded for perfection and utter goodness, or derided as absurd, evil, or childish. Everything in *Gawain* presents the reader with a double possibility; but the real question is whether this possibility was intended by the poet, or whether modern criticism, rising from ideas and philosophies unthought of in the Middle Ages, has introduced into the poem an ambiguity that is anachronistic.

That the poem is not intended to portray an idealized knightly figure in the character of Gawain is fairly obvious. Both the knight and the reader are aware that he has somehow failed to uphold the virtues for which he is lauded at the be-

[1] *Vantuono, xxv.*

ginning of his adventure. Whether this failure is trivial or not is a question that must be the subject of its own critical inquiry. Our interest, at any rate, lies in the realization that, as J.R.R. Tolkien expressed it, "in terms of literature, undoubtedly this break in the mathematical perfection of an ideal creature, inhuman in flawlessness, is a great improvement.[2]" Vantuono suggests that "the theme of *Gawain* is like life on earth, a combination of bright silver and dull bronze…Perhaps the poet deliberately developed ambiguity in his characters to show a human condition that is closer to life than any idealized creation could be, for no mortal is either all good or all bad.[3]" J.A. Burrow gives the clearest definition of this literary approach to the imperfect human condition when he says that, like *Everyman*, where the "hero's confrontation with sin, death and judgment ends happily, thanks to his penance and God's mercy,[4]" *Gawain* is a comedy. "[I]ts version of the Everyman experience is such that the hero can survive it bodily as well as spiritually, returning from it with honour and being reincorporated into his society—a more human kind of happy ending.[5]" "[T]he notion of comedy seems by its very nature to include all aspects of human life, the darkest as well as the brightest elements…[6]" This quote from Louise Cowan seems to mirror Vantuono's image of *Gawain* as "bright silver and dull bronze," and it suggests that by applying a theory of comedy to the

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[2] *Tolkien*, 6.

[3] *Vantuono*, *xxxviii*.

[4] *Burrow*, 185.

[5] *ibid*.

[6] *Cowan*, 2.

poem, the ambiguities may be, if not resolved, arranged into a meaningful literary pattern.

I would like to focus, in this essay, on the most problematic and elusive figure in the poem, whose importance in the poem is no less that Gawain's, if we are to judge by the title. The Green Knight is puzzling because he does not appear to be human; therefore, the ambiguities in how he is presented cannot be explained simply by assuming a fallen and imperfect nature. Instead, by his most obviously nonhuman aspect, his green skin and hair, he appears to be associated with one, or all, of three non-human realms, as Burrow points out: "according to medieval tradition, the colour green…was the colour of fairies, the colour of the dead, and the colour of the devil…Suggestions of the otherworld, the afterworld and the underworld are all appropriate enough in the context.[7]" On this point, as on many others, critics take wildly divergent stances, identifying the Green Knight with a number of historical figures, or with the devil, Merlin, Thor, a Christ-like figure or divine messenger, a 'wild man' or a Green Man.[8] The interpretation accepted in the poem by the characters, however, is that he is a "fay-man,[9]" and this is borne out by later references to Morgan the Fay. Rather than clarifying the issue, however, this solution makes it more difficult; or rather, it allows the Green Knight to remain ambiguous, instead of reducing him to an allegory of pure good or evil. The world of Faerie in medieval

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[7] *Burrow*, 14.

[8] *See* Vantuono's commentary on lines 136-50 of the poem, *Vantuono* 159-60.

[9] *Gawain*, 23.

folklore did not fit smoothly into the Christian world, in which heaven or hell were the only two possible origins for the supernatural. The inhabitants of Faerie could be good or evil, apparently at random; like human beings, they are morally unpredictable, but unlike humans they have unearthly powers. Like most figures of pre-Christian mythology, they represent, I would argue, forces and elements in human experience, seen apart from moral considerations.

In *Gawain*, however, the fay-man and his world intersect with the clearly moral and Christian world of Arthur's court. Gawain, as representative of that world, is endowed with all human and knightly virtues, a figure of moral perfection. The poet's intention, however, as represented above by Tolkien, Vantuono, and Burrow, is to bring this ideal perfection into contact with imperfect, lived, reality. In spite of his inhuman appearance and powers, then, the Green Knight is the representative of that imperfect reality, drawing Gawain out of his ideal courtly life into a journey that will test his ideals in less-than ideal circumstances. As Green Knight he embodies that force in experience that jolts the human being into action; and as Bertilak, in his human form as master of the castle, he is also the one who creates the circumstances of Gawain's most difficult test of character. Finally, as the Green Knight once more, he makes Gawain aware of his imperfections, but does not punish him according to a strictly ideal sense of justice. Let us take these three moments and examine them in turn, to see how the *Gawain* poet has transformed the world of Faerie into an image for the imperfect world of human experience.

When the Green Knight first appears, he is described in conflicting terms. He is "half a troll" and "the largest man alive,[10]" and yet he is also "the seemliest for his size that could sit on a horse." His green skin and hair are a cause for fear and astonishment, but he is dressed beautifully and like a courtly knight. Burrow remarks that "the whole of the following description hovers in a similar way between the monstrous-supernatural and the merry-human.[11]" In the same paradoxical vein, he wears no armor and carries in one hand a "holly-bundle,[12]" but in the other hand he carries an axe, "ugly and monstrous". "It is as if the Green Knight offers peace with one hand and war with the other.[13]" The explanation that he gives for this, of course, is that he does not want a battle, but a game. He is dressed without armor to show his vulnerability for the blow that he will receive. The axe is not to be used by him, but by the knight who will choose to take up the challenge. In hindsight, the reader understands that the Green Knight is deliberately confusing the issue. If he were to appear in full armor, for example, his chances of surviving a blow might be higher, and the knights would be less likely to take up a challenge against a giant who would certainly have no difficulty in lopping off their heads. Although he speaks in a perfectly straightforward manner, the Green Knight has knowledge that he does not impart to Arthur and his knights. The test begins with a deliberate concealment—a deception that is not an

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[10] *Gawain*, 23.

[11] *Burrow*, 13.

[12] *Burrow*, 25.

[13] *Burrow*, 17.

outright lie. This element of deception is a characteristic part of the figure of the Green Knight, both in his gigantic and in his human form, until Gawain's test is over. For this reason many critics find it impossible to see the Green Knight as a good or benevolent character. The natural modern reaction, as I see it, is to cry "foul." Gawain did not know he was being tested. Or rather, he did know: I think too little is made of the fact that a normal human being, however knightly, might experience some difficulty in cutting a giant's head at one blow. What he saw as a test of strength, however, turned out to be something far more subtle.

Rather than cry foul, let us consider the Green Knight as a figure of real experience intruding into the ideal world. He operates by the rules of Arthur's world, presenting himself in clear terms as a challenger, a man who understands the courtly rules and virtues. He knows Gawain, for example. Gawain, on the other hand, and all the knights in fact, do not know the Green Knight, in spite of his declaration when he leaves: "I am known to many.[14]" In spite of abiding by the courtly rules, however, the Green Knight cannot, or rather, does not, disguise his difference from what an ideal knight should be. He is a giant, his hair and skin color are unnatural, and these facts betray the unexpected nature of real experience. It does not appear to abide by the rules of what should or should not exist. It is unintelligible, irreducible to intellectual categories. For this reason, Arthur and the knights are understandably terrified. They are not cowards; but their perfect world has been

[14] *Gawain*, 33.

shattered by the intrusion of something imperfect, something that does not fit, that is too large and vivid for understanding. The Green Knight's deception, then, is not a sign of his deliberate malice, but a natural result of what he is—an experience that is too immediate, too opaque, to be understood directly. Consider Denton Fox's statement that "the poem is unusually solid and opaque.[15]" This is the nature of experience, as a brief moment of recollection is enough to convince any of us. The consequences of our actions often prove to be far other than we had expected; and every situation which requires action becomes a test of our ideals in ways that we only understand much later. Gawain, expecting a test of strength, cuts off the Green Knight's head, and only then discovers that the real test is one of truth and valor. He must keep his word and travel outside of Arthur's court, in order to have his own head, quite probably, cut off in turn.

Earlier versions of the beheading story apparently existed in which "the hero, after surviving the token return blow and thus proving his courage and fidelity, is asked by the giant challenger to strike off his head for the second time. The hero complies, and the giant by this act is unspelled.[16]" The *Gawain* poet, however, changes the story by making the Green Knight capable of shifting his form without the intervention of the hero. The reason for this very significant change must be found in the central part of the poem, which constitutes Gawain's second test. Clearly, the poet was not satisfied by the simple

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[15] *Fox*, 7.

[16] *Friedman*, 150.

test of truth and bravery involved in seeking out the giant and accepting his blow. Gawain would have aced that test, or at any rate passed with a very high grade, as in fact he does at the end of this poem, flinching only once at the blow. In such a straightforward situation, the courtly knight knows what to expect and his ideals are tested by his own standards. However, if, as I am arguing, the Green Knight represents the opaque and often deceptive nature of human experience, the *Gawain* poet needed to present Gawain with a more difficult situation. This occurs in the castle of the knight whose name is eventually revealed as Bertilak de Hautdesert, but only after he has been revealed to be the Green Knight himself. In the world that Gawain enters after he leaves Arthur's court (call it the world of Faerie if you like), things are not quite as clear-cut and perfect as he would like them to be. The castle itself seems like an exact image of Arthur's court: there is a noble master who is jolly and engaged in active sport, a beautiful lady whose most pressing interest is courtesy; there are feasts, and laughter, and Gawain is received and treated as the finest of guests, with the same honor that he is accorded in Arthur's court. Here, however, it becomes clear that something is different.

For the lady, courtesy is an element of appearance, and not of inner worth. Bertilak's jolly welcome, although sincere enough, is motivated by facts that Gawain does not understand; namely, Bertilak's knowledge of Gawain and satisfaction that he has taken up the challenge. The friendly exchange that he proposes, of everything that the two of them have gained in the day, is explicitly designed to test Gawain, and

the Green Knight later admits that he had deliberately set his wife to tempt her guest. That test, however, Gawain passes easily enough; he is sufficiently aware of the lady's intentions that his innate virtue warns him and keeps him on guard. The real difficulty of the situation lies, not in the hidden motivations of his host, but in the fact that two of his virtues have been set at odds with each other: courtesy and chastity. He is forced to act with courtesy while refusing the advances of the lady, and the difficult balance which he keeps between the two, quite well, we might add, nonetheless distracts him from the other virtue that he needs to keep in mind: truth, or loyalty to his word. Just at the moment when he has successfully navigated every trap, as he thinks, the lady offers him her girdle with the tempting statement that it is magical and will save him from harm. Gawain immediately accepts it, and he fails to tell Bertilak about it, naturally, since if he were forced to return it it would do him no good. Thus he fails in his promise to Bertilak. This is Gawain's one moment of imperfection, apart from the reaction of fear at the Green Knight's blow.

The Green Knight, even though he is given as much time in this part of the poem as Gawain is, does little more than provide the poet with opportunities to create some very fine hunting scenes. Only on later knowledge that he has orchestrated the entire situation of Gawain's temptation do we realize that his importance has been undimmed. What is significant about his presence as Bertilak, however, is that he is quite clearly human, in spite of his occasional shape-shifting skills. This makes his character in some ways even more ambiguous.

He lives an ordinary life, with a wife and servants, sleeps under a roof, hunts and eats to live, and is in all ways an embodied human, not simply a fay who is imitating the appearance of a human. Nonetheless, his world, for all intents and purposes like the ideal world of Camelot, is a place as ambiguous and imperfect as his own appearance in the form of the Green Knight. It is a place that challenges Gawain, embroils him in a experience in which the virtues, beautifully equal in the pentangle that he wears, seem to become relative to each other and to his situation. In the end, the peril of his situation takes precedence over his fidelity to his word, but only after he has become wearied by the constant struggle between courtesy and chastity. Like the Green Knight, Bertilak's castle is a less-than-ideal experience, something that happens too quickly and intensely to allow for clear reflection before a choice is made. The choice that Gawain thinks he makes, here, is to save his life at the expense of his virtue. The real outcome of his choice is that his life is spared only because of his virtue, and his one lapse in virtue is the cause, not of salvation, but of the only wound that he receives.

When the Green Knight reappears, the test is completed and he speaks with utter clarity. He reveals that he has been enchanted by Morgan la Fay, but he does not seem to be under any compulsion to act. Instead, he acknowledges the tests that he has laid on Gawain, and rejoices at the fact that he has passed them. Let us not, therefore, fall into the trap of thinking that Gawain has failed utterly. The virtues of Arthur's court have held up quite well in the unexpected situations to

which he has been exposed. His failure has been slight, and caused by fear of death, which the Green Knight understands as perfectly natural.

> *As a pearl than white pease is prized more highly,*
> *so is Gawain, in good faith, than other gallant knights.*
> *But in this you lacked, sir, a little, and of loyalty came short.*
> *But that was for no artful wickedness, not for wooing either,*
> *but because you loved your own life: the less do I blame you.*[17]

Although, ideally, love of life should not take precedence over virtue, human experience teaches us that situations of peril overwhelm us with the same unintelligible force that emanates from the figure of the Green Knight. It is sometimes impossible not to flinch in action, even if the mind would tell us to do otherwise.

My interpretation of the Green Knight, then, is that he is messenger of experience, invading the world of pure thought and ideal, testing the perfect Christian knight against an imperfect, fallen world. Whether one calls him devil or angel seems to be irrelevant: his motivations are not the subject of the poem, and from what he says we can only gather that he is delighted at Gawain's virtue, even though Morgan, whose power he uses, appears to have purely evil motives. In any case, this mixture of possible good and evil in his motivations is simply another expression of the ambiguity of human experience. The medieval Christian believed it possible for God to work through the temptations of the devil, just as he allowed Job to be tempted by Satan. Louise Cowan says of comedy that

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[17] *Gawain*, 92.

"deception and disguise are undertaken to make bad situations work out better.[18]" Although in this case, the Green Knight appears to make a good situation worse, his deceptions and disguises have the effect of bringing virtue, through Gawain, out of the ideal realm, and into the imperfect realm of human experience. Gawain's virtues shine all the stronger when they have been tested in the darkness, and that darkness is made all the brighter for them.

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Review: Crossing the Border

by DORENE O'BRIEN

Rychtycka, Ksenia. *Crossing the Border: Stories. Johnson City, TN: Little Creek Books, 2012.*
ISBN: *978-1939289018*

Ksenia Rychtycka's aptly titled debut collection, *Crossing the Border*, features characters that do what readers might expect: they cross borders. But they do it in unexpected ways, crossing not only physical borders as they move across the world, but emotional, psychological and even political lines. Most of the nine stories are set in the United States and Ukraine, with characters weaving across continents, pulled by loyalty, nostalgia, curiosity or desperation. Though many of these characters are prisoners—of history, politics, disillusionment, or fear—there is an undercurrent of hope and even salvation that is delivered in quiet but profoundly poetic ways.

The book opens impressively with "Homecoming," featuring a woman who has crossed thorny physical and emotional borders to return to the homeland of her youth. Having lived in the United States for decades after fleeing Soviet occupation, Vera now finds herself navigating the political tension of a newly liberated Ukraine, one that mirrors the emotional tension between her, the one who escaped, and her cousin Stefko, the one who stayed behind, but made a deal with the devil to survive. Rychtycka wisely explores the terrain of guilt, betrayal, and loyalty by offering historical context in place of

judgment or criticism, as seen in Stefko's simple but resonant comment, "We all have to make our choices."

"The Artist" also subtly but effectively explores the effects of political upheaval on personal relationships as Valeriy, a young artist unable to paint after returning to Ukraine from a year-long cultural exchange overseas, distances himself from his friends and from the arts community because he is so shaken by the changes in his country, "which had finally gotten to call itself independent but was now in worse shape than before he'd left." Like most artists, Valeriy is a chronicler of his milieu, a bold, independent seer who is broken by the vision of a country he no longer recognizes or likes. Rychtycka takes the reader to the edge of despair, making us feel every bit as discouraged as Valeriy, before offering hope to the artist and the reader in a vibrant and revelatory street scene perfectly fit for painting.

Hope again subtly overtakes gloom in "The Bell Tower." Under the oppressive regime of the Soviets, Ukrainians are not allowed to attend religious services or speak freely. "Even the walls in this country have ears," Marta says to her husband Petro, warning him to choose his response carefully after learning that his own son has joined the KGB. So Petro feels he has little to lose when he steals the key to the church on Christmas Eve, determined to voice his resistance, to reclaim his dignity, to offer a more optimistic future to the child he meets on a freezing night that will forever change his life.

As in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, Rychtycka explores the universal

dilemma of culture, identity and immigration through personal crises: the dissolution of marriage, the loss of self, the brutality of oppressive regimes that people not only endure but overcome. Like Danticat's Haiti and Lahiri's India, Rychtycka delivers an authoritative political and social history of Ukraine without being didactic due to her deep knowledge of and passion for her topic. *Natasha and Other Stories*, a collection by David Bezmozgis about Soviet Jewish immigrants, likewise probes the terrain of émigré culture but without the optimism subtly woven into Rychtycka's stories. In "40 Days" the reader is offered a new and striking perspective of the corruption that continued to plague the country even after its liberation. Roman, a poet and political dissident who had spent years in a Siberian labor camp, decides against his family's wishes to become a presidential candidate. When he dies under suspicious circumstances, the family is torn between quietly grieving and publicly denouncing the officials responsible for his execution. Like most of her stories, "40 Days" displays a compelling combination of heartbreak and hope delivered in beautifully poetic lines: "Luba can hear the birds singing around them as if life is just beginning, and one has only to reach deep inside to let the melody take hold."

Though many of her characters suffer great losses and have earned their bitterness, they do move forward, often in memorably restrained ways. "Orange in Bloom" opens with a simple declarative sentence, underscoring how a seemingly inconsequential event can alter a life: "The bird's arrival changed everything." Military troops may be congregating nearby in an-

ticipation of a political protest, but the elderly protagonist is determined to brave the streets in search of supplies for the parakeet that abruptly lands on her balcony. The bird is a good luck omen, one that counteracts the tragedy that often, like the tiny feathered creature, arrives without warning.

The characters that inhabit the pages of Rychtycka's book are authentic: Anna, who brings a curious tradition from Ukraine to the United States; Lesia, who migrates in search of money but instead finds love; Lina, an American girl whose Ukrainian grandmother shares heartrending stories of their family history. The settings, too, are vibrant and rich with detail, delivered by someone who has clearly done her research. Ksenia Rychtycka is a writer of astonishing compassion and honesty, a writer to be cherished and watched, and *Crossing the Border* is a must-read collection.

Notes on the Contributors

Jake Guy:

Jake H. Guy just graduated high school and is trying to find out whether writing or spending the most possible time sleeping on his couch is the most important thing to him. He is interested mostly in film (in which he hopes to make his career), but also photography, prose, piano, guitar, acting, inks, watercolor, and listening to every possible Billie Holiday and Tom Waits song on Earth.

Dave Hardin:

Dave Hardin is a Michigan poet and artist. His poems and paintings have appeared in 3 Quarks Daily, The Drunken Boat, Epigraph Magazine, [Slippage], Arbor Literary Magazine, Hermes, The Prague Review, Loose Change Literary Magazine and Detroit Metro Times among others. A Ruinous Thirst, Collected Poems was published in 2012.

Gene Hines:

Gene Hines lives in the mountains of Tennessee. He holds academic degrees in History, Theology, and Law and has served as a pastor, a missionary, and as a legal aid attorney. His stories appear in print and online journals; one story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Ron Ledek:

Ron Ledek has taught philosophy for over twenty years. Dr. Ledek's writings include books on conscience and its relation to God; and on the thoughts of Newman, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger.

Emily Lie:

Emily Lie is a writer from Fort Worth. She is a member of the Exiles, with whom she meets regularly to share and critique her writers.

Sharon Mooney:

Sharon Fish Mooney's poems have appeared in Ruminate, The Lyric, Pudding Magazine, The Evansville Review, String Poet, and Christian Research Journal and are forthcoming in Modern Age and First Things. She won the inaugural Frost Farm Prize for metrical poetry and was a semi-finalist for the Richard Wilbur Award and Blue Lynx Prize for a manuscript of ekphrastic sonnets. She teaches nursing research on-line for Regis University and Indiana Wesleyan, and lives in Ohio with her husband, Scott. They are both active in the Ohio Poetry Association.

G. D. McFetridge:

G. D. McFetridge writes from his wilderness home in Montana's Sapphire Mountains. His fiction and essays are published across America, in Canada and the UK.

Jim Murdoch:

Jim Murdoch is a Scottish writer living just outside Glasgow. His poetry appeared regularly in small press magazines during the seventies and eighties. In the nineties he turned to prose writing and has published three novels and a collection of thematically-linked short stories, 'Making Sense', which has just been published by Fandango Virtual.

L. A. Nicholas:

After many years of studying, teaching, (and translating) literature, L. A. Nicholas spends most of her time these days writing and taking walks along the shore of Lake Ray Hubbard. She originally translated these mini-fables, along with the rest of the volume from which they are extracted, while a graduate student in Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa. Her debut novel, Cast Into the Deep Sea of Stars, will be published around Christmas 2013

Dorene O'Brien:

Dorene O'Brien is a fiction writer and a teacher of creative writing at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. She has won numerous awards for her fiction, including the international Bridport Prize, Red Rock Review's Mark Twain Award for Short Fiction, the New Millennium Writings Fiction Award and the Chicago Tribune Nelson Algren Award. She

was also awarded a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her short stories have appeared in the Connecticut Review, the Chicago Tribune, Carve Magazine, Passages North, New Millennium Writings, Cimarron Review, Detroit Noir and others. Her short story collection, Voices of the Lost and Found, won the 2008 National Best Book Award in short fiction.

John Stocks:

John Stocks is a UK based poet who has had work published in magazines worldwide. He has been widely anthologised. He appeared in the 'Soul Feathers' anthology, alongside Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy, Maya Angelou, Sharon Olds and others.

Maria Stromberg:

Maria Stromberg graduated from the College of Saint Thomas More in 2004 with a BA in Liberal Arts. She has a MA in Literature from the University of Dallas and is a PhD candidate. Currently she lives in upstate New York, where she juggles her doctoral dissertation studies, musical endeavors and curious students of art, literature, languages, and piano. In her rare moments of peace and quiet she likes to sit in coffee-shops and write the occasional poem, short story, or scrap of novel.

Sarah Brown Weitzman:

Sarah Brown Weitzman, a Pushcart Prize nominee, has have had close to three hundred poems published over the years in

numerous journals such as Rattle, The Mid-American Review, The Windless Orchard, The North American Review, Slant, Poet Lore, Potomac Review, etc. She received a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her latest book, a children's novel titled Herman and the Ice Witch, was published by Main Street Rag in 2011.