THE LOST COUNTRY

A Literary Journal of The Exiles

Spring 2013

Vol. 1, No. 2

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The Lost Country is a journal published biannually by The Exiles, a Literary Club of Fort Worth. Vol. 1, No. 2 Spring 2013.

ISSN 2326-5302 (Print) ISSN 2326-5310 (Online)

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Cover Art: *Saint Anthony* by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

Front Cover: Marcel, Gabriel. "On the Ontological Mystery." Trans. Manya Harari. *The Philosophy of Existentialism*. New York: Citadel Press, 1995. p. 34.

Back Cover: Fergusson, Francis. *The Idea of a Theater*. New York: Doubleday, 1953. p. 24.

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

Sally Thomas

for the poems

Aunts, Burial in Holy Week, Detachment & In Praise of Punctuation

The James Patrick Prize in Fiction

is awarded to

Amanda Grace Poore

for the story

The Main Street Thrift Shop

The Judith Stewart Shank Prize in Criticism

is awarded to

Maria Stromberg

for the essay

The Face of Ungit

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A Note from the Editor

Almost a year ago, the proprietors of The Lost Country gathered at a local pub for the first time under the name of "The Exiles." Most were associated in one way or another with the College of Saint Thomas More in Fort Worth, Texas, and as they have said elsewhere, "they owe their common identity, purpose, and ideas to the legacy to that institution."

In 1967 Madison Jones, (who has since lectured at the College), published a novel entitled An Exile, previously published in The Sewanee Review. The exile in question was a certain Sheriff Tawes, whose boyhood home had been flooded by a dam project such as those undertaken by the Tennessee Valley Authority.† He loses his moorings and is barely able to exhibit his true character by the end of the novel.

While the theme of being lost in a new environment is common enough, the College from which many of our Exiles are recent graduates has severely altered its curriculum. The thus share in a living image of being cut off from the past. Perhaps in Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 Pre-Romantic poem "The Deserted Village" we find a similar situation. The men, women, and children of the village have gone to work in the factories. The world of Sweet Auburn no longer exists.

It is also the story of the pagan epic, especially the Aeneid; Troy has been destroyed, and Aeneas must guide his people to their new home. They can not go back. It is not only the so-called "Messianic" Eclogue but also the Aeneid itself that

suggested to many early Christians not that Virgil was a conscious prophet of the coming of Christ, but that he had produced an allegory of this event. (I use 'allegory' as the Middle Ages used it.)

As these examples illustrate, it is in the imaginative world of literature that we turn to attend to human existence and knowledge carried to the heart. Imagination, literature, and poetry are our occupation and activity as we live our lives, and they in turn reflect those lives in their images—the perennial human occupation being one of exile, of homelessness, of wayfaring: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke9:58). We are, all of us, searching for our Lost Country,

This is the world man inhabits; it is the world his literature imitates; and it is the world of The Exiles and this journal. They, and all mankind, live with the notion: one leaves Home to go Home.

Harry Hoyt Lacey
Honorary Editor
The Lost Country

† The Madison Jones novel burns in the memory of this Honorary Editor, as his ancestral home in Laceyville, Ohio was flooded by the Muskingum River Project.

Thomas A. Beyer

A harvest moon in winter

A harvest moon in winter
Strikes the heart a troubling sight,
A full-round disc suspended low
And orange in a blackened night.
The southern seasons lack reason, sense;
The southern world's unhinged.

There are no autumns here
On this barren plain of grass,
No feast of plenty, apple fair,
No pleasant loss of summer bliss,
No springtime maidens brought to bear,
No cold to warm the heart against—

Only endless heat,
And stagnant, humid air.
But for those that tell me
That Christmas draweth near
And the harvest's all but done,
I'd never know, nor never care.

The world hears not my pleas
For a respite from the dawn
And the unremitting Sun;
And when my heart doth long,
Too long, no waning-season comes
To kindle forth my song.

Year-round winter'd find me better
Suited to its charms;
If I must remain deprived
Of autumn's melancholy balms,
At least I'd know immortal death
And sigh a futile psalm.

La Città Eterna

Winding Mediæval lanes
Wend their whimsical way
Betwixt overwrought façades,
Unwary of the laws of logic,
Reason, and convenience.

They care not for compass points,
Nor our unfailing urge
To hurry t'ward our destinations,
As if nought existed here-to-there;
And the world was built on worry.

Their very make-up seems to fight against
The tyranny of purpose;
Wet, uneven cobblestone
Is difficult to walk on,
Much less run.

This is what happens,
One will say, *without*
A city planner.

And I'll reply, *Beg pardon, sir,*
But stuff your facts and figures.

Are children built,
In only one
Turning of the Sun?
Or according to our plans?
Are Loves? Lives? Faith?

How dare you wish that Rome was!
Pompous coward!
Too enamored of yourself
And your designs to love
The delicate fancies of Time.

The Old Songs

The old, forgotten songs, lost forever
But for clever men's devices, that record,
Encase, enshrine them, ever timeless, ne'er
To alter, no matter how the years extend:
The listener grows old; the songs are ageless.

From deep within invisible, minuscule grooves,
The songs, just the same, beckon to me,
Seize me, wrench me, out of this my life,
Transport me, back, back to where we were:
Emotion recollected in tranquility.

I live for a moment in long-gone days,
And the tenderness of funeral bliss,

Breathe the perfumed air of the dead place
Behind my eyes, lost in the melancholy
Nightmare of guilt, joy remembered: Time.

Why should I desire so cruelly, fiercely
To return? Is it only because the past
Is passed? Because I'm barred from it forever?
Because I hate! the fiery swords and the consequence
Of choice? Once-for-all: No more.

Ever forward. Ever, ever forward.
No time to think. Forever on the brink.
Ever, ever forward. Ever forward,
And on into vile eternity. Caught:
Between memory and destiny.

That moment. Before.
It was, my God! it was:
And the music played.

Donald Carlson

The Cost

This morning I remember loved ones lost
And marvel that they don't seem so remote.
These memories, as always, have a cost.

I found a swaying cedar brake embossed
In white, a glaze that seemed to make it float.
This morning I remember loved ones lost.

I'm not sure when these remnants had been tossed,
I found them in the lining of my coat.
These memories, as always, have a cost.

I put it on today against the frost
And felt a hint of tightness in my throat.
This morning I remember loved ones lost.

Not long ago, I thought that they'd been crossed
From traces of a life I live by rote.
These memories, as always, have a cost.

With nothing more of feeling to exhaust,
I'll mark it down as something I must note:
This morning I remember loved ones lost.
These memories, as always, have a cost.

Nightfall

Why is it that night falls but morning breaks?
The streets and paths are gradually drained of light.
Our trek around the neighborhood that takes
Mere minutes tracks the strangeness of our plight.
We started out in halflight—mellow, settled,
Then as we made our progress through the street,
A shadow flower opened, and it petaled
Concrete pavement, covering our feet.
The voices of some shadowers unseen
Upset the dog. He stops and contemplates
Who might be trailing with a backward lean.
The frogs grow raspy calling to their mates.
So gradual; yet suddenly we're hurled.
We walk from day into a darkling world.

Daybreak

The ritual begins again at dawn.
The dog will sit and stare out the back door
At rabbits as they're browsing on the lawn
And wonder what on earth we're waiting for.
I fetch the leash. Before I clip it on
He's poised to start our wandering outside.
Dawn penetrates the darkness; it is gone,
Then instantly, the light and dark divide.
Just like that—Oh, dear!—the night has ended.
We're off and running yet another race,
Retracing every step we've ever wended.
My mouth fills with, "Hail, Mary, full of grace."
And so begin all journeys that we take.
I see now that nights fall but mornings break.

Bethany Collier

Guiding Light

Darkness
By her nature
Manifests
The light,
Each little glow and flicker
That we never
Could perceive
Without her.

A candle can only burn so bright,
Is so small against the night,
And yet
For such a little light
We give great thanks
And…
Find our way.

And you are
a candle burning in a holy place,
the words to a sacred prayer,
the wooden beads of the rosary,
and, when I breathe…

the air.

Michael Lee Johnson

If I Were Young Again

Piecemeal summer dies:
Long winter spreads its blanket again.

For ten years I have lived in exile,
locked in this rickety cabin, shoulders
jostled up against open Alberta sky.

If I were young again, I'd sing of coolness of high
mountain snow flowers, sprinkle of night glow—blue meadows;
I would dream and stretch slim fingers into distant nowhere,
yawn slowly over endless prairie miles.

The grassland is where in summer silence grows;
in evening eagles spread their wings
dripping feathers like warm honey.

If I were young again, I'd eat pine cones, food of birds,
share meals with wild wolves;
I'd have as much dessert as I wanted,
reach out into blue sky, lick the clouds off my fingertips.

But I'm not young anymore and my thoughts tormented
are raw, overworked, sharpened with misery
from torture of war and childhood.
For ten years now I've lived locked in this unstable cabin,

Inside rush of summer winds,
outside air beaten dim with snow.

Tyler Morrison

Babylon

Babylon babbles on,
A babbling brook
Of whores and crooks
That pours on down
To Apollyon.

And Babel's tongue
Was always forked,
Not from confusion,
But the old deception
Of harmless snakes.

So march on, princes!
Make new wars!
Who dares to halt
The history books'
Immaculate Progression?

Crossing the Rubicon

I raise my glass and risk a glance,
Wanting and fearing her notice.
A gambler knows what wise men don't:
That in these fickle moments lies
The balancing act of chance,
When the myriad angels dance on pins,
And gods will learn what Fortune grants.

The die is cast; I catch a glimpse,
—Her hair, her eyes, her cheeks, her lips—
And see at once the fool I am again.

The Wings

She looks as though she's wearing wings;
They're folded neatly beneath her coat.
And I have sometimes wondered,
While stepping out to smoke,
If a gentleman bravely offered
To hang that somber cloak,
Would they spring, and would she float?

Or would they, could they, fall,
As fell one gorgeous cherub's?
In fanciful colors?
Resplendent white tatters?
Oh, Autumn has scattered all her bright feathers.
For the Prince of the Air once boasted these glories,
Molted, though soaring, the buzzard-bird's vanities.
Of such sad things Ezekiel wrote.

Perhaps instead they'd suddenly shatter,
As laughter bursts from a drunk man's throat.
There they would lie,
Like shards of soft-clouded sky,
A puzzle-piece window for novice and abbot,
A brand new icon in blood-stained glass…

—But I broach the skirt. I won't trespass.
Janus falters, the threshold looms,
Doorknob groans, and hinges moan.
But here, for me, for now at least,
The long-veilèd mysteries will last.

Jupiter thundered,
"*Stay far and far and far way!*"
Stay just behind the curtain, I say.

I'll keep my eyes on the mud-strewn earth,
And hands in my pockets and shoes on the turf.
Let pill-bugs roll among the grass,
And earth-worms burrow beneath the dirt.
I leave Heaven and Heaven's *beatae* above
To better, Italian poets.

For I wished to see, but could not see
An angel's face in a pretty young lass.

And if Fortune smiles again tonight,
If perchance she comes to stay and dine,
Then I shall take her coat and all
And hang it next to mine—
But I'll not look to see the wings.

B. R. Mullikin

August

We woke today
to find the wind
gently painting
in the yard;
strokes of red
and yellow gold
thickly strewn
upon the green.

The trees now glow
an august glow,
warmer now
than in the heat—
and from their limbs
the birds see signs
(bright omens of
a dying land).
They lurch and jump
from branch to branch
and boldly sing
the sights they see:

Standing firm
upon a hill
a great oak mourns
and sheds his leaves

to supplicate
a dying god;

he casts aside
his green leaf garb
with fingers raised
to beg the sun
some respite from
the icy cold.

Soon after this
the birds will leave
to seek some other
living place,
while we remain
to face the cold
and warm ourselves
the best we can
by burning dead
and broken trees.

And thinking thoughts
of English tea
or cookies dipped
in snow-cooled milk,
we try to sing
some happy song
of wonder in
a dying land.

Andrew Nicholson

The End of Summer IV

After Summer
Autumn is always brushed
Under the carpet
Like a half-baked afterthought
Before the Winter arrives
With its blanket
Of snow-rolled blues.

At the beginning of Autumn
There is a hesitation
In the breeze
Before the clouds
Darken the sky
And poison us slowly
With mustard gas.

There is a sadness
In the half-cut sun
Flickering once more
Before the clouds
Carry the sun away
Like a funeral director
As an ornament
Of a mystery
Dying with a silent scream,

Before setting their
Compasses north
Never to be seen again.

James B. Nicola

On The Way

All was safe, put well in the bag,
Thought I, when, on the way, a hag
Cackled with a laugh in a maddening fit,
BUT SHOULDN'T YOU PUT THE BAG *IN* IT*?*
Ha-HA, then vanished like a breath of air.
I wasn't sure of when or where
Only that I had to catch my breath
And felt I'd seen a shade of death
Though now and then I half surmise
That what she said was halfway wise,
Resuming my jagged way alone
Uncertain of the way now, or the crone.

Richard King Perkins, II

Statuesque

Dormant within a block of clay,
implausible to locate,
greyness crowds her unfashioned beauty.
She is serenity in the arroyos of California—
waiting for me to form her hands and breasts
into birds of paradise with wings of glass
that fly to me in a forlorn Illinois farm town.

Unused to the drafting of *eidolon*,
scarecrows and corn dolls
keep her embrazened in the town square
and watch from the street corners of pollen eyes.
I go to her in the most quiet moments of night
speaking of hermits and caves and fear.
Her patience is undivided and still.

Tom Pescatore

Promise Bop

That guitar would be
meaningless without
her voice,

I write that down
checking behind my back,
see, I prefer to write in secret

and I'll hide
that note in my pockets
forever, or

until it crumples into obscurity
on the next laundry day

because it isn't supposed to rain
for the next few weeks.

There's too much paper left

Three months since I finished
the last draft of that novel, that
first novel, and I can't really get
anything else going at all,
long, tremulous hours of writing
and deleting—
all I've managed…

a few measly pages
a few hundred words

I fear I may not have
enough blood left inside me
to stain a page.

Chiara Solari

Susurrus

oh
the long grasses in the field are so
beautiful
full of grace
wind-swayed
the strand of stem bends
under the silver rank of seeds

in the long summer
they survive
nursed to greenness by the light
no matter how it comes
a shimmering heat
to dry their paper leaves

while the wind passes
they susurrate and shiver
give tongue like lovers
though battered
only a violent touch
awakens the sigh of their true voice

seeing them
I link my fingers through their blades
envious of their peace
the stiffness in my spirit

desires to learn
the yielding of the grasses
the becoming of a truer self

The Tempest

Heart-hurt, the days drowning cover my head,
Draw me to dark, downward. This is nothing
But revolt of stiff-neck Nature, glutton fed
On desires, rebels myriad. Untoward they spring
From cracking faults in the soul, restless bred
To raise tempests within my narrow ring
Of human skull. From such waves mind has fled,
Whose waters never quench, but salty sting.

O'er lash of tide let patient hand be held:
So storm quiets and in reprieve of space,
In heart from hard-punishing violence quelled,
Dusky may bloom a little light, O God—thy grace.
Wracked by wind, by waves of wildness felled,
Yet may I, frail bark, shoreward on them race.

The Weight of Light

jet-trail cleaving
the slow rainbow of layered light
sunset pool of sky

at the sight I wonder
would a man born blind feel that sky
a liquid cataract
opening pores
sliding under skin to fill his body

light is
an overarching ocean
which wraps us
in ever-deepening waves

each day a radiant lake
and even the night
sprinkles us with stars

with open eyes
we watch the individual splendor
of color after color
raining upon us
in moment after moment
on storm days
filtered through clouds
the silver pure rays drip down
paler slighter here
in shining sheets at the horizon

through those veils
in sometimes moments like gifts
we see how light looks
at its most liquid
painted from seven hues

do all seven permeate our flesh
with special vitality
like water and air to recreate our cells

light is essential

the blind cannot survive
unless it seeps into them
and they feel it
breathe it
drink it with the thirsty skin at every second

life layers a glowing sediment
strained out of the days
but only seeing
we feel no residue of time

a blind man could tell us
wonders
how the light pours
how he feels it erode us
into the shape of ourselves

Gerald Solomon

All The Time

We no longer see that man that crazed old misfit
wander up our house-proud street.
Camped all winter on the subway's iron grates,
trusts in body-heat, a paper cup for coins.
Stutters to himself some repeated sorrows.

A mutt on a knotted string, always with him, bored.
Filled with his stuff, a borrowed market-cart.
Perhaps he planned to ignore these cold nights
just to get his normal sleep.
I've often passed him there.

The system doesn't work for him.
Seems our all-too-human pity—
arms spread wider than savvy *caritas*
or bandaged justice will—likewise lets down
a guy in woman's caftan, broken shoes.

I tell you I saw another one, in antique Rome,
under the plane-trees on crowded Via Formio,
unlikely squalls of rain in June throwing down
whole bunches of young leaves on darkened stones.
I remember still.

Wouldn't it be the same long ago?
I've read that hard on ninety, Sistine done with,

far from his giant boy-David—infirm, appalled,
sank down on those steps by the tourists' burbling fountains,
in deaf tears for all the friends he used to know.

Far Rockaway By The Sea

Far Rockaway, a storm coming—
swells at pale sight's last grey clue.
Thunder in the offing.
A sense of all, all, mere air—
above, down, forwards, inside, through.

You wage your time for a whole—
partials, weak explanations, glare.
Chinese flowers untwist, paper in water.
In endeared gardens cells fail with their thirst.

So some have said the works is: Who.
Seen across our unremitting daylight,
their skipping mountain crags are—who?

A cant smacking of divine sleight.
Men of cloth have parsed both stars and wars.
Who made the rules for Einstein's dice has lost…

Right here on this civil beach the ocean surge
has not deferred to impersonations—
only suasions of a fanciful moon's dull weight.

Maria Stromberg

Melpomene

Darkling the minstrel wanders
through paths labyrinthine
no-man-fathomed
his bare feet over the seared earth
making no sound

There is no kindly breeze
to waft even a whisper
of the moon's light
to his thirsting soul

In the stifling silence
he cries out, screams, bellows
to break the spell of deafness
on his ears

but all in vain
He begins to forget
whether his eyes are open
Hands outstretched
he feels his way
the rough stone tearing at his flesh

He wishes to turn back
but no longer knows which way
he is going

At the heart of the labyrinth
there is a monster
neither beast nor man
because it shares the form of both

The minstrel fears the sacrifice
but even more he fears the dark despair
of wandering pale and silent
in the black and winding paths

He prays for comfort
to the Muse who guides his song
He cannot hear the words
As he shapes them with his cracked lips

"Sing, Muse, Daughter of Zeus,
Memory's melodious child,
Sing for me an escape
From this labyrinth of woes."

These words he forms, weeping,
falling to the earth
and watering it with tears
With bloodied fingers
he feels the softness of a thread

No sooner does he take it in his hand
than his deafness is dispelled
he hears a voice
a faraway melody

that seems neither in the air
nor in the earth

and stumbling over rocks
with many a false turn
the minstrel follows that voice
the clear melody
that promises release from pain

But the further he walks
the deeper the labyrinth grows
and down into the earth
he finds no escape
only blinder darkness
and sharper pain

At the center of the labyrinth
lives the beast
with man's legs and feet
and head of raging bull
that bellows out into the darkness
a scream of unbearable pain

It is the minstrel who screams
He sees himself
mirrored in the dark water
the head of a bellowing bull
upon his shoulders
his hands and feet bloodied and torn

Cursing the gods
he dashes his image
from the face of the waters
the salt tears running down
his monstrous cheeks
"Have you forsaken me,
Daughter of Zeus?"

When he has tired of weeping
and echoes of his cries
have faded from the long
windings of the labyrinth
he hears the song again

It is the voice of a woman
who weeps while she sings
a melody of sorrow and pain
of hope lost
of faith dashed to pieces
of love betrayed

She is standing before him
The rope that binds her
is the thread he holds in his hand
The bitter tears that stain her cheeks
are the ones he has wept

But her voice is unclouded
not harsh with cursing
nor bitter from long waiting

Her melody rings clear and sharp
like a knife's edge

It pierces his heart with a challenge
and dares him face the monster
It beckons him forward
into the darkness of the winding path

Weary the minstrel rises from the earth
Was it a vision that he saw?

The darkness crowds around him unrelenting
and he cannot hear his own voice praying
but in his bloodied fingers
lies a thread as thin as a spider's web
and strong as a woman's voice singing

Darkling the minstrel wanders
through paths labyrinthine
no-man-fathomed
his blind eyes open
searching for the light of the stars

Mosaic Fragments

In the midst of life I found myself in a dark wood
alone, and palely loitering,
and wandering
down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind
I cried

not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
even if
April is the cruelest month
and this is
no country for old men,
where
all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared, with toil;
where
things fall apart, the center cannot hold;
I will not
go gentle into that good night.

I, being poor, have only my dreams,
these fragments I have shored against my ruins.
But
when I consider how my light is spent,
then on the shores of the dark world I stand alone and think—
when, when, Peace, will you, Peace?

Where might this music be, in the air or the earth?
Darkling I listen:
love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.
There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
and morning, on the brown brink eastward, springs.

Winner of the Spring 2013 *Harry Hoyt Lacey Prize in Poetry*

Sally Thomas

Aunts

It was long ago, and they are dead.
I never knew them, but I think about them.
The story left untold becomes a story
I can tell myself until it's true.

I never knew them, but I think about them,
These grim ladies in black high-collared dresses.
I can tell myself until it's true
That they've been laughing. The camera turns on them,

And they are grim: three ladies in black high-collared dresses,
Aunts posed beneath a catalpa tree.
They've been laughing. The camera turns on them
The weight of being seen forever like that—

Aunts posed beneath a catalpa tree,
Unloved and unremembered, three brown names,
The weight of being seen forever. Like that,
They fade. The catalpa dissolves,

Unloved and unremembered, a brown tree of names
No one can read, unraveling into the sky.
They fade, the catalpa dissolves,
A dark age overtakes them like sleep.

No one can read them. Unraveling into the sky
Like breath, their slender memory's unwritten.
A dark age overtakes them. While they sleep
I will tell their story to myself,

All breath, all the memories unwritten,
All the names wrong, the dates mis-guessed.
This is the story I tell myself—
What does time matter to a story?

So the names are wrong, the dates mis-guessed.
The sun's handprints among catalpa leaves
Are all the time that matters to this story
In which three women glower at a camera

Through sunlight handprinted by catalpa leaves,
A day on which anything might have happened
To these three who glower at the camera
Daring it to mistake them for the Fates.

On this day, anything might have happened.
All I know is that they stand glowering.
Daring the camera. Looking like the Fates
Who stare down their own unknowable future.

I know that the three of them stand glowering.
They cannot imagine that I will see them
Stare down their own unknowable future,
Where I stand, on the far side of the grave.

Do they imagine someone like me? *Who will see us*,
They might be wondering. *Who will love us?*
Who will know us on the far side of the grave?
Does the long loneliness look back at them?

Well might they wonder, *Who will love us?*
The relatives they visited are dead.
The long loneliness has looked back at them,
And in that moment I don't know what they are doing,

Which relative, now dead, they are visiting,
Why they've gathered beneath the catalpa.
What, in that moment, have they stopped doing?
Saved from time, what are they thinking

While the white sun glares through the catalpa?
Though the story left untold becomes a story,
Time doesn't care what they were thinking.
They are dead, and it was long ago.

Detachment

These midlife nights, when I turn from you in bed
It's not for loss of love, but from remembering

Death, crouched nearby in its copse of shadows.
As the dying stop eating, drinking, speaking,

As they gather their rationed breaths for the plunge
Out of existence—No, wait, but that's not right.

The soul outlasts the knowledge of those who've said
Goodbye, returning to the clean white anteroom

Of the living with its nurses' stations, its flowers
That keep on blooming even when the name

On the card has emptied of its occupant.
The soul moves on. Likewise, the dying body,

Beginning to edge away by small degrees
From breath and thought, declines offers to sustain it—

Even now, against my better will my life,
Unschismed, girds itself for this departure:

No bag, no cloak, shaking the dust from its feet.
Tonight I'm falling asleep in my own arms,

Thinking that in that day when one of us
Awakes to find the sun still shining,

Other people still laughing and playing music,
Mail accrued in drifts on the kitchen table,

Clothes in the closet hanging unperturbed,
The dog who looks past the figure in the doorway

Wagging his tail in confident expectation,
The last two beers dewy in the fridge,

Hours and years will line up like empty glasses,
Too much for one person to drink alone

Without long practice, taken unawares.

Burial in Holy Week

All our lives are just an eyelash, said my friend
Beside her baby's grave. The troubled sky
Galloped above the narrow cold red wound
Laid open in violet-starred grass. A monastery
Graveyard: a strange, apt place for a girl to find
Herself in white, an involuntary bride
In a communion of celibates, facing God
Who had given and received in one dread day.
The little box was settled into earth,
Heavy coverlet turned up, the clotted clay
Spaded smooth. Then, having seen this birth
Complete, the new womb closed, the other children
Ran laughing among the modest, ordered headstones
In the wind, beneath the veiled and sinking sun—
Alive as fire, brief and hungry, with that abandon
Which is a kind of praise—throwing pinecones.

In Praise of Punctuation

The comma stops the clock. When dinner's done,
It gives the men a breath in which to push
Their chairs back, groaning, stand, and one by one
Regress into the den to watch the television.
That sentence might have passed in a clattering rush
Like a late-night freight train bowling through a station,
Empty boxcars banging. Their smutty wash
Unsettles papers on the platform. In the hush,
Time maintains its measures, but with a gap

Where the comma's finger presses *pause*, intrudes
So that a road-stained man clutching his odds
And ends in a rag can make one hopeless leap
For an open door as it clamors past—say God
Ordains the leap—land safe, and safely ride.

Winner of the Spring 2013 *James Patrick Prize in Fiction*

THE MAIN STREET THRIFT STORE

by **Amanda Grace Poore**

Adeline felt that itchy feeling she always got when it was ten minutes to closing and no one was in the store. She was always tempted to leave early and go home to a bubble bath and her cat, Sir Gawain. Then she would look at the computer system that clocked her in and out and her compulsion to stay until exactly 9 o'clock would keep her frozen at the counter like some timeless, ageless princess of the thrift store. Time seemed to expand as if someone had put it in the microwave, then—Adeline's brain switched into motion and she was gone before the clock struck 9:01.

* * *

The store was quiet, save for the rickety air-conditioner that clunked on a few minutes later. It picked up the dust from the second-hand boots and swirled it about uselessly.

Main Street Thrift was a large thrift store, comparatively. Near the front of the store, in front of the cash register, there were various knickknacks: sunglasses, teacups, porcelain masks, buckets with jack-o-lantern faces, picture frames. To the left there was a mock living room set up with mismatched furniture and bookshelves lined with broken cameras and computer parts. Further down was a single row of torn children's books and Anne Rice novels.

To the right of the register, it had one large room that looked like it had once been a dance studio—mirrors lining one wall and a tacky, fake hardwood floor. This room was filled with sad, old gowns and wedding dresses. Without so much as an attempt at a smooth transition, the room opened into the rest of the store. The ceiling became ten feet taller and the floor was adorned with peeling grey carpet.

This part of the store was filled with encrusted clothing and accessories. Endless racks, organized by season (and by color for whatever reason). Two large rectangular windows at the very top of the far wall let a mixture of street light and moonlight fill the vast chamber.

Then, in the silence, from the children's corner there came a slight rustle, as if someone were hiding in the middle of the clothing rack.

Whispers began to spread down the line, rippling the coats and jeans and then the button-up shirts until the dance hall of dresses flitted with restless excitement.

"Is she gone?" Someone asked in a hushed tone.

Then everyone began to ask until the store echoed with whispers. A transparent old man popped into existence at the front of the store. He picked up his fedora off a dusty coat rack and put it on. He picked up a teacup and filled it with a transparent liquid from his finger tip. He took a gentle sip and nodded. As he slowly became more saturated, more opaque, he picked up a tiny bell in the shape of an angel and tinkled it.

The store was instantly filled with other transparent people, no more than twenty in all. They were shrugging on clothing and heading to the living room for the early evening meeting.

Augustus, the old man in the fedora, took his place behind a sharply unlevel podium that had a children's bible sitting open on it. He closed it and set it on the floor, making room for his notes that appeared seemingly from nowhere.

"Good evening, fellow go-betweeners."

"Good evening, brother," most of them chanted in unison, like some schoolchildren accustomed to the structure. Two people looked terribly out of place, however. One was a young woman in a puffy ball gown and the other was a middle-aged man in a suit coat with patched elbows.

"I wanted to announce that, unfortunately, Mrs. Weatherly's jumpsuit was sold today."

Everyone nodded knowingly, except the two confused people—the girl and the man in the suit coat.

"She and her stories about her dog, Muffin, will be missed dearly, but she chose to go with her clothing." Augustus paused here.

"You will also notice that Bernie is no longer with us. As some of you know, he made a breakthrough with us early last morning and moved on."

Scattered applause passed among them. Augustus smiled and changed demeanor.

"Now for something completely different. It appears this morning we have two newcomers. Come on up and introduce yourselves."

The girl in the puffy dress approached the podium like a beauty queen receiving her crown. She waved superficially at everyone.

"Hello, my name's Sally. I've been haunting from my old closet at my parents' house for ten years. I guess they finally decided to move on. My great aunt Urma told me they would.

She said they would keep her diamond necklace there for eternity because it was timeless and they never knew her all that well, but that my dress would just remind them of me and hurt them too badly. I guess she was right, because here I am." She said all this in one breath and then smiled and tilted her head.

"Very good, dear," said Augustus. "Now for you, sir. Come on up. Don't be shy."

The man in the patched suit coat looked confused. He did not look as if he cared for the idea of being brought to the center of attention. When he reached the podium he took a moment to look around at everyone.

"Hello. My name is Bill and—" he paused as if his mouth were dry. "And I'm having a horrible nightmare."

Augustus suddenly looked concerned. Everyone exchanged looks and was silent.

"Surely you know by now what's happened to you, man?" Augustus said.

"What do you mean?" The man sounded paranoid. "That I'm in a terrible, terrible nightmare? Because I can't see any other explanation—" As he said this he examined his own transparent hand.

Augustus cleared his throat.

"Excuse us, Bill, but we are not accustomed to fresh souls here. It seems kind of strange that someone would sell your coat to a thrift store upon the day of your death. Perhaps you even sold it yourself and then there was an accident…"

"But I didn't."

Everyone else looked horribly uncomfortable.

"Maybe you were murdered," someone said. It was a little, doll-like girl in a red dress. Everyone turned and stared at her

as if she were a predator. They were still, silent, and palpably scared.

"Maybe," said a woman dressed in a yellowed wedding dress. She was gaunt and had long, dark hair. Her eyes were sunken, almost bruised-looking. Her voice, sharp and deep, had cut the air. She was not standing around the living room area, but was instead sitting in a rocking chair that sat on the other side of the door at the entrance some fifteen feet away.

"Mrs. Tallow. How nice of you to join us," Augustus said in a way that seemed to put everyone else at ease, for they had been stiller than the grave.

"My ex-husband at least waited until the next day before he sold my dress. It's been worn by three other girls, and I can say with confidence that none of them are married any longer."

"Yes," said Augustus, unimpressed. "You told us that story when you arrived five years ago."

"Though we never cared to ask who would marry you in the first place," whispered Nelly Triffle, an old woman in a green Christmas tree cardigan. The new girl Sally giggled.

Ignoring this, Augustus addressed Mrs. Tallow. "Perhaps this means you have volunteered to be Bill's mentor while he resides here. Seeing as you think you can sympathize."

Mrs. Tallow stood, rising to an impressive height, and glided silently back into the racks of the dance studio room. Bill did not seem to mind that he had been declined by the woman.

"Who will look after Bill tonight?" Augustus asked the rest of the room.

They all shifted and averted their gaze—all except for one. A small arm could barely be seen above the heads of some

people in the back. It was raised and waving as if to answer a question.

Augustus smiled.

"You can put your hand down, Samuel, and come here," he said and turned to Bill. "Samuel may seem young, but he's been here a while. I'm sure he'll make an adequate mentor."

Samuel was indeed young. He looked as if he were seven years old. His straight black hair was cut into a bowl shape and bobbed as he made his way forward. He wore rainbow suspenders and knee-high socks.

"Bill. This is Samuel."

"My parents came here thirty years ago from Vietnam to raise me in America because they wanted a better life for me. I was born at Miracle Grace Hospital in Ohio. I went to school and I had lots of friends. Then one day I got into the car to go see a movie, I remember I was excited about the movie because it had dogs in it and I liked dogs, and my dad was driving and he didn't see a truck that hit us on the side where I was sitting.

"The next thing I remember my parents were sad and looking at my clothes. My mother said that she couldn't do this and left the room. My dad put the clothes in a box in the attic and I would come out every so often. One day they got a dog. I liked him, I played with him a lot.

"The next thing I know my favorite suspenders belonged to another boy and I followed him around. He didn't like going outside or doing anything fun. Pretty soon he stopped wearing them too and his mom used them to hold her skis together. Have you ever been skiing? I haven't and I don't think that lady had either. I sat in their attic forever it seemed.

"One day, though, they sold my suspenders to a second-hand store, whatever that means, and a pretty girl bought

them. She wore them only once at a party where the boy she liked spilled his drink on them and I made him trip on his face in front of her. I stayed in her closet for a few years and spied on her. We were in love, but she forgot and sold my suspenders to here last year."

Bill was only vaguely paying attention to the boy. He had been flicking himself in the arm for the last hour and a half trying to wake up.

"So who were you?" Samuel asked after a pause.

Bill looked up at the boy.

"I was … am a university professor of sociology," Bill said stubbornly.

"Augustus was a professor too! Well, he was a teacher anyway. He taught kids how to 'think outside the box.' He says I'm very good at that."

"Are you?" said Bill, disinterestedly.

"Yes, like I can tell that you still don't think you're…" he leaned in and began to whisper, "d-e-a-d yet."

Bill sighed.

"Why in God's name, pardon the expression, when we die would we turn into ghosts that haunt our old clothes?"

"Not everyone does, just those who really had an attachment. And it's not just clothes. Some people are attached to whole houses or pencils or something. Matt J. over there is attached to his camera." Samuel pointed out a large young man who held a beta tape video camera. He was currently taping Sally, who was spinning in circles and laughing.

Bill shook his head.

"Why are we ghosts at all? There is no such thing!"

Samuel gave him an annoyed look.

"Gee, mister. For someone who knew stuff when he was alive, you sure are dumb as a dead guy." And with that he hopped off the piano he was sitting on and walked over to play with a little girl who was serving tea to her doll.

With no real books to read and no working radio, Bill spent the rest of the night avoiding everyone else by looking through the copious rows of clothing.

Not everything was haunted, of course, but Bill had to wonder about what kind of person would haunt them. Tacky sequined t-shirts and plaid coats with mysterious pockets. Worn-out belts and chipped high-heels. But the most confusing thing he came across was in the winter section. Hidden amongst the heavy coats was a pair of faux fur pants. It took Bill a while to find the zipper, the location of which only made the pants that much more bewildering.

"I figured you for more of a leather pants guy." It was Sally, the beauty queen.

Bill put the pants back, embarrassed, and mumbled something about 'just looking.'

"Some of us are telling stories. Care to join?" She motioned over to the living room area where almost everyone was gathered (Mrs. Tallow was nowhere to be seen).

"Stories about your deaths?" Bill presumed, in a manner that said 'I don't want to be a part of such things.'

Sally shook her head.

"I don't think so. Made up stories."

Bill sighed. He had come to the conclusion in the last hour that this was not a dream, mostly because while the premise of the situation did not make sense, everything within the confines of this world was consistent. This probably meant that he was either A) crazy or B) a dead ghost man haunting his

favorite suit coat. It did not really matter which, because in either situation he had something he had to work out before he moved on, so he might as well just go with it.

The woman, Mrs. Triffle, was telling what must have been a very humorous story because the group around the living room was bursting with laughter. Sally and Bill took a seat and people began discussing who would go next.

Sam's hand was the first in the air. Everyone looked at each other uncomfortably.

"Well, he hasn't gone in the last few nights," Mrs. Triffle said, reticently.

Everyone murmured in agreement and Sam beamed with an unnatural happiness.

"Once upon a time there was a little boy," Sam began.

"All your stories begin with a little boy!" said the girl, Annie, with whom he had been playing earlier. Her voice was drenched in a petulance that made Bill cringe.

Sam looked at Augustus, pleadingly, who made a simple gesture that said 'carry on.'

"Once upon a time there was a little boy…" he started again. "A little boy puppy. And the puppy died and haunted his collar.

"For a while the collar sat in his owner's coat closet, getting all gross and dusty. The dog would come out when his owner went to work and bark at the mail man at noon like he always used to do and fall asleep at the foot of his master's bed.

"One day, though, his owner got a new dog and put the old dog's collar on it. This made the old dog mad. He made the new dog have all kinds of bad dreams and stuff.

"After years of this the new dog died, making the old dog very pleased with himself. Only the master was very sad about

the new dog, even sadder than he was over the old dog's death. One year later the master died of old age in his bed and the last word he spoke was the new dog's name.

"For twenty years the old dog haunted his collar as it sat in a yicky old box in someone's attic. He could never bring himself to move on. His master would be there, but…" Sam's voice got caught in his throat here. "but would his master be happy to see him? Would he even be waiting for him?"

Everyone was silent. Evidently, this was not the usual story given by Samuel. The naturally cheerful boy now had a face that was streaked with tears.

Augustus stood up swiftly and went over to comfort the boy.

"There, there, Samuel. Why don't you go over to the toys and see what new things we got in today?"

Sam nodded and made a quick departure. After a few minutes of soft muttering the stories resumed. Sally told one about a Barbie that came to life as a life-sized woman. Just as Bill was beginning to think that it sounded familiar, Augustus came over and took him aside.

"Would you go and talk to him? I think he's taken a liking to you."

Bill looked over at Sam, doubtful.

"It will be good for you too, I think," said Augustus, nudging him in the right direction.

Bill took a deep breath, steeled himself, and approached Sam.

"Find anything good?" Bill asked.

Sam shook his head.

"I know you're over here to talk to me about my story. I always make them up on the spot, which is why people don't like them."

"I liked it."

Sam glared at him, thoroughly unconvinced.

"It was sad," Bill tried again. "Does that mean that you're sad?"

Sam turned to him, earnestly.

"I'm afraid that my parents aren't there yet, you know. That they haven't passed on. I want them to be there. Heaven or wherever. And … also I don't. What if they don't like me anymore? What if they got a new son and they only love him now?"

"Look, Sam. You're parents still love you. You were their son. People live their whole lives in shadows like yours."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked and suddenly Bill no longer looked like he was in the chatting mood.

They were silent for a moment.

"You're not very good at this, are you?" Sam sighed as he stood. He left Bill and rejoined the story time.

Bill's time at the Main Street Thrift Store marched on uncomfortably. He found himself attending store times and meetings, but sticking to the back and never contributing. After the first week, Mrs. Triffle stopped trying to include him. They all did. It was as if they had begun to treat him as a ghost of ghosts. He was haunting them more than they were haunting the thrift store.

After one morning meeting, however, Augustus approached Bill.

"I can't help but to notice that you don't feel at home here," he began.

Bill shrugged. He did not want to be at home here.

"Look," Augustus said, flustered. "You are an academic man—"

"Were."

"I beg your pardon?" Augustus asked.

"I was an academic man. Then I died and went to hell."

"Pull yourself together, man. This is not hell. We're ghosts. Which means you are still needed here."

"Why am I needed? I'm a shadow of a shadow. Nothing I ever knew in life even matters now."

Augustus looked as if he could have slapped him. He sighed and regained his composure.

"I've been here for a good while now. Too long, I dare say. I've seen lots of people come and go, ghosts I mean. I've seen them work through their problems and be set free. I've also seen people get stuck, people go the wrong way, and I've seen them fade away altogether."

Bill liked the sound of fading away just then. He avoided Augustus' gaze.

"I've made it my job in death what it was in life: a guide. I'm helping everyone reach their potential. What did you do when you saw a student lose their way?"

Bill shrugged.

"I didn't baby my students. I let them know that if they went astray it was their own damn fault," he muttered.

Augustus raised an eyebrow.

"Alright then," he said. "I guess it is your own damn fault." With that, Augustus stormed off, leaving Bill in an even greater depression.

He tried to remember what it was like to be a professor. These things were slipping more and more from him every day.

From what he could recall, he had been a very callous teacher. He had never bothered with students that didn't seem interested. He let people who slept and skipped do as they pleased and then he would quietly flunk them at the end of the semester and block their emails. But for the students who put everything into the work, he had been a dedicated, compassionate man. Or so he liked to think.

Bill had never won a best teacher award nor had anyone ever told him that they loved his classes, but he always figured that that wasn't the important thing. The important thing was that they learned the subject (and the lesson that life was not going to baby you). He had always wished that someone had taught him that before he made a fool out of himself as a young man.

Someone had once asked Bill if he always wanted to end up as a professor. This question had shocked him. He thought that it was evident that this was what he wanted—was destined to do. "Didn't you have a dream, though? Something you wanted to get famous from or something?" He had replied lamely that you can be a famous professor and that had ended the conversation.

Secretly, Bill always worried if he left an impression in the world or not. Only vague things came to mind—the rare occasions when people gave him credit for something.

"Maybe I should just fade away and pretend that this life never happened at all," Bill said under his breath.

He closed his eyes and concentrated with all his might on clearing his mind, making himself empty, transparent. Then a thought occurred to him: Augustus was trying to ask him something. He was asking about his academic background. Maybe it was only out of pity. And maybe it was something

lame that Bill would not find fulfilling at all to answer, but Augustus wanted his expertise for some reason or another. Got to take what you can get, Bill.

Augustus was flipping through some old records and talking with Mrs. Triffle about them.

"I never much cared for this Barry Manilow," Augustus was saying as Mrs. Triffle shook her head in disagreement. She was about to say something when Bill approached.

"Augustus. I apologize. You were going to ask me something, weren't you?"

Augustus looked up at him and nodded.

"Yes, Bill, I was."

"If you'd still like to ask, I promise I'll be more amenable this time."

Mrs. Triffle pretended to see someone at the other end of the store and left them. Augustus looked around and made sure they were alone before he spoke.

"Like I was saying earlier, Bill. I've been here a very long time. Longer than I'd like. I think I'm done."

The words stopped Bill's thoughts for a second.

"What?"

"I'm done. I've helped a lot of people move on; it's been what's kept me here. I keep thinking the next one is the last one, but I get pulled in to stay by the next and then the next. It never ends."

For the first time, Bill saw Augustus look truly distressed. Somehow, he even looked older, frailer.

"What do you want me to do?" Bill asked, confused.

Augustus stared him in the eyes for a good while before he spoke.

"I want you to take over for me. Help these people." These words were a whisper.

Bill had neither agreed nor disagreed to this, but over the course of the next week he came out of his shell a bit. He participated in story time and held conversations with people individually, learning a good deal about various time periods (like how teenage girls in the 80's really felt about Scott Baio). It was really quite interesting from a sociological point of view. The one person he had been avoiding, however, was Sam. His mentor had not bothered to hide his disappointment with him ever since their last conversation. Now it was time, though, to make amends.

Sam was trying on over-sized coats with Annie.

"You look like a vagrant!" Annie said, giggling.

"Not a bad coat, though," Bill said.

Sam turned to look at him and then looked back at Annie.

"Did you hear something, Annie? I thought I heard something, but it must have been the wind."

Annie giggled.

"It wasn't the wind, silly. It was Bill!"

Sam crossed his arms and looked defiantly away from Bill.

Annie sighed.

"You're no fun anymore," she said and pouted off.

"Sam—" Bill started, but Sam turned away again.

"Sam, look. I'm sorry I've been a bad student," Bill said, awkwardly getting on his knees to be even with the boy.

"What did you mean when you said that I was lucky?"

Bill looked confused.

"Before you said that I was lucky I wasn't alive or something. It hurt my feelings."

"Sam, no. I didn't mean that. I meant that it would be hard for someone alive to be better than you—to your parents. It would be hard for them. But it's probably harder for you, being dead…"

Sam looked at him.

"Did that happen to you?"

"Did what happen to me?"

"Did someone always compare you to a dead person or something?"

"Something like that," Bill admitted.

Sam nodded.

"Was that so hard? To tell me about your life?" he said, slyly.

Bill smiled and shrugged.

"Are we friends again?" Sam asked, sticking out his hand.

"Of course," Bill said as they shook hands.

That next evening Bill was resolved to tell Augustus that he would take the responsibility, but flecks of doubt swirled around his mind. Sam would be doable, but what about Mrs. Tallow? She didn't seem to even come out of her dress rack anymore. What if more people showed up like her? How could he agree to take over the position of guide when he wasn't even sure he could do it? What if Augustus moved on and everyone here didn't want him as their guide or if they did, he simply failed them?

Bill found Augustus after the nightly meeting.

"What makes you so sure I can do this?" he asked bluntly.

"Nothing … yet," Augustus admitted.

This set Bill to thinking. How could he prove his worth? He would help someone pass. Someone difficult. Go for the gold.

He spotted her gliding back and forth in front of the mirrors in the old dance studio. She was examining her dress with a vacancy that chilled Bill. She didn't seem to see anything. Her cataract-grey eyes did not move, nor did any other part of her. She was like a wooden doll on a track, hovering back and forth.

"Good evening, Mrs. Tallow," Bill said, taking care to make his voice loud.

"Good evening, professor," she replied without flinching.

"Do you have a moment?"

He shuffled his feet in the silence that followed.

"I believe I have an eternity."

"Could you tell me how you died?"

Mrs. Tallow stopped floating. She turned and stared at him.

"I've already told you that." Her voice was calm. Bill was completely unnerved.

"Yes, uh, well. Could you tell me in more detail? You know, start at the beginning."

"I suppose." She glided over to a chair in the corner and Bill followed.

"When I was young and foolish," she began. "I met a man named Tallow. I did not love him, but I didn't seem to think that mattered. He offered me a new life. So I married him. It turned out that he despised me, but wanted my father's money. If you had ever met the man, you would not have realized this. He was comely and meek, sniveling even. And I was beautiful. Even my insidious father, who had turned away dozens of suitors, approved of Mr. Tallow.

"It was our wedding night and I was somewhat dreading the consummation. He seemed to be nervous himself, but not

about lovemaking, as I was soon to find out. He waited until I took off my dress and then stabbed me three times in the heart. I remember the pain vividly. All of these fools here died in comparatively peaceful ways. Only those of us who were murdered will ever know what it feels like."

She paused here to look Bill directly in the eyes. Bill felt like she was going to jump out at him and snarl. When she did not he took a deep breath.

"I'm not convinced I was murdered," he said.

"Yes. It is strange that you don't remember," she said in an airy, distant voice.

"So, after you died he sold the dress?" Bill pushed, changing the course.

"Yes. A week later, after the funeral."

"Why didn't you haunt him? Or the house, or something else?" Bill asked.

"He was an idiot. The police caught him the day after he sold my dress and hanged him. My father saw to that."

"I see," Bill said, looking around. He was searching for something else to say or something else to ask.

"You want to know why I stay with the dress and ruin weddings." It was a statement.

"I guess, although it seems obvious," Bill said.

"Oh?" Mrs. Tallow contested.

"Yes. You do it because you think marriage is a sham. You think you save the women the trouble, right?"

Mrs. Tallow was silent. Her face looked as though she had just eaten something very sour.

"No, professor. I don't think marriage is a sham. I think most people actually love each other, or think they do. I haunt this dress because I hate them and their happiness. I hate them

all. Why should they get the life I wanted? What makes them deserve it? Nothing!" Spit flew from her mouth as she ejaculated the last word.

Bill's eyes widened. Mrs. Tallow actually seemed to be growing in height.

"Everyone deserves to find love," Bill said, shocked at her rage.

"Did you ever find love, professor? I don't see you pining over some long lost strumpet! Only the fools get love. Only the weak, ugly, self-indulgent fools!" She was now growing faster. Soon she would be taller than the ceiling allowed.

The others had begun to gather around the opening to that room to watch the horrible scene. Like all men who badly needed to say something, Bill stood speechless.

"I was beautiful! Beautiful, you hear!" Mrs. Tallow was now screaming.

This triggered something in Bill.

"Maybe," he shouted up at her. "But I think all this hatred has made you ugly. I mean, my god, you're the ugliest thing I've ever seen!"

"What?!" Mrs. Tallow was livid. Smoke started to surround her.

"What the devil are you trying to do, Bill?" Augustus had worked his way to the front of the crowd.

Bill ignored him.

"Just look at yourself in the mirror! You're like a demon!"

Mrs. Tallow did not look in the mirror—not right away at least. First she let out a bone-shaking screech. The electricity of her engorged spirit shot out in all directions, catching the racks of dresses on fire. This seemed to surprise her as much as

anyone else. In her wild turning she caught a glimpse of her reflection.

The sound she made then was one of ultimate disgust. She was like Dracula cowering from the light, Frankenstein's monster flinching from fire.

"What have I become?" She shrank back to her normal size.

Augustus and a few others ran into the room and started trying to put out the flames by smothering them with blankets from the bedding section. This seemed to only fan the flames.

With some reticence, Bill went beside Mrs. Tallow.

"We need to go. Your dress will burn up," he said as kindly as he knew how.

"Let it burn," she said, stripping off the dress.

Bill watched her throw it to the ground and pass through the conflagration.

Outside, everybody gathered to watch the life go out of the old thrift store on Main Street. Bill went to stand next to Augustus.

"I'm sorry," he told him, quietly.

"What?" Augustus had been lost in thought, staring at the flames.

"I'm sorry, Augustus. I messed that one up big time. I guess I'm not the guy."

Augustus laughed then. Not the hysterical laugh of a mad man, but the full chortle of someone who was privy to a joke that the other person was not. Bill cocked his head in confusion.

"As far as I'm concerned, my bags are packed!" Augustus managed.

"What?" Bill asked, feeling as though he was beginning to hate that question.

"I've been trying to get Mrs. Tallow to pass peacefully for 30 years."

"That was peacefully?" Bill was incredulous.

"For a second there I thought she was about to be pulled into, you know, hell. Instead she passed on! Incredible."

"I burnt down the thrift store," Bill said, obstinately.

"I was getting tired of that dump anyway." It was Mrs. Triffle who spoke then. She was beaming.

"This whole thing has inspired me. My Ted is probably waiting for me on the other side by now. Sure he had halitosis and ignored me to watch football, but he was the love of my life, the fool." She laughed boisterously.

It was then that Bill spotted Sam. He was sitting on the curb, separated from everyone, looking very sullen. He excused himself to walk over to him.

"What's the matter, mentor?" Bill asked him, taking a seat next to him.

Sam looked up at him and sighed.

"I'm not your mentor. You don't need one."

"What's up?"

"I want to go home," Sam pouted.

"Then why don't you?" Bill asked.

"Because I'm still scared. I don't want to leave everyone!"

Bill smiled.

"I don't think you have to worry about that," Bill said. "You see Augustus and Mrs. Triffle?"

Sam nodded.

"They're going to go with you. When you pass you'll get to see them all the time too."

Sam wiped away the wetness from his face and sniffed.

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

Then Sam's face split into a giant grin. He appeared to be perfectly fine, almost as if nothing had been bothering him a second ago.

"Just kidding," he said, jumping up. "I knew that they would be. You did a good job getting Mrs. Tallow to pass. I thought she'd never leave."

Sam ran over to Augustus and the others, leaving Bill to gape at him.

"I guess now I don't need you," Bill muttered. He joined them and they all took a moment to watch their past home burn.

* * *

Adeline was not having a good morning. First, she overslept. The night before had been rough—a long-distance fight with her boyfriend. Then she spilt coffee all over her shirt in the car. When she pulled up to her work, however, all of that vanished on account of it being burnt to the ground.

The police and fire department were there in force, taping off the area and rummaging through the ashes. Adeline got out of her car and approached the first officer she saw.

"What the hell happened?"

"Fire, ma'am. I'm gonna have to ask you to step back."

She was going to protest—say something like "But I work there!" Instead she went across the street to watch the activity. As she started to sit down on the curb she spotted a suit coat with patched elbows—it was folded neatly on the sidewalk. She picked it up and instantly recognized it. A man had

brought it into the store the other day. She remembered thinking he looked very intelligent, and also very sad.

After looking around to see if anyone was watching she searched the coat pockets. She was never allowed to do that at work. It wasn't her job to sort the clothes. She just manned the counter. In the inside breast pocket she found a note. It was folded delicately into fourths.

It read:

Dear whoever you are,

I hope you make more of a difference in this life than I have.

—Professor Saxon

CLEAN BABY

by **Ron Shannon**

The day I turned twenty-four I woke up sincerely depressed.

I had recently rented a small, first floor apartment carved out of one of the corners of a crumbling Victorian stranded in the middle-class section of town. My place had the only private entrance and the only direct access to the dilapidated porch out back. That morning I took a cup of coffee, opened the wooden screen door, and walked over to one of the four-by-fours that held up the porch's leaky roof. A rusty spring slammed the screen door shut while I took a sip of my coffee.

The month of May had turned the area my neighbors called backyards into an unexpected garden, teeming with life. Purple and yellow flowers grew along Mrs. Aberscat's side of the back fence, a blue jay frantically explored the vicinity around Whitaker's pear tree, and the local rabbit hoped to find an early harvest in Johnson's new vegetable patch. Mrs. Rachlin had hung sheets up on the clotheslines that threaded her property. They swayed on a mild breeze, and when I closed my eyes and concentrated, I thought for sure I almost detected the fresh smell of her fabric softener.

I went back inside, filled my cup with more coffee, and turned on the radio just loud enough to hear it through the screen door. A rock'n'roll guitar gently rattled my worn-out

speakers while a couple of bees discovered the Aberscat flowers. I placed my coffee on the metal tray next to the old porch swing and sat down. The sun came in at just the right angle to warm my face, so I closed my eyes and leaned back. I rocked the swing with my bare foot. The radio played in the background. I took comfort in the vague scent of clean linen.

Around half past noon I sat up and reached for my coffee. It had long since turned cold, but I had to get up anyway if I ever intended to go over and check on my girlfriend, Tina. I didn't need to call to let her know I was on my way because it wouldn't matter once I got there.

My beat-up old Mustang traveled the ten or eleven miles down River Road to Runyon Avenue as if it had been placed on autopilot. Tina lived with her mother about a half-mile down Runyon, on the corner of a nameless, forgotten side street that came to a dead end in front of a pile of loose gravel. I parked my car under a dogwood tree and headed for the house, but something made me stop and turn around. The car didn't look half bad in the shade. It reminded me of how Tina never got tired of going for rides in that rusted-out piece of junk. She could easily talk me into letting her shift the three-speed on the floor as we drove around town. I loved the way she giggled and the way she clung to my arm when she told me we'd always be lovers.

Today the house looked quiet, isolated from the surrounding sounds of spring. I rang the doorbell, didn't expect an answer, but waited to be certain. Next to the door today's newspaper leaned against the one that had been delivered yesterday. Tina had been left alone for two days, probably three.

I fumbled for the key her mother had given me and opened the back door. I called out her name, laid the keys on the

kitchen table, called out her name again before I walked down the hall toward her room. The smell of urine and vomit got stronger as I got closer. I found Tina lying on the floor in pajamas stained with urine. Dried vomit had caked into the carpet all around her face.

I went over, knelt down on one knee, and lifted her hair back from her cheek. "Tina? Baby, please wake up."

She stirred, her eyes flickered, and when she attempted to lift her head she whimpered so softly I almost didn't hear her.

Litter covered the floor as if she had made the room her campground. A half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich lay on a plate. The bread had turned brown, and it smelled rank when I picked it up for a better look. She had laid out her works on the dresser next to the bed, but the syringe still lay on the floor where she had dropped it.

"Tina, please wake up. You're scaring me." She opened her eyes and her lids had that recognizable droop that accompanied what she called 'her run'. I held her head up and brought myself down on the carpet next to her, but careful not to sit in anything. "How long ago did you shoot up?"

That's when she must have realized I was holding her. "Johnny, what are you doing here? I'm so happy to see you." Her head lolled and I tried to control it for her.

"C'mon, I've got to get you cleaned up. You stink. How long have you been lying here?" I picked her up and leaned her against the bed. Her eyes were open now but glazed over from the smack.

"Oh, Johnny, you do love me don't you, honey, even just a little bit?" Her head landed heavily on her chest. A small trickle of drool rolled down her chin.

"Of course I do. Where's your mother?"

She made no attempt to raise her head or answer me, so I went into the bathroom. I found a towel and a washcloth. Put some shampoo and soap out where I could get to them. I turned on the water and made sure it started to fill the tub before I went back to the bedroom.

When I got back I found Tina right where I left her. I started the struggle to get her undressed. Urine had saturated her pajamas, underwear and even her bra. I slid them into a pile, found a paper bag in the kitchen, stuffed everything in it, and closed it up as tight as possible. Meanwhile, Tina had curled up naked on the floor; her body had been ravaged with needle marks—on her arms, inside her elbows, on her legs, inside her thighs, and on her feet between her toes. Some of the marks were old and scabbed over; others were fresh and looked like they could bleed with the slightest touch.

I held my breath and leaned over her.

"You do love me, don't you?" she mumbled. Her eyes opened. She looked directly at me.

"Can you stand?" I asked.

She held out her hand with an effort. I took it, pulled her to me, and steadied her dead weight. Then, I wrapped my arms around her hips and positioned myself on her left side. Slowly, we made our way into the bathroom. I helped her into the tub and sat her gently down in the warm water.

"It's hot," she said. "You always make it so hot."

"Come on, it's not that bad." I plunged the washcloth in the water and squeezed it over her head. "I want to wash your hair. You're going to help me."

"Oh, please, Johnny. The soap always gets in my eyes."

"Then keep your eyes closed. Your hair stinks like puke."

She frowned at me, but she soon lost track of the conversation and lowered her head.

I rubbed some of the soap on the cloth. Very carefully, I smoothed it over her face and immediately wiped it off before anything got into her eyes. I stood up, found a glass by the sink, used it to scoop up some water, and dumped it over her head until her hair was soaking wet. Then I took some shampoo and lathered it into her scalp until I felt I had washed out the foulness that had matted itself into her beautiful blonde hair. She smiled up at me, through beads of water, when I rinsed it all out.

I got her to stand for a brief moment and attempted to wash the rest of her. She moaned as I gently scrubbed, her hand massaged my right ear, and her fingers twisted inside my long hair. I sat her back down and reached for a towel.

When I looked back she had slid down. Her face began to submerge. The water rose over her mouth, but she breathed through her nose and her breath made tiny ripples on its surface. I watched as she slid dangerously close to completely going under. How easy it would be for her to end it here and now. No more of this pain. She looked so peaceful. I waited for the water to take her away. I could just let her slide under. No one saw me come in. I could leave and no one would be the wiser. Her mother would come home. Such a tragedy. She would call me in tears. Maybe it would be for the best.

At the last minute, I pulled her up and clear from the water and kissed her forehead. "OK, let's get you dried off and back into bed." I picked her up and wrapped the towel around her. That would have to do for now because I wasn't strong enough to do any more.

I took her back to her room, sat her down on the chair against the closest wall, stripped the linen off the bed, and found fresh sheets in the hallway closet. After I made up the bed I found a clean shirt and a pair of clean underwear. It wasn't easy, but I got her dressed and comfortably into bed with the blankets pulled over her. Satisfied, I sat next to her and stroked her wet hair.

"You're so good to me," she said. "What would I do without you?"

I didn't answer her. I just continued to stroke her hair.

"Johnny, you know what I need?"

"No."

"I need it, you know I do." She looked at me and I really thought her mind was lucid.

"No, you don't. You know what we need to do? We need to get you clean, baby. No more needles. Wouldn't you like that?"

She sat up, hooked her arm through mine, and leaned her head on my shoulder. "There's money in the top drawer of my dresser. Please, take it. You know how to get in touch with Raymond. Please, Johnny."

Getting in touch with Raymond meant a series of phone calls and a meeting somewhere on George Street. What interested me was where she got the money, but I didn't dare ask. I opened the drawer, found the wad of bills neatly rolled up inside a rubber band, and stashed it in my pocket.

"I do love you, Tina."

I cleaned the carpet with some disinfectant I found under the kitchen sink. The liquor store at the end of the block had a phone booth inside the building. I could use it to call Raymond. My Mustang would go unnoticed in the parking lot be-

hind the library. George Street was just a short walk from there. With mercy, I would be back and gone before Tina's mother got home.

Tina was now completely passed out, so I kissed her gently on the cheek and left the same way I came in. I locked up the house, put the bag of her dirty clothes in the trash and went back to my car. I put the key in the ignition, but sat for a moment and watched a robin chirp and dance madly back and forth on a limb of the dogwood. A mating ritual I thought.

Without warning, a tear ran down my left cheek and I quickly flicked it away with the back of my hand. Another one, down the right side this time. I let this one go. A sob convulsed deep inside my chest and it came out in a gasp. I cried, and I cried, and I cried.

HORACE

Book 4, Ode 3

Translated by **Maria Stromberg**

He whom you, Melpomene, once
have seen emerging into gentle light,
no Isthmian boxer's skill
shall exhibit, nor shall he swiftly guide

the horses from Achaean chariots,
nor for warlike deeds victorious,
a duke adorned in Delian foliage,
having crushed the swelling pride of kings,

shall he to the Capitol be displayed:
rather what waters flow into the fertile Tiber,
and how dense the branches of its groves,
shall earn his fame in soft Aeolian verse.

Rome, of all cities preeminent,
has deigned to place me in her chorus
as the voice of her budding loveliness
and envy's tooth no longer stings me.

O Pierian one, who sweetly tempers
the golden lyre's jingling chords,
who could, if you desired, on the mute fish
bestow the music of the swan,

it is wholly by your gracious gift
that I am revealed to every passerby
as the foremost poet of the Roman lyre:
my very breath, my power to please,
if any I have, are yours.

PABLO NERUDA

Sonnet 17

Translated by **Maria Stromberg**

I do not love you as if you were salt rose, topaz
or shaft of carnations generating flame:
I love you with the love of certain things obscure,
secretly, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you like the flowerless plant that carries
within itself, hiddenly, the luminance of those flowers:
by the grace of your love lives darkly in my flesh
that tight-furled aroma that ascended from the earth.

I love you without knowing how, nor when, nor whence,
I love you unswervingly without obstacle or pride:
and I love you thus because I know no other way,

save this way in which neither I "am" nor you "are",
so near that your hand on my breast is mine,
so near that your eyelids close with my sleep.

FATHOMING "CLIFFS OF FALL FRIGHTFUL": HAMLET'S MAPPING OF THE TRAGIC ABYSS†

by **Judith Stewart Shank**

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
. . . . . .
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing—
. . . . . .
O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. … (152)

Gerard Manley Hopkins

It could be said that these lines from one of Hopkins' "Dark Sonnets" embody the experience of Hamlet—with one crucial exception. The evocative word "fathom" has two related meanings: first, to find the bottom or extent of something, to measure its depth and sound it; secondly, to reach or penetrate with the mind, to get to the bottom of something, to compre-

† An earlier incarnation of this essay originally appeared in *The Tragic Abyss*, published by the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture in 2003 and edited by Glenn Arbery. It is reprinted here in an expanded version by the generous permission of the author.

hend it thoroughly and master it. Hamlet is the exception to Hopkins' vision of the frightful cliffs of fall, because Hamlet fathoms the tragic abyss in both senses of the word: he plummets to its depths, and he fully comprehends and masters its nature. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's mapping of the tragic abyss, and Hamlet is the mapmaker.

In the archetypal tragic pattern, the protagonist falls into sin, discovers his culpability, and chooses either to accept his guilt and its consequences or to deny his guilt and persist in that evil which leads to despair.[2] Hamlet is unique[3] among tragic protagonists in that the inevitable vision of his own fallenness and original sin occurs *before* the action by which he

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[2] Of course, "sin" is not the concept usually applied to the fall of Greek (or pagan) tragic protagonists. The Oedipus cycle, for instance, speaks of Oedipus and his actions as inexpressibly impious, a pollution and curse upon his house and kingdom. Consequently, one might say the word "sin" is applied only analogically to Greek tragic protagonists, and yet this depends on one's view of creative intuition and the existence of eternal patterns which constitute the very fabric of reality and are Christian. This viewpoint is obviously not a Christian apologetic but rather an insight which, as Hans Urs von Balthasar writes, springs from the foundation of faith. This insight is too intricate to be unfolded fully here, but the basic idea (again from the standpoint of a faith which enables one to *see*) is that the Christian pattern of man's sin and fallenness, redemption, and salvation *is* the very fabric of reality from its beginning and that the Greek tragedians intuited and embodied this pattern in their plays, calling the components of the pattern (*e.g.*, "sin") by the closest approximation they had prior to Revelation. (*See* von Balthasar 419–20 and 500–03.)

[3] Although the analogy between Orestes and Hamlet is apparent, I think the assertion of Hamlet's uniqueness is still valid. Orestes understands the commandment of Apollo to revenge Agamemnon's murder and the consequences he will suffer if he does not, but it seems to me he does not clearly anticipate the consequences of following Apollo's commandment. Orestes seems to be shocked by the appearance and pursuit of the Furies roused by Clytemnestra's slaying. Hamlet, on the other hand, foresees the whole dimension of his paradoxical situation, as will be discussed.

fears to bring guilt upon himself. Hamlet fathoms the nature of the tragic abyss, not in retrospect, but in prospect. From the time the Ghost issues his commandments, Hamlet explores with increasing horror the paradoxical contours of the tragic abyss and finds that, being a man, there is no way he can escape guilt through his own actions.

Hamlet's "world-sorrow" is, of course, evident from the beginning of the play: "O God, God, / How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (1.2.132–34). What apparently has not been evident to many is the *cause* of this sorrow and overwhelming disgust. Hamlet has been accused of being indecisive, excessively self-reflective, neurotic, genuinely insane, and suicidal, none of which diagnoses a close reading of the play bears out. Hamlet's disgust rises from his ever-increasing vision of the depths of human fallenness—in other words, from coming face to face with the inescapable fact of original sin, that "age-old anvil" on which his cries "wince and sing" (to quote Hopkins once more): for, as Hamlet says to Ophelia, "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (3.1.117–19). Hamlet's disgust flows from his realization that man's ontological dwelling is in the house of guilt.

Thus we find Hamlet in his first soliloquy, *before* he has seen the ghost of his murdered father, articulating his dawning awareness that something is terribly, terribly wrong with the postlapsarian world and those fallen men and women who inhabit it, with the "too too sullied flesh" of incarnate men:

> O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed

> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely. (1.2.129–37)

What has precipitated this disgust is not only his mother's "o'erhasty" marriage with his uncle but also his burgeoning doubt that appearances genuinely reflect reality. As he has said to Gertrude, "I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76); yet, faced with the "dexterity" with which Gertrude has posted "to incestuous sheets," Hamlet now doubts whether his mother's love for his father had ever been what it seemed. In his youth, Hamlet saw Gertrude hang upon his father, "As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on," and yet within a month after following King's Hamlet's dead body "like Niobe, all tears," Gertrude married Claudius. How then, Hamlet questions, could Gertrude have truly loved his father, as she seemed to? Even a beast, he exclaims, would have mourned longer than one "little month," before the tears dried in her eyes or her funeral shoes grew old. Nor can Hamlet console himself with the idea that Gertrude has merely sought an approximation to her lost husband, since Claudius, Hamlet says, is "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (1.2.143–57). This discrepancy between appearance and reality—"seeming" and being, "acting" and acting—is one of the dominant themes of the play.

Worthy of notice also in Hamlet's first soliloquy is his dismissal of suicide as a viable alternative for a disgusted and world-sorrowing man. Hamlet is a Christian. In his first soliloquy, the acceptance of suicide as a mortal sin and its conse-

quent dismissal from the realm of possible actions is stated in all simplicity: "O that … the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon [law] 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.129–32). In his disgust with humankind and the world, does Hamlet, in his first soliloquy, cry that he wishes suicide were an option? Yes. Is it obvious that Hamlet, the Christian, accepts the fact that suicide is *not* an option? Yes. The cry of the tragic protagonist, from Job to Oedipus to Lear, has ever been "Cursed be the day that e'er I was born," but it is one thing—and an altogether human thing—to voice one's despair over living in a fallen world and entirely another thing to act upon that despair by committing suicide. It is mentioned and dismissed in his first soliloquy, and suicide is *not* the contemplated action of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, despite its being so played by many, though not all, Shakespearean actors.[4]

The "To be, or not to be" soliloquy is about whether the contemplated *action* (Hamlet's execution of Claudius) is "to be"; the question is whether Hamlet is to bring the *action* into being. That is why Hamlet refers, at the end of the soliloquy, to "enterprises of great pitch and moment"; it is high and momentous enterprises which "lose the name of action" because of the possibility of judgment and damnation after death, which is Hamlet's theme in this soliloquy (3.1.86–88). The Christian Hamlet, who is so very noble and possesses, as do all the greatest Shakespearean characters, a fully developed

[4] In my opinion, Kenneth Branagh is the only actor in the filmed versions of *Hamlet* which I have seen who has interpreted the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy correctly, perceiving the action in question to be the slaying of Claudius, not of himself. Unfortunately, the precedent for portraying Hamlet's intention during the soliloquy as suicide seems to have been set by Lawrence Olivier's portrayal of Hamlet in the earliest film version of the play.

imagination, would never speak of suicide as an "enterprise of great pitch and moment"; only the most vain and deluded of men could so regard themselves and their own ultimate act of despair, and Hamlet is not among them.

Indeed, it is nobility which Hamlet first ponders in this soliloquy, as a consequence of asking whether the action is to be or not. Is it nobler simply to suffer in the mind, or is it nobler "to take arms against a sea of troubles" and thus end them by active opposition? If he were to act, then what? Being mortal, he knows that at some point, probably as a consequence of acting, he will die. What then? What happens at death? Does death issue only in an eternal sleep? If, when we die, we do *no more* than sleep—"To die, to sleep— / No more" [than sleep]—and all the heartaches "and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to" are ended in that eternal sleep, then why not act? Why not take arms against the sea of troubles and end them? *But*, on the other hand, if "in that sleep of death" dreams perchance may come, we must pause before acting and reflect upon the consequences of our actions. The dreams which may come in the sleep of death are an image of divine judgment and its consequent damnation or salvation. These reflections about consequences—about the guilt we may incur for our actions—are why men bear calamity for so long without acting, why they "bear the whips and scorns of time." It is the fear of judgment and damnation—"the dread of something after death"—which "puzzles the will" to action "And makes us rather bear those ills we have, / Than fly to others that we know not of." Death is "The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns." Hamlet cannot be sure that his action will not result in his damnation after death. It is concern about the eternal fate of his soul which

causes Hamlet's "native hue of resolution" to be "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." It is the desire not to be damned for his action which "turns awry" the currents of the momentous enterprise of slaying Claudius and makes that enterprise "lose the name of action." It is not insignificant that Hamlet's greeting to the "fair Ophelia," who enters at the end of this soliloquy, is a request that she remember all Hamlet's sins in her prayers (3.1.56–89).

Bertram Joseph has observed that the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy should be regarded as a continuation of Hamlet's previous soliloquy, in which Hamlet, goaded by the passion with which the Player has rendered Hecuba's suffering, examines his own reasons for delay in fulfilling his promise to the Ghost (2.2.560–617). This soliloquy, which closes Act Two in most current editions of *Hamlet*, precedes the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy by no more than fifty-five lines, and Joseph further notes that, according to "the good Quarto and the First Folio," there was no act division at this point in the manuscript. Thus, audiences of Shakespeare's time would have heard, first, the soliloquy in which Hamlet questions his reasons for delay, confirms the necessity of ascertaining that a devil in the form of his father's ghost is not ensnaring him, and plans to acquire "evidence" of Claudius' iniquity, followed almost immediately by Hamlet's further meditations in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy on the possibility of being damned for slaying Claudius as the cause of his delay (Joseph 110–11). Thus, as has been said, Hamlet's concern in this soliloquy is with the potential consequences of his action in slaying Claudius, not with the consequences of slaying himself.

But with his profound and contemplative soul, Hamlet sees in his own particular situation an instance of universal human

experience. Were it not for reflections about guilt and damnation, who would bear "Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, / The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, / The insolence of office … Who would fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life…?" Any man who thus suffers, Hamlet sees, could take on himself the making of his own "quietus" "With a bare bodkin [dagger]"—that is, any man could be quit of all that oppresses him by thrusting a dagger into the agent of all which he suffers (3.1.71–73, 75–77). It is perhaps this passage in Hamlet's soliloquy, especially when taken out of context with those "enterprises of great pitch and moment" toward which the soliloquy moves, which has led interpreters to think that Hamlet is contemplating his own suicide—contemplating ending his suffering through violent action against himself rather than violent action against the perpetrator of that suffering. This misinterpretation is facilitated, I think, by the misunderstanding of the words "bodkin" and "quietus." Although literary critics and any reader who uses a footnoted edition surely know the meaning of the word "bodkin," the general audience viewing *Hamlet* is extremely likely to interpret "bodkin" as meaning "breast," since, first, actors such as Lawrence Olivier and Mel Gibson, as well as countless theatre actors, have portrayed the scene by holding the dagger pointed at their breast (and usually a naked or "bare" breast), and, secondly, because the word "bodkin" sounds like a diminutive of the word "body"; thus, a general audience may neglect investigating the definition of "bodkin" under the assumption that they have already grasped its meaning.

Furthermore, the word "quietus" does not mean the peace and "quiet"—through suicide—of no longer contending with the hardships of the world, although that meaning is often as-

sumed because of the resemblance between "quietus" and "quiet." "Quietus" is, in fact, a legal term which means a full discharge or release from debt, obligation, or office; "quietus est," again in legal terminology, means "he is quit," in the sense of being discharged from the debt, obligation, or office. This meaning of "quietus" is identical with the primary definition of "quittance," as when we say, "He has received his quittance," meaning he is no longer under any obligation, although "quittance" carries the additional connotation of recompense, repayment, and reprisal. When Hamlet says "he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin," he is saying that any man might be "quit" of debt, obligation, or office by violent action, by taking "arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end[ing] them."[5] In Hamlet's case, he would be released from his obligation to his father's ghost and the debt of his own promise to avenge his father's murder by executing Claudius; he would be discharged from his heaven-appointed office of "scourge and minister" (3.4.174–76). But, as Hamlet sees his situation at this point in the play, he would thereby also put his soul in peril.

For the Christian Hamlet, the possibility of damnation is his dilemma. How does one, as a Christian, and not in self-defense or war, kill another human being? More especially, how does a Christian prince kill his uncle, his mother's husband, and his king? Hamlet, with all his excellence of forethought, can imagine the chaos that will afflict Denmark if Claudius is killed. The consequences of the death of kings—even evil kings—permeate Shakespearean drama with particu-

[5] See also Hamlet's use of the word "quit" in his speech to Horatio (5.2.63–68), quoted on p. 103 of this essay.

lar ominousness, and for all that Rosencrantz is a sycophant, his speech to Claudius on that subject rings true:

> The cesse of majesty
> Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
> What's near it with it; or it is a massy wheel
> Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortised and adjoined, which when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boist'rous ruin. Never alone
> Did the King sigh, but with a general groan. (3.3.15–23)

Hamlet, however, faces a still more profound question: how does he know by whom (or what) he has been charged to kill Claudius? He has nothing to act upon but the word of a ghost, and Hamlet has ample evidence that words do not always express the truth. No earthly court mandates him; he has no legal sanction, and—however disordered its current condition—Denmark presumably has its laws and trials to ascertain guilt and render judgment. In any case, Hamlet is prince of a state, not a state-appointed executioner. Thus the Christian Hamlet says:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil, and the devil hath power
> T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me. (2.2.610–15)

And again, as he lays the plot for the play and asks Horatio to observe Claudius "with the very comment of [his] soul," Hamlet says:

> If [Claudius'] occulted guilt
> Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
> It is a damnèd ghost that we have seen,
> And my imaginations are as foul
> As Vulcan's stithy. (3.2.81–86)

Hamlet's instinctive response when he first sees the Ghost is a prayer: "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" Is the apparition before his eyes a sanctified soul or a devil?

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee. (1.4.39–44)

For it is unholy that a Christian soul, buried according to the sacraments of the church, should again walk the earth—that it should, as Horatio has already said, "usurp" the night and the form of the dead King Hamlet (1.1.46–49). Why, Hamlet cries, should his father's "canonized bones" have "burst their cerements"? Why should the sepulcher in which King Hamlet was "quietly interred" have cast him up again? (1.4.47–51) Can such an aberration from all Christian doctrine and belief be anything but demonic?

After the Ghost charges Hamlet with revenging his murder by Claudius and vanishes, Hamlet vows, "thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain"

(1.5.102–03). But now Hamlet is caught between two commandments: the Ghost's "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25) and God's "Thou shalt not kill." Hamlet is in the situation we have come to call a "double-bind"; he has fallen into the crevasse of paradox—literally damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. Hamlet's delay in acting, so often attributed to neurotic indecision or some sort of Prufrockian hyper-consciousness, is due to neither of these but to his being caught in a situation in which he can see no way to act without incurring guilt.[6]

Indeed, the first image implanted in Hamlet's mind by the Ghost is that of the tortures—the "sulf'rous and tormenting flames"—of, not yet even hell, but of purgatory (1.5.3). For King Hamlet, as he tells his son, was "Cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sin" and died unabsolved, "No reck'ning made, but sent to [his] account / With all [his] imperfections on [his] head" (1.5.76, 78–79). The Ghost's term of purgation is finite, but its terrors are such that, were he not forbidden to communicate this revelation of eternity to the living, he could horrify Hamlet:

> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
> Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,

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[6] In point of fact, Hamlet's heightened self-awareness is commendable and manifests his nobility, wisdom, and depth of soul. Consider, for instance, Hamlet's fore-mentioned insights into the devil's use of human melancholy and weakness to further his own demonic ends and the devil's power to cloak evil in the appearance of good. In such insights, Hamlet displays self-knowledge and wisdom about the nature of the universe far beyond his years; Dante had to pay the price of a harrowing journey through hell to see such truths with clarity.

> Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part,
> And each particular hair to stand an end
> Like quills upon the fearful porpentine. (1.5.15–20)

If such "fasting in fires," such a "prison house," is the temporal fate of the merely unabsolved, what images of the horror of eternal damnation must invade Hamlet's mind?

And yet Hamlet has fallen even more deeply into the crevasse of paradox than has thus far been conveyed, for the Ghost issues, not one, but *three* commandments, saying, "If thou didst ever thy dear father love—," then: 1) "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder"; 2) "Let not thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught"; 3) "But howsomever thou pursues this act, / Taint not thy mind…." (1.5.23, 25, 84–86). What a commandment is this last, that Hamlet must revenge his father's murder without tainting his own mind! Not only must he not damn his soul, but he must find a way to revenge the murder that leaves his mind pure, unstained, untroubled, and at peace. And yet revenge, as Hamlet knows, is not a Christian act, even if commanded by a less dubious authority than a ghost.[7] Hamlet's task, then, is, not only to revenge his father's murder, but to do it without damning his soul *or* tainting his mind. Paradox is the yawning gulf of the tragic abyss, and Hamlet is caught in its maws. The mark of his engulfment in the abyss is the profound suffering into which he is plunged by the paradoxical nature of his task.

However, paradox in tragedy is a teacher, just as Dionysus, in whose honor the great Greek tragedies were written, was a

[7] Cf. Hamlet's listing of revenge as a sin when he speaks to Ophelia, quoted on p. 97 of this essay (3.1.125).

teacher to those who were willing to accept him as their god. What paradox teaches Hamlet is that there *is* no way, being human, that he can escape guilt through his own actions or, to put it another way, that he can know with certainty that he will not incur guilt by acting. As Hamlet looks within himself for that spiritual place from which he could act in innocence and purity of intention, without tainting his mind, he discovers progressively that, because he is human, there *is* no such place. Hamlet's entrapment by paradox leads him to the insight that man's ontological position in the universe is that of the guilty one—in other words, to the insight that the time has been out of joint ever since the Fall from the Garden. To ascend from the tragic abyss will demand of Hamlet a transformation: a face-to-face encounter with original sin as a reality within the souls of all men, including himself, despite deceptive appearances of virtue.

The themes of appearance-versus-reality and the fallenness of mankind are intertwined from the beginning of the play. Hamlet's questioning of the reality of his mother's love for his father is verified by the Ghost's contemptuous description of Claudius and his liaison with Gertrude:

> Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
> With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts—
> O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
> So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
> The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.
> O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there,
> From me, whose love was of that dignity
> That it went hand in hand even with the vow
> I made to her in marriage, and to decline

> Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
> To those of mine.
> But virtue, as it never will be moved,
> Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
> So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
> Will sate itself in a celestial bed
> And prey on garbage. (1.5.42–57)

With the Ghost's use of the words "adulterate" and "seeming-virtuous"; his description of Gertrude's having been won over to lust for Claudius; his distinction between the sacramental love of marriage and the "decline" to extra-marital lust, the Ghost simultaneously intensifies Hamlet's distrust of appearances and his perception of the depths of human fallenness—so easily is mankind seduced to "prey on garbage."

As Hamlet, hiding behind his "antic disposition" in the depths of the tragic darkness, struggles to ascertain the reality of the Ghost and to fulfill his commandments, he is further confounded by the "seeming" of Ophelia, who, obeying her shallow and devious father, has presented to Hamlet the appearance of not loving him. What, and whom, in this visible world, can he trust? To his childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he voices his world-disgust and ever-increasing awareness of human fallenness:

> I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this

> majestical roof fretted with golden fire: why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.303–17)

Yet these friends in whom he confides have answered Claudius' and Gertrude's summons, and they will attempt to play upon him as on a pipe, as Hamlet says, to lie to him, snare and sound him, and "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery" (3.2.372–74).

But it is in Hamlet's well-known "nunnery" scene with Ophelia, which immediately follows the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, that the agony of Hamlet's deepening vision of man's—and his own—fallenness is most fully articulated (3.1.90–152). Hamlet's behavior toward Ophelia in this scene has been much maligned. His attitude has been interpreted as misogynistic and abusive. But we must first remember that Ophelia, however pathetically, has placed herself among those whom Hamlet cannot trust. Much more importantly, however, we must see the essence of the scene as Hamlet's expression of his disgust with the fallen condition of all humanity, including himself. Because he *loves* Ophelia, he expresses to her the depths of his despair, although she does not understand it and indeed goes beyond filial obedience into the realm of deception in their conversation. In this scene, we see that Hamlet has moved from an initial horror concerning the sins of others

toward a profound awareness of his own potential for sin. He says to Ophelia:

> I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck that I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. (3.1.122–30).

We are not meant to believe from this speech that Hamlet is a bad man. The point is that Hamlet is a *man*, and that he now knows that to be a man means to "relish" of original sin, not to be able to "escape calumny." Having eaten from the tree of good and evil, man cannot undo his aboriginal choice for self over God, and all now bear in their hearts the knowledge of evil through participation in it, whatever particular sins they may or may not commit. All human beings since the Fall are of the "old stock"; virtue may be grafted upon the "old stock," as one grafts young saplings to old trees, but man's original unfallen state cannot be regained, and individual sins, in thought and in deed, will issue from the tainted stock (3.1.17–19). It is for this reason that Hamlet tells Ophelia, "get thee to a nunnery," for why would anyone want to "be a breeder of sinners"? Every man and woman born into the world will bear the inescapable taint of original sin and its consequences. As Hamlet says to Ophelia, "be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.… Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath

made me mad" (3.1.137–38, 148–49). This is not the madness of insanity; this is the agony of a noble and honest mind which is looking directly into the depths of man's fallenness and the darkness of the abyss.

Not for nothing do images of the original Fall dominate this play. "'Tis given out," the Ghost says, "that, sleeping in my orchard, / A serpent stung me.… But know, thou noble youth, / The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" (1.5.35–39). With the Fall of Man comes the loss of the Garden in its health, purity, and innocence—the serpent is in the orchard, the weeds in the garden, the canker on the rose, the "leperous distilment" in the blood, the "vicious mole of nature" in mankind. Indeed, *Hamlet* is filled with images of weeds, thorns, and diseased flowers. Hamlet calls the world "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed" in his first soliloquy, conveying the image of a self-propagating infestation. Ophelia dies while "Clamb'ring to hang" "on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds" and "down her weedy trophies and herself / Fell in the weeping brook" (4.7.172–75). The Ghost has told Hamlet to leave his mother "to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.86–88). However, Hamlet is summoned by Gertrude and, when he confronts her, says:

> Confess yourself to heaven,
> Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,
> And do not spread the compost on the weeds
> To make them ranker. (3.4.150–53)

The Ghost bemoans that he was "Cut off even in the blossoms" of his sin (1.5.76); Laertes uses the image of flower buds

galled by cankerworms in his ill-advised speech to Ophelia concerning Hamlet's affection for her (1.3.39–40). Not only the Ghost, but even Claudius sees King Hamlet's murder as the repetition of the curse of Cain when Claudius so abortively tries to pray: "O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murder" (3.3.36–38). And, coming full circle, Claudius' use of the word "rank" again evokes Hamlet's initial image of the world as an unweeded garden possessed by "Things rank and gross in nature," smelling of weeds.

The fallen world is permeated by poison, spreading contagion, premature decay, and seeping corruption. While Hamlet waits with Horatio and Marcellus for the appearance of the Ghost, Horatio asks Hamlet whether King Claudius' drunken revels are a Danish custom. Hamlet answers that, although it is indeed a custom, it would be "More honored in the breach than the observance," since the "heavy-headed revel" soils Denmark's reputation in the eyes of other nations, causing them to ignore genuine Danish achievement and see only drunken Danish orgies (1.4.13–22). As an analogy for the way in which this fault of excessive revelry poisons Denmark's reputation in the eyes of other nations, Hamlet says:

> So oft it chances in particular men
> That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
> As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,
> (Since nature cannot choose his origin)
> . . . . . .
> that (these men,
> Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
> Being nature's livery, or fortune's star)

> Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo,
> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault. (1.4.23–36)

Thus Hamlet introduces the idea of the corruption that spreads from a single but vicious innate blemish of nature—an analogy of the effects of original sin.

The Ghost horridly intensifies this image of spreading corruption as he relates the manner of his poisoning by Claudius. While King Hamlet was sleeping within his orchard, his "custom always of the afternoon," Claudius stole upon him with the juice of a poisonous plant in a vial,

> And in the porches of my ears did pour
> The leperous distillment, whose effect
> Holds such an enmity with blood of man
> That swift as quicksilver it courses through
> The natural gates and alleys of the body,
> And with a sudden vigor it doth posset
> And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
> The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine,
> And a most instant tetter barked about
> Most lazarlike with vile and loathsome crust
> All my smooth body. (1.5.60, 63–73)

In *Hamlet*, as Wolfgang Clemen (crediting Caroline Spurgeon) has written, "the idea of an ulcer dominates the imagery, infecting and fatally eating away the whole body; on every occasion repulsive images of sickness make their appearance" (113). The corpses "nowadays," comments the grave-digging

clown, "scarce hold the laying in" before they rot, because they are so infected with the pox (5.1.166-68). Hamlet tells Gertrude not to console herself with the idea that he is mad when he confronts her with her sins, lest that idea "skin and film the ulcerous place" in her soul while "rank corruption" spreads underneath the surface, infecting "unseen" and undermining "all within" (3.4.145-150). Spreading poison, Clemen writes,

> becomes the *leitmotif* of the imagery: the individual occurrence [the poisoning of King Hamlet] is expanded into a symbol for the central problem of the play. The corruption of land and people throughout Denmark is understood as an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning. And, furthermore, this poisoning reappears as a *leitmotif* in the action as well—as a poisoning in the "dumb-show", and finally, as the poisoning of all the major characters in the last act. (113)

A cancerous mole, a vicious innate blemish, a corruption in the blood, a spreading infection, a seeping poison—these are the images in which *Hamlet* embodies original sin and its consequence: the tendency of man to serve himself rather than God, to make those choices for self which Dante witnessed in the *Inferno*. Although the particular egregious sin in *Hamlet* is fratricide, Hamlet's vision, as a tragic protagonist, is universal: given the fallenness of man, thus must it always be that the corruption of original sin issues in individual sins, be they great or small, actual or potential. The Greek image of the curse upon the house prefigures original sin as the curse upon the house of mankind.

But to return, then, to Hamlet's dilemma. The journey of a tragic protagonist, as Aristotle pointed out, is one from ignorance to knowledge; more than that, however, the odyssey of a tragic protagonist demands a redefining of identity, a new knowledge and image of self. A successful tragic protagonist is one who chooses to accept that new identity. Thus, Hamlet's vision of the depths of iniquity possible within the human soul moves rapidly from a focus on the sins of others to the real and potential sins within himself. Hamlet's knowledge and definition of his identity have changed: he knows that, being a man, he is not free from sin, and he believes that he cannot act without incurring guilt and damnation. He has fathomed the depths of the tragic abyss and seen that, as a man, he stands in the condemned place, the abode of the guilty. How then to act? How to fulfill the commandments of the Ghost to avenge his father's murder without tainting his mind? Because Hamlet is greater and nobler than Laertes, he cannot say, as Laertes does when he learns that Hamlet has mistakenly slain Polonius,

> Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
>
> Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged
> Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.132–36)

It is not until the events at sea, which he recounts to Horatio, that Hamlet can resolve the Ghost's paradoxical commandments and act with a mind untainted.

The resolution of Hamlet's dilemma, begun at sea, is composed of two elements. First, Hamlet has gained positive proof that Claudius has ordered his execution by England's rulers through the agency of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Hamlet, through his substitution of the execution order, has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. Hamlet's reaction to the fact of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's presumed execution manifests the first shift in Hamlet's conscience. When Horatio comments, "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't," Hamlet says, "Why, man, they did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience; their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow" (5.2.56–59). Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths do not impinge on his conscience; insomuch as Hamlet has acted as the agent in bringing about their deaths, he has done so without tainting his mind.

But more important is the freeing of Hamlet's conscience regarding the execution of Claudius. At Horatio's exclamation, "Why, what a king is this!" Hamlet replies:

> Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
> He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
> Popped in between th' election and my hopes,
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
> And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect conscience
> To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil? (5.2.63–70)

In this speech we see the ultimate shift in Hamlet's conscience: from fearing damnation *for* killing Claudius to expect-

ing damnation for *not* killing him. To let such a "canker of our nature" go on living to commit further evil would indeed, Hamlet says, condemn him to damnation for his inaction. And if he can act without fear of damnation, he has made a major step toward acting without tainting his mind.

There is, however, more to the freeing of Hamlet's conscience than the empirical proof of Claudius' treachery, and this second element has fully changed Hamlet and brought him to his final redefinition of self. Hamlet has surrendered himself into the hands of a divinity and fully accepted the shaping of who he is by that divinity. Further recounting the shipboard events to Horatio, Hamlet reveals how he has renounced his self-will and entrusted himself to God:

> Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
> That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
> Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. Rashly
> (And praised be rashness for it) let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.4-11)

How the divinity will use him, Hamlet does not know, but he no longer bewails that heaven has chosen him to be a "scourge and minister" and to set the time right. His role, he now knows, is to wait, to be ready for action, to be guided as heaven dictates, to let his end and his very self be shaped by God. Hamlet has found, to borrow an image from T. S. Eliot, the "still point" of his soul, from which action may flow without tainting his mind.

Nonetheless, like all great tragic protagonists, Hamlet remains human until the end. As the Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus* retains the irritability of a humbled and suffering old man, as Lear howls at Cordelia's death, so Hamlet is visited by trepidation. After Hamlet hears of the fencing match arranged by Claudius between Laertes and himself, he has a presentiment—an "augury"—of his imminent death: "thou wouldst not think," he says to Horatio, "how ill all's here about my heart" (5.2.213–14).[8] But, encouraged by Horatio to decline the match, Hamlet says: "Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.220–24). Hamlet's "prophetic soul" may retain the human quality of misgiving, but he knows himself to be in the hands of that providence which embraces even the fall of a sparrow.

From this point on in the play, Hamlet is courteous and courtly. More importantly, he acts with a free and untainted mind. In order to act without tainting his mind, he had to learn to act without evil intention—without "a purposed evil"—and leave the rest to God. Thus, immediately following the "readiness" speech, he asks Laertes' pardon and acknowledges that he has wronged him by slaying Polonius but says also that he did not intend the evil:

Sir, in this audience,

---

[8] This presentiment of his imminent death is not the first time in the play that Hamlet has revealed a capacity for augury. He has, of course, suspected Claudius of murdering King Hamlet since his father's death and Claudius' marriage to Gertrude, which is why he cries, "O my prophetic soul!" after the Ghost says he was slain by Claudius (1.5.40).

> Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
> Free me so far in your most generous thoughts
> That I have shot my arrow o'er the house
> And hurt my brother. (5.2.241–44)

Hamlet's "disclaiming from a purposed evil" in his apology to Laertes may strike some as sophistical. But Hamlet would never have taken it on himself to slay Polonius intentionally, reprehensible as the old man's behavior was. Obviously, he did not intend the "evil" of killing Polonius, although he later seems to see the event as mysteriously woven into the designs of providence:

> For this same lord,
> I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,
> To punish me with this, and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister.
> I will bestow him and will answer well
> The death I gave him. (3.4.173–78)

A possible further question, however, is how Hamlet can disclaim a "purposed evil" in general when his intention was to slay Claudius. In his speech to Laertes, Hamlet says that his "madness," his "sore distraction," was the cause of his killing Polonius:

> What I have done
> That might your nature, honor, and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,

> Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged;
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (5.2.234–40)

He was not himself but caught in the darkness of the abyss. Speaking in the presence of Claudius and the court, Hamlet both dissembles and tells the truth in this passage. The fiction of "madness" as insanity must be maintained in front of Claudius. However, it is quite true that, when Hamlet mistakenly slew Polonius, he had not yet come to that "still center" of surrender into the hands of God. Hamlet was, at that point, still in the throes of his agony over being chosen as Denmark's "scourge and minister"; he was "mad"—not in the sense of insanity—but with the fear of damnation. His intention was not to do evil—in fact, he wanted above all things *not* to do evil and be therefore damned—but to fulfill the role appointed him by heaven through the agency of his father's ghost. In his speech to Laertes, Hamlet speaks from his current vantage-point, which is that of a purged and surrendered soul.

In the final scene, Hamlet fully manifests his surrender to God and His providence. His actions and his end are indeed shaped by God; he neither intends evil nor contrives; he becomes God's instrument. In this denouement of "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventors' heads," Laertes is, as he admits, caught in his own snare and "justly killed with [his] own treachery" (5.2.385–86, 308). Claudius cannot forestall Gertrude from drinking of the cup he has poisoned for Hamlet. When Gertrude proclaims her poisoning and Hamlet cries that the source of this villainy and treachery be sought out, Laertes answers:

> It is here, Hamlet. Hamlet, thou art slain;
> No med'cine in the world can do thee good.
> In thee there is not half an hour's life.
> The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,
> Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice
> Hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie,
> Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned.
> I can no more. The King, the King's to blame. (5.2.314–21)

Hamlet did not engage in the fencing match with the intention of killing Claudius, although he believes that he would court damnation by letting Claudius live. Hamlet has not manipulated the time and events to this moment; it has come, as he prophesied, of its own accord. Claudius' treachery is now a matter of public record. Hamlet is ready to act with an untainted mind, without contrivance or "a purposed evil," and with the knowledge that he cannot, through his own efforts as a man, free himself from whatever guilt adheres to his actions.

Moreover, as befits the actions of a Christian prince, Hamlet's slaying of Claudius at this point is not so much a matter of private revenge as it is a public execution before the forum of the court, in which Hamlet's attitude has the character of God's righteous wrath and his action that of nemesis. Justice, not revenge, is the theme in the death of Claudius. Laertes has already declared his own death to be just because of his treachery. After Hamlet forces Claudius to drink from the cup by which Gertrude was poisoned, Laertes again evokes the dictates of justice, saying that Claudius "is justly served. / It is a poison tempered by himself" (5.2.328–29). Indeed, it is a poison that Claudius first tempered when he poured the "leperous distillment" of "cursed hebona" into King Hamlet's ears

(1.5.61–64). Because he has not repented, Claudius is caught in the net of a strictly retributive justice. As he murdered his brother by poison, so is he slain by poison.

The dying Hamlet and Laertes pray to free each other from guilt. Laertes says, "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / nor thine on me!" And Hamlet replies, "Heaven make thee free of it!" (5.2.330–33). Hamlet knows that only Heaven, the "divinity that shapes our ends," has the power to free man from guilt. Hamlet's faith in that divinity remains true faith, which is, by its nature, blind to things not yet seen. Death is still the "undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns," but Hamlet's surrender to the divinity has been complete. Augury is no longer his province. Indeed, augury is not a human concern under the grace of that providence which encompasses even the fall of a sparrow. "The rest is silence" is not an expression of nihilism but an avowal of Hamlet's faith and a testament of his surrender to the providence and purposes of God (5.2.359).

Although there is to be no augury—no words to reveal truly the "undiscovered country" of death and eternity—there will be words from Horatio that express the truth of the events which have corrupted Denmark:

> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on th' inventors' heads. (5.2.382–86)

In the world of this play, where words have not expressed the truth of human thoughts and deeds, Horatio's words at the last will truly reflect reality, as Hamlet's would have if that "fell sergeant, Death," had not been so "strict in his arrest" (5.2.335–38).

As Horatio's words articulate reality in the final scene and beyond, Hamlet's journey of insight has embodied the deepest reality of all: the truth of that darkness into which tragic protagonists are called. Hamlet has fathomed the tragic abyss and seen man's inescapable guilt in its depths. He has seen that the tragic abyss is man's place because it is the home of the guilty—that place where finite fallen man, "this quintessence of dust," meets the "divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will." In fathoming the tragic abyss, Hamlet has answered the question which permeates all tragedy: "What place is this?"—a question given explicit voice by Oedipus after he has discovered his true identity and his guilt, found Jocasta hanged, and blinded himself within the dynastic house. When Oedipus emerges, his face covered with blood, and the Chorus begins their dirge, Oedipus says:

> I I
> This voice of agony
> I am what place am I
> where? Not here, nowhere I know!
> (*Oedipus the King ll.* 1694–97)

The same question dominates the opening of *Oedipus at Colonus*, which begins with Oedipus' inquiry to Antigone, "Where, I wonder, have we come to now? / What place is this, Antigone?" (*ll.* 2–3). Oedipus is exigent in his insistence to obtain

an answer to this question and thereby fathom the nature of the place in which he finds himself. One might say that the entire play of *Oedipus at Colonus* is the answer to his question, with its image of the fertile grove, sacred to the Eumenides, in which Oedipus is caught "up—or down— / Into a space unseen" by "something invisible and strange" (1681–83). No death—or is it an ascension?—could be more paradoxical in its imagery than Oedipus', and no backgrounds or "backdrops" could be more paradoxical than the two images which dominate the action of *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*: in the first, the great dynastic house, doomed to fall; and, in the second, the lush, perennially green grove of the Eumenides. Relating the manner of Oedipus' death—which no one but Theseus may witness—the Messenger tells how blind and crippled Oedipus himself led them into the Sacred Grove, stopped at the Earth's "Doorsill of Brass," cleansed himself and his garments, made libations to the dead, embraced his daughters and wept, then sent them away after they heard the voice of the god calling to Oedipus again and again to come. Then, says the Messenger, a little while after they had all withdrawn except King Theseus, they turned around

> —and nowhere saw that man
> But only the king, his hands before his face,
> Shading his eyes as if from something awful,
> Fearful and unendurable to see.
> Then very quickly we saw him do reverence
> To Earth and to the powers of the air,
> With one address to both.
> But in what manner
> Oedipus perished, no one of mortal men

> Could tell but Theseus. It was not lightning,
> Bearing its fire from God, that took him off;
> No hurricane was blowing.
> But some attendant from the train of Heaven
> Came for him; or else the underworld
> Opened in love the unlit door of earth. (1587–1662)

As in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the answer to the tragic protagonist's question, "What place is this?" is consistently embodied throughout tragedies in paradoxical images and specifically in images of the place where earth meets sky: the binding of Prometheus at the horizon; the confrontation of the Furies and Apollo in the *Oresteia*; the mysterious end of Oedipus, who seems simultaneously to ascend into the sky and descend into the earth, doing so, moreover, by crossing the earth's "door-sill." That the tragic abyss is the place where man meets God is embodied in such images of the meeting of earth and sky. The tragic abyss is that metaphysical place where finite man, composed of dust, meets an infinite God, whose purposes man's reason cannot fully comprehend. This is the meaning of God's theophany at the end of the Book of Job, in which God speaks from the whirlwind in the sky and gives Job, not *concepts*, but *images* of Himself as Creator, thus conveying His answer to Job's questioning: "I am God and you are only a man, formed of earth; My ways are not your ways, and your finite reason cannot encompass My infinite purpose." Job's choice is to surrender to this divine revelation or to reject it and still insist on knowing God's "reasons." Job and Hamlet are alike in their choice to surrender completely to the "divinity that shapes our ends" without a conceptual understanding of the mystery of God's intentions. As Oedipus says, shortly before his

ascension/descension, "These things are mysteries, not to be explained," and as Theseus says, "These things are in the hands of God" (1526, 1779).

The image of the great dynastic house which forms the backdrop for the first stage of tragedy, in which the protagonist discovers his guilt and chooses either to accept or reject it, recurs consistently throughout tragedies, be they Greek, Shakespearian, or Faulknerian. The dynastic house is, of course, an image of the house of mankind, doomed to fall because of original sin. As was said above, no image, when combined with the symbol of the great dynastic house, could be more paradoxical than the image of the Sacred Grove of the Eumenides, which dominates and forms the backdrop of *Oedipus at Colonus*. Only a successful tragic protagonist, one who has chosen to accept his guilt, surrender himself into the hands of God, die to his old self and be reborn comes to this third stage of tragedy, in which he is fully reconciled with God. The Sacred Grove of the Eumenides is the image for this full reconciliation between the protagonist and God; it is the *telos* of the tragic protagonist's life and of his journey. But what is it? What is this Sacred Grove? First, it must be noted that it is man's (Oedipus') true home, as the Chorus says: "He shall not seek another home, / For this, in all the earth and air, / Is most secure and loveliest" (670–72). The Sacred Grove is of an unending fruitfulness and fertility; it is untouched by storms. It is full of music and it is the birthplace of all the arts:

> In the god's untrodden vale
> Where leaves and berries throng,
> And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough,
> The sweet, sojourning nightingale

Murmurs all day long.
. . . . . .
And here the choiring Muses come,
And the divinity of love
With the gold reins in her hand. (671–80, 693–95)

"Heaven's dews" drop onto the flowers of the Sacred Grove "At daybreak all the year." The Grove is a source of ever-living water: "The river's fountains are awake, / And his nomadic streams that run / Unthinned forever, and never stay; / But like perpetual lovers move / On the maternal land." And, like the ever-flowing, life-giving water, the "fruit" of the Grove never dies and it regenerates itself:

The olive, fertile and self-sown,
The terror of our enemies
That no hand tames nor tears away—
The blessed tree that never dies!—
But it will mock the swordsman in his rage.

Ah, how it flourishes in every field,
Most beautifully here!
The gray-leafed tree, the children's nourisher!
No young man nor one partnered by his age
Knows how to root it out nor make
Barren its yield;
For Zeus the Father smiles on it with sage
Eyes that forever are awake,
And Pallas watches with her sea-pale eyes.
(681–82, 688–92, 698–706)

And then there is the fact that this is the Sacred Grove of the *Eumenides*, those entities who, as the Furies, dogged the steps of mankind as curses, who withered the land and made women barren, but who, in the *Oresteia*, were transformed into the Eumenides, now showering blessings on mankind, making the land fertile and marriages fruitful. From curses into blessings, from barrenness into fertility, from sterility into regeneration—that is the movement of spirit, the action of the soul, which underlies the life of the successful tragic protagonist. The Sacred Grove of the Eumenides is an image of the *telos* of the tragic protagonist because it is an image of the curse upon mankind (original sin) transformed into a blessing upon mankind (acceptance of guilt, penance, and suffering; surrender into the hands of God; death of the old self and birth of a new self). To become a successful tragic protagonist—that is, a tragic *hero*—is to reside in a place of endless fertility, fruitfulness, and regeneration, and to know that one has been in the hands of God all along. What fruits may come from the person who has wholly surrendered to God, died to self, and been reborn? We have only to look at the Saints for the answer to this question.

But however deeply profound and illuminating the image of the Sacred Grove is, it is still to *Hamlet* that we turn for the explicit mapping of tragic place. Hamlet's fathoming of the tragic abyss enables him to map the geography of man's paradoxical ontological situation: that there is no way, being human, to escape guilt through one's own actions. But in his encounter with the paradox of original sin and unavoidable human guilt, Hamlet has also seen that Heaven can make him free of it, if he will allow God to shape his end, to lead him to a new identity, and to remake him into a new self. All tragic

protagonists encounter this mystery at the depths of the tragic abyss. After Oedipus' true identity has been disclosed in *Oedipus the King*, the Chorus says, "I see your life finally revealed / your life fused with the god" (1518–19). Whether a particular tragic protagonist's god has been Apollo, as in the case of Oedipus and Orestes, or the Christian God, as in the case of Hamlet, there is a sense in which all tragic protagonists encounter Dionysus, the paradoxical god of tragedy, in the depths of the abyss. As Dionysus was yearly dismembered and reborn, so the successful tragic protagonist must choose to let his old identity, his idea of who he is, be torn apart in order that a new self be born—not that self which he thought he was but the person whom the gods intend him to be. The successful tragic protagonist must answer the call of Dionysus to yield and move beyond his old self (*ecstasis*) and join in the mysterious ecstasy of death and rebirth. Thus the self-blinded Oedipus, after he has discovered who he really is and his own unspeakable guilt, proclaims, "Now / I am / Oedipus!" (1768–70). Lear, after Cordelia rescues him from his metaphorical descent into infernal regions and the grave, redefines himself as "a very foolish fond old man … old and foolish" (4.6.60, 84), and we are reminded that the fallen Adam is the "Old Man," whom Christ redeems as the "New Man," but only at the cost of suffering, crucifixion, and death. It is only after Hamlet has surrendered himself into the hands of the "divinity that shapes our ends" and consented to that dismemberment of his old identity requisite for the birth of a new self that he can declare "This is I / Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.258–59).

Hamlet maps the depths of the tragic abyss and the parameters of the ascent from it. Although the tragic fall plunges the protagonist into groundlessness, this "yawning into the inde-

terminate" is, as Glenn Arbery writes, something "out of which ground itself stabilizes, an exposure of depths mysteriously astir with terror and healing, a revelation of the blackness-to-us of the divine" (vi). For a successful tragic protagonist—a tragic *hero*—the ground indeed stabilizes in such a way that an ascent from the abyss is possible and a destination is revealed. To become a tragic hero, the protagonist must make the right choice in the bowels of the abyss. Confronted with original sin and man's ontological paradox of inescapable guilt, the protagonist must choose to surrender himself into the hands of God, whose purposes the mind of man cannot encompass, and experience that healing which emerges from the terror. The destination of a tragic hero is the mystery of a life beyond the vision of mortal men, in which the old self has died and a new self been born. Hamlet, most noble of Christian princes, makes the map with unflinching integrity, and anyone who, having experienced the abyss, chooses to accept, surrender, be reborn, and thus ascend will find Hamlet at the destination of the journey.

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Winner of the Spring 2013 *Judith Stewart Shank Prize in Criticism*

THE FACE OF UNGIT: C. S. LEWIS' ADAPTATION OF APULEIUS IN *TILL WE HAVE FACES*

by **Maria Stromberg**

Much of the power of myth can be seen in its ability to inspire retelling. Since ancient times, poets have taken the myths handed down to them and, by recreating them, have found new possibilities and new insights. In each retelling, the myth unfolds its potential for meaning, and the greater its potential, the more powerful the myth—that is, the closer to the mysterious truth of reality. "The myths … are perhaps the truest stories ever told" (Howard 160). The greatest mystery is that which nearly every myth approaches in some way or other—what is the relation of human and divine? The story of Eros and Psyche, first told by Apuleius in the second century AD, is one of the most powerful and influential myths that have come down to us because of its universal approach to that question. The name Psyche means "soul" in Greek, and thus the myth holds the potential interpretation in which the human soul itself is beloved by the god whose name means "love." Several versions of the myth have come since then, but none so powerful and unusual as C. S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*. Lewis takes the main theme of the myth—love both human and divine, perverse and perfect—and delves into the

possibilities, left implicit by Apuleius, of understanding that love.

The greatest change made to the myth by Lewis is his movement of the focus of the story from Psyche herself to one of her jealous sisters, whom he names Orual. Instead of the two sisters who persuade Psyche to disobey her divine husband out of jealousy, Lewis gives the reader one sister who believes that everything she is doing is for Psyche's sake, who sees the castle only for one moment and convinces herself that it is an illusion. "Lewis has removed the certainty of supernatural causality behind the myth" (Manlove 194). From the perspective of Orual, the motives of the gods are unclear. She is convinced that they are evil, trying to steal away from her the person she loves wholeheartedly. All critics agree that the story told by Lewis is still about love—but no longer the straightforward love between human and divine that Apuleius had focused on. That story is left out, hinted at, but never seen by Orual herself. She never sees the god, although she hears his voice when it is too late and Psyche has been sent on her sorrowful wandering. The main story is about Orual's love—her love for her sister, which is deeply twisted and difficult to understand. "It is a story of true love and false love, of the selfless but also of the selfish parading as selfless" (Kilby 171). Orual destroys the happiness of her beloved sister because she cannot bear to give her up to a divine power: "The point of the book centers on the 'case' of Orual, human affection and its possessiveness in the face of the possession of its object of affection by a higher power" (Glover 188). This twisting of love in Orual's soul occurs not only in her relation to Psyche, but eventually in all of her relations and in all types of love: "As Lewis observed in *The Four Loves*, affection, friendship, and eros may all be per-

verted: here, Orual distorts affection and friendship in her relationship with Psyche, as she elsewhere distorts eros with her counsellor Bardia" (Christopher 198). By giving the reader the other side, as it were, of Apuleius' myth, Lewis can focus on a characterization of love at its most flawed: "that love which, when unsanctified, becomes tyrannical and possessive, which rots and stinks and turns into hatred" (Van Der Weele 191). There is nothing like this in Apuleius' version of the story: or is there? If this is a true retelling of the myth, and not simply the writing of a new myth, Lewis may have found a possibility in the first telling that he could expand upon. The answer can perhaps be found in one of his less noticed, but just as startling changes to the original story: the creation of Ungit as Lewis' version of the goddess Aphrodite, mother of Eros and goddess of love.

Who is Ungit? In the non-Greek world of Glome where Lewis sets his story, Aphrodite is not a beautiful, dazzling goddess in woman's form, but a shapeless stone, covered with the blood of sacrifices. No other character in Apuleius' myth changes so much in character or appearance as Aphrodite transformed into Ungit. The Fox, Orual's Greek tutor, recognizes Ungit as corresponding to Aphrodite, but it hardly seems possible that she is still the goddess of love. In Lewis' own mythology of the story, she is not really a goddess in the same sense that Eros, known only as the god of the mountain, exists as a supernatural being. His voice is heard, Psyche sees him, and Orual herself feels his presence at the very end of the book. Ungit, however, never appears. She is shapeless and terrifying. In spite of this, the people of Glome find comfort and peace from their worship of her.

None of this seems to parallel the Greek understanding of Aphrodite. Yet there is a certain terror and mystery surrounding her: according to the Greek legend she was born from the foam of the sea and the blood of Ouranos' castration—thus, parentless and of an origin beyond human understanding. In that sense, like Ungit, Aphrodite is faceless: she is unintelligible. As Orual realizes from the Fox's telling of his story, Aphrodite is also terrifying in spite of her beauty when she appears in her true form to the mortal Anchises. Nor is Aphrodite necessarily good, for all her aesthetic appeal. In the story of Cupid and Psyche, as told by Apuleius, it is the incredible jealousy of Aphrodite that creates all of the problems for Psyche. Her relationship with Cupid is a little too close for comfort, even if they are mother and son. She is ready to punish Psyche with the worst of relationships in return for the loss of her worship, even if that was not Psyche's own fault but that of the people who idolized her. The tasks Aphrodite makes her perform after discovering that Eros had fallen in love with Psyche are meant to be too hard to accomplish. It is only the intervention of Jupiter that finally forces Aphrodite to stop and accept the relationship of the two lovers. This possessiveness of love, intense jealousy masked as affection, inability to let go of someone related to you—all of these elements were taken by Lewis and made the center of the story in the character of Orual. Aphrodite represents not only sexual love, but also the dark and ugly sides of what love can become. In her actions, Aphrodite is not beautiful. Nor is she divine; she is all too human in all of her aspects. She is not divine in the sense that Lewis would have understood the word divine. She represents, not the ineffable and transcendent, but what is common to humanity itself. Mythology often makes divine what is repre-

sentative of a mystery of human nature: thus Ares, god of war, embodies mindless violence; Artemis, a feminine desire to be untouched and unsullied by love. These tendencies are difficult to understand, even, or perhaps especially, for those in whom they occur. Mythology gives them a certain objectivity by making them into figures of a story, but the end of the story is not understanding the divine, but understanding the human; yet perhaps it is possible to understand the divine through the human. As the story of Eros and Psyche shows, not to mention many other myths of various times and places, there is an overwhelming belief that humans at their best, and with help, can become divine. Apuleius' myth provides one such account, and it shows quite clearly that one thing must be overcome in the path to divinity: Aphrodite, the goddess of love. One of the most curious features of the story as Apuleius tells it is the final task that Psyche must perform: to go to the underworld and bring back the chest that contains Proserpina's beauty, to give to Aphrodite. If Aphrodite truly is beautiful, what does she need with some other goddess' beauty? This is never explained, yet it provides a possibility in the myth that Lewis explores to its full potential. Aphrodite is overcome and defeated by a transformation of her ugliness into beauty—a beauty not human or sexual, since it comes from the underworld, the land of spirits. It is this spiritual beauty, carried by the hands of Psyche, the soul, that redeems the ugliness of human love and makes possible the union of human soul and divine love. The pattern of the myth, seen in this light, allows Lewis to write the story *Till We Have Faces*, infusing into it all of his Christian belief, but without making it into an allegory of the Christian faith.

There are two versions of Aphrodite in Lewis' retelling of the story—Ungit, the goddess to whom sacrifices are made, and Orual, the ugly sister whose possessive and selfish love must be purged. As the story goes on, Orual learns, through dreams and visions as well as conversations and her own retelling of her story, that she too is Ungit. At last, when the vision comes to its culmination, and she waits for Psyche, having understood herself at last, she is Ungit to whom Psyche brings the beauty of Proserpina. Then, in a further twist, she becomes Psyche as well—that is, the beloved of the god who loves Psyche. But this is for later. What does it mean for Orual to be Ungit? Ungit, like Aphrodite, is a figure of something universal and mysterious. Orual, on the other hand, is one particular person in whom the mystery and formlessness of Ungit grows until it overwhelms her. Yet both are not purely negative or evil in their effects on others. The worship of Ungit is treated by Lewis with a strange kind of reverence. The priest is a powerful figure, and his belief and piety are real. He is sacred, and the house of Ungit is also sacred. He understands the presence of mystery in the world, and of what is beyond reason's grasp, and he is proved to be right—not necessarily in his particular understanding, but in his knowledge that there are things he does not know. For all of his philosophical tendencies, the Fox is less like Socrates than the priest in this respect. The Fox pretends to have answers for everything, and to discount what cannot be fitted into his rational system. Ungit, as representing what is mysterious and ineffable in human life, can, in that sense, be called divine, even if Lewis does not show that she actually exists. She is not there at the end, when the god comes for Psyche—or she is only there within Orual. At one point towards the end of the story, when the old priest is dead

and the new priest of Ungit has brought in a Greek statue of Aphrodite to adorn her temple, Orual sees a woman offering sacrifice at the old stone. The woman is convulsed with grief, yet after praying to Ungit she becomes calm and at peace. The new, beautiful statue, is not for her and does not give her comfort. There is a sense in which the divine must be mysterious and beyond comprehension, and yet close to the nature of things. Ungit is described as brooding, like a loaf of bread, maternal and yet stifling like the nurse who embraced Orual too closely and possessively. This is how Orual sees her. Yet she is a stone—that is, of the earth itself, connected to nature directly. The story is that she pushed herself out of the earth, not that she fell from the sky. She is not manmade—if made at all, in the understanding of the people of Glome, she is made by the same power that made the earth, and is thus, like nature, outside of human control. The beautiful statue of Aphrodite, on the other hand, is made by human hands. It cannot comfort because it contains no mystery and no sense of connection with what is beyond the human.

Ungit is not merely a representation, like Aphrodite, of the mystery and sometimes ugliness of human love. She is also the imperfect way in which an imperfect and still barbarous people understand something of the ineffable power of the divine. They cannot help confusing the mystery of their own human passions and the mystery of a divine being. The god of the mountain, like Eros, is not faceless—but he cannot allow his face to be seen. Orual, unlike the god, is faceless by choice, because she hides herself from self-knowledge and the knowledge of others. Her use of the veil to hide her ugliness is symptomatic of this. It is an outward expression of her refusal to admit her wrongdoing and the ugliness that has invaded her

love for Psyche. The more she refuses herself, the more faceless she becomes, until she becomes the formless Ungit—not as a divine being, but as the mysterious power of selfishness that feeds on everything that comes to it. These two aspects are united in Ungit, depending on the person who approaches her. It is the human and worst aspect that grows in Orual until her veil becomes her "face"—not her true face, but the symbol that allows people to recognize her. When she grows old, she realizes that by removing her veil she can go in disguise—she has no face that others would know. Yet the removal of her veil is the first step in the recovery of her true self. It is at that point that the voice of the god in the river forbids her to kill herself. Instead of destroying what little self she has left, she must prepare to recover her true face—which happens within the dream in which her father shows her that she is Ungit, and then she herself sees her sin through the reading of her own accusation. It is a mirror to her soul—a soul now stripped of the veil of self-delusion and pride. Orual realizes at last that she has become Ungit, the swollen, selfish, all-devouring spider that sacrifices what it loves—but at the same time she is also the other side of Ungit for the first time. She is the side of Ungit that is capable of divinity. Orual, as the veiled queen, had lost her true face but had also become for her people something like Ungit. She had become a just and good queen who gave security and prosperity to her nation. This was also something of which she was capable. Lewis takes care to remind us of this. But this potential for goodness in Orual was not from the heart when she acted as queen. It was the veil that she used to hide the turmoil of her soul, to forget about Psyche and her guilt towards her. In order to gain her true face, Orual

needed more than the good actions of most of her life. She needed to be transformed from Ungit into Psyche.

Here Lewis, at the end of his book, departed most fully from the myth as Apuleius told it. Ungit, and Orual, are both described as motherly figures, but they are both barren. Only in the mythology of the priest is the god of the mountain a son of Ungit. In reality, at the end, he becomes the lover, not only of Psyche, but, it is implied, of Orual who has become Psyche as well. He is the one to whom all love is properly directed, and Orual, for all her once painful and twisted love of Psyche, the love that governed her life, must admit that even Psyche does not matter for her own sake, but for the god's sake. In the old myth, Apuleius hinted at an improper relation between Aphrodite and Eros as mother and son—it is through her excessive love for Eros that Aphrodite becomes the evil figure to be defeated. For Lewis, however, there is no such thing as excessive love for the god. He is the only one, in fact, who can be loved above everything. It is Psyche who must be loved, not for her own sake, but for his. Orual has learned that there is an order in love, which she had overturned in blaming the gods and wishing to keep Psyche for herself. Unlike the pagan mythologists, Lewis has faith that all mortals are loved by the gods. To lose Psyche to the gods is only to lose her as long as Orual does not love them herself. When she becomes Psyche, the one who loves and is beloved by the god, she gains everything that she had lost—and much more. To become Psyche is to gain the face that is most truly one's own. The meaning of the word Psyche implies this, of course, and Lewis does the most he can with the Greek allegory. The Greeks also guessed that all humans, all souls, were beloved by the gods. But to gain that face is not easy—some, like Istra, are born being Psyche. Others,

like Orual, fight against it all of their lives. How does Orual gain her face at last? She does so through Psyche's gift of Proserpina's beauty. To know oneself is not enough—the true face is a gift that is given, and that is why it is so difficult to accept for the soul that is proud.

"The one condition of joy is obedience" (Howard 159). This is not something that Lewis has imported into the myth from his Christian consciousness, although it is certainly integral to his faith. It is something that was implicit in the myth from the very beginning. Psyche can do nothing of herself—it is Eros who must save her from her own foolishness. Her entrance into Olympus is not deserved, it is a gift of Zeus for Eros' sake. However, in making Orual the main figure of his story, Orual who is Aphrodite as well as the jealous sister, Lewis makes clear that gods do not only love the mortals who love them. The painful journey of Psyche is actually the journey of Orual herself—she bears the pain, she does the hardest work of unraveling her own distorted life, until she is ready to receive her true face. In Lewis' telling, Psyche does not obey her sister and betray her divine lover because she is persuaded by her; she does it knowing what will happen because it is the only way to save Orual. That is the point at which Psyche acts like a divine being. Even though Orual does not love the gods as she understands them, the gods love her and prove it through the suffering they allow her to experience. The trials of Psyche are her trials, and the result is her transformation. What was unclear or ambiguous in Apuleius' myth is retold by Lewis to support the full meaning that was implicit. In Lewis' retelling, we humans do not suffer because the gods hate us, but because they love us.

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REVIEW: *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories, 2nd ed.*

Oates, Joyce Carol, ed. *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.
ISBN: 978-0-19-974439-8

by **Thomas A. Beyer**

This year saw the publication of a revised version of *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates, successor to the first edition published in 1994. In it Oates endeavors to compile works which, when viewed together, will give some impression of the overall movement and development of fiction across America's history. But more than that, her "inspiration," as she says in the Introduction, was to feature "familiar names, unfamiliar titles." As a result, while she includes such obligatory selections as Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," she foregoes others in favor of bringing her readers new insights on old authors by providing them the opportunity to read those works with which the vast majority of us are woefully unfamiliar. "Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener'" says Oates, "has entered our literary consciousness, deservedly, but what of 'The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids'…?" "Henry James' aesthetic is nowhere more perfectly realized than in 'The Beast in the Jungle,' anthologized virtu-

ally everywhere; yet what of 'The Middle Years,' so much more direct, more human, more personal in its statement of the isolate's (or the artist's) life?"

In the end, what Oates has given us is, on one level, a valuable catalog of the history of American fiction. But on another, and more significant, level, *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories* is an anthology of new and unexpected perceptions on reality from some of our greatest artists. Oates' collection isn't perfect. Her prefaces to each work, for example, focus too heavily on historical and biographical concerns. But I, for one, cannot think of anything more priceless or worthwhile than the chance to encounter and engage with the world and human experience in such astonishing, and astonishingly profound, ways as this anthology supplies—stories from the New World, revealing new worlds of imagination and truth.

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

Thomas A. Beyer:

Thomas A. Beyer is a former student at the College of Saint Thomas More in Fort Worth. He is currently attending Texas Woman's University seeking the completion of his Bachelor of Arts in English Literature. In June 2012 he and several other former members of Saint Thomas More founded The Exiles in an effort to carry on some semblance of that institution's singular legacy of the love of learning and truth. He is also a new husband and father.

Donald Carlson:

Donald Carlson holds a PhD in Literature from the University of Dallas. He is a former Fellow in Literature at the College of Saint Thomas More and teaches English at Trinity Valley School in Fort Worth, where he also co-directs the Much Ado About Shakespeare summer workshop with his wife Anna.

Bethany Collier:

Bethany Collier is an American who currently lives and teaches English in Central America.

Michael Lee Johnson:

Michael Lee Johnson is a poet, freelance writer, photographer, and small business owner of custom imprinted promotional products and apparel in Itasca, Illinois. He is heavily influenced by: Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Irving Layton, Herman Hesse, Krishnamurti, Charles

Bukowski, Leonard Cohen, and Allen Ginsberg. Michael has been published in over 25 countries, including several chapbooks. He is also editor/publisher of seven poetry websites.

Tyler Morrison:

In 2012, Tyler Morrison became the last graduate of the College of Saint Thomas More. In addition to his poetry, he is currently writing his first album and play.

B. R. Mullikin:

B. R. Mullikin received his BA from the College of Saint Thomas More. He is currently finishing his Master of Arts in Humanities at the University of Dallas.

Andrew Nicholson:

Andrew Nicholson is a 40-year-old writer, writer, performer and sometime experimental musician from the Manchester area of England. He published one book of poetry through N Press entitled *Return to Kemptown* in 2010, and his second book, a collaboration with Jeff Dawson entitled *A Means to an End* has also just been printed.

James B. Nicola:

James B. Nicola has had 300 poems published in periodicals including *Atlanta Review*, *Tar River*, *Texas Review*, *Lyric*, and *Nimrod*. A Yale grad and stage director by profession, his book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* Award. As a poet, he also won the Dana Literary Award and a People's Choice award (from *Storyteller)*; was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a

Rhysling Award; and was featured poet at *New Formalist*. His children's musical *Chimes: A Christmas Vaudeville* premiered in Fairbanks, Alaska—with Santa Claus in attendance opening night.

Richard King Perkins, II:

Richard King Perkins, II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He has a wife named Vickie and a daughter named Sage. His work has appeared in hundreds of publications including *Prime Mincer*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Fox Cry*, *Prairie Winds*, and *The Red Cedar Review*.

Tom Pescatore:

Tom Pescatore grew up outside Philadelphia. He is an active member of the growing underground poetry scene within the city and hopes to spread the word on Philadelphia's new poets. He maintains a poetry blog. His work has been published in literary magazines both nationally and internationally but he'd rather have them carved on the Walt Whitman bridge or on the sidewalks of Philadelphia's old Skid Row.

Amanda Grace Poore:

Amanda Grace Poore is currently a graduate student at the University of North Texas, pursuing her MA in Library and Information Science. She works at the public library in The Colony, Texas developing youth literacy and providing technology training. Her undergraduate degree at The University of Texas at Arlington focused on creative writing and screen-

writing. She is currently writing a fantasy novel entitled *The Coin*.

Judith Stewart Shank:

Dr. Judith Stewart Shank has taught literature and philosophy for twenty-seven years. She was one of the founders of the College of Saint Thomas More, designed its undergraduate literature curriculum, and served as Academic Dean of the College from 1998–2000. Dr. Shank is a frequent participant in Liberty Fund colloquia and directed a colloquium on "Freedom in the Works of Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and Gerard Manley Hopkins" in 1998. She is currently Senior Professor in Literature and Philosophy at the College of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More.

Dr. Shank received her PhD and MA in Philosophy and Literature from The International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein, after receiving a master's degree in Human Relations and a BA in Philosophy from the University of Oklahoma. In addition to the essay published herein, Dr. Shank is the author of "Perilous and Beautiful: Form and Restraint in John Crowe Ransom's Vision of Community," *The Political Science Reviewer*, XXX, 2001; *Country Boy Odyssey*, with Roy P. Stewart, the inaugural volume of the Oklahoma Voices Series, Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2000; "Von Hildebrand's Theory of the Affective Value Response and Our Knowledge of God," *Aletheia: An International Yearbook of Philosophy*, V, Peter Lang, 1992; and numerous articles on literature as a mode of knowledge and the nature and criteria of the literary work of art. She is also working on two books, tentatively entitled *Experience Fulfilled and Redeemed in Knowledge: Defining the*

Literary Work of Art and *A Violent Love*, a series of essays on tragedy.

Ron Shannon:

Ron Shannon has a MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. Recently, he has published short fiction at clevermag.com, an online magazine and in the short story anthology *Hazard Yet Forward*. He has submitted two novels with the hope they will be published, and he is working on a third. He lives and writes at the New Jersey Shore and he is a member of Romance Writers of America.

Chiara Solari:

Chiara Solari spends her days attempting to instill a love of literature and classical languages in the students of a private Catholic school in North Idaho. In her spare time she writes the occasional poem and labors over her novels: she has written four and is slowly editing them in the hopes of gaining an agent and publisher. She runs a blog, called *Chiara's Balancing Act*, which she updates twice a week. Currently she holds a BA in Liberal Arts, and occasionally thinks of returning to school for Library Science.

Gerald Solomon:

Gerald Solomon was born in London and studied English Literature at Cambridge University. After a short spell as sales assistant at a bookshop in London's Charing Cross Road he worked as a producer at the BBC. Subsequently becoming engaged in education, he helped found General Studies courses at Hornsey College of Art, and this led eventually to an enjoy-

able period teaching poetry courses at Middlesex University. He retired early in order to paint and write. His poems have appeared in numerous magazines in the USA and UK as he prepares his first collection. He is married, with four children, and lives in Manhattan.

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.

Sally Thomas:

Sally Thomas' poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *First Things*, *The New Yorker*, *Modern Age*, *Dappled Things*, and numerous other journals. Her first poetry collection, *Brief Light: Sonnets and Other Small Poems*, was published in the Fall of 2012. An advocate for home education and a lover of choral music, she lives with her husband and four children in North Carolina.

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