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THE
HITCHLIT REVIEW



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“The essence of the independent mind lies not in what it thinks, but in how it thinks.”

-- Christopher Hitchens

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Poetry

Apology

Rachel Tramonte

Dear body,
Media sold you
And I bought the parts
Breasts
Legs
Hands
Waists
Thighs
so many thighs.
Bodies cut above the nape of the neck.
I saw you in movies, magazines, online—
Littered, altered, on the city streets

Dear body,
I am sorry
I dragged
You around
Like a sack of potatoes,
A quartered chicken,
Unnamed carcass,
Bag of hockey gear,
Dead baby,
Plastic of Paris unicorn head.

I will collect the parts.

Sex Assignment

Rachel Tramonte

By an ancient art or science
sex is assigned: XX, XY

You occupy the body you do.
We hope it fits.

We live in minds, slip down glass halls,
nap in caves of ice with fluorescent lights and disco balls.

The mind leads the body down the corridors it does.
Perception breaks genetic codes apart.

Save yourself. XXOX. Slip the knit,
work off the purl, bind off.

Fathers

Rachel Tramonte

Dad, I saw you bearded, mustached, absurd among their equipment.
The nurse already wrapped you in light blue robe.

At fifty-two I left you talking and moaning in room 322
while rubber fingers fiddled with IVs and monitors.

Dad, I know we sprinkled your ashes at Dickens's house,
in the grape arbor in Amherst, and under the Brooklyn Bridge,

but I still think you are in the elevated tunnel at Mass General
where they wheeled you from room to room. I think you are still

waiting in the hospital bed for me to deliver a cannoli or rum baba.
April, ten years later,
you make your first visits in the form of Berkeley's half-homeless
men.

You were the one shivering under the damp yellow and white pottery
barn duvet
in front of the yoga studio to whom I gave a jar of my coworker's pea
soup.

His name was David—my brother's name. He told me a few
irrational things
and apologized for sitting by the front door. I said, "No worries.
Take your time."

Yesterday you had a long white beard and long rounded nails and you
drew me
into the health food store to buy you a bar of dark chocolate, 70
percent.

You gave me the wrapper and said, *only \$2.99—lifts my spirit, lifts my mood.*

I bought you two and he sang “Piano Man” just like Billy Joel

La la la, di da da

La la, di da da da dum

Sunday Defiance

Charlotte Jones

Our Father,

*Or maybe "Our Mother" or "Great Spirit"?
Don't really believe in God.*

which art in heaven

*And I sure as hell don't believe in heaven,
or any hereafter for that matter.*

hallowed be thy name.

*I like saying "halwa", that gelatinous sweet
Middle Eastern dessert.*

Thy kingdom come,

We'd all like to come.

thy will be done,

So long as it doesn't conflict with my will.

on earth as it is in heaven.

*Good luck with that since the earth
is beyond repair these days.*

Give us this day our daily bread.

*Too many carbs,
so please give me fish and veggies.*

And forgive us our trespasses,

No trespasses here.

With the possible exception of pride.

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Hell no.

Just 'cuz it's written doesn't mean I have to say it.

And lead us not into temptation,

Personally, I'd like a little temptation.

Please lead me into some.

but deliver us from evil.

*Looking for fun, not evil,
so I'm OK with this one.*

For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

*The whole reason this country exists
was to get away from kingdoms.*

*Yeah, whatever.
Thank god this is nearly over.*

Well, at least until next Sunday.

God Explains CRISPR

Barry Peters

He's wearing a snappy blazer,
purple button-down,
purple pocket square,
God at the auditorium podium
pontificating in front of a 12-foot PowerPoint

explaining the unexplainable in a French accent,
comparing our genetic strands to a train,
CRISPR to a Pacman chomping bad DNA,
metaphors designed to make designer genes
seem banal, like getting a nose job, He says,

explicating
medical implications
political implications
class implications
corporate implications
ecological implications
global implications
ethical implications
spiritual implications

God in a lab coat creating the stuff of universe,
including the law of unintended consequences,
such as God cashing in on His own research.

They're even making a documentary:
God in His kitchen cooking with CRISPR.

Before gene-altering kits were available by mail,
no two butterflies had the same wing pattern.
now, thanks to Chef God and his molecular cutlery,
they do. They do.

A Modern-Day Blackfoot

Yvonne Higgins Leach

-- *For Elliot Fox*

He is fused to the sun and air
like the wash of light on river water.
His Blood Reservation is a mouth
that speaks of tree-blanketed hills
prairieland, badger, elk
berry, bear, and wolf.
He speaks to wolves.
After a date with his wife
he drives her in his slick-black Silverado
large hands at the wheel
headlights breaking through
the drench of darkness
up the meandering road
and into the pullout
across from the burned-out aspen stand.
They step out
under the star-magnified sky
engine off but clicking
like an irritated insect.
Belly River bulges
from the springtime snowmelt.
The Belly River wolf pack
in the windless night
rest near their den
accustomed to the cool earth beneath them.
When he cups his hands and howls
down the canyon
they stand up
stretch their throats skyward
and howl back.

Impartial Memories

Yvonne Higgins Leach

Not my first time overnight in an airport hotel
in a foreign country. A pre-dawn flight out means
I kill time walking cobblestone streets. The town
in *riposo* so I enter other spaces—

the shadows of shutter-dressed apartments,
garbage cans sunstruck and weighty on curbs,
surprisingly, inside the local cemetery.
Here, photographs adorn above-ground graves.

I leave and think ironically
Nothing much to do here but live.
I, a passerby, a temporary fixture,
never to return again, will sleep worry-free

in my soundproof room tonight.
When asked about my trip I will go on
and on about the cathedrals, castles, villas, and museums,
the pastas, cheeses, and wines. And yet,

my quiet neighborhood walk amid white stucco,
red roofs, unfamiliar trees, and the sound of the local
church bells ringing, that's a memory I like too—
and the Italian cat on the windowsill closing her eyes to the sun.

Summer

Lopamundra Basu

The barrenness of dry soil and snow, now a memory,
this old deck, the swing padded with cushions rocking
from which I see the apple tree shorn of blossoms, awaiting fruit.
Fall plantings of pear, cherry, Douglas fir and Japanese ash
still alive, after the ice-storms. The young boy glances fondly at
saplings rooted in autumn, while I breathe blooming lilacs.

Like other years, I think of cherry tomatoes, serrano peppers in pots
on the stairs, or squash blossoms in the backyard. Fleeting longings
before I return to the swing's seductive back and forth.
The new Ondaatje beckons as does Mary Oliver
I will pick fruits that ripen on shelves for years.

Summer Storm

Gay Baines

I hear the puddling in the gutters,
that mysterious rush of rain
in grass. Beneath the east window,
neighbors' lamps gleam on the
fragile pools in thirsty leaves.
I imagine purple pansies
lifting their gray and yellow eyes
to the sky.

After a month of
drought I should rejoice, but don't.
Somewhere people murmur *There
is a god*, but to me it's a visit
by a gray-coated spirit that will
drift away to the East,
looking for the wind.

Remember

Eva-Maria Sher

Remember there's a quiet
place inside that knows
something no one else
can tell you.

Remember there's a word
that's all your own
a dance never before
danced waiting for you.

Remember the rose blooms
whether you've heard its
poem or not

and the wide sky
is lonely for your song.

Altar Call

Bill Abbott

So you found yourself there
Alone in that crowd
In that moment of the universe,
On that hot summer night,
Surrounded by those hot hundreds of people,
And everybody's singing
And everybody's singing,
"I have decided to follow Jesus
No turning back, no turning back."
And you're hot in the summer night
And you're a little bit hungry
And you've felt this way before
A few years back, right before you passed out,
But this time, you're not that lucky...
And you're swaying and you're singing
And you start to mistake the feeling
For a religious experience
And you stagger down the aisle for the altar call
And you drop to your knees, crying
Because you feel so tired and so hot
And you think that maybe you've finally found God
Behind those exhausted eyes of yours
Under a tent revival on a hot summer night,
But you didn't.
You renewed your faith
In something you didn't want
Again.
A stale wafer, a sip of grape juice,
And you're all better, cleansed of past sins.

The next day, you watch as another church member
Gets dunked in the river,
And you feel jealous that your baptism wasn't that exciting

And you feel jealous that he probably felt something more than
you did

And you watch as he goes under
And you watch the water's surface
For spirits or angels or something...
But nothing happens.

He comes back up, drenched and shivering
But renewed somehow...

And you don't feel renewed anymore.
You feel as lonely and isolated as ever
And you want to assume again
That everyone feels the same as you in their faith,
But you can see otherwise all around you.

They decided for you
That you'd follow Jesus,
And you wish that you could do something about it
But there's no turning back.
No turning back.

Alternative to Prayers

Bill Abbott

So, you're going to pray for me.
Thanks. I appreciate that you'd
Spend any extra time and thought
On me personally.

But I have a list of other things you can do
That will be just as useful to me as your prayers.

You can collect lint from between your toes.
You can send a tax-deductible donation to Lorthos
 The fish king.

You can build up your power into your hands
In anticipation of a solar blast.

You can rescue baby unicorns from the threat of cardboard.

You can build yourself a home out of crushed beer cans.

You can memorize the works of E. L. James,

Dedicate your life to ferret feeding and grooming,

Hang drapes around the windows of shantytowns,

You can scout out a new cell phone service,

Compare your insurance rates to that of other companies,

Invent your own doohickey that runs off of peanut shells,

Give away all your earthly possessions,

Hoard your house full of flea market nick-nacks,

Spend all your time carving a statue of St. Stupid.

You can rearrange your furnishing by color,

Then start over by function, alphabetically.

You can listen to a new style of music, something you haven't tried.

Just don't tell me about any of this. I need no benefit.

I just would like for you to use your time
In a way that is just as useful as praying.

Me Also

Leisha Douglas

In this time of confessions,
speechless I nod,
agree with what is spoken
gathers weight, approximates
truth though it is remembrance
of scenes once discounted
or deliberately ignored;
the drunk neighbor's leering chase,
my stepfather's gropes,
horny young men with limpid eyes.

What I know
not just bone knowledge, empathy
or a declaration of sisterhood.

Whenever the unforeseen happened,
I was there but not
there, that magical skill
perfected as a child.

It was my way to be
impermeable, eradicate
intruders although what remains
is mostly a nonverbal tangle
from which little can be constructed.

Politics

Leisha Douglas

Trying to grow a wildflower meadow,
for three years,
I plant the same seed packs every spring.
What comes up always a surprise.

Last year, mugwort, among the asters and cornflowers.
Now, switchgrass, belligerently drunk on good soil,
waves above brown-eyed Susans and poppies.
I seek to create unkempt beauty,
tousled like young girls rising from sleep,
to provide a haven for butterflies and bees
but politics involves compromise
even if the common good is the goal.

Corruption is always a threat
but every winter I forget, envision
an outcome where each flower has
what it needs to thrive,
potential enemies subdued
if not eliminated.

Fiction

Witching Season

Grace Timko

The two windows in her bedroom were tall and low. There was a sliver of wall in between the frames, small enough that she often wondered why not connect them and drew pictures of rooms with just one window that might have been two. She wished that she had the whole expanse of the wall as a glass portal to the outside. Each day she would come home from school, have a snack at the kitchen table while she did her second-grade math homework, and return to the windows. Even if it was winter, she loved to open them as high as she could reach. She would rest her chin on the sill and take deep breaths in and out, in and out. The cold air would burn her throat and lungs, but she craved the sensation of feeling the chill disperse through the cells in her alveoli, carried through her blood to each part of her body even the mole on the base of her neck.

At the windows, she waited for something to happen, for something to appear out of the woods that lined her backyard, curving around the grass like a crescent moon. Sometimes, the evergreens would rustle in the wind, and she felt like something extraordinary was going to happen—perhaps even happen to her. She waited for a familiar to appear to her in the shape of a black and white cat or a dog with a gold-plated tag reading “Ash.” One day, while immersing herself in the daily ritual, she saw it. A stark red fox against the washed out, dead foliage and the brown-gray grass that had died near the entrance to the woods. Later, she would say that it stared at her bedroom window and disappeared into the depths of the trees—her mother rarely allowed her to venture more than a few feet in for fear of tick bites, but today she sprinted from her windows and down the back stairs and out the porch door and in after the fox. She never found the fox, her fox, but she happened upon a graveyard of old roller skates, the kind with four bubblegum pink wheels that are still available to rent at old rinks. Leaving them untouched, she examined them: what she imagined was once white leather was coated with a sheen of gray grime, the shoelaces swollen with water

and whatever else they absorbed from beneath the decaying leaves on which the skate lay. The wheels had scuffmarks.

*

In the spring of sophomore year, she read *The Crucible* and felt she truly understood why Marilyn Monroe fell in love with Arthur Miller. Outside, the cold strangeness of rain spilled over the gutter and cascaded down the window glass like a sheet slung over a rope. It was hung by wooden clothespins, one marked with the letters *M* and *W* in thick, black lines of ink. She flung the window sash up and leaned her head back and out and over until her neck was resting on the sill and her hands gripped underneath. The rain caught her long hair and weighted it down toward the stone patio below. She craned her neck further over the sill until her head was hanging out the window. To her, the water was baptismal in spite of the fragmented decay of leaves and earth that it carried across her crown. She then had the terrible sensation that she was going to fly and pulled herself up and through the window. That spring, the roots of daffodils drowned and rotted in the dirt. Inside, she looked at herself in the mirror and said, *You're the saddest girl I've ever met.*

*

There were the summers, and her mother rarely found her inside. In their backyard, she would peel the spongy bark off trees and plunged them into the earth—the foundation for a fairy garden that remained unfinished and eventually would decompose. She raided the neighbor's touch-me-nots and delighted in the thrill that struck her as the pods hanging off the plants popped open at the slightest pressure between her thumb and forefinger, after a moment of feeling threatened. Seeds scattered on the front walk—usually three or four per pod—and they reminded her of discarded sunflower seeds that she would find in the dugout at softball practice. After collecting about four pods-worth of her main ingredient, she would sometimes grind them up into potions along with nectar pulled from the heart of honey suckles and glitter.

Then she found a bone.

It was her eleventh June when she unearthed it, half-buried in the dirt by the mushroom patch blooming in the southeast corner of her yard. It might have been a dog's treasure, abandoned years before her pet-less family moved in to the house. But to her, it was the most

exciting discovery yet. She created rituals around this bone and it became her source of power. When the sun began to set behind the trees that encircled the neighborhood, she would return the bone to its hiding place underneath the porch, wrapped in an old piece of satin torn from her mother's old figure skating costume. Her best friend, Emily, would pretend to live amongst wild horses and come before her for medicine or magic. Together, they made up a summer counterpart to All Hallows Eve, though the exact name has been lost to time and lack of neighborhood lore.

In fact, the neighborhood was completely puzzled by the initiation of a pagan holiday in August—*Why not wait until October*, they asked—and set out bowls of pennies or popsicles that melted even in the shade because who has Halloween candy in the summer? The girls just laughed. Instead, they would wait until sunset to weave through yards and burst through the hedges that sectioned one off from another, screeching because they were banshees and this is what the sacred night called for. Her younger siblings wanted to join in, so the girl and her best friend created a world that the others could not access—entered only by walking a street on which no one lived. This street was Chestnut. It was sandwiched between Hemlock and one other, but those two were the most important to the girls who turned off of Hemlock onto Chestnut and even though her siblings followed her and Emily, she pretended as though they were invisible to her, that she was on the other side. All the while, the bone was forgotten like names of streets or childhood phenomena that occurred only under a full moon as their mothers would not let them out in complete darkness.

*

The autumn chill drove out the bugs that would stun themselves on her bedside lamp, keeping her up at night long after she clicked off the bulb. She was afraid that they would fly into her ears. They came in after sunset, if she opened her window for just a moment to listen to the crickets or an owl, or if her mother kept the back door open too long while calling her children home out of the dusk. Lying in bed, she could hear the bugs tap, tap, tap against the warm glass, desperate attempts to find whatever it was they were looking for. This time was her favorite—when her mother refused to turn on the heat and the air conditioning was too overpowering. And

she could sleep with her windows open all night—if it wasn't Sunday or a full moon. Then she wouldn't sleep.

She wasn't sure if there was something pagan in her that made her anxious on Sunday nights, that rebelled against the mass card posted on the fridge or the premise of pulling on itchy, unforgiving uniform stockings draped over the chair in the corner of her room. But then, she also wasn't sure why her body rejected sleep on nights boasting a full moon. Mostly, she never felt sure about anything. But tonight, her mother handed her a cup of tea and sent her off to bed before settling down to watch *60 Minutes*, her father already half-asleep on the couch. She heard the fast-paced ticking as she climbed the stairs. Her legs were sore. For the last three days, she had gotten off the school bus at the furthest stop from her house and walked home to tire her out. Of course, she was already exhausted. For the last four nights, each time she settled into bed and stilled her brain and bones, her right leg made itself known. It would crave movement. It was as if she had a phantom leg that crept up to her mind like smoke, begging her brain to fire neurons that would summon the smallest twitch of a toe or bend of a knee. Her leg invoked restlessness through the bloodstream and soon, her whole form was pricking with a need for action. The internet offered remedies, so she stretched her legs before bed. When that didn't work, she curled her toes and tensed the muscles in her legs until she was on the verge of slipping into the pain of a charley horse. After, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to her ceiling, she sometimes wondered if it was her body or her mind; but mostly she found herself screaming into her pillows, tears and frustration soaking into the fabric. She wished that she knew the invocation of sleep. Her mother suggested praying the rosary or counting sheep.

At the top of the stairs, she ducked into the bathroom. From her glasses case she picked out four or five white pills, a mix of melatonin and valerian root. After lining them up on the counter, she ground down on them with the back of her hairbrush and used the spine of a magazine to neatly shape the powder into a pile. Next, her mother's sleeping pills and then, some pink-ish, oddly shaped pills she had thrown in for good measure after pressing hard on each child-proofed bottle in her parents' medicine cabinet. One by one, she methodically dusted each pile into her cup of tea. Clumps

bubbled to the surface and steam still billowed from the mug like a cauldron. She used the end of a toothbrush to dissolve the ingredients and complete the concoction. Before shutting off the lights, she inhaled and blew away the evidence; it scattered like sugar.

Earlier that afternoon as she had walked up her driveway, the wind began to pick up and with it, the leaves. Their front yard—which was about an acre—had four trees parallel to the sidewalk, lining the path from the neighborhood bus stop; in their backyard, an oak loomed over the house. A mix of leaves collected in the grass and in the air and blew over her feet, scratching and scraping at the blacktop. There was something in her that had stirred as she watched the leaves spiral into a column taller than she was now—something like potion-making and roller skates.

*

With her eyes closed, she felt heat flush her cheeks. It would have been nighttime in November then—her mother would have finally relented and turned on the heat, filling their house with a stale and stuffy aroma that slowly became undetectable. But here, the girl's eyelids grew hot as they would if she leaned in too close to the fireplace, past the chain-link curtains that made a shrill noise when pulled open. Or if she opened the oven to vegetables crisping on parchment paper, excess oil collecting in pools and leaving dark brown spots where they burned off. She had not opened her eyes since waking up in this place, half-buried at the point where three roads converged. When she awoke—lazily and suddenly—she glanced down each path, which were distressingly alike and seemed to lead further into the forest. Light filtered through the canopy of branches and danced around her when the wind rustled through. She felt as though she was in the depths of a kaleidoscope. Dizziness and displacement washed over her, and she shut her eyes to the three roads and falling leaves. She dared not think about what had become of her, but sometimes the ruminations manifested behind her eyes and crept up her brainstem like a migraine.

There was no telling how long it had been since she drank down her potion of sleeping pills and chamomile tea—willing it to be nightshade—but she tongued at the grainy coating on her teeth and wondered if it would be there for good. Each day she re-discovered something about herself, like the crackling of static as she smoothed

down her hair. Somehow she knew it was a deep, chocolate color like it had been before. Then there were the rings of onyx and moonstone stacked on two or three fingers. Earlier today, she had flexed her feet, which were still submerged in the earth, and felt the heaviness of shoes, the scratch of a metal zipper against her ankle. The heat was not to be happened upon, but to encroach upon the girl. She opened her eyes, and her body shivered in the immediate cold.

A woman stood over her with two torches, one in each hand. The right was extended toward the girl's face. The flames at the tip of the other jumped and flickered, and it looked as though the woman had three heads crowned by the moon. One of them, she felt, looked a bit like her mother—the fleeting silhouette of a nose was peculiar and known. It was night, but the crossroads were aglow with torchlight and moon beam. The trees surrounding the girl were now dead and their branches bare, skeletal. She pushed her hands down to prop herself up and found that her body was half-consumed by snow. Her hands felt nothing but softness and compression in her wrists. At the sight of bare skin resting directly upon the glinting ice, she shuddered and noticed that there was a rosy blush to her skin against the cool blue. The heat seemed to come from her core, burning from the inside out. The girl gazed up at Hecate.

Hecate leaned down and told her that the only way to choose was to die, to let go, to fly and fly free. There was a choice to be made, and the girl felt so lost. Hecate plunged a torch into the ground, embers flew. They burned, prevailed in the snow, and Hecate pressed her thumb to the girl's forehead. She murmured something that the girl could not hear or understand, but there was the sweet smell of saffron, and its bitter taste blossomed in her mouth. She licked her chapped lips—the staked torch burned close. Then came the sound of hounds barking, growing louder as they approached. She couldn't bear to close her eyes again, so she looked skyward and caught a lump in her throat. Three dogs stopped before the single road diverged and began to dig the girl out as Hecate watched. Their paws dug up snow and dirt, leaves and wildflowers until the girl was able to bend her knees in loose dirt. No one saw the lone moonflower bloom in the cover of darkness.

The girl rose and the distinct thought occurred to her: that she may never close her eyes again. She thought of her mother and how she might have closed her daughter's bedroom door, relieved to see her finally sleeping after many weeks of long nights and ordinary chamomile tea. Her mother, with whom she had planted Poet's Narcissus daffodils in the fall; her mother who put a single bloom in water and left it by the girl's bedside table, which had not even begun to wilt before the girl died; her mother who also left two tablets of ibuprofen next to the vase as the flower was poisonous and its aroma migraine-inducing, but the girl and her mother thought it was beautiful. The girl thought back to her childhood and the summer, how she would pretend to cross over worlds by walking down the street on which no one lived. It brought her mind to talismans and tree bark, and she could feel the popping of touch-me-nots as she stood in the place of the crossroads. There was the bone that somehow she knew was still underneath the porch, wrapped in silk. Her palms pricked. Hecate gestured to the torch.

Come away, little spirit, she said. Come away.

The New Americans

Brigitte Aflalo-Calderon

It's noon on Labor Day.

From the open window of my newly renovated apartment in Adams Morgan I can see the Washington monument. In the park across the street, neighbors are settling around picnic tables, opening cans of beers, lighting up barbeques. Soon, the city will smell of grilled meat. A flat smell, unlike the aroma at Rachid's stall on the road to the beach where my father and I often stopped for lamb sandwiches.

My red barbeque fits perfectly on the balcony. Inside, on the dining-room table, a brand-new battery of stainless-steel forks, knives and spoons shines next to the red ceramic plates. They too are new. The refrigerator is filled with platters of home-made hamburgers to which I have added a touch of cumin. Ayesha, my old housekeeper, would be proud of me. There are also hot-dogs, twelve-packs of Heineken and bottles of Seagram's ginger ale. On top of the buffet by the window, I have set bowls of macaroni and egg salads and coleslaw, all bought at Deane and Deluca in Georgetown. I've done everything by the book. The INS officer who gave me the American citizenship test can rest happy.

A soft knock on the door. It's my father. As usual, he is impeccably dressed. Today it is in white linen trousers and a matching short-sleeve shirt that shows off his toned arms. Looking at him, you wouldn't guess that he is 73. He walks in holding a dozen miniature American flags that he displays like a bouquet in the copper jar that we bought in the *souk* in Rabat, our hometown. That was long ago when I had just turned 17. We were shopping for a floor vase for my bedroom. The jar had caught my eye.

"It looks like a chamber pot," my father said, hardly looking at it. "I like it," I shot back. We argued. "You sound like a married couple," the salesman said, laughing. A comment that my father's

friends often teased me with when he took me along to dinner parties or to watch him play tennis. I resented this label. It made me angry, but I never told anyone. It took me years to realize that indeed my father had turned me into his little wife after my mother had died thirty-five years ago when my brother was born. I had just turned four.

“Your apartment is a mess,” he says. I don’t react. I no longer feel belittled. Eight years ago, when I was still living with him in Rabat, I would have jumped at his throat. Today, I stand strong, stronger than he is. I am the one who paved the family’s way to America where I landed ten years ago with a small suitcase, \$250 in my wallet and on a high. I no longer was an appendage. I was free.

Now, he is rearranging the pillows on the sofa. I hear him humming ‘Take Five,’ a favorite tune of his. Seeing my father in good spirits warms my heart. As the pioneer, I feel responsible for his happiness.

My friends arrive, stars and stripes hats on, arms loaded with bottles of Chardonnay, bowls of guacamole, family-size bags of Tostitos scoops and trays of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies. My dad rushes to greet them. I don’t mind him playing host. I know he misses the glamorous parties that he used to throw at his house in Rabat. He kisses each guest on both cheeks. “A Moroccan tradition,” he explains. They smile and hug him back. Here is red-haired Robin, pierced-nose Ashley, twins Erin and Seth and recently divorced Brandon. Names that my lips are still struggling with. Amina, Kenza, Rafik --these are the sounds that roll naturally on my tongue. I’ve left them at home, the place where I took my first breath in, and, then, abandoned for one that did not know I existed.

Yet, living in America had been my dream since I was eight, when my father took me to a Fourth of July garden party at the US Embassy in Rabat where he had spent his professional career. High above the roof, a gigantic American flag, the largest flag I had ever seen before, was flapping in the breeze. I wanted to climb up the

pole, grab it and disappear in its folds. ‘One day, you’ll be mine,’ I thought to myself. Thirty years later, I was pledging allegiance.

I gesture my friends to sit down on the red leather poufs that my paternal grandparents had offered me on my fifteenth birthday. I cherish them. They have put up with my fits of anger when my father didn’t allow me to go out on Saturday night, heard me choke on my first cigarettes and comforted my heart darkened by the absence of a mother.

“Let’s have a drink,” my father says, “it’s my first Labor Day celebration as an American citizen.” He opens a bottle of wine, pours a generous amount in each glass. After the toast, he tells stories about his life in Morocco where the sun shines 365 days a year, it takes only four hours to get from a sea-resort to a ski lodge and family is everything.

“It was difficult to leave all of this behind, but I feel blessed to be reunited with my family, my daughter, my son, his wife and their three children. My grandchildren, all born in the USA. Like in Brian Springsteen’s song.”

“No, dad, Bruce, its Bruce Springsteen,” I say, trying to hide a giggle. He doesn’t hear me.

“Ready for burgers? I’m starving,” Robin says. She brings out the platters of meat and trays of buns, sets them on the table near the barbeque. I watch her flatten the hamburgers with assured hands and I see Ayesha’s fingers, tattooed with red henna, sprinkle anise seeds on bread dough. She was the closest thing to a mother that I ever had. We Skype every other Sunday.

“How do you like your burgers cooked,” I ask. My friends respond with a unanimous, ‘well done.’ Why do Americans like their meat overcooked? It must taste like the skin of an old goat. My father and I look at each other, amused. We like our burgers rare. I pull two off the grill for us.

I flip the buns. They have a nice golden color like the ‘kesra’, the small round bread that Rachid made his sandwiches with.

I smell lamb roasting at his outdoor stall. I picture him under his orange umbrella, slicing open the ‘kesra’ and stuffing it with pieces of juicy lamb before wrapping it in the pages of an old newspaper and handing it to me with a grin that showed his crooked teeth. I hear him arguing with his younger brother, accusing him of being ‘too slow, too lazy and dumb as a donkey.’ I laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” my father asks.

“Nothing,” I reply.

“Really?”

When I turn my head, I see him on the sofa, all alone. My friends are standing by the buffet cracking jokes. Does he feel excluded, he whose stories would captivate friends and relatives for hours? Is he drifting back to familiar places? Is he at Rachid’s?

The first time my father took me there, he had to lift me up onto a stool at the tin counter. Since then, I have eaten dozens of sandwiches. Three years ago, when I flew back to Morocco to help him move to Washington, DC, we both went to Rachid’s. However, we were unable to tell our friend that in a few days my father was leaving for good. He would have been devastated, like Ayesha.

“How can you leave the country of your ancestors? It’s a crime. You belong here not to America,” he would have cried.

There would have been some truth to Rachid’s comments, a truth that perhaps neither my father nor I had come to terms with. So, that day, we both swallowed our tears with the burning-hot mint tea. Today, whenever I go back to Rabat, I visit him and order the same sandwich, which he systematically refuses to have me pay.

My father is walking toward me. He stops by the doorway, leans against it. His eyes are following the white trail of a small airplane. They wander a bit before resting on my face, caress it. We

stare into each other's eyes. For an instant, nothing exists but the place we come from.

“The burgers,” he calls, stepping by the barbeque, grabbing the fork from my hand, planting it into the meat. “They’re perfect. Great job,” he says turning toward me with a luminous smile that makes my heart melt.

Smoke billows from the grill. In the park across the street, children are staring at me. I wave at them. They wave back with their miniature flags.

The Drama Queen

Phillip Parotti

When Alicia Ford named her daughter Miranda, I have serious doubts that she'd ever read *The Tempest*. Rather, in an age of unremarkable Janes, Marys, and Sues, I think she'd aspired for something more flamboyant and, given the conformity of the times, achieved her aim. Mrs. Ford cut a rather flamboyant figure herself, dressing on the edge, taking part in amateur theatricals, and decorating her house in a combination of fuchsia and chartreuse while the remainder of her post-war generation turned to pink and turquoise. But there was a wire loose somewhere, something which manifested itself in a mild kleptomania, and while I can't be certain, I always suspected that the loose connection had been passed along to Miranda. The flamboyancy most certainly had, and while the lot of us were growing up, Miranda's penchant for it made itself known to us in a variety of ways.

In the mid-Fifties, girls did not come to school with purple hair, and neither did Miranda; that atrocity they saved for a later generation. In fact, Miranda's naturally blonde platinum hair always proved to be one of the most attractive things about her, but no matter, at about the time when all of her eighth grade friends were first trying makeup, Miranda discovered peroxide with the result that she appeared one morning sporting a single green stripe running straight down from the crown of her head to the end of her flip, something, she said, which she had "tried as an experiment." Being boys, we felt we had cause to snicker. So as not to be upstaged, two other blonde girls in our class tried the same trick with disastrous results, but the event, no matter the outcome, marked Miranda as a trend-setter and carried right over into our high school years where, combined with vivacious energy, her reasonably attractive face and figure, and her bubbling personality, she applied herself with rigor.

As a freshman and after some specially arranged but rapidly concluded gymnastic training, Miranda tried out for and earned a spot as the school's most junior cheerleader. Cultivating popularity like a loved and nurtured flower, she then plastered the walls of the

girls' and boys' restrooms with brilliantly colored campaign posters that couldn't be missed while less perceptive students lined the school halls with posters that could be missed because they disappeared utterly by blending with hundreds of others. In so doing, she brought off another coup, catapulting herself into the presidency of the class which also earned her an immediate place on the student council, an honor much coveted in those days when America was thought to be the exemplar of Democracy.

Having commenced with flash, Miranda exerted herself, organizing service projects in an era when they came few and far between, uplifting "school spirit" at every turn in concert with her cheerleading ambitions, and promoting the arts by organizing a theretofore unheard of *freshman play*, dramatic undertakings having previously and traditionally been left to the more sophisticated juniors and seniors. I need not mention, I suppose, that Miranda landed the female lead and that Cornelia Otis Skinner would have been stunned by her performance. More than one of our teachers was heard to say that Miranda appeared to be a girl destined to go somewhere.

At the same time, in a move that some of the girls found uppity, Miranda began to duke it out—metaphorically, of course—with a sophomore contender for the attentions of homely but notoriously talented student athlete, a sophomore letterman who showed every promise of being elected football captain during his senior year. As her friend and occasional confidant, I am not altogether sure that Miranda was smitten, but socially, she knew where her bread was buttered and campaigned for the jock's attentions with some success. Which is to say that the star in question, for the next three years, sometimes dated Miranda for as long as six months before letting her cool in the wings while dating the rival beauty from his own class for similar periods. It was during those fallow intervals that Miranda tended to drop her confidences on me, and to say that she showed me a capacity for calculated scheming in those moments falls short of the fact. I thought her rival fortunate to have avoided assassination. Possession seemed to mean everything to Miranda; actual emotional attachment to the letterman remained vague, and in reflecting on that, I think I learned something about her.

During our senior year, Miranda rose to peak performance. Designated head cheerleader and student council president, she twice ran for state offices and won them both. Later in the year, when the annual talent show beckoned, she roped a bunch of us into a “skit” that she failed to explain to us beforehand, and then, once we had committed ourselves to participate, she sprang a modern dance ballet on the unsuspecting lot of us. The girls who'd agreed to participate seemed enchanted; we boys were mortified to think that we'd agreed to appear in front of our high school in anything resembling a ballet, but having given our word, we toughed it out with the result that Miranda, as chief choreographer and prima ballerina brought off a triumph, something the school had never seen and something which, to my astonishment, caused them to leap to their feet with applause the minute we finished. I still have mixed feelings about that event, but with regard to Miranda who put the whole thing together and directed it to a finish, one imagined that the sky might be the limit, and then, very rapidly, her tent collapsed.

Through our four years of high school, as with everything else she'd set her mind to, Miranda had built herself a stunning academic record. If she was not an A-plus student, she came close, and while I can't be sure, I think she'd become a contender for being named class valedictorian. During the previous year as one of only five juniors to be admitted, she had earned an early tap for Lambda Lambda Alpha, the school honor society, and in a day when the college application process was none so stringent as it is now, she'd been accepted by several good schools. And then, one month before graduation, she got caught cheating. That loose connection, possibly inherited from her mother, had finally shown up. I've never known the full particulars and don't know them now, but according to rumors that raced through the school, she'd turned in a term paper to a history teacher, the whole of it copied from a published book which the history teacher happened to know almost by heart. So the evidence proved incontrovertible, and with something close to the speed of light, Miranda found herself stripped of her membership in Lambda Lambda Alpha, stripped of her post as head cheerleader, stripped from the presidency of the student council, and forced to recognize that letters on school stationery had been dispatched to the governing organizations overseeing the state offices to which she'd

been elected. I have no idea how those organizations responded; I never heard another word about them.

Officially disgraced, Miranda lightly explained it away by saying that she'd never before cheated on anything but had tried it once as "an experiment, to see what it felt like," and failed. Her attitude seemed to be "Oh fiddle-de-dee, and aren't we about to graduate anyway?" She did not, however, deliver the valedictorian's speech, and she did not receive an honors chord when she walked across the stage at commencement, but she did graduate and went off to college in the fall trailing in her wake a slight hint of sulfur.

I didn't see Miranda again for three years. The occasion of our brief reunion turned out to be unusual. Small towns like ours do not offer much in the way of clubs, restaurants, or concert venues, so if returning students don't take things in hand, aside from family gatherings, Christmas vacations can be dull. To avoid that danger, our crowd used to collect twenty dollars a head from as many returning students as possible and throw a series of formal dances at Christmas. Given the size of our high school's senior class and the numbers of college students who came home for the holidays, we used to be able to arrange three or four of those quaint formals with which to break up the tedium, and in the middle of my junior college year, a group of oldsters, older even than our parents, also gave an afternoon tea dance because, they said, "they wanted to see the young people dance once more." Where those same oldsters had ever seen our generation dance in the first place, I have no idea, but alive to the possibility of picking up one of my former classmates for a date that night, I put on a coat and tie and went, and at some point during the afternoon, well after the party got going and while I stood talking to a friend of mine who had come home from West Point for Christmas, our attention was arrested when a smartly dressed young woman with coal black hair came down the stairs and entered the Merritt Hotel ballroom, alone and mildly slithering. The bouffant in evidence, beautifully shaped and lacquered in place seemed perfect for the woman's carriage and figure, but something about the face that went with it struck me as not quite right, and that explains why it took me more than sixty seconds to recognize Miranda: the coal black hair she'd invented for herself clashed more than a little with her coloring

while delivering what I could only appreciate as the totally unexpected.

“Trying a new look, Miranda?” I asked when we finally met.

“It's not permanent,” she laughed, giving me a playful slap on the arm. “The director said that my part called for black hair and that I had no choice but to conform to my *role*.”

I knew and perhaps Miranda knew that I knew that the *role* to which she was conforming happened to be the part that she had set herself in coming to the reception at all, but I let the lie slide and wished her well as she went off to search for her long discarded letterman. I did not think it polite to mention that he'd married the year before and gone to live in South Carolina where his wife's family gave him a job managing their furniture factory.

After that, I didn't see Miranda again for at least five more years. From time to time, however, I gleaned a piece of news about her. Nearly a year after the Christmas reception, I heard that she had transferred to a university in California “to complete her degree.” Later, a classmate told me that she'd completed her degree in psychology and was thought to be working for a travel firm in Los Angeles, and a year or two after that, I ran into her father on Main Street one morning, and he informed me that Miranda had signed on as an entertainment director with a well known cruise line and had been cruising the Pacific all the way from Valparaiso to Anchorage and back. I asked him to send her my best wishes and left it at that, but during the Christmas holidays the following year, when Heather and I chanced to be in town on one of my brief leaves, I went into Herb's Rexall Drug one afternoon and discovered Miranda sitting by herself in one of the booths.

Within seconds, I suppose, we were once more talking like we had in high school. By that time, of course, we were both in our mid-twenties, and I'd just come home from my second trip to Vietnam as the Gunnery Officer on a destroyer escort. Time, although I don't suppose we were fully aware of it, seemed to be flying.

“And I understand you're married, to little Heather Templeton.”

“That's right,” I said. “Came home on my first leave in '64 and snatched her right off her mother's porch swing. We have a

daughter as well. Just at the moment while Heather visits with her classmates, my folks are babysitting and spoiling Miss Willow. What about you? Gentlemen callers? Engagements on the horizon? Cruise ship officers chasing you from stem to stern?"

"Hal!" she laughed, much amused, but then she showed me a serious face. "I almost got married," she said quietly, "last year. But it was not to be."

"Oh?" I said.

"Yes," she said quietly, breathlessly, waiting for her reply to take effect. "He was a captain in the infantry. We met in San Francisco. My cruise liner was in for the week, and he was temporarily living in the Bachelor Officer's Quarters at the Presidio waiting to ship out for Vietnam. We fell in love instantly and spent a glorious week together before he caught his flight. He wanted to give me an engagement ring and marry before he left, but in the end, we decided to wait until he got back and meet at the Top of the Mark a year and a day from the time of his departure." She paused then, I remember, her eyes focusing blankly on her empty coffee cup before adding in a near whisper, "He was killed outside Quang Tri a month before he was to return home."

"I'm sorry," I said, with a much sympathy as I could muster. I didn't know what else to say. I didn't know whether she was trying to conjure up the last act of "An Affair to Remember" or ape Donna Reed's final scene in "From Here to Eternity." Whatever the case and for me at least, there was no mistaking her: with practiced skill and without batting an eye, Miranda Ford had just floated the biggest whopper that I'd ever heard her tell, so in keeping with the moment, I let her think I'd swallowed it and eventually went on my way resolved never to believe another word that Miranda let slip.

After that meeting at Herb's Rexall, I didn't see Miranda again for decades. Apparently, according to various bits of news that I picked up from friends across the years, Miranda eventually left the cruise line, earned graduate degrees in Guidance and Counseling, and went to teach in a small college somewhere in the South. A year or two later, according to Lou Ellen Hobson, Miranda married. "Breezed into town to show off her catch," Lou Ellen said. "Flashy, if you ask me. Driving a bright new Mustang, wearing white California loafers without socks, tall, dark and handsome, but a mite

too slick . . . , a man I wouldn't have trusted three feet out of my sight.”

How mousey little Lou Ellen arrived at that conclusion, I will never know, but apparently, she had insight because, after an interval of two or three years, the next thing we heard was that Miranda's husband had decamped to a place unknown leaving Miranda saddled with about three hundred thousand dollars in debts while living in a state where the lingering effects of Napoleonic law made her responsible for them. That, I thought, was dirty pool, and really, I felt sorry for her.

A year or two later, while Heather, Willow, Lilly, and I were once more home on one of my leaves, Heather ran into Alicia Ford while out buying groceries with my mother.

“I asked her about Miranda,” Heather said when she returned, “and Alicia said that she was doing fine, but when I asked where Miranda was living, Alicia clammed up tight, and I couldn't get another word out of her.”

Across the next two or three decades, five or six more people that we knew reported the same thing. Here or there, someone had run into Alicia, or Mr. Ford, or Miranda's little sister, and when they'd asked about how Miranda was doing, the answer had always come back “fine,” but all questions about where she might be living or what she might be doing had elicited nothing but silence. I can't be sure, of course, but my guess is that saddled with debts that she could never hope to pay, Miranda, like her husband before her, had decamped, probably incognito, to a state or location where the creditors couldn't get at her. And that was absolutely the last word I heard about Miranda until long after I'd retired from the navy and taken up my own teaching career at Barnett State.

Heather and I have never belonged to a country club. As a naval officer frequently on the move, we never remained in one place long enough to have the urge, but owing to the fact that my father had designed the building and been given a membership in recompense, my parents did belong to a club, and after my father died, my mother went to the club once or twice a week with friends in order to enjoy the dining. If we happened to be in town, she usually took us at least once during our visit, and it was something we considered a treat. In '98 or '99, a year or two before my mother

died, we went up one evening for dinner, and after the meal when Heather and mother left me with my coffee while they went to the powder room, I glanced off to my left, spotted a fairly dumpy redhead wearing glasses and a nondescript gray dress sitting at a table with Miranda's little sister, looked again more closely, and recognized a thoroughly transformed Miranda. Leaving my coffee, I stood up and walked over.

“Evening Alessandra,” I said, greeting Miranda's sister with a smile. “Sorry I didn't spot the two of you earlier, but it's good to see you. How are things, Miranda?”

“Lynn,” she said, cutting me short, without looking up. “The name is Lynn.”

“I see,” I said. “In town for long?”

“No,” she said, still without looking up at me.

Detecting a slight look of alarm in Alessandra's eyes, I got the message. For whatever reason, Miranda Ford did not wish to be recognized, singled out, or even spoken to.

“Well,” I said, “nice to see you both, but Heather and my mother are coming back, so I should be on my way. Cheers.”

And with that, I turned away, rejoined my family, and left, and that was the last time I ever saw Miranda.

Five or six years later, and that must have been around 2005, Heather and I were home for yet another visit. Mother had passed away by that time, but we'd kept the house which we used as a family cabin during the summers, preferring to spend our time up here in the mountains rather than swelter with my colleagues down in the East Texas flats. And on one afternoon when I was downtown looking into the galleries, I ran into Alessandra who appeared to be shopping for ceramics.

“Alessandra,” I said, “good to see you. How are things?”

“Fine,” she said, greeting me with a smile. “Ted's just retired, and our grandson has just graduated from college.”

“Congratulations,” I said. “And what do you hear from Miranda?”

Alessandra's smile disappeared, and after a moment's hesitation, she looked down and gave her head a disappointed shake.

“You were always a good friend to her, George,” she said, finally looking up at me, “so without going into detail, I'll put it this

way. She's living in an ashram of sorts somewhere in northern California. In so far as Ted and I can determine, whatever is going on in that place resembles a cult, and while we can't be sure, we think she's turned whatever money she had over to them and lives up there like a virtual prisoner, doing menial jobs in a barracks of some kind. Once or twice a year, she sneaks out and calls us on the phone, but we've never talked to her for more than five minutes at a time. She says that she's fine and that she's resigned, whatever that might mean, but it makes us uneasy.”

I was shocked. Immersion in a cult was about the last thing I would ever have expected from Miranda.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I hope things will work out.”

What can a person say in a case like that. Any talk about blighted promise or life's strange twists would have seemed cruel, so with a slight shake of my own head, I changed the subject.

What Miranda might be doing now is anyone's guess, but when I occasionally think of her, I'm reminded of that damn ballet when, dressed as the grim reaper, I picked her up as a dead weight, a prima dona costumed as a dying swan, and carried her from the stage while the auditorium erupted in applause.

Non-Fiction

Raped on the Way

R. Gurley

I became a conduit that night, November 23rd, 2013. I was a 42-year-old Californian woman lying on my back looking at an almost full moon on a dirt road outside a church somewhere in Bolivia. Three men raping me at an intersection in the shadow of a crucifix cast from Samaipata Bolivia Evangelical Church.

I've learned since that night people think rape is sex. These people are wrong. Rape is hate forced into someone by someone else. Loathing mixing in one's liquids, moving into places uninvited. I felt something in me escape that night. Rape rearranged me. I became a receptacle, a conduit, a shell.

These men were strangers who'd entered my life moments before. I was walking after midnight from the bar downtown to an Airbnb I'd rented with some friends. I know what you're saying now. I can hear it. A woman should never walk alone at night. I know that now. The world isn't safe for a woman or a girl. But let me ask you this: In what logic system does a woman walking home alone deserve this?

I heard footsteps behind me at a corner in front of a church. I could see my Airbnb porch light. I turned. A man racing toward me. Powder blue Abercrombie sweatshirt hood pulled over his face like the grim reaper. I ran. He pummeled me, pushing my face into gravel, then thorns. His sneakers struck my side. I was on my back. I opened my eyes. Man became men. There were three.

Car lights is how it ended. The men became roaches rushing toward the shadows. My body took a breath. My body was alive. My body picked me up. My body ran toward the Airbnb porch light and jumped its fence. The men had stolen my purse. No key. My body banged on the door. My body screamed. My body said it. "I've been raped!" A friend answered the door.

I ran upstairs, covered my body with clothes. I ran downstairs. My friend handed me water. I sat on a couch in the living room. My friend ran out the door. He returned minutes later. He'd gone to the corner by the church. Three figures walked toward him,

coming back for me. They returned to shadows when they realized the figure was a man. I listened. My face throbbed. I shut my eyes.

They'd ask me the next day something they'd never ask a man. What was I doing here? Samaipata, Bolivia, once an isolated village Che Guevara passed through on his way to his last stand near Vallegrande, a few miles up the road, was now a resort town for the jet set from Santa Cruz de la Tierra, one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, three hours away. Locals, jet setters, expats now filled up its streets. I followed this crowd from Santa Cruz where I'd moved to the year before to escape grief. My boyfriend, Jon, the love-of-my-life kind of thing, died two years before of brain cancer in Riverside, California. His death handed me a bucket list. International teaching was item number one. So why the hell was I here? A school had offered me a job. I accepted it and packed up my things. Gotta get outta there to come here. Santa Cruz de la Tierra, Bolivia, to start a new life. I was forty.

These thoughts woke me. I couldn't believe I had slept. Sun rising. A dream? I pushed myself up. I looked down. Blood stained the sofa's yellow tweed. My feet pushed into the white ceramic tiles on the cold floor. I stood.

The men's hate seized my ankles. My legs buckled. My body fell fetal on the floor. Body betraying mind. I smelled strangers. This was no dream. I was raped.

I wanted my mom. My mom, a girl in the fifties, a woman in the sixties. She dressed me, born in the seventies, in T-shirts that read "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman" since I was five. I wondered what she'd do, a Baby Boomer raised on Donna Reed, weaned on Steinem. I was born at the crossroads, Generation X, Prince, Madonna, Boy George, a generation which gender turned on its head. Because of this, I never understood my mother's mantras to not make waves; to my Gen X mind, making waves was why we humans were here. I swore I heard her, along with generations of women before, whisper as I lay there on the floor—*Just let this go! Pretend it was a dream!* I made a decision. I screamed.

The scream woke my friends in the house. They came to the living room in their pajamas. They grabbed my arms. They lifted me from the floor. They called others. Others came to the Airbnb,

gathered on the porch. These people were my friends. I'd been with them the night before.

They took pictures of me with iPads. They handed the iPads to me. My face, displaced, blackened eye, sideways nose. I handed the iPads back. Those pictures couldn't be me.

They said I needed to go to the hospital. They took me. Diarrhea green was the color of the Samaipata Hospital walls. The doctor was no better; he looked like Jabba the Hutt. Jabba motioned me to an office, not an exam room, when he saw my beaten face. My friend translated for me the night before. Jabba yawned, scrawled on a script pad and slid it across the desk to me. My translator intercepted the paper. She read and crumpled it. Aspirin? She told him to fuck himself in English. Jabba smiled.

The people took me, then, to the police. Their station was near the town plaza. The station's door was a barn door. A green-clothed officer told me and my translator to have a seat. The translator told the officer the story. The officer spoke. The translator told me we had to fill out a *denuncia*, Español for police report, except the officer didn't know how to use the computer. My translator offered to help. They switched places. Hours later, paper rolled off a printer, which pre-dated the laser kind. The officer assured us they'd find the rapists. He said there was no rape in Samaipata. We were walked back to the barn door. The sun was going down.

We returned to the Airbnb. Others were waiting there. I told them what the officer had said. Someone laughed. Someone said, "The police are dirtier than the criminals here!" Someone stuck a stack of papers into my hand and said, "Suspects." Grainy pictures printed from local Samaipateños' Facebook pages—men someone heard of in the community that could have done this. I looked at these. My heart sank. No one looked familiar. I flipped through the pages. Then, I saw the EYES. My eyes raced to know the EYES' name. JE Montenegro. Someone whispered, "Look how she's shaking!" Montenegro's picture fell out of my hands. It landed on the ground.

We took the picture to the police. The officer knew JE Montenegro. He glanced at Montenegro's picture—*un chico malo*, a bad boy. The officer said he'd bring Montenegro in for questioning the next day.

The next day I got a call. The officer had Montenegro and wanted me to identify him. I walked to the station with a friend. A man of about twenty sat in the same chair I had been in the previous day. His muscles rippled out of the sleeves of an Abercrombie T-shirt. He turned to look at me. The EYES. Their hate grabbed my ankles again. I fell to the ground before I could say: It's him!

The story of the crime spread through Samaipata's streets. People gathered outside the police station. They surrounded me to protect me. Someone approached me to tell me the Montenegros would give me 200 Bolivianos, the equivalent roughly of thirty bucks, if I kept my mouth shut. Another person whispered, "We don't talk about rape around here." Another person whispered, "Although it happens all the time." The police told my translator they couldn't provide me a *denuncia* to take to Santa Cruz where I could get a real forensics exam. The police released Montenegro. Montenegro's fifteen-year-old wife pushed a baby stroller past me as he glared at me. I heard someone scream in English that he was my lawyer. He told me to hop on his motorcycle to return to the hospital to demand a gynecological exam. I followed him to escape the crowd.

Jabba welcomed me back to the hospital with a growl. I didn't speak Spanish but I understood what Jabba said to the lawyer. What the hell is she doing back here? The lawyer said something. Jabba shrugged. I went into a room, a deeper shade of diarrhea green. The equipment looked like a donation made in 1952. I took off my pajama bottoms. I cried. I didn't want Jabba to see what the strangers had left behind.

A hundred campesinos, Bolivian farmers, showed up at the Samaipata City Hall a few weeks later. All had a copy of my medical exam from Jabba, forged, saying I wasn't raped. They waved the papers at the *alcalde*, the Bolivian equivalent to mayor. They screamed: *The gringa wasn't raped*. They screamed: *The gringa is a whore*.

This didn't faze me when I heard it. Too much had occurred to surprise me. I was denied a forensics exam five times in Santa Cruz because I didn't have a *denuncia*. I was granted one after seeking legal counsel at Santa Cruz's closest thing to a shelter, *Casa de Mujer*. I returned to work with the word rape scrawled on my classroom door. I'd told the administration. The word remained there. I thought I had syphilis. That was fun. People who supported me got threats.

But we had the smoking gun: a phone bill with Montenegro's number transferring two dollars of my phone credit at 4:00 a.m. on November 23, 2013. He had no wiggle room. I got counseling. My boss had given me the name of a counselor who spoke English. I called her and made an appointment. I went to her office, sat on her couch, and told her the story. She looked like Tina Fey. She drew circles on a dry-erase board after I spoke. She talked about energy. These words gave me hope. Maybe she could help me. Maybe she could see what I'd become: a conduit, a shell. She drew stick figures of the men and me as well as some arrows. The arrows pointed away from me and toward the men. She said, "Don't you see?" What I saw suggested my energy drew the men to me. I told her this. Her brown eyes blinked and she agreed. I felt the men's hate inside me. I asked if she had ever been raped. She shook her head no. The men's hate grabbed the markers and reversed the arrows' direction. "You've got it all wrong, lady," I said. "Those men pushed hate inside me." I showed her the proof. I told her how I fantasized about holding a gun to the back of their heads, how I wanted to make them shake. She shrunk away from me, scared. She said, "You're being aggressive." I replied that was the point. I needed help with hate. I asked her if she'd ever been raped. The no delivered with an undertone that she was somehow above all that. The rape was my fault in her un-raped eyes. I walked out.

I sought counsel elsewhere, in my upstairs room on a yoga mat with YouTube. YouTube had wisdom: Jack Kornfield's *Ancient Heart of Forgiveness*. He said forgiveness didn't mean I had to condone anything. He said forgiveness can sometimes mean making sure this never happens again. His words helped me. Something in me moved.

A call came, an expat had rescued two dogs. Something told her they were for me. Two terrier faces looked up at me the next day. One had a blue collar, the other one pink. They looked like my dog that I loved as a kid. I looked up at the sky. Yes, I told the expat, they're mine.

Mick and Minnie, that's how they entered my house. Minnie waddled to me with a sock she found. Mick shook, a mess like me. We walked upstairs and listened to YouTube in the dark.

I waited for the trial for a year and a half. I taught by day and learned dogs by night. Mick clung, while Minnie was comedy. She escaped one day and ran into a bush. Mick and I watched leaves rustle. Minnie's tail peeked out and wagged. A hotdog bun filled her mouth when she returned. I laughed. Mick yelped too. Joy—the first time in months. Minnie renamed Sugar. The end of a bitter season.

A call came from my lawyer one day. The trial was set in Vallegrande, the town where Che Guevara's body minus his hands was found underneath a landing twenty years after his death. I got in his car the next morning. We drove six hours to the Vallegrande courthouse. The judge canceled. My lawyer whispered *sucio*—dirty! We drove six hours back to Santa Cruz. We did this again the next week and the week after that.

We brought the press. The judge slammed the gavel. The press scribbled on pads. The trial lasted weeks. The defense's witnesses argued the rapists were good boys. The defense lawyers said I was a whore. The prosecution presented evidence. The prosecution put me on the stand. I closed my eyes. I saw flashed that morning after the crime, lying fetal on that floor. I understood on that stand why people keep their stories to themselves. Cameras flashed. I opened my eyes. I would speak for them. I told the truth, so help me God. The courthouse gasped. The rapists were sentenced to twenty-five years.

The rapists' faces were six-feet long on a screen. I was on a Bolivian TV station. A journalist asked me questions. My translator answered them. Salsa music bumped the room. My face replaced the rapists' on the screen. My testimony. Rape celebrity. The music stopped. The lights went down. Commercial. The journalist looked past me and asked her assistant, "*Quien próxima?*" Who's next?

I had to leave Bolivia. My lawyer said, "You're no longer safe." I had been fired for this, so I had planned to leave. "My new job in Paraguay starts in a month," I told my lawyer. My lawyer said I needed to leave in three days. I sold what I could, put the rest on the curb. A friend would drive the dogs to Paraguay. I got on a plane with two suitcases and flew.

I was contagious in Paraguay. A fellow teacher told me to not tell anyone. "People judge," she whispered, a thirty-nine-year-old woman on Tinder saying she was thirty-one. My boss heard the

whispers. “Why didn’t you tell me?” She asked me one day. I didn’t think rape pertained to my employment. She rolled her eyes and said “We don’t want any problems here, understand?” Rape spreads even with the rapists behind bars.

I hid in my house. The dogs walked me until Sugar escaped one night. She never returned. Mick and I wandered through Paraguayan streets overgrown with vines, calling her name. Sugar was the love of Mick’s life. I understood. I hugged him and whispered, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Things weren’t okay. Mick hid in dark places, lost weight. He got dog treats and fluffy balls. No interest. He’d return to sleep. Sugar’s loss turned him into a conduit, a shell. I understood; I scuffed his ear.

I woke Mick early every day. We walked. A routine. We stayed out of yesterday and tomorrow. We listened to Jack Kornfield at night on a yoga mat. We forgave. We loved. Love confronted the men’s hate, Mick’s abuse, our losses. Hate was no match. We were okay.

I survived. This is my story. My hope is this story sheds light on what goes on in the dark. My hope is I work to ensure this never happens again. These men’s fingers on my throat. These men will never leave. I look at Mick. I have a choice. I am a conduit, a shell. The men’s hate could strangle me as it had for the generations of women before me. I think of my mom, that morning, fetal on the floor. I think of the T-shirts she had me wear, infusing me with a language women were just learning when I was born. I put this language into pen to paper...I became a conduit that night, November 23rd 2013...

We Can Be Heroes

Olaf Kroneman

A recent op-ed piece in the New England Journal of Medicine (Vol. 379, No. 6), written by fourth-year medical student, Mr. Leo Eisenstein, suggests that physicians should organize to fight “burnout.” The student reminds us that “burnout” was described by Dr. Herbert Frudenberger in 1974. Dr. Frudenberger opined that the root of professional exhaustion was the result of monotony, and also caring for patients whose illnesses result from the consequences of socioeconomic disadvantage and marginalization.

Mr. Eisenstein believes the crux of burnout is individual powerlessness to assist the disadvantaged.

Maybe. But I suspect the root cause of physician burnout today is much different than that of 1974.

When I was a fourth-year medical student, burnout was the furthest thing from my mind. I was excited and nervous over the prospect of taking care of patients and being responsible for their lives. I saw myself as the physician hero that Mr. Eisenstein believes is extinct.

I refuse to accept this.

To me, being a hero, or really a consummate patient advocate, is my way of preventing burnout and definitely monotony. It has worked for forty years.

A case comes to mind. (Patient’s identity obscured.)

I attended a young African-American woman who developed a severe illness, survived, and was restored to health.

However, she developed a complication of the treatment and suffered facial deformities.

She told me that when she left her apartment, she wore a surgical mask. When she spoke of her facial scarring, tears flowed from her eyes to be pathetically absorbed by the mask.

“Can’t you help me?” she asked.

“I’ve called your HMO,” I said. “They said your policy doesn’t cover cosmetic surgery.”

“This isn’t a nose job I’m asking for. I want my life back. If it wasn’t for my daughters, I’d have ended all this.”

“Are you suicidal?”

“Yes, but don’t give me Zoloft, don’t give me Prozac, get my face fixed. I won’t go through this much longer. I’m barely hanging on.”

“Please, don’t do anything. I’ll think of something. If only I could get the HMO doctors to see the problem.”

“Why won’t they examine me?”

“It’s easier to say ‘no’ over the phone.”

She left the office; she neglected to put on her surgical mask; people in the waiting room stared.

My wife works in the office; she took me aside, squeezed my arm firmly, and said, “Do something, whatever it takes; do something.”

“Her HMO won’t pay for cosmetic surgery.”

“This isn’t right.”

“I have a stack of denials for the past year, and she is suicidal and would have done something if it wasn’t for her two little girls.”

“This is no longer cosmetic.”

“It is on paper,” I said.

She wept.

My wife was relentless in getting the woman help. She was not used to dealing with prior authorizations, out-of-network issues, doesn’t-meet-admission-requirements, not approving ordered tests, financial accreditation of physicians, DRGs, peer-to-peer reviews, but the other “peer” didn’t see the patient—just the EMR, the forced labor of EMR, and its specious “meaningful use” qualifier.

She is a layperson who believes patients should get the care the doctor prescribes.

“You are naïve,” I said.

She was silent, then said, “Call the NAACP.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

She was resolute.

“If you don’t call, I will.”

I knew she would.

I got the phone number of the HMO patient help line. I dialed and got a recorder. I waited for the “Your call is important to us, please leave a message after the tone...”

“This is Dr. Kroneman; my patient needs help. I have been trying to get cosmetic surgery for her for over a year. This African-American woman needs surgery and you have denied her. You have two hours to call me back, or I will call the NAACP and see if they can help.”

Within minutes, the phone rang.

“Hello,” I said.

“Who am I speaking with?” the voice on the other end said.

“To whom am I speaking?” I asked.

“This is the medical director of the HMO.”

“I’m Dr. Kroneman.”

“Did you just call threatening to involve the NAACP?”

“That’s me.”

“I don’t like to be threatened.”

“It’s not a threat. It’s a courtesy call.”

“You’re angry.”

“Damn right I’m angry. I don’t like you jacking my patient around.”

“What you mean, ‘jacking the patient around?’”

“It’s an expression for making her fill out forms and making me write letters, knowing all along you won’t approve her surgery. I’ve been trying for a year. She is horribly disfigured.”

“I have reviewed her policy. She is not covered for cosmetic procedures.”

“If you saw her. If you knew her before—if you had a heart, you would have approved this a year ago.”

“I have a heart.”

“If so, would you examine her?”

“I have reviewed her case. She is not covered.”

“Listen,” I said. “My friend is a plastic surgeon. He goes all over the world, fixing children with cleft palates in third-world countries. He said he would do her surgery for free.”

“No,” he said.

“I’m going to drop the dime on you.”

“What you mean, ‘drop the dime?’”

“It’s an expression for calling the NAACP.”

“Look, I’m a brown man and I know prejudice.”

“I’m a Danish white guy, but I can’t determine if you’re prejudiced or not because you denied the patient care without seeing her. You had no idea she was Black until I informed you of my intent to call the NAACP. I’ll give you a pass on prejudice.”

“You’re playing the race card.”

“Your words, not mine.”

“Will they listen to you?”

“Are you willing to take that chance?”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll approve this.”

“Don’t you want to see her? Get a good look at her face?”

“No.”

“I want a date and time and approval number.”

“I can’t give you the date.”

“I’m a reasonable man. Just give me the approval number.”

“Okay.”

He gave me the number.

“Dr. Kroneman, I just want to say you are a difficult man, with no tact, and no bedside manner.”

I didn’t know that bedside manner was relevant to this conversation, but let it go.

“When my bedside manner gets really bad, I’ll become a director of an HMO, just like you.”

He hung up.

I got my approval number, and she got her surgery and her face back. All is well.

The medical bureaucracy can be cruel and impersonal. But it is well funded and organized, as evidenced by the tragedy of doctors employed to work for corporations that sabotage the efforts of other doctors who actually examine and care for patients. This is an indictment of our profession’s willingness to accept the violation of previously sacrosanct medical tradition.

I am not proud of the conversation; I don't like confrontation. I definitely would have called the NAACP. It is a shame.

David Bowie sang it, "We can be heroes."

In today's healthcare environment, we must be heroes.

The Pump Room Salad

Beverly Pimsleur

When my mother was dying, she asked me to make her a Pump Room Salad. It was the luncheon special we ordered in the Pump Room of the Ambassador Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, 1945. That was the year the three of us traveled on weekends to the Hines Veterans' Hospital to see my Uncle Ben, who had returned from the Second World War a paraplegic. The visit for my mother and her sister (my aunt Ida) was fraught with anxiety. For me, I relished spending time with the two most important people in my life: my mother and my aunt. Seated between them on the restaurant's red velvet banquette in my best dress and with my freshly curled hair, I felt safe and snug, a moment to savor before we left for the hospital and what awaited us there.

Because I was my uncle's favorite niece, my mother and aunt thought my presence at the hospital would cheer him up. No one questioned if it was a good idea to take a third grader to a hospital of wounded men.

Images flicker in my mind, like an old black-and-white film: I walk between neat rows of gray metal beds of young men, some sitting up with bandaged heads, others lying still under flattened sheets where their limbs had been. Nurses, in uniforms white as snowflakes, push clattering dollies piled high with rolls of bandages. And the smell, not entirely unpleasant, pungent like my aunt's menthol mints.

I don't remember my first reaction to seeing my uncle lying motionless, but my presence didn't accomplish what the family hoped. Uncle Ben did not cheer up, at least not during the first months.

On the long afternoons when my mother and aunt flanked his hospital bed eager to entertain and engage him, I spent my time with the nurses in their station, amusing myself and them, like a team mascot. They gave me tasks, like stacking paper cups for the water cooler. I don't remember ever being bored: I was an only child and

accustomed to amusing myself. After only a few visits, the nurses would shout out, “Hey! Shirley Temple is here today.”

On Saturdays there was entertainment, and on one Saturday a photo was taken of Basil Rathbone, known for his role as Sherlock Holmes, and me. He’s giving a soliloquy to the men, some leaning on crutches, others in wheelchairs. It’s like the scene in every movie when the entertainers visit to cheer up “the boys.”

My family was impressed that Mr. Rathbone incorporated me in his act. I wonder what he thought of a little girl planted among those sad bodies. Maybe he was trying to cheer me up too. I remembered how he tried to encourage those helpless men to escape to somewhere else, if only for a few hours, and in my twenties—when I became a movie buff—I saw all his films.

Maybe it was because my Uncle Ben wasn’t improving that lunch at the swanky Pump Room was my favorite part of our stays in Chicago. The waiters were all black men dressed in knee britches, red waistcoats and white gloves. To me as a child, it seemed like a fun costume party. Now, I would cringe at those getups, making cartoon characters of the black waiters.

After a few months, the waiters came to recognize me and served my ginger ale cocktail before my mother asked for it. My mother, aunt, and I always ordered the same thing: the Pump Room Salad, a large white ceramic bowl filled with iceberg lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes and peppers, topped off with a sprinkle of crunchy Chinese noodles and a glob of sour cream. It was as colorful as a Christmas decoration. The idea, or at least ours, was to mix up the concoction and then crunch down on the cold vegetables and noodles enveloped in the smooth white sauce. Heaven! When we got back to Ohio my mother dutifully bought all the ingredients so we could reproduce the salad at home, though eating it at our yellow vinyl kitchen table wasn’t the same experience.

It took a half a year of hospital visits before my uncle’s spirits lifted. Whether it was (in part) because of our insistent presence, his courage to face his new life, or a combination of circumstances none of us would ever figure out, Uncle Ben began to smile again. In his last month at Hines, spring defeated the Chicago winter. Outside the windows buds like little snap peas appeared on the trees, and the air in the wards seemed sweeter. Uncle Ben was able to sit in a

wheelchair and leave his room. I hopped on the back rungs of his new mobile transport while my mother or Aunt Ida took turns cradling their arms around me, pushing us around on the smooth, gray, paved walks on the hospital grounds. I remember feeling happy that my uncle had the tease back in his voice and that he would soon be able to go home. But, I admitted to myself, I regretted that our jaunts to the Ambassador were over; I had become used to my first whiff of luxury. I would miss our Pump Room Salad lunches.

Twenty years later when I was married and cooking from Julia Child's "The French Chef," brandishing my *coq au vin* and whipping up countless *mousse au chocolates*, we laughed about how we had once thought of the Pump Room Salad as a gourmet treat. But when my mother was sick and dying of lung cancer and didn't have much of an appetite, I asked her if there was anything she felt like eating, and to my surprise she said she wanted the Pump Room Salad.

I prepared it for her with the ingredients I hoped I accurately remembered from forty years before and served it on a tray in her bedroom in the blue-rimmed soup bowls from my childhood. When I took her tray away, I noticed she'd eaten almost every bite.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

My mother lay back against her rose silk pillowcase, closed her eyes and nodded twice. She died two weeks later. That was thirty years ago.

In writing about those last weeks of her life, I wondered if I'd accurately remembered the ingredients of the salad I'd made for her. I googled and found the Ambassador Hotel Pump Room phone number. I was thrilled. The restaurant was still in Chicago, but the online photos showed a twenty-first century, renovated version. Glass and stainless steel tables, slim young waiters in black T-shirts and ties. Progress. Not a pair of white breeches in sight.

I rehearsed what I'd say when someone answered the restaurant phone.

I'm writing a memoir that references a stay in your hotel in the 1940s and I'm trying to verify one of the dishes that you served then.

Instead of being treated like an annoying caller, I was transferred to the public relations department. I explained I was looking for the recipe for the Pump Room Salad I'd eaten in 1945.

"Oh, what an interesting challenge," said the eager young voice. "I'll research it and get back to you."

I thought that might be the end of it, but Victoria called me back the next morning.

"I found some menus from the date you gave me, but none of them have salads with the ingredients you described. I'd be happy to email you a copy of the menus."

Within minutes I had a 1945 lunch menu from the Pump Room on my computer screen. I read every offering; none of them even remotely resembled the salad I remembered. But I was sure I'd eaten that salad in the Pump Room, at the Ambassador Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, when I was eight years old. Now I wondered: Had my mother coined the name to embellish a humble creation she prepared in our Ohio kitchen?

Whether or not the Pump Room Salad had its origins in the Chicago hotel is a moot point. I still fix it for myself on a hot summer day, eating it from the same, now chipped, blue-rimmed bowl.

When Proust dipped a little French butter cake dipped in a cup of tea it triggered a happy childhood memory. Proust has his madeleine. And I have my Pump Room Salad.

A Nasty Taste of Freedom

Jay Bradley Bush

A car, even a piece of shit like my first car, represents so much more than metal and petroleum-based lubricants. A car is freedom. A car is responsibility. A car takes bored kids from point A—wherever that may be—to points B, C, D, and back to A where they can rest quietly after a full day of...yikes, did we actually do that?

James held tight onto ropes I'd added as makeshift Oh Shit! handles while we drifted around a corner in my first car, a 1980 Honda Civic—which had been dubbed “The Nasty” by friends and family. In desperation for my first set of wheels, I bought The Nasty from James—who dressed and acted like a bad hybrid of Hunter Thompson and Neo, from *The Matrix*—for four hundred dollars and an ounce of weed. The exterior of the Civic, when I bought it, was rust covered sky-blue with black rims. I never was one for a sky-blue car and black rims didn't fit my Toontown-esque idea of life. I decked out The Nasty with some adornments and new paint. A few cans of neon blue for the body; blaze orange for the doors; canary yellow for the tires **and rims** and, with the addition of a bowling trophy (stolen from the local high school) as a hood ornament, the outside of the car was as flashy as a Jr. high girl's Bedazzled purse.

The Nasty got its name from the layers of black mold inside the car. When I bought it, the mold was so thick you could scrape it off with a putty knife. The car leaked from every possible opening. Rubber gaskets around the door had dry rotted, the sealant around the windshield was so deteriorated that my mullet fluttered elegantly even with the windows up. Rain poured through the windshield like water through a colander. The hatchback let in water by the gallon. After my exterior modifications, I had to do some interior work to get rid of the mold—for some reason none of my friends wanted to ride around in a clown car that smelled like a trashcan.

Under the wet, rotting carpet I discovered the water had done its damage on The Nasty's floor pans. The holes were so big I could put my hand through them and the jagged edges cut me when I was

stupid enough to try. With the addition of a little plywood, I set that safety concern aside.

The next and biggest issue was the rotting back seat. Rain and summer sun had turned the spongy seat medium into one giant, putrid dish scrubber. When I removed the seat, three of the four rusty bolts broke off leaving sharp, tetanus laced surprises for unknowing passengers. The Nasty, free of its city-dump-on-a-hot-summer-day scented air freshener and biggest proponent of black mold was smelling better and looking better. A few dollar store candles super glued to the dashboard had The Nasty ready to take me and my friends from point A to all points beyond.

WARNING: Candles inside a car may seem like a good idea but if you burn them while driving on curvy roads, and the wax spills onto the dashboard, it will catch on fire.

“I’m riding in front on the way back!” James shouted over The Nasty’s brand-new Sony in-dash—the only thing James spent the money to fix when he owned the car. Four new speakers and a black and red Sony stereo complete with digital equalizer display turned nightly excursions into a disco and day rides into melodious mechanical mayhem.

“Not a chance,” Jason, my older brother, said as he calmly licked the joint he was rolling and pushed in the car’s cigarette lighter.

The road narrowed from a two-lane with fresh gravel to a single lane with grass growing so high in the middle I’d have to mow The Nasty’s grill when I got home.

We were getting close to point B.

The Great Snake Migration in LaRue Pine Hills is a yearly event that closes Snake Road—yes, that’s what it’s called—to drivers from March 15th to May 15th. People come from across the world come to witness something like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*’s snakes-in-the-tomb scene. They expect the bluff line to be dripping with snakes. They expect snakes to be hanging from the trees like Spanish moss from a Georgia oak. They expect to need their knee-high leather boots to protect them from the vicious bites of angry cottonmouths, copperheads, and timber rattlers. Instead, for their expensive plane tickets and rental cars, they typically see a turtle or two, a few bullfrogs, and maybe, if they’re lucky, the odd snake. But to three stoners with a freshly painted and mold free Nasty, two

bags of grass, a fifth of rum, a vial of coke, a handful of hot Coors and nothing else to do, a walk down Snake Road seemed like great idea.

The Nasty rattled to a stop and wheezed as its four cylinders slowed. I turned the key, wondering if it would be the last time my fresh wheels would get me from point A to point B. For luck, I rubbed the bowling trophy mounted front and center to the hood. My pot infused mind ran through a list of possibilities from: stranded on Snake Road on the one day of the year that it *did* look like a scene from Henry Jones Jr's nightmares; to running out of beer before the end of five-mile hike down the crescendoless tourist attraction.

Jason passed the glowing joint to James who passed the bottle of rum to me. I took a quick sip of the Calypso and nearly spit it back out. "Swill!" I shouted. "Toss me a beer so I can wash this shit out of my mouth."

The Coors assaulted my tongue with hot, frothy vengeance. Too many bumpy back roads in a car with bad shocks and no back seat. We might as well have put the beer in a paint mixer then microwaved it. I threw the nearly full can at The Nasty, leaving a beer splatter across the driver's side door and took a long pull from my water bottle.

The joint made its way around the circle by the time I tossed the Coors and, needing to taste something other than hot, cheap liquor and beer, I broke the golden "Puff Puff Give" rule of pot smoking etiquette and smoked it like Snoop Dogg.

Snake Road lies between the LaRue Pine Hills bluffs and a swamp often referred to as "the scatters." Through hundreds of yards of snake infested, mosquito filled yuck, on the other side of the scatters, is the Big Muddy river—a tributary to the Mississippi. In most places, the Big Muddy looks like its name suggests: a big...muddy...river. Local legend gives the river a bit more personality, though. Some call it the "Big Muddy Monster" others call it the "Murphysboro Mud Monster" but what eye witnesses report is a seven-foot-tall white hair covered, muddy, sasquatch-like monster. It's been said to attack people in campgrounds and leave twelve to fifteen-inch footprints in the river bank.

As the three of us hiked, smoked, and searched for something interesting, our endeavors turned up empty. Five miles

through sweltering heat and humidity got us a few million mosquito bites, a couple ticks, sweat soaked t-shirts and forced James to take his leather trench coat off—something that rarely happened even in the humid, Southern heat.

Parked beside The Nasty, a Japanese film crew was unloading a rented cargo van and trying to get directions to the snakes from James who was high and drunk enough by then that his ability to decipher their broken English was no better than his ability to dress appropriately for the heat. Between the three of us, we encouraged the film crew to, hike right beside the cliffs where snakes might still be moving. It was as likely for them to see snakes up there as it had been for us to see them on the road.

The three of us sat down in The Nasty's sweltering interior, candles still burning, giving the car that "Fresh Linen" scent. James mounted the old, worn-out boat seat I used as a replacement for the original bench. It was a half-torn, camouflage seat with a raised, swiveling center that rocked and rolled on the uneven steel. He wasn't happy about it.

"Where to?" I asked my brother.

Rolling another joint, he said, "Let's go check out the bridge." Jason was conductor of our aimless symphony; the director of our stupid teenage movie. The bridge Jason mentioned was about three miles from Snake Road. It was a railroad bridge that traversed the Big Muddy at one of its widest points. Rusty, hot rivets held the ancient bridge together like the old webs of a dying spider. Under the bridge, the river ran through fields and swamps; an enormous, spiny sea serpent with no beginning and no end. Trees that had been uprooted by erosion and engulfed by the river's ever-growing boundaries floated downstream like logs from an old lumber town. Garbage and other drifting monstrosities floated alongside the old logs turning the river into a flowing superhighway of debris.

Something about the Big Muddy sent shivers up my back. Maybe it was the stories of the Mud Monster I'd heard from the time I was a child. Maybe it was the dying trees that lined the edges of the filthy water. Maybe it was farming run-off that turned the water a diseased looking pearlescent-brown. The sickness that seemed to roll from the mouth Big Muddy into the vein of the Mississippi was arsenic coursing through the countryside. Nothing grew around its

edges and dying fish washed ashore spreading the odor of death miles around.

I wasn't opposed to checking out the bridge, as Jason suggested, and God knew we had nothing better to do with our time, so I passed the joint, laughed as the Japanese film crew slid half-chaps over their boots, and turned The Nasty's key. It roared to life—as much as a four-cylinder engine can roar—and I pushed the clutch. With the high-pitched whizzing old manual transmission cars give when shifted into reverse, The Nasty took us from the parking lot to the grassy road. Robert Plant's subtle warning, "When the levee breaks I'll have no place to stay," blasted from the car's best feature. James, Jason and I felt the music as the rolling joke took us from point B to point C.

I brought The Nasty to a halt in a small turn-out used by fishermen who were brave enough to eat the mercury and pesticide laced piscine meat. Shuddering to death along with Robert Plant's shouts The Nasty had taken us to a serpentine crossroad. Steel tracks crossed liquid poison at the bridge where Jason was leading us.

"You been out there before?" James asked motioning toward the bridge as Jason mounted the tracks.

"Yeah. Couple times. Never been across, though. Wanna try?"

I had my hesitations, but James and Jason were both game. In the way teenagers often are, I was stuck between common sense and what the group wanted. Of course, being a constant victim of peer pressure, I agreed to journey across the bridge.

The gravel road we'd arrived on was a high banked levee made to keep the Big Muddy at bay during floods. Below it, on both sides, swamps spanned much of the area. The train tracks had also been raised so goods could be shipped through the swamps even during high water times. The two raised roads crossed and spread out like arthritic fingers from a giant's hand. As we stepped away from the road, onto the tracks, gravel changed from small broken limestone to larger chunks of jagged granite. The kind of thing that, if you fell on it, you'd need stitches rather than a Band-Aid.

Chemical scented wooden ties almost masked the smell of some decaying animal that had been hit by a rushing train. The pelt, which lay between the two steel rails, crawled with insects. I wanted

to say, “Think that’s meant to be a warning?” Instead, I kept my mouth shut, held back the vomit that threatened, and ignored my racing heart.

Tossing rocks and railroad spikes off the edge of the bridge into the murky waters below, we paid no attention to anything but our tiny bubble of life. As kids do, especially high and drunk kids, we missed the very obvious signs of upcoming trouble.

When I was small, growing up in tornado alley, my parents warned that tornadoes sound like a rushing train. I heard trains from our car, at railroad crossings, and knew they were loud. So loud you couldn’t talk over them, couldn’t even hear the Sony and four new speakers blasting out music in *The Nasty*. Thousands of tons of steel running down steel rails has the potential to be deafening.

Stoned, a bit drunk, a little freaked by the river, the Mud Monster, the corpse of whatever animal met its fate on the bridge, I heard a tornado.

“Fuck!” James shouted as he dropped the rock he was about to toss at a dead fish floating in the water some sixty feet below us.

“MOVE!” Jason screamed.

Our responses were different. Jason’s was to get off the track ASAMFP—as soon as mother fucking possible. James looked at the train with a sort of mild confusion. He knew what it was, and knew it wasn’t a good thing that we were standing in the direct path of a steel dragon but didn’t know what to do. I took a brief moment to better understand the situation. We were in the middle of the bridge, I knew this because the highest point of the steel framework was almost directly above us. We had no time to go back the way we came, the way from which the train was coming. I looked the other direction, trying to judge the distance, how fast I could run and how fast the train was coming.

The only thing we could do was try.

Jason and I took off at a full sprint, James lagged, trying not to trip over his coat, heavy boots, and also trying to keep a good hold on the bottle of rum he’d been nursing. James clearly didn’t understand the gravity of the situation.

With my legs moving as fast as they could carry me, after the first fifty meters, I checked over my shoulder to see my progress. I had no chance of out running the train. James and Jason were left in

a Road Runner-esq dust trail behind me and would be crushed by the train in fifteen, no, ten seconds.

Jason, I noticed, was waving his arms emphatically, toward one side of the bridge. I thought for sure he meant for me to jump into the horror show of a river below. If I had the choice of being smashed by a train or being drown in a log and trash filled, radioactive wasteland, I'd take the train. But when I turned back around, I realized Jason wasn't waving for me to jump, he was waving for me to scoot to the side of the narrow train bridge onto a platform that hung off the edge of the rusting monstrosity. A three-foot by three-foot steel platform had, for whatever reason, been welded to the bridge's architecture. It was out of the way of the train and, I hoped, would hold the weight of all three of us, if we could squeeze onto it.

I took an ankle twisting, right turn and nearly fell in the monster's path. Recovering, I jumped out onto the rusting platform. It had no handrails, and no lip on the edge. The bottom of it was rusting through, like The Nasty's floor pans. I could see the river through the steel. The platform gave, just a little, when I stopped on the outside edge. Rusty flakes fell in slow motion to the river below.

Jason was right behind me, almost to the platform, by the time I turned around. But James, clown combat boots and huge leather coat slowing his run, was closer to the train than to the platform. "Come on!" I caught myself yelling. It didn't matter what I yelled, nothing could be heard over the steel dragon's roars. The conductor had been pulling the airhorn for the last twenty seconds but never once hit the brakes.

Jason stood at the edge of the platform, risking his arm as a sacrifice to the dragon as he waved James on shouting something incoherent.

James never made it to the platform, though.

He dropped to the granite gravel, elbows first, less than a foot away from the train as it flew past him at speeds so quick it pulled my hat from my head. Mullet blowing in the wind, I covered my ears as the screeching and crying of steel on steel flew past. The bridge swayed—back and forth, up and down, as heavy train cars shifted by.

Flakes of rust fell from the bridge onto our heads just as flakes of rust fell from the platform the we stood on, as the train and our lives passed in slow motion.

When the last car passed, James stood, obviously shaken, but not stirred by what had just happened.

“What the fuck?” Jason asked, glaring at James.

“What?”

“Dude, you couldn’t run faster than that?”

“It’s this goddamn gravel!”

“Are you hurt?” Jason asked. James took off his drug filled coat, laid it carefully on the ground, checked out his elbows. They were red but had been protected by the thick buffalo leather of his ridiculous trench coat.

I stepped off the platform, loud squeals emitted from the steel as my weight shifted from the edge of death’s diving board to the main bridge. My shaking hands still held the glowing joint we’d been passing before the tornado came. I took another Snoop Dogg puff and handed it off to Jason.

We walked back to The Nasty in silence, each of us ruminating on what happened. James never mentioned it again, nor did Jason for that matter, but on the way home, as I shifted gears from first to second, second to third, third to forth, I began, as much as a teenager can, to understand the responsibility that came with my choices. Fear, it seemed, was a factor that had the potential to change a life for the better, or, if ignored, the worse. Freedom, say the freedom of one’s first car, was more than just doing whatever we felt like because we could, freedom had consequences. Freedom required responsibility. Responsibility was an adult’s word—a word that didn’t fit in my youthful, stoned lexicon. A word that meant nothing to me...before that day.

I looked in the rearview mirror as James slid from side to side on the uneven boat seat. It occurred to me that if we had an accident, the ropes his white knuckled hands gripped would be worthless. It wasn’t that I started worrying about everything, overanalyzing everything, it was that I realized, as we drove a rusted-out, mold-filled, shit-box down a gravel road in the middle of nowhere, pockets full of drugs, high and drunk, that having my first car out for the first time almost got me killed. We’d always been careless. We had BB gun

fights, when we ran out of BBs we'd use our wrist rockets and hickory nuts from the trees that lined our property. We jumped off cliffs onto nearby trees and shimmied seventy feet down. We swam in rivers with currents so strong they would overtake fishing boats. We were careless, stupid, and as The Nasty rumbled down the curvy, gravel road, my pot and rum infused mind realized what carelessness could do.

Point C could have been our last stop. And all the points between C and today could have been lost by a single careless moment. That car took my friends and I on dozens of trips from points A through Z and while it was my first experience of real freedom—the kind of freedom that requires responsibility—it left a nasty taste in my mouth.

Contributors

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Gay Baines holds a B.A. in English from Russell Sage College and has done graduate work at Syracuse University and SUNY - Buffalo. In 1991, Baines won the National Writers Union Poetry Prize, was named Honorable Mention in the Ruth Cable Memorial Poetry Contest in 1996, as well as other prizes.

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