

Printer's Devil Review



Spring 2012



Printer's Devil Review

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We do not accept postal submissions.

Duly Noted

The editors would like to congratulate Kendra DeColo, whose poem "The Dream in Which You Are" was selected as a finalist for the 2011 *Best of the Net Anthology*. The poem appears in the first issue of *Printer's Devil Review*.

Ian Poole, one of *PDR's* founding poetry editors, will be stepping down after this issue. The editors would like to thank Ian for sharing his knowledge and passion with us over the last year.

In our first two issues, we identified the artists and works featured on our covers. We neglected, however, to provide their biographies on our contributors page. Starting with this issue, we've changed our practice, and so would like to recognize our previous cover artists.

TERESA DUNN provided the cover image for our Fall 2011 issue. The recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, Dunn holds an MFA in painting from Indiana University, Bloomington. She is an assistant professor of painting at Michigan State University and has also taught painting at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas and at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Dunn is represented by Hooks-Epstein Galleries in Houston, Texas, where in 2009 she had her most recent solo exhibition, entitled *Dilemmas and Innocents*. She is a member of First Street Gallery, located in Chelsea in New York City.

ROBERT MCCANN provided the cover for our Spring 2011 issue. McCann earned a BFA in studio art at Missouri State University in 1996 and an MFA in painting from Indiana University at Bloomington in 2001. Later that year he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to paint in Berlin, Germany. He has taught at Missouri State University and Washington University. He is presently an assistant professor of painting at Michigan State University.

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Editor's Note

IT'S AN EXCITING TIME for independent literature in New England. Enterprising editors all over the region have been starting up magazines featuring poetry, fiction, essays, and art that otherwise might not have made it past the gatekeepers of mainstream literary publishing. Without the support of universities or commercial houses, these editors and their volunteer staffs do the hard, daily work of scouting for new talent, reading submissions, helping writers with revisions, copyediting, layout – to say nothing of building and maintaining web sites, drafting and disseminating promotional materials, and hosting events.

Most of these publications don't make a profit, and they aren't meant to; they exist primarily to serve a community of readers and artists, not to generate income for their editors. Many editors keep their journals afloat with donations from readers and friends and (of course) with their own money.

Readers form passionate attachments to these publications – to the fine poetry published in *Amethyst Arsenic*, the queer feminist erotica of *Salacious*, the *Inman Review's* hyper-local lit. Readers of one magazine, though, don't necessarily read (or even know about) the others.

Before the proliferation of journals in the last few years, readers of indie lit in New England were like isolated swimmers treading water in a broad ocean. But now the sea floor has rushed up to meet them, forming solid but scattered islands. The readers, however, are still castaways, often unaware of the companion islands that lie just beyond the horizon.

A few weeks ago, I met in the basement of Boston's Lorem Ipsum Books with some of my fellow editors. We struck upon an idea to publish an anthology that would show off the best work being published in our respective journals. We're calling the project *Best Indie Lit New England*, or *BILiNE*, and we plan to publish the first volume in fall of this year. You can learn more about the project at our website, biline.org. If you edit an independent journal in New England, you can also use the site to submit work for consideration.

We hope that *BILiNE* will provide opportunities for readers to discover new writers and publications, and for authors to gain greater recognition and find new audiences for their work.

Clearly, there isn't space in this brief note to catalog the many independent

journals being published throughout New England. Still, we'd like to take the opportunity to introduce *PDR's* readers to publications you might have missed. Armed with this list, we hope you'll get out there and read more indie lit.

AMETHYST ARSENIC is a Boston-based online journal founded in 2011 to publish the best poetry and art to the widest possible audience.

In print since 2006, BALLARD STREET POETRY JOURNAL showcases work from poets from around the world. *BSPJ* is based in Worcester, Massachusetts, and publishes a print edition each year.

THE INMAN REVIEW is a print-only journal based in the Inman Square neighborhood of Cambridge since 2009. It showcases the fiction, poetry, arts writing, and visual art of the neighborhood and of the broader Cambridge and Boston-area communities.

INTERROBANG?! MAGAZINE is a biannual web and print zine for the arts. It aims to publish unique and cutting edge work, focusing especially on artists who haven't been published or have had minimal exposure. Editors & staff are split between Providence, Rhode Island and New Orleans, Louisiana.

MEAT FOR TEA: THE VALLEY REVIEW is committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

Founded in 2006, the title of the MIDWAY JOURNAL speaks to its aesthetic; the editors seek to publish work that crosses and traverses boundaries.



Proposed Cover for *BILiNE*, Vol 1. 2012

NAUGATUCK RIVER REVIEW (NRR) is a semi-annual (twice yearly) journal of narrative poetry that has been in publication for four years.

RADIUS is an online literary journal devoted to poetry, how it works, and how it interacts with the real world. It publishes two or three times a week, and specializes in political poetry, elegies for poets, and invented forms.

A print magazine of queer feminist sex art and literature, SALACIOUS aims to meld pornography with high art, comics with erotica, titillation with stunning visuals.

Thomas Dodson



Contributors

HARRIET “HAPPY” BURBECK is a New Orleans comic artist, illustrator, and musician. She has shown her work at a number of galleries in the Crescent City, including Mimi’s in the Marigny, Du Mois Gallery, Zeitgeist Multi-Disciplinary Arts Center, and The Candle Factory.

M. R. B. CHELKO holds an MFA from the University of New Hampshire and is assistant editor of the unbound poetry journal *Tuesday; An Art Project*. Some of her recent work can be found online in *RealPoetik*, *Missouri Review*, *POOL*, *Vinyl Poetry*, *Loaded Bicycle*, and others. Chelko’s second chapbook, *The World after Czesław Miłosz*, is forthcoming from Dream Horse Press. She and her husband live in Harlem.

BENJAMIN SWALLOW DUKE has shown his work at numerous solo and group shows, both in the United States and abroad. He has been awarded international residencies at Bamboo Curtain Studios, Taiwan and at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Art in Taipei. A catalogue entitled *Benjamin Duke 2001–2010: Nine Years of Work* was published by Garden City Publishing in June 2010. Duke teaches painting and drawing at Michigan State University.

GEORGIE FRIEDMAN has her MFA (video, film and photography) from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in conjunction with Tufts University, and her BA (studio art: photography) from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her current projects include video installations, video and film experimental narratives, and several photographic series.

JOHN GENTILE was born in Italy and attended the Institute of Fine Art in Florence. He was a founding member of the Boston Visual Artists Union and was one of five artists selected to represent the Boston group showing at the West Broadway Gallery in New York. He was awarded the UNESCO prize at the International Exhibit in Monaco. He has had numerous one-man shows; his work can be found in public and private collections all over the world.

ANNABEL GILL graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2005. She moved back to Massachusetts in 2008 and is now co-editor of *The Inman Review*. Her work has appeared in that publication and *Freak Flag*. She is currently completing a novel.

JUDD HESS holds an MFA and an MA from Chapman University. He was co-winner of the 2009 Ellipsis Prize and the 2011 John Fowles Creative Writing Prize for Poetry. His poetry has also been published in *BorderSenses*, *Pigeonbike*, and *Prick of the Spindle*.

BRIAN R. HAUSER is an assistant professor of film studies at Union College in Schenectady, New York. His feature-length screenplay *Cult Flick* won the 2010 H. P. Lovecraft Film Festival screenwriting competition.

DAVID MEISCHEN has short stories in or forthcoming in *Bellingham Review*, *Dogwood*, *Prime Number*, *Superstition Review*, *Talking Writing*, and *Valparaiso Fiction Review*. Meischen’s poetry has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Borderlands*, *Cider Press Review*, and elsewhere. He is the co-editor of *Wingbeats: Exercises and Practice in Poetry*, a 2011 release from Dos Gatos Press.

REBECCA GIVENS ROLLAND is the author of the forthcoming book *The Wreck of Birds* (Bauhan Publishing, 2012), which won the 2011 May Sarton New Hampshire First Book Prize. She is a speech-language pathologist and doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

GABRIELLE REEVE is a sneeze away from being a graduate of Emerson College. A native of Brookline, she hopes to one day have a real job but is not opposed to marrying rich. To date she has eaten approximately one billion extra strength “mixed berry” Tums and wishes to dedicate this story to them.

ED SKOOG has been a Bread Loaf fellow, writer-in-residence at the Richard Hugo House, and the Jenny McKean Moore Writer-in-Residence at George Washington University. His poems have appeared in *Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *Narrative*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, and elsewhere. His first book is *Mister Skylight* (Copper Canyon Press, 2009).

EDWIN M. STECKEVICZ is a writer-musician who has lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts for nearly thirty years. His stories have been published in *The Kenyon Review*, *Sou’wester*, and recently in *The Inman Review*. As Randy Black, he has release two CDs of his original songs on Waterbug Records out of Illinois.

How to Sex Yourself

FIRST YOU WILL NEED TO BE BORN. You will come into this world to find you have something important that may make you like me and half the human race. Or it may make you like the other half. The half that wear it outside like a sword and a rocket and a car and a gun and the Empire State Building. This genital crapshoot is a fifty-fifty proposition. Good luck.

If you are like me, you will own scratchy pink dresses and Barbies. You will break a pencil trying to draw nipples on Barbie's blank and mountainous breasts. You will wear a witch mask for Halloween that smells like sweet rubber erasers. It will disappear when it becomes dangerous, when you are afraid to be ugly even for a little while.

Your parents will not be unhappy, but sometimes your mother will fling the plates onto the table at dinner and slam shoes and coats into their proper places with the ghost of a snarl on her lips. Then your parents will argue in half-stifled roars while you kneel on the floor, your head tilted over the heating vent that carries their voices into your room. Listen to your mother's scattered testimony of slights, a Sisyphian catalog of household duties weighed out against making peace. It will be easier to take your father's side because she cries and her voice grows shrill and terrible. Besides, you will think as you work out which lucky Barbie gets to marry the lone Ken, *Mom started it. She always starts it.* It doesn't occur to you that it started so, so long ago.

When you begin to grow breasts, you will be the one to fight with your mother. She won't let you wear a belly shirt outside the house. She will tell you darkly that things happen to girls who wear eye-catching clothes. (Maybe Red Riding Hood would have fared better in a nice slate gray or layered taupe.) The older you get, the less vague these threats will become, and by ninth grade she will be telling you about a woman who was raped on a crowded subway train while the other passengers stared through her like a ghost. The nightly news will be an object lesson and the crime blotter scattered with supporting examples. Someday you will not hate her for these obscene warnings. You will hate the boys who learn about these things slowly and remotely. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Not just the shadow. Not just you either but you learn it first and it doesn't just live in your brain; it travels over your skin and clings to your eyelashes. Remember the days your mother pulled your arm and walked faster, held you close – and you heard the rhythm of her heartbeat whisper: “Don't get raped. Don't get raped. Don't get raped.” You will hate the boys who were held like this, close and loving, by mothers and fathers who failed to tell them: “Don't rape. Don't rape anyone.” You will look more closely at the newspapers your mother studied. Accidently rip the page as your hand tightens around warnings from the police for young women to avoid the dark, to travel in packs, not to dress like sluts. “There are two elements necessary for a crime to occur: DESIRE and OPPORTUNITY.”

You are the opportunity.

Growing like ivy between your fear and vigilance (what's behind you, where are the exits, put your key ring in your fist, sharpest key poking out between your pointer and middle fingers like a dainty Wolverine, hurry) will be lust. Masturbate for the first time when you're eleven to Han Solo coming out of the carbonite at the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*. In sex ed you will learn about wet dreams and when it comes time to submit your anonymous questions, inquire hopefully if a girl can ever have one. Write this in cramped, nervous haste before anyone can read it over your shoulder. The teacher will somehow miss your slip when pulling queries out of an old Red Sox hat, and you will try to look it up in the textbook. It will say that everyone experiments and that's okay.

Then it will describe the habits and expectations of boys on the brink of manhood and their God-given right to flog the bishop. Nothing much will be said about girls, and you will be afraid. You will try to stop touching yourself. Basing your methods on fuzzy understandings of 12-step programs from movies and TV, you will attempt to wean yourself off sticking your hands down your pants at night. This won't work but you will learn that you don't feel as guilty before that nice thing at the end happens. You will try to put this off for as long as possible and if you feel it starting you make yourself stop for one full song on the radio (playing softly to muffle the rattle of your twin bed) before you can start again. This will lead to an embarrassing Pavlovian response to the song "Mambo Number Five" and sometimes your hand will cramp up. You will suspect that the reason boys your own age don't seem to like you very much is because they know you are not a real girl, not when you keep doing this dirty, bad thing.

When you enter high school, you will gaze so intensely into your own navel that you will fall into it and live off your wits in a belly button kingdom of hormones and books and tentative sips of vodka. You will seem beyond gender, obsessed with sex but so dwarfed by discovery that you will fancy yourself a questing eye, unanchored by binary bodies.

One day when you are even older, and perhaps a little less of a nerd, you will make the truly miraculous discovery that things can touch you. Grandparents will die and friendships will end. But you will lock lips with a girl who tastes like pizza and beer as she presses you against the chilly stone wall of a church. You will lose your virginity on a futon because the boy who invited you upstairs to watch *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* cannot afford a bed. You will have a lot of sex and be shocked you didn't think of this before. Mostly you will date older men. Boys your age still don't like you for very long.

But you will not forget the subway rapist and the constant fearful litany of a woman walking alone. Homeless men will ask you if your pussy tastes good; you will stop giving them change. You get in few fights but fantasize often about punching someone – a meaty, honest wallop in a sneering face, cutting your knuckles on tufts of wannabe beard. Sometimes, when the bruised sky turns the purple pink of a

sloppy Easter egg, being brave and being stupid will be the same. You will smother the cluck and whine of your mother's voice as the light fades and you turn into the shadowy alley between KFC and the old Nike factory. Your heart will flutter and your feet will fall blindly on the uneven asphalt but you will gobble up the fear because it's better than being chickenshit and angry.

Don't forget to become truly angry sometimes or you will burn through your makeup and clothing and urban impassivity. Do it at the window in winter with a cigarette in your hands if you can.

Here are three stories that you will never stop telling yourself:

When it's your turn to research a world topic for seventh-grade social studies you will Google "gender issues" because it seems important. Your search will return 11,900,000 results, but just by chance you will read about female circumcision first because you live in a really Jewish town and you will wonder if this combination of words is a joke or a metaphor. You will learn about rusty cans and little girls sewn up while their aunties hold them down. Your face will flush and your ears burn because it is true in a way no reported foreign travesty or true crime has been for you before. Men accustomed to dealing in girls proved pure, sealed shut against temptation until a husband breaks them open, unwraps them like a bloody, mutilated gift. You will go the bathroom and be sick before the presentations begin. Other people will talk about solar power and elections. When it's your turn, you won't get past your second slide before the boys in your class start shouting.

"This is freaking disgusting! No one wants to hear about this!" They pantomime gagging and someone coughs "Cram it lesbo" just soft enough that you're not sure you heard it. A few of them get a couple rounds of "Shut up" chanting in before the harried teacher absentmindedly silences them. You've grown up with these guys, and your friends are here somewhere, but all you can hear is the booing and hissing, and all you can see is the slide in front of you with the picture of the dented Campbell's top sharpened to a blade. Later you will challenge some of these boys to a fight behind the big tree at lunch but none of them will show.

Years later you will read about a B-list actress-director who was killed in her apartment by a construction worker who lived down the

hall. He claims it was because she asked him to keep the music down. You will become fascinated and repulsed by this story. You will read that at first she was thought a suicide because he hung her in her own shower. You will watch a movie she made about domestic abuse and pie. You will find out that the child actor in the film is actually her daughter, the entire script a kind of love letter to her pregnancy, and you will watch the little girl wave to the camera over and over again, wondering when she'll read the news articles and police reports you've combed through almost every day for a week.

Egypt will have a revolution, and you will see a video of a young woman in a veil leading the chanting at a demonstration. You will post anything you find about violent government responses to the protestors on Facebook or your blog because you think it's important that *people know the truth*. On the day their demands are met, the crowd in Tahrir Square will separate an American reporter from her crew. She will be gang-raped by almost two hundred men. You will not know how to celebrate their victory anymore. You will try to read a book instead. You will understand that turning a story about Middle Eastern peoples overthrowing a dictator on their own terms into the individual saga of a white woman in peril is wrong, but you won't be able to stop thinking about it, so you won't say anything at all. You will get in another bar fight and you will lose again and be released from a chokehold only because you cry. Later you will read that the reporter was rescued in the end by a group of women and Egyptian soldiers, but your arm will ache where he grabbed you to stop a right hook so you will quickly forget.

These things will rest under your eyelids. Go home, eat a snack, brush your teeth. Read a book about a man in a desert with a gun. That man is you. You quest and you understand. You could read a book about a woman but you've read them all and you want to feel powerful and iconic and simple. You can't run away from men forever. And not from this man, this gunslinger. He lays down evil with twin pistols and strides across mountains. Then he sees a woman. And you are both of them at once. And unless you are very, very lucky, things begin to go wrong because she doesn't speak naturally like him. She is speaking across a great silence and her words warble on the same notes all the

time. Sex and power and good and evil get bounced off her like sonar so that he can feel it. So you can feel it. But you see her and you wonder and the book doesn't hold you the same now. You put it down. Close the windows. Lock the door. Make sure the curtains are closed so no one peeps while you slip into pajamas. Double check the door. Close your eyes.

Can you even dream yourself born like the other half? 🌸

M. R. B. CHELKO

from *Manhattations*

sun so bright it voids one side
of each building

all the windows broken
in my mind

my mind the abandoned dance hall
the pigeons don't fly when

I kick them
New York

aging New York elderly even
the sky its crisp

bedsheets the clouds
its white plumes of hair

my toes cut up and covered in dirt
bird shadow

on a sun drenched brownstone
I'm awake

I've slept through the war
a single lit candle

in the rubble of a church
long stemmed like a rose

who knows what in the night
tried to get in

Call of the Cult Flick

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

—*Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), H. P. Lovecraft

There is nothing more terrifying to me than the sudden realization that I am, inescapably, out of my depth. It is the keen awareness, the visceral experience, of the unknown that brings on the bitter and metallic jolt of adrenaline. As I stood sweating in that apartment, watching friends perform the script I had written, I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. I had a consumer-grade Digital8 camcorder, a naked and blazingly white G.E. Reveal bulb in a ceiling fixture, and a homemade bounce board to add some fill light to each shot. The most sophisticated piece of equipment on that set was a two-hundred-dollar Azden two-stage shotgun microphone that was rigged up to an aluminum painter’s pole we were using as a boom. It was June of 2002, and we were shooting my first feature.

One Night on Oswald’s Green is about three adults who regularly get together to play a table-top role-playing game based on the fiction of the American horror writer Howard Philips Lovecraft (1890–1937). The group is somewhat dysfunctional – especially because they

are not dealing well with the recent death of a long-time member in a freak accident. This provides the frame for the film-within-a-film, the story of the game scenario. In that scenario, the three players take the roles of late-1920s investigators, who travel to a remote New England town to look into strange events related to a reclusive scientist.

I had grown up deeply involved with role-playing games like this one, and my brilliant plan was to use the intricately painted miniatures that often serve as accessories for these games, along with detailed scale-model sets, to photograph the various tableaux of the game scenario with a digital still camera. My actors would provide the voice-over dialogue for their investigators, I would buy high-quality sound effects to layer onto the soundtrack, and some creative use of postproduction image panning would provide the visual movement that the metal miniatures could not.

Of course, it all fell apart. Like so many before me, I had naïvely embarked upon the complicated undertaking of making

a movie with almost no money at all. I had a camera and creativity and friends, and I thought my problem-solving skills would be enough to overcome the challenges that would eventually come my way. Once my tiny crew and I wrapped principal photography, I spent the rest of the summer recovering from that frenzied, two-week production schedule, the realization that I didn’t have the resources to finish the film slowly sinking in. My own skills weren’t up to the task of turning my visions into apparent reality; I had already painted the miniature figures, but building the intricate model sets was beyond my ability, and my graduate student stipend was not equal to the task of hiring people who might be able to do it. It was stomach-wrenching to think of all the time and effort my friends had put into this project, and I couldn’t bear to think about the moment when I would have to confess that I had simply bitten off more than I could chew. None of us would ever see this film, and certainly none of us would ever premiere it at the annual H. P. Lovecraft Film Festival (HPLFF).

All of these worries and doubts were pushed aside, however, when I was called up to active duty. In a previous life, I had been in the army, and now they wanted me back for twelve more months. I thought very little about the film that year. The tapes, the equipment, my computer, and all the miniatures sat in storage, waiting for my return. It was a loose end, like my graduate studies, and the thought of it made me ache.

So I tried my best not to think about it. Still, it is sometimes hard to keep our interests a secret. Over the course of my

tour of duty, my boss, Chief Warrant Officer Marler, and I talked a lot about books and movies. Eventually, I got around to mentioning Lovecraft, and we discovered that this was perhaps the one thing we had in common outside of the uniform, the one thing that switched off our automatic defense mechanisms (mine sullen, his surly). When my year was up, the Chief bought me the two volumes of the *Annotated Lovecraft* as a going-away gift.

Lovecraft was an early-twentieth-century writer from Providence, Rhode Island, where he spent most of his life. From his youth he was fascinated by science and literature, especially the gripping short stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the fantastic mindscapes of Lord Dunsany. Eventually, Lovecraft combined these interests into his own particular species of weird fiction.

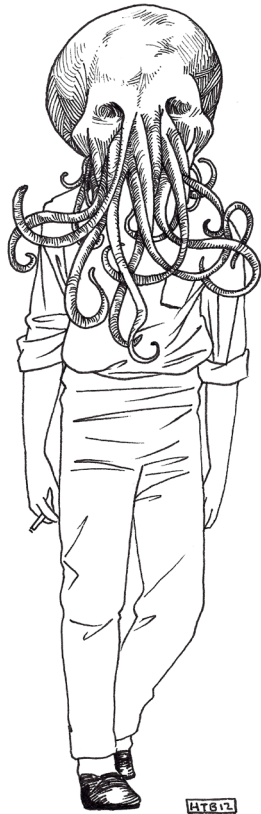
Lovecraft’s fiction falls into two broad categories: horror and dreams. Early on, he lamented that he wrote derivative “Poe stories” and “Dunsany stories,” and for some time he despaired of ever writing a true “Lovecraft story.” Though the quality of his output was tremendously varied over his short life – and there is a compelling case that his gargantuan correspondence deserves as much if not more attention than his fiction – he is now best known for a group of stories that the French author and filmmaker Michel Houellebecq terms “the Great Texts.”

These short stories and a handful of somewhat longer works, about a dozen in all, include “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Dunwich Horror,” “The Whisperer in Darkness,” “The Shadow over

Innsmouth,” and “At the Mountains of Madness,” among others. Lovecraft set these stories in his modern day, though most of them take place in a curious geography of fictional New England towns like Arkham (with its ivy-covered Miskatonic University) and Innsmouth. His characters set out from such places in search of things that would have been better left unknown.

Most of this forbidden knowledge touches on a shadowy pantheon of extra-terrestrial and extra-dimensional beings with names like Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, Azathoth, and Yog-Sothoth. These entities are worshipped by nameless human cults as though they were malevolent gods. They are, in fact, supremely indifferent to humanity and our mundane concerns. The threat inherent in these tales of horror is not that these creatures are bent on our destruction; the extinction of the human species is usually posited as simply an inevitable by-product of their ascension. Often Lovecraft’s characters learn about these beings from books of forgotten and dangerous lore, the most famous of which is the *Necronomicon*, a fictional tome arguably more famous than the man who conceived it. Usually, these searchers are rewarded for their efforts with insanity or death (or both, in that order).

On my way home, I dove into those books and started thinking again about *Oswald’s Green*. None of the problems had gone away, but I started thinking about how I might return to it. The immediate path I chose was to attend the Lovecraft Film Festival in early October of 2003. Though I had never been, I had found it online a couple years before. I had ordered a handful of



the festival’s best films off the internet in a vhs series called *The Lurker in the Lobby*. I saw Bryan Moore’s *Cool Air* (1999), starring a wonderful Jack Donner, and realized that there were indie filmmakers out there who could put together enough of a budget to make a satisfying period adaptation of a Lovecraft tale. I saw shorter films by Aaron Vanek like *The Outsider* (1994) and *Return to Innsmouth* (1999), as well as Bob Fugger’s *From Beyond* (1999). It was the discovery of this festival and these films that inspired me to want to write and produce my own Lovecraftian film in the first place.

Going to the festival was clearly, then, about returning to a time prior to my experiences over the past year. I also planned on seeing a number of old friends along the way, people I knew from my first active-duty stint in the 1990s as well as college friends from before that. I imagined it as a classic cross-country road trip of the kind I had always wanted to take. I would be driving alone, taking my time, camping to keep costs down. Here was nostalgia for a dream. I had taken many long trips by car, but none of them had ever seemed romantic enough to fulfill this desire I had, a desire that came to me fully formed via books and movies, a desire that smelled like diner coffee and pine forests and gasoline. And in the middle of it, there would be three days of Lovecraft adaptations. Jack Kerouac with tentacles.

Days of driving, my silver Ford skimming along hundreds of miles of asphalt, gave me a lot of time to think about what I had done, what I was doing, what I was going to see at the festival. None of that really prepared me for what I did see when I got there. At the time, the festival ran annually in the historic Hollywood Theatre in Portland, Oregon. (Now, the festival also has a separate run in Los Angeles.)

This art movie house, with its baroque façade, had been built in 1926 as a grand, 1,500-seat theater with a balcony, an orchestra pit, and an organ for silent film accompaniment. Over its long life, the grand theater had been chopped up into three smaller venues; the main floor was intact, but the balcony had been split into two screening rooms. The entire house was a bit threadbare,

its eighty years showing in the stained carpeting and the cracked plaster.

What struck me most forcefully, though, as I entered the theater, was how it was so obviously filled with love: of film, of the building itself, of fans, of Lovecraft. Everyone I saw and everyone I met were all at the HPLFF for the same thing. The festival programmed a handful of features, many of which were examples of the lower-budget Hollywood films inspired by or adapted from Lovecraft like *Beyond Re-Animator* (2003) and *Necronomicon* (1993). There was also Ivan Zucco’s Italian adaptation *The Shunned House* (2003) and a feature-length documentary *The Eldritch Influence* (2003). However, the bulk of the festival screenings were made up of independent short films, fan films essentially, like the ones I had seen in *The Lurker in the Lobby*. These are the films that most everyone really comes to see. The audience is filled with the filmmakers, and many of the filmmakers began as members of the audience.

The fan camaraderie was unlike anything I had experienced before, even in the military. Even though the days of driving had left me with a noticeable limp (I used my umbrella as a makeshift cane while I walked off whatever those bucket seats had done to me), I still sat happily and watched hours of short- and feature-length films. I hobbled around the dealers’ room filled with books and movies and memorabilia and resin sculptures and fans, everywhere fans. All sorts of people came: men and women, teenagers and seniors. Some looked very much like the fans you would find at any convention dedicated to some byway of popular culture. They tend to

be male, between the ages of sixteen and forty-five, wearing tennis shoes and black T-shirts (preferably with some otherwise obscure Lovecraftian reference). But the Lovecraft set also attracts a strong contingent of the goth-punk crowd. They are onboard with the black, but they prefer leather, corsets, tattoos, and lots and lots of metal on their clothing and in their bodies. Mixed in among these are the notables: the filmmakers, authors, artists, and other movers and shakers that keep the festival train running with their output. These few are often dressed more formally, though the fabrics are still quite dark, with room for the occasional merlot necktie or ceremonial cloak. Mixed in with all of these are not a few local Portlanders, who sometimes seem a little lost in the Hollywood Theatre, but who more often seem game for this annual carnival.

At the Pagan Publishing table, I flipped through books and supplements for *Delta Green*, a modern-day setting for the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game. In *Delta Green*, a super-secret U.S. government organization tries to protect the world from the mind-rending horrors of the Cthulhu mythos. Sitting behind the table was Adam Scott Glancy, who somehow bears an uncanny resemblance to Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski* without really reminding you of John Goodman. Turning from the Pagan Publishing table, I met and chatted with Jack Donner, who had a table all to himself where he was talking with attendees and signing eight-by-ten glossies. Donner has been acting for over half a century and is well known to another group of fans as Romulan Subcommander Tal from the original

Star Trek television series, though his roles have spanned across many genres on stage as well as on large and small screens. He is the kind of tall that remains tall even when seated, and his shock of white hair, hollowed cheeks, and closely trimmed moustache and goatee confirm rather than lend his air of dignity.

I recall very little of what we said, but I remember his voice, deep and resonant, perfectly in keeping with his presence. Other festival attendees would step up to the table, say hello, maybe compliment Donner on his work in *Star Trek*, but almost all of them, myself included, praised his performance in Bryan Moore's *Cool Air*. His portrayal of Lovecraft's character, Dr. Muñoz, who must remain in his freezing apartment in order to survive, is one of the most frightening of the entire Lovecraftian film library and all the more so because it is so touching. He had embodied the mad scientist filled with regret, and here we all were smiling with him and shaking his hand.

When a couple people I had been talking to announced that they were going over to the nearby Moon and Sixpence Pub, I went along. It was there, over pints, that I met some of the festival's more active filmmakers. I spent the most time speaking with Aaron Vanek, a young filmmaker in L.A., who was already responsible for several indie Lovecraft films. His last film was *The Yellow Sign*, a slight departure from orthodox Lovecraftian filmmaking, as it is an adaptation of Robert Chamber's tale of cosmic horror. Though I had never met Aaron before, I had seen him in a behind-the-scenes featurette from

one of his films. When Aaron found out that I had driven across the country to get to the festival (most attendees live on the West Coast), I was welcomed as an honorary "Lurker" on the spot. From that point on, I felt like I was part of the festival: not just a tourist in the land of Lovecraft, but a citizen.

Much of this feeling came from the fact that the organizers not only welcomed me, but also asked me to help. After the screening of *The Shunned House*, the festival hosted a Q&A with Ivan Zucco, the director. Ivan speaks English, but he is somewhat hard of hearing, so they needed someone to stand on stage with him and relay the audience's questions so that he could answer. As I stood on the stage, listening to Ivan and the audience, I felt like I was contributing to their enjoyment of the festival. That wound up being the defining moment for me. It wasn't just the films that made the festival experience what it was; it was the people and their exchanges of greetings, memories, art, ideas, and enthusiasm.

My experience at the festival did not provide a revelation about how I could salvage *One Night on Oswald's Green*, but it did provide the kernel of something else. Years later, I would write a screenplay that fictionalizes that first road trip to the HPLFF and turns it into a Lovecraftian journey into madness called *Cult Flick*.

I didn't write it so that I could produce it in the way that I had *One Night on Oswald's Green*. In fact, I did not expect that anyone would produce it. *Cult Flick* is not a commercial script.

It is a niche artifact, a script with which a relatively small number of readers would connect. However, I did know that the HPLFF was stuffed to the gills with those readers. Here was a home for what I had to say; here was the cult. I entered the script into the festival's screenplay competition in 2010, and by late summer I received word that *Cult Flick* was among the six finalists. I would be returning to Portland seven years after my initial visit, and this time I would be going as a guest of the festival.

Each year since my initial visit to HPLFF, the submissions have gotten better. There are still some howlers, some unintentionally horrifying, some unintentionally humorous. Typical of these is the short video "At the Reefers of Madness" by Brian Clement, in which a group of Miskatonic University stoners summon Nyarlathotep through a dimensional rift in their linen closet and demand that he provide them unlimited weed. The Dark One obliges them in exchange for certain...sacrifices on their part. The admittedly catchy tag line for the film admonishes, "It's a *dimensional gateway drug*." But the heights get higher with each festival run, as more and more filmmakers bring their talents and inspiration to bear on the considerable challenge of adapting Lovecraft's weird fiction to the screen.

The standout examples of this quality output are two longer films produced by a group known as the H. P. Lovecraft Historical Society (HPLHS): *Call of Cthulhu* (2005) and *The Whisperer in Darkness* (2011). Both of these films attempt faithful adaptations of Lovecraft short stories essentially by imagining what a contemporary

cinema adaptation might have been like. Lovecraft wrote the short story “The Call of Cthulhu” in 1926, though it did not appear in print until 1928. Accordingly, the HPLHS film of the same name is produced as a black and white silent film, complete with dialogue intertitles and the kind of musical score that would have been played by the house orchestra in a movie palace of the time. It tells the story of Francis Wayland Thurston, who pieces together a mystery left behind in a box of documents by his granduncle, Professor George Gammell Angell of Brown University. Prof. Angell collected various documentary accounts of strange dreams, earthquakes, dark rituals, and archaeological discoveries all over the globe that hinted at the truth of certain unspeakable legends concerning The Great Cthulhu.

Cthulhu, an extra-terrestrial being of immense power, has been slumbering beneath the ocean in his sunken city of R’lyeh “until the stars are right,” when he will rise and end the world as we know it. The film relates Thurston’s investigation of Angell’s work as a silent film, complete with a wild cult ritual in the Louisiana bayou, a visit to the newly risen city of R’lyeh by a crew of Norwegian sailors, and a final climactic encounter with a terrifying stop-motion Cthulhu. For Lovecraft fans, this film came as a breathtaking revelation.

The HPLHS immediately set to work on their next feature, *The Whisperer in Darkness*. This story first appeared in *Weird Tales* in 1931, and so the film is figured as a proto-film-noir, science-fiction thriller in black and white with synchronized sound. In it, Albert

Wilmarth, a professor of literature at Miskatonic University, addresses local concerns about strange creatures that have been found dead in the aftermath of severe flooding in the Northeast. Wilmarth is interested in folklore, but he doesn’t believe that the rural Vermont folk are actually finding strange beings. However, when one of those locals presents him with shockingly strange photographic evidence, he feels compelled to investigate further.

His journey to the wilds of Vermont brings him into contact with a chilling conspiracy between humans and fungoid extra-terrestrials known as the Mi-Go, creatures who possess the technology to remove the human brain without ceasing its function and place it in a specially designed cylinder, ostensibly for the purpose of space travel (since the human body cannot withstand the rigors of the experience). The short story ends here with Wilmarth running in horror from his discovery, but the film continues and plays out a further scenario in which the conspiracy’s true purpose is not alien abduction but alien invasion.

The film faithfully presents Lovecraft’s story as though it were released as one of Universal’s horror classics and then cranks up the horror even further by adding a diabolical alien laboratory in a cave, a dramatic summoning ceremony crawling with CGI Mi-Go that look like huge insects, and a thrilling aerial chase between a biplane and the hideous Mi-Go. After *Call of Cthulhu*, I was not certain that the HPLHS could top themselves, but they did. And now I can’t wait for more.

Both *Call of Cthulhu* and *The Whisperer in Darkness* engage in nostalgia for a lost cinema culture. Every frame of these films attempts to evoke a movie experience from the early years of the classical Hollywood studio era. From the titles to the makeup to the props to the special effects, there is little beyond the sharp-edged digital video image quality to jar the viewer out of the illusion that the films are lost titles from the Universal Studios vault. But that feeling of having succeeded in traveling back in time (aesthetically at the very least) is not, I think, the point of these films. They are adaptations, after all, and every adaptation is on one level nostalgic: it is trying to transform a narrative from one medium into another in order to recapture (and possibly even enhance) whatever value the audience took away from its experience with the source. We cannot ignore the fact that most cinematic adaptations are also mercenary adaptations; the transformation comes at a price. The formula in this case is assumed to be that audiences will line up to pay money in order to recapture that value from the past.

But I also cannot help thinking that the act of nostalgia is not simply a turning back. It is not only an attempt to refuse the present by returning to the past. It is not merely a surrender to the fear that ingenuity and originality are no longer. Instead, nostalgia is a kind of cultural work that inevitably *reworks*. In the

same way that an adaptation can never be completely faithful to the original – there is no way to step into that same river twice – so too is it impossible to actually return to that earlier, happier time. The mode of nostalgia will never deliver someone to that earlier, better place, but it will deliver them *somewhere*.



Nostalgia, then, can be one of many strategies for responding to a frustrating present.

Lovecraft himself found much of his world frustrating while he was alive, and he felt immense nostalgia for periods of history he never experienced directly,

in particular the eighteenth century. A number of critics have noted that one of the main reasons Lovecraft's fiction has not been better regarded has less to do with his choice of genre and more to do with his writing style, which deliberately recalls eighteenth-century prose. One of his earliest extant stories, "The Beast in the Cave" (written 1905, published 1918), displays what some might call the worst excesses of this florid and archaic style. Consider the opening of this tale:

The horrible conclusion which had been gradually obtruding itself upon my confused and reluctant mind was now an awful certainty. I was lost, completely, hopelessly lost in the vast and labyrinthine recesses of the Mammoth Cave. Turn as I might, in no direction could my straining vision seize on any object capable of serving as a guidepost to set me on the outward path. That nevermore should I behold the blessed light of day, or scan the pleasant hills and dales of the beautiful world outside, my reason could no longer entertain the slightest unbelief. Hope had departed. Yet, indoctrinated as I was by a life of philosophical study, I derived no small measure of satisfaction from my unimpassioned demeanour; for although I had frequently read of the wild frenzies into which were thrown the victims of similar situations, I experienced none of these, but stood quiet as soon as I clearly realised the loss of my bearings.

This is not the writing of a Modernist author in tune with the literary avant-garde of his day. The style comes directly from the Gothic and sensation fiction published over a century before in

England and the United States. The archaic syntax, evident borrowings from Poe ("nevermore"), and the preference for British spelling conventions would all count against him with mainstream critics. But for Lovecraft, this was no mistake. Though he had a cutting edge interest in science, he had no interest in the literary experiments of James Joyce.

And though his stories often harken back to earlier periods in American and European history for their background and style, they just as often reach back even further to a time on Earth before the development of *homo sapiens*. Lovecraft's horror is famously a cosmic horror; it recoils at the vastness of the universe and humanity's insignificance within it. The development of his perspective was linked directly to early-twentieth-century developments in physics and astronomy and their influence on Lovecraft's essentially materialist view of the world. I think that in many ways, the nostalgic style of Lovecraft's prose enhances the effect of his philosophical refusal of a romantic or mystical view of the world.

This is the kind of rhetorical move that the very best of the Lovecraft film adaptations are also making. The HPLHS and other filmmakers producing Lovecraft adaptations are making the films that they and a relatively small audience want to see. They are not making films for an audience of millions. However, they are using a cinematic style that was specifically developed in the early years of movies to attract and entertain mass audiences in order to drive profits in a massive industry. It is the filmic equivalent of

an archaic prose style with romantic associations. We need only look to the critical and popular success of *The Artist* (2011) to know that archaic film style is still effective film style and that audiences are indeed subject to those romantic associations. Hollywood has failed to provide them with satisfying Lovecraft adaptations, presumably because Hollywood producers do not feel that faithful adaptations of Lovecraft stories would be profitable at the box office.

Guillermo del Toro, who is a keen Lovecraft fan and an accomplished director of big-budget fantasy-horror films (the *Hellboy* films and *Pan's Labyrinth* among them) had to shelve his plans for a big-budget adaptation of *At the Mountains of Madness* after pre-production was well underway. Fans had known for years that del Toro wanted to do the film and, in general, their faith in his ability to do the story justice was high. But last year del Toro reported that the studio backers had become squeamish about the film's price tag and pulled the plug. They were worried that such an expensive Lovecraft adaptation wouldn't find the audience it needed to be profitable.

If updated adaptations of Lovecraft stories fail to connect with fans in a satisfying or inspiring way – in some way that will approximate the emotional responses they had to the original story – then one might be forgiven for believing that the stories are simply not readily adaptable. However, another response is not to try to bring the stories with us, but rather to set out on a quest to return to the story in its

original context, to get outside of our time, our modes, and ourselves. The HPLHS expends enormous amounts of time, energy, and cash imagining what it would have been like to make a movie out of a Lovecraft short story in 1928 or 1933. Simultaneously, they create films that encourage us to think not only about how we perceive movies and our relationship to them, but also about the way that we conceive of the stories we tell ourselves. Instead of continuing with the fiction of the moment, these filmmakers explicitly gesture to the fiction of the past, and as a result they illuminate the present moment in ways that might allow us to better understand ourselves.

It is difficult to dismiss the potential relevance of the waning of celluloid film at this point in motion picture history. The HPLHS would be the first to admit that the digital revolution makes their adaptations possible. Producing their movies on celluloid, whether 35mm or the more indie-friendly 16mm, would simply be cost prohibitive. Even Hollywood producers are finding this to be the case. Kodak has eliminated its film department and filed for bankruptcy, while the manufacturers of 35mm motion picture cameras have quietly ceased production. More and more theaters are switching out their 35mm projectors for digital equipment. Perhaps most importantly, cineplex audiences are less and less capable of – and maybe less and less interested in – telling the difference between high-definition digital video and celluloid film. We are not witnessing the end of film in an absolute sense, but we are certainly witnessing the end of celluloid

film as the medium of choice for the motion picture industry.

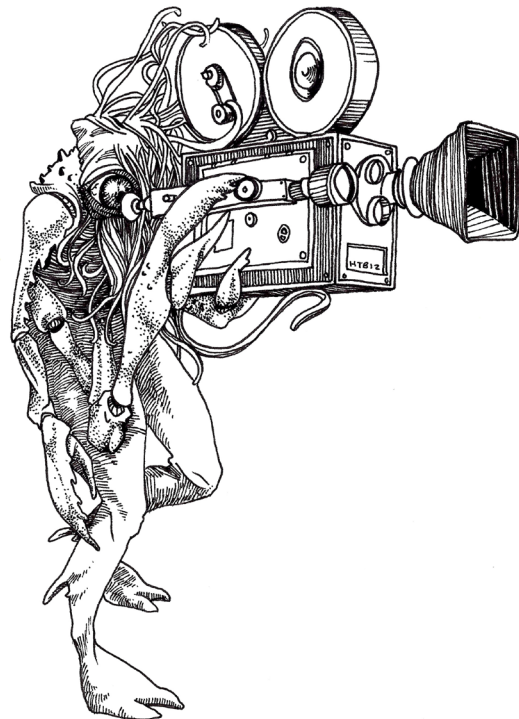
It took a quarter century for Hollywood to recover from the transition to sound film before it was ready to produce films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), but that transition was much more fundamental than our current one.

The addition of synchronized sound and the more gradual addition of the three-color Technicolor process were seminal moments in the development of commercial motion pictures. It seems to me that the transition from celluloid to high-definition digital video is not of the same order; the whole point of this transition seems to be a preservation of aesthetic standards rather than a revolution in them – Hollywood wants you to believe that HD is just as good as film, not better and not different. One could argue that 3D technology has the potential to revolutionize cinema in the way that sound and color did, but if that's the case, then filmmakers have not discovered the secret formula that will get audiences to recognize that the revolution is upon them.

All the same, the end of commercial celluloid has spurred the production, release, and success of films like *Hugo* (2011) and *The Artist*, both of which are deeply nostalgic for the days of silent film. What are these films trying to do at

this moment in cinema history when we are about to leave celluloid film behind? Are they trying to go back and touch upon what we have come to see as some of the stylistic high points in film history in order to take stock of what we should take with us into the future? Are they saying something about the inadvisability of striding boldly into that future?

The answers to the latter two questions are “no” on both counts. Though these films tend to look back fondly on the early days of celluloid cinema, neither of them posits anything essential about those days. Indeed, *Hugo* (itself an adaptation of a graphic novel) partakes freely and gleefully of the latest in 3D technology while seeming to look back,



and *The Artist* needs to use CGI artists in order to recreate the Hollywood(land) of the late 1920s. *Hugo* uses new techniques to talk about old technology, while *The Artist* uses recent technology to remind us that old techniques still work.

The HPLHS calls their particular mix of old and new cinema techniques “Mythoscope.” For them, the availability of professional-consumer versions of commercial high-definition technologies means that they can conceive, design, and produce highly faithful motion picture adaptations of the Cthulhu mythos stories without waiting for studio number crunchers to decide whether the opening weekend box office would be sufficient to justify the financial risk of production. The HPLHS takes on that risk because they are more interested in the finished film than they are in its bottom line. They are their own biggest fans.

They are not actually going back to a happier time, because in that time, Hollywood was not making the films that they would one day want to see (or at least Hollywood wasn't making *all* of the films they would want to see). More importantly, Hollywood still isn't making what they want to see. The HPLHS is in some sense correcting the history of cinema by providing the contemporary adaptations of Lovecraft's works that were not created at the time and that are still not being created.

The HPLHS, and all the indie filmmakers at the Lovecraft Film Festival – and thousands of other indie filmmakers at other film festivals around the world – are shouting their slogans at the barricades of the digital revolution,

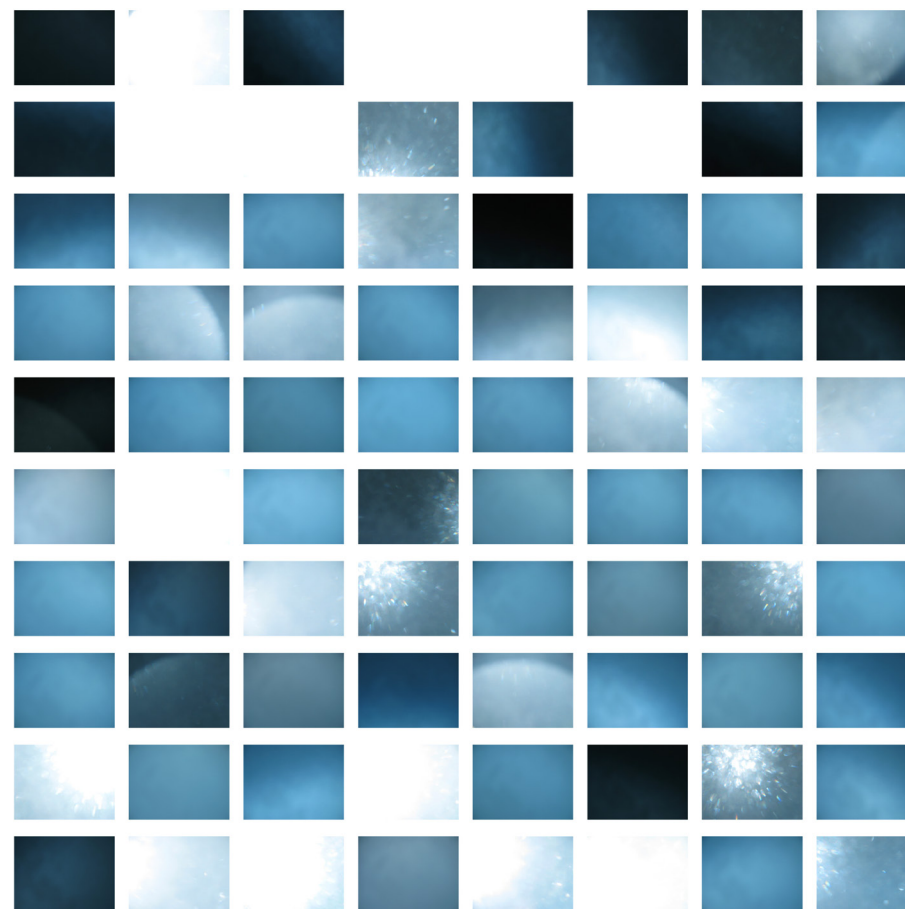
saying, “This I what I want to see and hear. This is what I want to know. And if you won't show it to me, I will create it myself.”

Lovecraft began his writing career with the archaic and derivative style on display in the opening of “The Beast in the Cave.” Many years later, though, as he found the words that would best convey the horrors he had in store for his readers, his art grew more powerful and assured. The first few lines of “The Colour out of Space” (1927) are representative of this mature talent:

West of Arkham the hills rise wild,
and there are valleys with deep woods
that no axe has ever cut. There are dark
narrow glens where the trees slope
fantastically, and where thin brooklets
trickle without ever having caught the
glint of sunlight. On the gentler slopes
there are farms, ancient and rocky, with
squat, moss-coated cottages brooding
eternally over old New England
secrets in the lee of great ledges; but
these are all vacant now, the wide
chimneys crumbling and the shingled
sides bulging perilously beneath low
gambrel roofs.

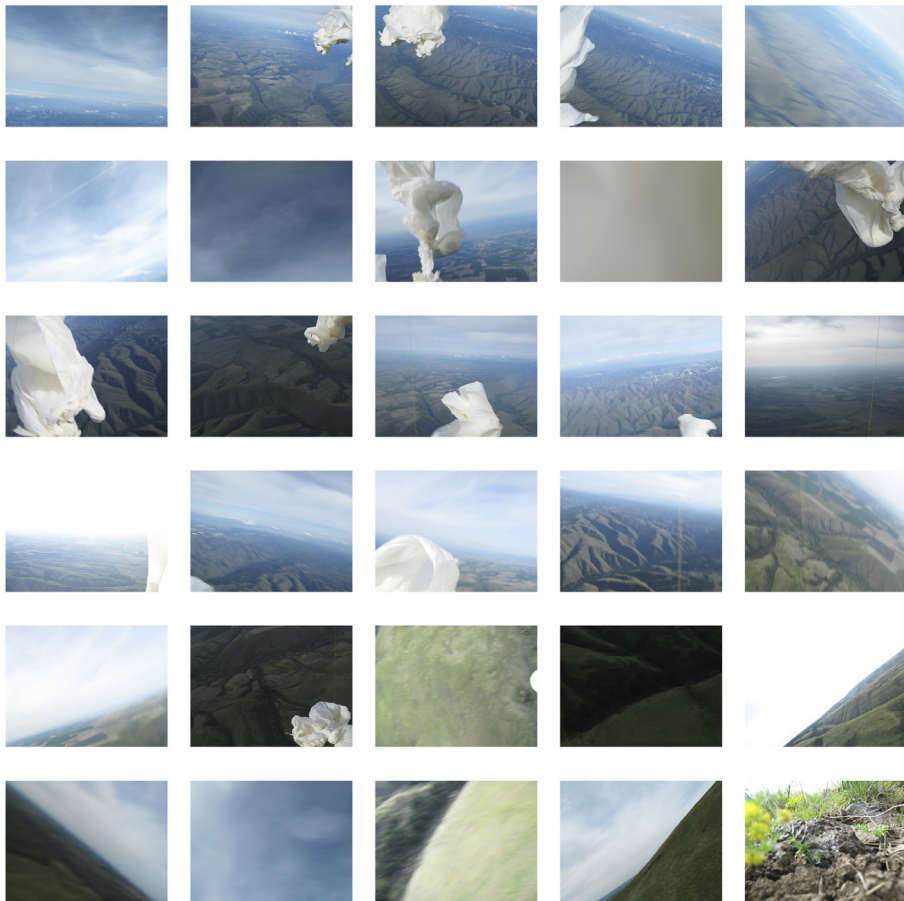
The scene remains atmospheric in the best traditions of weird fiction, but the writing is no longer drenched in the purple ichor of Gothic prose. Lovecraft needed to begin in that cave. He needed to go back and plumb the depths of the literature he knew and loved best in order to discover his own way forward. I think the efforts of the HPLHS are doing something very similar today. They are reaching back into our cinematic past to find something that never was but perhaps should have been. ●

Georgie Friedman



Flight I, Time Group Seven of Ten. 2010
Archival Digital Print, 24 × 24 in.
GEORGIE FRIEDMAN

Text by JOSHI RADIN



Flight V, Descent III (Remnants and Landing). 2010
 Archival Digital Print, 30 x 30 in.
 GEORGIE FRIEDMAN

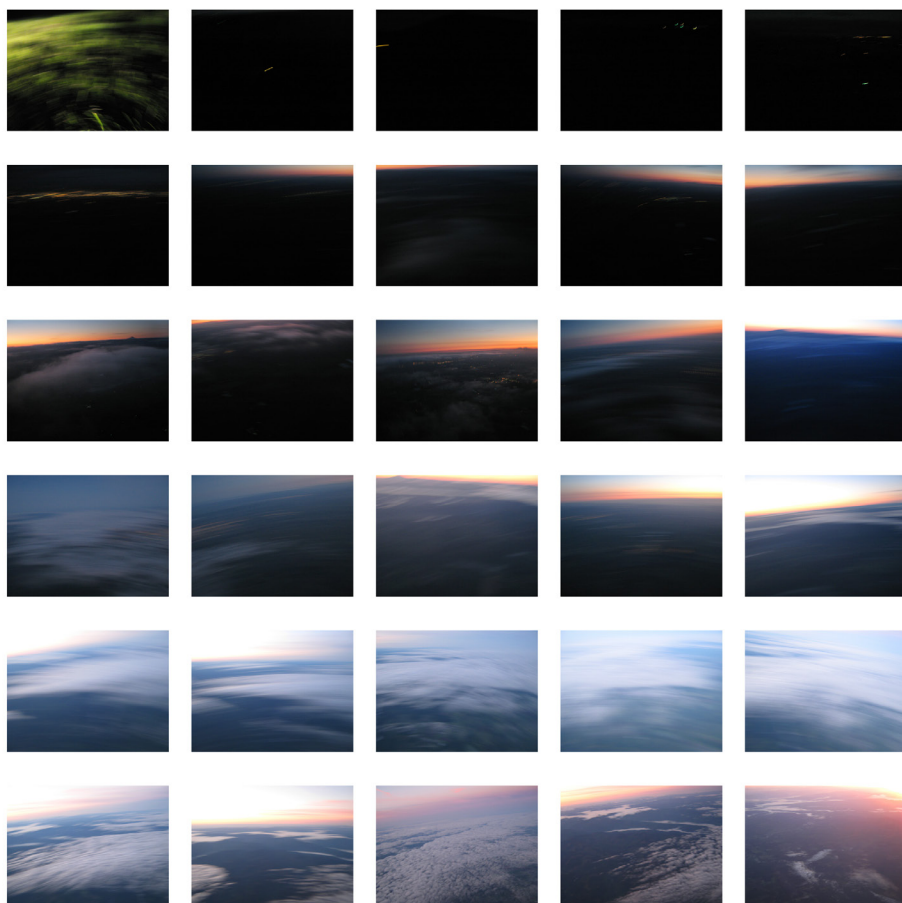


When I first saw Georgie Friedman's Flight Series, I was drawn in by the abstract color patterns, their structured presentation within a modernist grid. But Friedman's photographs are about much more than the formal relations between colors and the harmonious division of space—the series explores time and technology, repetition and difference, the thrill of flight, the shock of an unprecedented perspective, and the flawed storytelling of the camera.

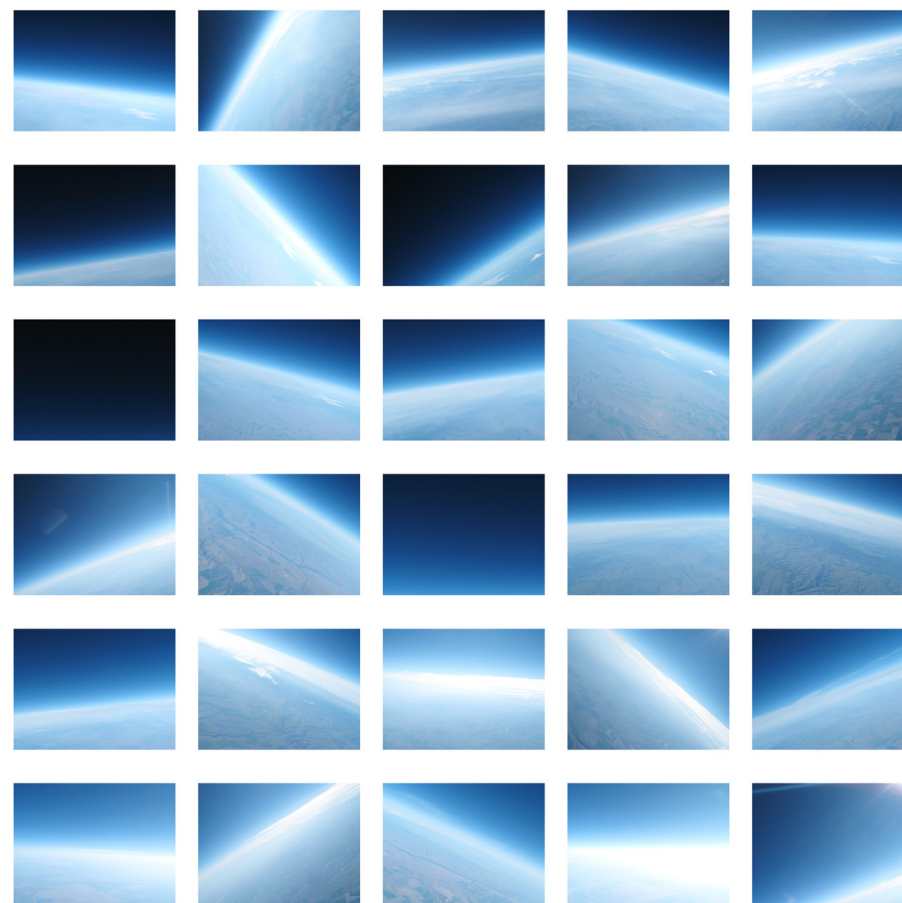
Well before this series, Friedman was exploring photography's relationship to time, the ways in which the still image always refers to key moments before and after the act of documentation. Then, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Friedman's work took a new direction; in photographs and installations, she began to consider the relations between natural forces and human experience, between atmosphere and emotion.

In 2010, the artist collaborated with a pair of engineers (Justin Hamel and Chris Thompson) to take a series of photographs from 90,000 to 100,000 feet above the earth. High-altitude balloons carried automated digital cameras into the thin air and freezing temperatures of the stratosphere. The balloons ascended in uncontrolled flight, at the mercy of wind speed and air pressure, gently rocking or violently spinning depending on atmospheric conditions. The cameras recorded it all, including the moments after one balloon burst and gravity violently reasserted its claim on matter.

The photographs, selected and arranged into ordered representations of time, offer glimpses into the contingent relationships between objects and the elemental forces that determine their trajectories. These images refuse the iconic blue-marble image of Earth as a timeless, untouchable sphere and present instead a fragmented, dynamic view of the planet as a site of contained chaos.



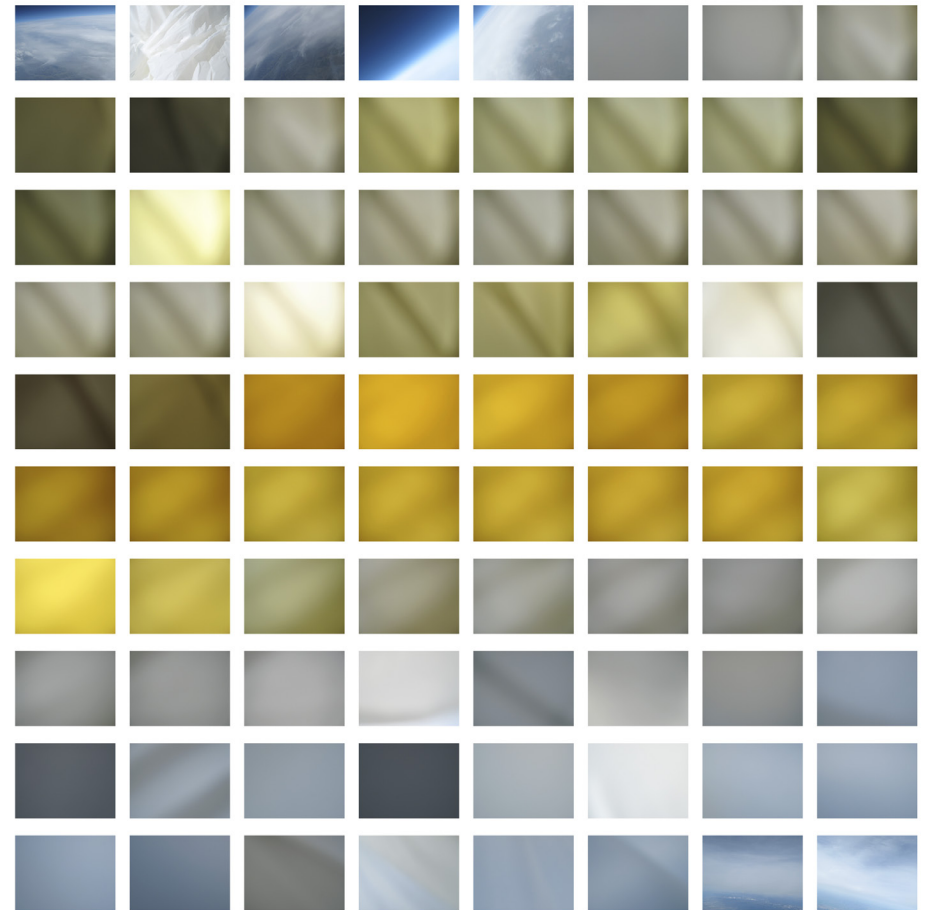
Flight VI, Ascent I (Dawn). 2010
 Archival Digital Print, 30 x 30 in.
 GEORGIE FRIEDMAN



Flight VI, Descent II (Spin). 2010
 Archival Digital Print, 30 x 30 in.
 GEORGIE FRIEDMAN



Flight II, Ascent I. 2010
 Archival Digital Print, 30 x 30 in.
 GEORGIE FRIEDMAN



Flight V, Descent II (Balloon Abstracts). 2010
 Archival Digital Print, 30 x 30 in.
 GEORGIE FRIEDMAN

JUDD HESS

The Holographic Principle

Examine the humming insides of a balloon
from which all invisible colors emanate;
(and though I tally the cog-clicks in clocks
and linger with the vistas from behind their faces)
the elastic edge of the universe unfurls faster
than photons, in love, chase after each other
(out like a child to the chip-paint line on the
playground, touch, and back with a dodgeball).
Brightness begins somewhere around here
magically, toaster-warm on all sides,
(I can know nothing of vector field doldrums;
the ocean flows faster than any ship)
and mirrors all us and us on the moving edge
like a projector. I no longer fear our dying.
(I am saying this as the silent-film star lounging
on the wide wall, seen to be dancing.)

JUDD HESS

Grass Cross Ceiling

Hell is that world that appears to the worst mind.

Invent an elephant
gimbling through a village.
Let the warp and weft bend with him.
He may crush sleeping children.
He may spin cotton candy.

While we watch, he will dervish-whirl.
I will remind him to collapse
in a pile of stitched gray socks.
Then we might debate the fallacy of a hammock.
When will the coffee need planting?

Frances

REMEMBER WHEN YOU DIED? We found your body in your bed on a Sunday morning in July. You'd been dead since Friday night or early Saturday morning, when you'd gone home early from your neighbor's place across the street, saying you felt tired. We came in and went from your house all weekend before we found you.

I used to be a very anxious person, and I imagined disaster and death as a real possibility every time someone I loved left the house. By the time you died I wasn't like that anymore. So I remained calm, even on Saturday afternoon when the house told me you were gone. Your Jeep was in the gravel drive, but the mail was uncollected on the tile floor in the foyer, and the heavy green curtain covering the main door hadn't been pulled back. That was all, but it was clear to me then.

It was the weekend of the Tube bombings down South. I had the newspapers under my arm when I came home, and I went to my room on the top floor to watch the news and read the papers while I sat on my bed. I watched young people trying to stay collected while they talked about searching for their missing partners. Simon had only died a month or two before. We'd gone to Glasgow for his funeral, Antonio and I, with a carload of people I no longer trusted. I was wearing a bright red raincoat, and I met his mum and his sister for the first time. His mother seemed delighted to meet and grasp the hands of anyone who had ever known Simon. We retired to a pub by the cemetery after the burial. Our wealthy hippie landlady, Claire, bought me a whisky

and remarked on how nobody could cry. I'd been the only one in our pew to do so back at the church. Turning my back on the grave at the cemetery was the worst moment. Simon. So there we were drinking whisky, and "fuck all of you," I thought.

That Saturday afternoon with the papers spread out on my bed, the telly on, your body in your bed two stories down, the clouds scudding across the hills out my window, is still very vivid in my mind. I felt the temporariness of our bodies, like they were nothing but paper-thin membranes. Bubbles bound to burst. I felt death right next to me: not a ghost or a reaper, but an invisible force of inexplicable power; not the bomb, but the blast.

Antonio rang me the next morning, minutes after he'd left my flat. That was when my heart sank. Your neighbor was looking for you. She'd said you were missing. At the word "missing" I had an unexpected sensation: extraordinary relief. You were gone. I was free of you. You had disappeared into nothing just like a bubble, and I was alone with the great house, with the hills, with the Scottish summer light, and no longer subject to you. My first-class honors degree that had meant so much to you would vanish into irrelevance, and my stilted, self-taught propriety along with it. You had left me alone with the beauty that you had spent your life making, but now free of *you* in it.

But only for a few minutes. The doorbell rang downstairs. I went down the two flights and across the foyer, but no one was outside. I turned around to run nearly head-on into our neighbor as she came out of your apartment. She was glassy-eyed and breathless. She had let herself in through the garden and gone into your room. You were not missing. You were dead.

We had cups of tea while we waited for the ambulance to arrive. I had found Moritz upstairs, home from an overnight in his office, and I told him. "Are you sure?" was all he said. When I brought him downstairs, the little girl from across the street was there as well, your young friend who used to hang out in your kitchen and eat the ice cream in your freezer. Moritz went into your rooms and looked at your body. He invited me to come, but I didn't. It was after he returned that he had gone back upstairs to make us all tea.

Remember Moritz? He loved you a great deal. Your precision and propriety made him feel taken care of. He was nothing like your son, with his long hair, off bartending in Australia. Moritz loved the way you did things. He loved your garden, where he held Easter egg hunts for us all. He cherished those green hillside views from our rooms. He worshipped Hume and Voltaire, his subjects of study. He had seen very little of life beyond his own world and was easily shocked. But once he saw your body with his own eyes, he accepted it.

That was the end of those few months when, after Simon, Antonio's PHD supervisor dropped dead of a heart attack in Germany, and our brother-in-law shot himself one morning before breakfast in Mexico City. In Boston, my parents had put my childhood dog to sleep; they called me on my way back to your house one morning, on those beautiful streets in Morningside, and I burst into tears. I went quickly up to my room so that you wouldn't see me. I don't think I ever told you any of that. When they came to take your body away, the little girl started to cry just a little bit, but when I reached out to touch her arm she froze and recoiled.

I went outside to wait for Antonio, and I watched them take the white body bag out on a stretcher with you inside of it. I tried to make out where your face was underneath, which direction your body was facing.

It was such a beautiful day. You had been dead two days, so you missed the weather we got. Mostly, though, I stopped enjoying it after that. I don't remember the rest of the day after they put your body inside the van.

The house was never the same without you, Frances. You would have been pleased to know that. You would have been irritated, but I think very pleased. Thank you for having me there. You gave me two months after Simon and my graduation to just watch the light change on the hills.

It's my perpetual inclination to make a metaphor out of things like this; but really all I know is that your body lay two stories beneath me that bright weekend, until we found you, and that I didn't go in to look at it with Moritz. I think perhaps I should have. Still, I was there, and so were you. Do you remember that? ●

REBECCA GIVENS ROLLAND

After Searching Acres of Field

This winter only a muddy-winged one
curses in a Mason jar then crashes

clear moon levitating around it scours
improbably hastens away not

shouting platitudes even to earthworms
shuttered to even the thought of sound

ice-blown fields bleat with distraction
alarmed body shimmers in response

streaked spotlight on everything I'd never
lunged for since I'd convinced myself

bones hid like rock salt in delicate slabs
shallow under inscribed obsidian

I'd kept every bracelet as poor proof
at least once I'd had something to care for

that love didn't leave though the gold
spun and flickered for years in the ground

A Man in the House

GRACE WAS DUSTING WHEN THE DOORBELL RANG. Four years at her new house in town, and still each time she heard the two-note chime, she wished she'd resisted when the builder sold her on this needless convenience. She liked the sound of a neighbor's knock. Dropping her dust cloth to the coffee table, she rinsed her hands at the kitchen sink and ran the tips of her fingers along the shafts of her eyeglasses, tugging stray hairs into place behind her ears. As she crossed the living room, the bell chimed a second time. She pulled the door open.

Rupert stood there with his hat in his hand, fresh combed and shaved at four in the afternoon, dressed in starched khaki from head to toe. Surprise got the better of Grace for a moment – the smell of a man on her porch, the years.

"Rupert Koehn." She paused with her hand at the screen door hook. "You'd surprise our savior at the second coming." It was a kindness – wasn't it? – to stop him where he stood.

He grinned. "You were never one to mince words."

Grace tried to resist the smile pulling at the set of her face, but Rupert's question was too much for her.

"How long do you suppose you can keep me standing out here before Frieda spies me?"

Plucking the hook from its eyelet, Grace stepped into the bright warmth. "Walk with me," she said. "I'll show you my flowers." Glancing at her sister's house, squatting unpainted on the other side of the garden – and

Frieda doubtless hovering, her nose at a slit in the window blinds – Grace led Rupert into her bluebonnets, the blaze of them beneath a cloudless sky.

In the years that came after, she marveled at their ease together that afternoon, as if their separate lives had wrought no change. Even Frieda's spying felt familiar. From the bluebonnets, they walked among hollyhocks, poppies, calendulas, phlox. They spoke of the next day, her sixtieth birthday, with no mention of the decades gone by. They drifted to the roses; a row of them bloomed along the garden's back border, with the climber at midpoint, a cascade of pale pink petals, yellow-gold at the centers with sticky stamen clusters.

Rupert put his nose to them and breathed. "Miriam would've loved these. I'm afraid I haven't taken care of her roses."

"You've had a difficult year."

"The house is so ..." Rupert studied the ground for a moment. "Quiet." He turned and moved to the next rose bush. "I never really got used to my daughter being gone."

Fourteen years ago, in the months after Pearl Harbor, Rupert and Miriam's only daughter had moved to Houston and found work there. Her failure to marry or return had caused considerable head-shaking here in Nopalito, where folks rarely made it even so far as Corpus Christi, fifty miles east of the brush country farms they still plowed with mules in the war years.

"Caleb was the real surprise," Rupert said. "He was barely five. How long ago was that?" His son, he told her, came back to him in dreams, a wide-eyed four-year-old holding Rupert's hand as they walked the fence lines, the creek bottom, the fields. Listening, Grace thought of her youngest brother, Julius, dead of a burst appendix in the fall of 1918 a week before his sixteenth birthday. She still felt the ache of loss, and there were mornings, she said to Rupert, when she woke to the feel of her brother's presence in the house.

"That's it," Rupert said. "That's how it feels. Like no time has passed. Then I look in the mirror." He turned to her, a handsome man still, but sixty. "It's like being hit with the backside of a shovel."

"And Miriam?"

"Her things are everywhere – clothes in the closet, perfume on them when I open the door for a suit on Sunday." Rupert stopped, as if

searching for words equal to what his wife's death had taken from him. "There isn't a thing in the house she didn't touch. On bad days I could light a match to the place."

Somewhere in the neighborhood a screen door clattered, the rattle of it dry as a husk.

"Come," Grace said, "let me show you my cannas," and they walked to a bed of lilies like tongues of flame in the rich wet bed beneath her kitchen window. Two hummingbirds were feeding there. One of the birds darted upward, hovering momentarily at Rupert's head, and then dropped back to the petals.

Grace laughed. "It's that sweet stuff you put on your hair. Making a fool of that bird."

"I confess I like to smell good. But Grace," he waited for her to look at him, "I'm long past fooling anyone." Rupert spoke directly, without a hint of pleading, and then turned back to the flowers. No burden of obligation had been shifted, no one else's need weighing her down as they finished their walk in the garden and she walked him to his car.

For a moment, waving as Rupert drove away, Grace felt almost dizzy, so rare was the lift he'd given her.



Two hours later, with her cleaning done and the supper dishes cleared, Grace paused for a moment by her kitchen table. A wedding gown lay askew there, a jumble of beaded satin bristling with net. She was sewing a copy, a bride's dress in miniature for the flower girl, her six-year-old granddaughter Janet, who stood in the middle of the kitchen floor wearing the beginnings of a satin under-gown and chattering at Dolan Woodhouse, Grace's boarder. Dolan was quarterback of the local football team; baby fat plumped his cheeks above a whisker-shadowed jawline. He was shy, and Janet had used that to her advantage, interrogating him about his engagement to Hollis Slater, his high school sweetheart.

"I'm engaged too," Janet announced, with a flourish on *engaged*.

Grace knelt behind Janet, took up her pincushion, and went back to the fitting.

"Who's the lucky man?" Dolan dropped his voice, but Grace could hear the tickle in his throat.

"Grady. I'm going to marry Grady. He's five."

"I don't think cousins are allowed to marry."

"But I want Grady. He takes care of my dolls."

Grace spluttered around the pin between her teeth. Grady Smith was cute as a button, dolls or no, but his father would be mortified to know that Janet was spreading the boy's fondness for a girl's playthings.

"Ouch!" Janet flinched and Grace lost her grasp on the hem.

"Hold still."

"Dolls aren't for boys," Dolan announced. "What if he doesn't want to?"

"Grady loves my dolls. Hey, wanna know a secret?"

The hem shifted in Grace's hands. She sat back and waited as her granddaughter rose up on tiptoe and stretched toward Dolan, who had leaned forward and cupped a hand at his ear. Grace couldn't distinguish a word, but as Dolan listened, his cheeks turned bright as a slap. Janet had a knack for embarrassing shy boys and men.

Grace had done that to Rupert once, made him blush just by whispering. They would have been sixteen, if memory served, the porch swing swaying beneath them, side by side in the warm hush of early evening. She knew he was courting her; she wanted that. It was like the rough and tumble of growing up together – the excitement of this new game they were playing – and she could make up the rules. Without so much as a word between them, she found herself up out of the swing and dancing with him, the two of them humming a familiar tune.

On impulse, giggling, she leaned into him, her lips to his ear, and sang a breathy bit of silliness from the lyrics. *There's such a funny meter to the roar of your repeater*. Rupert shivered, and when she pulled back to look at him, his cheeks were bright with the rush of blood. In the instant, brushing against him as they danced, she felt the ridge of his erection against her and knew what she was feeling. Rupert swept her away from him and into the swing. He scrambled off the porch, and was gone. She sat waiting – she didn't know what else to do – and when he came back the day had dimmed.

"You took me by surprise," he said, and took her hand.

"All I did was whisper. I've whispered in your ear before."

"It's not the same."

"I'll be more careful."

“Not too careful.” He smiled and squeezed her hand. “Promise?” Grace snipped a thread. *Promise*. Nothing but trouble in that word.

“Grammar?” Janet jiggled at her shoulder. “I’m talking to you, but you don’t answer back.”

“I was somewhere else for a minute.”

“You were right here.”

“Don’t sass your grandmother.”

“I need to know when I can marry Grady.” Janet had put a rein on her voice, but just barely.

At the table, the bride’s dress rustled with the arriving breeze. It made Grace’s skin prickle just to think of all that net.

“When would you like to marry Grady?” she asked.

“Soon as you finish my dress. Say,” Janet turned back to Dolan, “when are you getting married?”

“Not as soon as that.” Dolan looked at Grace and looked away. “Not as soon as I’d like.”

The breeze switched directions and slammed the back door shut. Grace dropped her pincushion. Dolan scrambled to his feet and opened the door. The breeze came in, whooshed out. The door slammed again. Grace dropped the hem and stood to face Dolan. Helpless is how he looked – skittish as a week-old foal.

“You’re young,” she said. *Still wet behind the ears* is what she thought. “Don’t rush to the altar.”

Dolan took a breath and began. “I know how you feel, Mrs. Hoffman, but Hollis wants us to get married right away. Her folks too. Coach says to get a season of college football under my belt first, but I don’t know.”

“Walk on your own two feet for a while.” Grace surprised herself. She hadn’t intended this meanness. She wanted to warn Dolan, to keep him safe from something she couldn’t even name. She wanted words that would release the weight she felt in her chest. Was this the best she could do?

Dolan stood there mute, like one of her sons. At Dolan’s age, they’d looked at the floor, too. And then did what they wanted.

“Don’t throw your life away.” Grace took up her pins and finished with Janet.



The next morning, after clearing the breakfast dishes, she sat for a few minutes over a second cup of coffee. Opposite her place at the table, double windows looked out on her open back porch, framing a view of the unfenced yard – and, on the other side of the alley, Karl Lindeman’s back yard, also unfenced. Grace liked the unobstructed view. She relished the pocket of night air still hovering in this space near the window – until Papa Karl stepped out of his back door. Even before the old man hoisted the waistband of his khakis and took his cane in hand, she suspected he would come to her door. It took a while for him to haul his girth across the mowed expanse that separated her house from his.

“*Guten Morgen*, Grace.” He made the last halting steps across her porch and rattled the screen door.

“Morning, Papa Karl. *Was machst du hier so früh?*” She had no intention of opening her door. She’d never be rid of him if she did.

“Been up since five,” he said. Grace knew the force of that habit. “Expected you by 8:00, 8:30.”

“It’s 7:45.”

“*Mein Haus*, Grace, *mein Haus ist ein Schweinerei*.”

Grace could picture the mess. There was only one of him, but he might as well have let pigs run loose in the house. “I’m not your *Putzfrau* every day of the week. I cleaned your house *am Montag*. *Heute ist Freitag*.”

“It’s not Monday yet?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

The old man scratched at the stubble on his sagging jaw line and released a burst of gas. “Can I sit with you for a spell?”

Holding her breath, Grace stepped onto her porch and sat down.

Papa Karl lowered himself into the other chair. “Back home on the farm *habe ich nicht so viel vergessen*.” The bulk of him pushed at the chair arms. “Always on Monday washday. Always *Arbeit*.” And he launched into a litany of the work he had not forgotten.

His shirt, as usual, was not up to its task, the spider-veined flab of his stomach bulging pale as pork belly, a thicket of white hairs at the line of his khakis swirling to the parts he scratched so fondly. His ponderous undershorts carried stains for her on washday. She could feel

the naked burden of him shoving at her, this neighbor who'd offered to marry her – and Garret barely settled in his grave. The bone weight of Garret in the marriage bed she carried with her still – the heft of his need, the load that had shifted to her when he opened his wrists. The dead weight of him when they found him.

“*Was ist das?*”

Grace looked up from her thoughts.

“In the light. There's something in the light.”

She followed the line of his forefinger. “*Schmetterlings*,” she said. “Oh, look.”

Several butterflies hovered in a shaft of light beneath her mulberry tree, and the sun came dancing through their wings – orange, edged in black, dabbed here and there with white. A moment and they were out of the light, all but lost now in shade.

“I can't even *see*.”

Grace turned to Papa Karl. “They're gone now.”

He had tears in his eyes. “What good am I, Grace? What for I should get out of bed in the morning?”

The old man had survived half of the ten children born to him alive. He'd seen his favorite daughter trip at ten into a cauldron of rendering lard, his eldest son felled by a heart attack at forty. Seventy-five now, he'd been defeated by the new house in town. She knew it wasn't the house, really. He felt useless off the farm. But the sight of his slumped shoulders frayed her patience.

“You can't let yourself go.”

“I know what you're going to say next. I've got it by heart. Count your blessings.” Papa Karl chopped at the air with a lecturing forefinger, a mockery of Grace that was not lost on her. “Put one foot in front of the other. Get down on your knees and thank the good Lord.”

“And good advice it is, if any man on God's green earth could take it.”

“You're like the parts that keep repeating when we sing a hymn at church on Sunday.”

“Exactly.”

And Grace sent him home. There was a time she'd have invited her old neighbor in for coffee and cake. If he were sick in bed or visited by a kind of loss that could be measured, she'd still lend a helping hand.

But naked weakness had brought Papa Karl to her door this morning. It hardened her heart just to look at him.



The widows arrived shortly before three, with Grace's younger sister, Norma Pfeiler, rapping at the front door.

“Do I smell peaches in April?” she asked, following Grace to the kitchen with Brunhilde Klein and Gertrude Krause behind her, all three of them in rayon floral prints they'd worn for Easter Sunday not quite a week ago.

Grace insisted that hats and gloves be left at home for her hen parties. Norma had never objected. She set her poppyseed cake on Grace's dining table and removed her head scarf, revealing salt-and-pepper hair pulled back smoothly into a bun at the nape of her neck. Gertrude slid a lemon chess pie onto the table, while Brinnie slipped a plate of crustless pimiento cheese sandwiches into place. Younger than the other widows by twenty years – no one but her mother had ever called her Brunhilde – Brinnie pulled a compact from her purse and patted her hair into place. Her tiny, plump fingers were encased in short white gloves, Grace's stricture notwithstanding. Satisfied, she turned to the source of Norma's question about peaches.

If Grace numbered pride among her sins, she would likely blame it on yeast. With a plentiful supply of peach preserves left on her pantry shelves, she'd decided to splurge and fix her favorite coffee cake – sweet, kneaded dough rolled to the shape of her jelly roll pan, spread thick with jam and sprinkled with her perfect streusel, the buttery smell rising in waves from the center of the table where the cake cooled.

As they fussed over the coffee cake, Frieda came to the back door. Wearing a faded dress and lady's black lace-up wing-tip shoes run down at the heels, she carried a birthday card and no contribution for the table. Tall and large-boned, her shoulders stooped by the weight of the hay she'd stacked, the milk pails she'd carried through six decades of farm life, Frieda looked every bit of her seventy years. She paid scant attention to her face or hair. As Grace and Norma knew, their sister had given up on the niceties one day in 1925 when a mule kicked her husband in the gut and he bled inside until it was too late.

“Well, Gracie,” Frieda growled, eyes bright with the joy she took in sparking mayhem. “*Hast du ihn schon geküßt?*” She pursed her lips and made kissing sounds in the air.

Brinnie came sniffing at the scent of gossip. “What’s that? What did she say?”

“What’s going on there?” Norma spoke from the table.

“Frieda said something about kissing. Oh!” Brinnie all but stomped her foot. “I wish you all wouldn’t talk German.”

Norma looked from Frieda to Grace. “Sisters?”

Frieda shrugged and moved to the table. She’d pull a paper bag out of her purse before the afternoon was over and load it with leftovers. She was sitting on a pot of money, but the shame of pilfering left no mark on her.

“What’s this about kissing?”

“There hasn’t been any.” Grace dismissed them all with a wave.

“Not yet. But once before.” Frieda winked at Grace.

“You old fool. That was forty years ago and more.”

“What *are* you talking about?” Norma had clearly reached her limit.

“Rupert Koehn dropped by yesterday. I showed him my garden.”

“Oh.” Norma looked blank for a moment. Then her face brightened. “Sister, that’s wonderful.”

“Don’t play matchmaker with me.”

“But isn’t it too soon?” Frieda wrestled her face into an expression of mock alarm.

“It’s been ... how long?” Brinnie paused, measuring. “A year since he lost Miriam.”

“He didn’t lose her.” Norma showed no patience with words that prettified death. Of all Grace’s acquaintance, she was the only one not afraid of the words for what Garret Hoffman had done to himself with a freshly honed knife.

“Sister.” Grace put an edge in her voice, a plea.

“He didn’t misplace Miriam. The woman died.”

“I’d lay odds he was marking the calendar.” Frieda’s chuckle rattled in her throat. “Waiting one year exactly.”

“Whatever for?” Gertrude shared an isolated farmhouse with her mother-in-law, well past eighty and ghostly frail. Without so much

as phone service, she had trouble making sense of what the hens said when they got together.

Grace spoke to Frieda. “You’ll have me dancing with him before the day is through.”

Norma took her up. “You two were born dancers.”

“What’s this about calendars and dancing?” Gertrude was still trying to find her way. “And who kissed whom?”

Grace opened her mouth to put an end to things, but Norma stepped in.

“Rupert courted Grace. A long time ago. She caught him flirting with me and threw him over.”

“Oh.” Gertrude looked as if she would never catch up.

“After Charlie passed,” Brinnie spoke into the awkward silence. The widows never mentioned her husband, killed on an oil rig twenty years ago, when a piece of his shirtsleeve had snagged in an auger.

Brinnie looked at Norma and cleared her throat. “After Charlie *died*, not six months later, Joe Glenn Edge came to my door. He stood on the porch and asked me to marry him.” A quiet wonder softened the edges of her words. “I didn’t so much as ask him to come in, so afraid what folks would think. I don’t remember what I said. Scared him off for good. Next thing I knew he was married to Stella Brown and her belly out to here.”

The young widow glanced around the room. Her eyes came into focus when she met Grace’s gaze. “Look at me,” Brinnie said. “I’m thirty-nine years old.” She pronounced her age like a sentence and, turning, led them to the living room.



By three thirty, the gathering had recovered. Grace loved the sound of a *kafee klatch* – voices rising and falling in the afternoon light, the widows spilling words into the swirl, their hands keeping time like a chorus of band directors. Sometimes, though, with no cue that a change was coming, the conversation snagged on a single comment. Voices stopped and hands dropped into laps, all eyes homing in on the one who’d rippled the peace. As happened at exactly 3:47, by the clock on Grace’s kitchen wall. Having started a pot of coffee, she stood in the living room doorway for a moment, listening.

Frieda, seated opposite in Grace's rocking chair, informed Gertrude Krause that someone with more money than sense had installed a washateria in Kingsville. This news had circulated after Dolan Woodhouse returned from a football recruiting visit to the college there.

"I think it's a good idea." The voices stopped and all eyes turned to Brinnie, stranded in the middle of Grace's couch. From the space behind her, she fetched the purse she surrendered to no hostess, grasped it primly in her lap, clasped her gloved hands on it and waited. With her dimpled cheeks and her wide-eyed innocence, her impossibly small pumps not quite making contact with the hardwood floor, she looked nothing like the woman who, half an hour before, had told them about the man who got away. This was the Brinnie they knew.

"I *do*," she said. "I wish we had a washateria in Nopalito. Wait, let me explain. My Mr. Dentry, he's been with me for two years now, coaching over at the high school? He says he likes it here. Well how's the poor man supposed to wash his clothes?"

"Am I to understand," Norma asked, "that if he had a place to do his wash in public, you'd stop doing it for him?" She suspected – she'd said as much to Grace several times – that Brinnie did more than laundry for the man who rented her garage apartment.

"Send him to Kingsville," Grace said.

Brinnie rewarded her with a blank stare. Kingsville was a forty-mile drive.

"Whatever you do," Norma put her hand on Brinnie's arm, "stop cleaning up after him. Or put him to work helping you. Let the man at least hang his own clothes."

"And who's going to iron them?"

"Honey, a washateria doesn't iron your clothes."

"I hope you charge him for ironing his pants," Frieda declared. "That heavy khaki. And all that starch. *Gott im Himmel*, I hated ironing my Augie's khakis."

Norma turned to Frieda. "Sister, I wouldn't iron a stitch for Jake Pfeiler if he rose up out of the grave tomorrow."

Grace spoke to Brinnie. "You're as much as taking money from another woman's pockets."

The little widow blanched, but Grace was in no mood to be kind. She took in ironing. Brinnie didn't.

"If Bob Dentry's mother didn't have sense enough to teach the man to iron, he ought to be paying someone for it." Grace stopped and kept the rest to herself. Brinnie's coach was cute as a puppy and about as useful. Not worth the effort it would take to swat him.

"I would never have let Mr. Krause do the ironing." Gertrude started to defend her statement, but Frieda and Brinnie turned to Norma and the conversation moved elsewhere, the momentary discord forgotten.

Grace wondered what would happen if the widows were asked to fold their hands in their laps when they came together. Would they go mute? Several months back, her eldest grandson, ten years old and full of himself, had tried to negotiate her living room with a dozen women gathered. He'd been all but knocked down by the flurry of hands in the air, like birds indoors, wings beating to get out.



When it was time for refreshments, Norma followed Grace into the kitchen. She dropped her voice into the register they'd used as girls with secrets in a house full of ears.

"Did he ask you to go dancing? Tell me you're going to see him again."

"Ooh, that Frieda." Grace opened her silverware drawer and counted out forks. "I wish she'd choke on her own tongue."

Norma counted spoons from the drawer and moved to the table with Grace. "Has it ever occurred to you that you keep too tight a rein on yourself?"

"So I should make a spectacle?" Grace lowered her voice. "Like Brinnie running after her coach?"

"Let her chase him if he makes her happy."

"*Sie hat nicht alle Tassen im Schrank.*" Grace shimmied one of her coffee cups against the saucer beneath it. "A few cups missing from the cupboard."

"That's unkind. But it isn't news. Something's always gone missing with Brinnie."

"She wasn't even twenty." Grace paused, thinking of the day the constable had knocked at her young friend's door to say that Charlie Klein would be returned to her in pieces.

"It's a wonder all of us haven't rattled something loose," Norma said. "My house is so quiet some days." She looked intently at Grace. "Four years I've been a widow, but no man showed up at my door yesterday. Oh, sister, don't turn Rupert Koehn away."

"You step out with him." Grace spoke with a bluntness she hadn't expected. She turned toward the living room, suspecting the others had heard.

Norma kept her voice down. "Hasn't he done his penance yet?"

"It's not that." Grace hated the sound of her whisper. She might as well have hissed.

"Sometimes I think you're hard."

"I've had to be." Grace felt the tightness at her throat. She'd had a household to look after since her mother died and, after Garret's suicide, three grief-stricken sons to raise up on her own. A farm to run. A war coming. No man beside her when most she needed help.

"You're not hard with your grandchildren."

"It's not the same." And Grace was finished. She excused herself to her bathroom, leaving Norma to play hostess.

Taking a washcloth from the linen closet, she wet it under the tap and dabbed her face. It was delicious – the moist cloth against her eyes, the drift of cool in patches on her forehead as the damp evaporated in the air from the raised window. Opening a compact from the medicine chest, she retouched her powder and put her glasses back in place. A gray-haired woman who clearly looked her sixty years gazed back at her in the mirror. Grace used a little bit of powder and a light shade of lipstick, an occasional home permanent, a rinse that left her hair with a silvery sheen. Her breasts, still ample, sagged beneath a simple shirtwaist dress.

Garret had loved her breasts. He'd loved looking at them in the lamplight of their bedroom, touching them, putting his mouth to them when finally she let him, skittish and self-conscious though it had made her feel. With time she had eased into this pleasure between them – until a night during her first pregnancy, when Garret put his mouth to her breasts and they began to leak. Her breasts weren't for Garret anymore. She didn't stop him, but she knew he felt the change in her. It opened the first distance between them. In the last months of his life, as darkness overwhelmed him, she'd despaired of his dependency in bed

with her, eyes closed like a baby, something vital drying up inside her while he suckled there.

The light fluttered at the edge of her vision, and Grace turned from the mirror. Like a breath at the window, the breeze toyed with an edge from her curtains.



By five, Grace's party was winding down. Frieda complained about her aches and pains, grouching that she needed to get back home. Gertrude washed the last of Grace's cups and saucers, and Brinnie dried them, her gloves lying neatly on the countertop nearby.

"Girls." Norma's voice beckoned from the living room. "You're not going to believe your eyes."

Brinnie dropped the cup towel and reached for her gloves while Gertrude dried her hands. Grace followed her friends to the living room window.

Dolan's Studebaker stood in the little half moon of crushed rock out front, its chrome-tipped airplane nose pointing at the trunk of Norma's dusty old DeSoto. At the open passenger door of the gleaming Studebaker stood Dolan and Hollis, looking like a picture. Dolan had on a suit clearly just off the rack. Hollis was dressed in pale yellow with matching shoes and hat. She was holding a bouquet of yellow roses. He had a yellow rose bud at his lapel. Everything about the couple, even the way they smiled, said newlyweds. Brinnie burst out the front door, with Norma and Gertrude behind her. Frieda all but shoved Grace down the steps behind them.

They converged in a jumble, with Dolan and Hollis telling their story in fits and starts. Grace stood at the edge, watching. Her boarder and his intended hadn't wanted to wait, they said, and Hollis hadn't really wanted a big church wedding. Her parents had given the young couple their blessing and driven to the county seat with them to serve as witnesses. When Brinnie got breathless wanting to know what was next, Hollis announced a suitably romantic weekend.

"I'm all packed and ready to go. Dolan's got to grab a few things here and then we're honeymooning – you'll never guess where – at the Casa Ricardo in Kingsville."

At the mention of honeymooning, Brinnie turned to Norma and, standing on tiptoe, whispered into her ear. Norma nodded and turned to Frieda while Brinnie whispered to Gertrude. Norma led Brinnie and Gertrude back into the house while Frieda strode across Grace's garden and her own barren yard, then disappeared behind her front door. Suddenly it was quiet, so quiet Grace could hear the bees at work among her flowers.

Dolan stepped forward and took her hand in both of his while Hollis retreated behind the open car door and stood there waiting.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hoffman. I should have told you last night." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "But I promised Hollis."

"You've kept your word. Now what? You've got bed and board here but no room for a bride."

"Coach Dentry got us a garage apartment over by the high school." Dolan's words came at her in a rush. "I had to tell Coach. He's been like a father to me, and I know he didn't tell Mrs. Klein. He promised he wouldn't. Oh, and we'll pay for my room through May, Hollis says we should and –"

"You'll do no such thing. I haven't got so feeble I need charity." Grace turned to Hollis. "What about you, young lady? What are you going to do with yourself?"

Hollis stepped out from behind the car door, wilting under Grace's gaze. "The apartment Coach Dentry got for us? It'll take weeks to get it clean and straight. Not that I mind." Hollis grinned, as if to reassure herself. "I never much cared for high school. Seemed like band was the only part I liked."

Grace clasped her hands behind her back and fought the itch to shake Dolan's bride. With her own mother three years gone, Papa had pulled Grace out of school when she was ten and put her to work in the kitchen. She hadn't had the chance, at seventeen, to prance around a football field half naked, twirling what looked like a cheap double-tipped dinette chairleg at the head of the marching band.

Brinnie flung Grace's front door open, saving the bride from what might've been said. The tiny widow rushed toward them, with Gertrude and Norma close behind. On cue, Frieda appeared among the hens while Dolan retreated to pack his things.

Watching them flutter, Grace felt suddenly old. Her friends still looked like the aging widows who'd fetched up at her front door just hours before, but they'd broken free. Giddy as schoolgirls, they deferred to Brinnie, who moved as if she could not keep up with her heart.

The young widow chanted in a breathless rush. "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue."

"*Schnarreganz*," Grace said. "Honking like a goose." But no one paid her any mind.

The other widows took a collective breath and repeated the chant. Even Frieda. It was too much for Grace, her sister's old-man voice, low and rough and quivery all at once, let loose from its tether.

Frieda fanned at the bride with a lace handkerchief she'd tatted at fifteen for her trousseau. Hollis hugged her and tucked it in her purse so that when she closed it, the lace protruded like a fan.

Brinnie pulled a rhinestone-studded comb from her hair and a compact from her purse. She'd had the comb less than a week, she announced, had worn it only twice, for Easter Sunday service and Grace's birthday party, so it was good as new. Hollis removed her hat and, setting it on the carseat with her purse, swept her hair back on one side and slid the comb into place, then replaced her hat, took up her purse and smiled, a brightness like love or lunacy spilling from her.

Norma stepped forward, and for a moment Grace couldn't breathe. Her sister was holding their mother's cameo brooch. Fixing Grace with a quiet stare, Norma turned to the bride. "This was Mama's. Except when my sister wears it, she hasn't let it stray from her dresser since Papa gave it to her. I've borrowed it for you, Mrs. Woodhouse." Hollis blushed at the mention of her married name. "You are to return it to Mrs. Hoffman first thing Monday morning."

Grace watched herself step forward and pin her mother's cameo to the young bride's bodice. Norma waved a length of satin ribbon, a pale powdery blue, scavenged from Grace's sewing box. She twined it around the bride's bouquet, tied a bow into place, and stood back. Dolan reappeared as Gertrude produced a box of rice from Grace's kitchen cabinet, and when the newlyweds stepped to the car, the widows tossed handfuls into the air above them. Dolan started his Studebaker while Hollis arranged herself beside him. Had Grace ever been so young?

She knew the click of a camera had not captured her at such a moment, and no one, it seemed, had thought to snap a picture of Dolan and Hollis this afternoon, at the start of their life together, before a bedroom door closed on them as man and wife.

When finally the widows stopped waving, Gertrude turned to Brinnie. "Let's you and I walk Frieda home." Brinnie looked lost for a moment but went along without a word. Grace knew what her friends were up to, but she was too tired to resist. She walked with Norma to her own front door.



The two sisters lit at the kitchen table. Norma looked around the room, then turned to Grace.

"This house is going to feel mighty empty with Dolan gone."

"I have the hens. My grandchildren. Some days I have too much company."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Oh, sister, go dancing with Rupert Koehn."

"He hasn't asked me to go dancing."

"Give him half a chance and he will."

"I haven't danced in years. I'd step all over my own feet."

"A body doesn't forget." Norma swept Grace to her feet, waltzing circles with her as they had when they were girls together at home. Norma hummed a tune from years back, then sang almost under her breath, "*Du, du, liegst mir im Herzen. Du, du, liegst mir im Sinn.*" You live in my heart, you live in my mind. The words trailed off and left her humming the rest of the old waltz.

"Have you forgot what rhymes with *Herzen*?" Grace surprised herself with the question.

Norma stopped short and looked her right in the eye. "*Schmerzen*, Grace. Heartache. Just plain old human hurt. Put it at last behind you."

Grace gathered herself and tried to find words for the ache that weighed on her this afternoon, a way to explain the separation she felt between herself and her sister's wish. "It's too late," she said and took her place at the table again.

"To let go?"

But Grace had let go. She'd gone on without Garret. She'd let go of so much. She'd learned to be wary of attachments.

"I was sixteen." Norma's voice broke in.

Grace shook her head. Her sister had taken a wrong turn.

Norma didn't seem to notice. "I wanted to believe that the face I saw in the mirror was pretty. I wanted to make Rupert look at me. And that's all he did. He looked at me."

"He looked at you the way a man looks at a woman." Yesterday – ten years ago – the old bitterness in these words would have gnawed at Grace. Today she felt acceptance, even release.

"You were upstairs." Norma was arguing a point she clearly didn't realize Grace had conceded. "You weren't supposed to walk in on us. We meant you no harm. *He* meant you no harm."

A long lost image of Rupert's upturned face glimmered at Grace. He'd promised her no harm. "Pride goes before a fall," she said.

"Who're you accusing? It was your pride that roused his."

"But only for a little while."

"Sister, I'm lost."

"He humbled himself. Two days later, he came to me and he humbled himself." Grace couldn't sit. She got up and walked to the door. Late afternoon shadows crept across the back yard, softened by the fine cross-hatch of screen she peered through. Memory tugged at her from a hideaway she'd left dark these many years. She heard June bugs clicking against the window screens on the old house, saw lamp-light pooling on Rupert's face, with him on one knee looking up at her.

"He pleaded with me," she said. "He swore by my memory of Mama it would never happen again."

Stand up like a man. She'd torn the words out of herself and flung them at Rupert. She wanted to slap him. Telling Norma, Grace could feel the itch in her palm, and she understood it wasn't pride at work in her the night she turned Rupert away. It was contempt.

"He looked weak as a bottle-fed calf. I didn't want him like that."

"Making a promise he would've kept."

"I didn't want him on his knees." As simple as that, she had decided

two lives. Like shuffling at cards, the clatter of them coming together in a new pattern. Tap twice against a table top and the deck is whole again. With no way back to the moment before.

“And now?” Norma asked.

Now.

There was such stillness, such quiet, for a stretch of moments. It seemed to Grace that everyone was holding a collective breath, listening. She felt Norma waiting. She pictured Frieda at her back steps across the way, Gertrude and Brinnie on the stoop behind her, each with a hand cupped to an ear. She imagined Rupert pausing at his back gate – and a hush in the cemetery where Garret, where Miriam, lay biding. She felt herself listening, wondering what the answer might be.

“Grace?”

“Shhh. Listen.”

Out in the yard, the mulberry tree stirred, leaves brushing against one another in a whispery flutter. A moment later, on cue, the Gulf breeze whisked through the screen door, a cool drift trembling in the hair at her neckline. She felt the pull of the draft flowing through the house behind her, heard curtains rustle at the living room windows. And Grace was back – breathing, thankful – at her own kitchen door. In a little while, as on so many nights of her life, she would open a bedside window, take a seat in her rocker by the window in the dark, let go of her day before getting into bed. *That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.*

She’d been such a fool. She almost smiled to think so. She felt lighter somehow, unburdened.

“I’m waiting for an answer.” Norma spoke from behind her. “What now?”

Grace turned to her sister. “I have a wedding dress to sew. A spare bedroom to clean for my next boarder.” She looked forward to both.

“Don’t trifle with me,” Norma said. “I am not a patient woman.”

“You want to know about Rupert.” Grace took her sister’s hand. “It was pleasant to be in his company,” she said. “That’s all the answer I have.” She paused. Then, for herself as much as for Norma, she added four simple words. “For the time being.”

Together, then, they walked to Frieda’s to fetch Brinnie and Gertrude for their ride home with Norma. The day was fading, the western sky spilling amber. Afterwards, when Norma drove off, Grace walked in her garden. She stopped to admire the hollyhocks – planted last fall and coddled through the winter, their shoots as high now as her shoulder, tight buds unfolding at the peaks and beneath them looser and looser eruptions of petals. They went all the way back to Papa’s house, these flowers. They’d begun with her mother. Grace had been saving the seeds – and trading with her neighbors – for fifty years. She had picked them with her treasured brother Julius. She had teased Rupert, who never got the hang of flowers. Every year of her married life, she’d planted them with Garret. Another day, admiring them, she’d have clipped some for the kitchen table. But somehow this evening, she couldn’t bear to. She wandered there for a while, and when dusk took the color, she went back inside.

M. R. B. CHELKO

from *Manhattations*

thanks but I prefer to perpetuate a difficult
and lonely lifestyle a birch tree I'll glide
easily on this bridge over the river because I don't have to
understand why I am a tree or how a bridge gets built
to use one how it must have thrilled those first
savage engineers when their horses refused
to enter the depths
the rapids I don't want
to live forever not even after
my conversation with Nick about not wanting
to live forever I'm reaching can't you tell
the emotional center were I'm still
a child wandering through some neighborhood
in Indiana on a street named after a beautiful woman
Marilyn not Monroe just some
farmer's daughter

ED SKOOG

Hattie's Hat

Some song keeps bringing me
Technical to the marbled kiss
Depicted in light box above the oaken bar
A song I myself deploy
To farewell like a fighter jet
Co-workers left behind
Dimming into semi-appearance,
Singing with a borrowed pen
On this paper napkin in the smell
Of a worked sea. O Ballard,
In the wet throat of your streets
That pistol Time forever holstered,
Like a pin unaccounted for.

John Gentile

Text by JESS BARNETT



Three Paper Sculptures.
2011
Oil on canvas
36 × 48 in.
JOHN GENTILE

THE PURSUIT OF MEMORY is a difficult art. Considering John Gentile's pieces, displayed in this edition of *PDR*, it's clear that we each have our own methods for this pursuit.

For some, it's collecting items for scrapbooks or saving photos in albums; for others, it's through savoring smells, which can bring us back to a different time more poignantly than anything visual ever could.

In Gentile's work, he seems to trap images, either memories or visions, within the boundaries of layers. Light and color, shaped in some pieces like a twisted length of telephone cord or a barbed-wire fence, trap layers of meaning behind them, presenting these to the viewer like an offering. In others, the cords of light themselves create the image, as in *Change Up*, which features

disembodied orange flowers of dubious origin.

In *Old Clothes*, the clothes and cords are equal layers, creating a lonely, left-behind feeling that recalls vacant lots behind schools or abandoned train tracks.

Gentile's oil technique creates a faded, slightly blurred-at-the-edges feel that adds to the sense of nostalgia, muted in some pieces and exaggerated in others (as in *Old Clothes* and *Three Paper Sculptures*, respectively).

Gentile's stint as a commercial artist from 1961 to 1971 shows in his occasional inclusion of scraps of words and advertisements in his work. These are always carefully modified, however, to exclude any pertinent information.

Memory cannot be branded.



Old Clothes. 2010
Oil on Canvas, 68 x 92 in.
JOHN GENTILE



Change Up. 2010
Oil on Canvas, 60 x 80 in.
JOHN GENTILE



Study for Old Clothes. 2010
Graphite on Vellum, 13 x 17 in.
JOHN GENTILE



One Through Fifteen. 2010
Oil on Canvas, 74 x 124 in.
JOHN GENTILE

Second Team

LAST NIGHT I DROVE THROUGH A SNOWSTORM to play basketball with my son. It's thirty miles from my house to this weekly game at the university, and when I get there I use an alias. He doesn't know I'm his father. We shake hands, slap each other on the butt after a good play – nothing special. Before last night we'd never had a conversation.

Connor didn't make the school team, but he plays intramurals and is a good ball-handler. He's a sophomore now, twenty years old. It's amazing to me how much of his life I haven't been around for. His group practices in the small gym, and there is a pick-up game afterward that includes some townies and the members of the team who stick around. Connor always stays to play after practice. His work ethic is like my father's. Must be one of those things that skips a generation.

I wouldn't be surprised if Connor thinks I'm dead – well, if he thinks his father is dead. He knows I'm alive because we end up guarding each other every week. We're about the same height, but he's faster and a much better shot. Now that I'm not drinking, I keep myself in pretty good shape, but it's still a struggle to run with the younger guys. Last night he slapped my hand away when I put it on his back while he was trying to post me up. He stopped play and accused me of holding.

"I'm not holding," I said.

"Keep your hands off, then," he said. "You can't just push me out of the lane. It's a foul every time."

"All right. Your ball. Let's just play."

I hate to argue on the basketball court. It takes me out of the flow of the game, out of the zone I get into, running up and down and reacting instinctively to the play.

A few points later, Connor blocked my shot, but his body slammed into me and knocked me to the floor.

"Sorry, George," he said, leaning over me. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I said, and took the hand he offered. His team scored the winning basket on the next play, and the game was over.

After showering, I sat on a bench in the locker room and wondered if there were going to be any hard feelings. Connor walked past and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Later, man," he said.

"Later."

I'd wanted to get there early last night to talk with him before the game, but the snow storm made me late and I missed my chance. He went out the door – these young guys get showered and dressed in a hurry – while I was still pulling on my socks.

Joyce, my second wife, is having a baby in a few months, and all I can think about is Connor. Connor is going to have a half-brother or half-sister; Connor should understand that I'm not dead; he's my son and I want to know him. I've cleaned up my life – sober for six years – and I hope that means my days of stupid mistakes and bad decisions are over.



I had parked my Pontiac next to Connor's blue Toyota pickup truck. His engine was chugging, warming up as he scraped the windshield. It was noisy out there with the town's snowplows rumbling by – the massive blades scraping the roadway – and the beeping backup signals of the smaller trucks clearing the parking lot. Connor's down jacket already had a frosting of snow on the shoulders. He wasn't forward- or center-tall, but guard-tall like me, right around six feet. The brown hair that curled out from beneath his orange knit hat looked whitish and stiff. Our breath came out in clouds.

"Snow like meal, snow great deal," he said.

I squinted up into the dense, gray sky and unlocked the door.

"I think it's stopping," I said, then ducked in and started the car.

When I got out with the scraper and whisk broom, Connor called over to me.

“George, don’t you listen to Petey Ledoux, the weather guru?”

“Naw,” I called back. “I don’t pay much attention to those guys. They’re never right, and by the time you listen to their spiels you could have gone out and checked the sky yourself.”

“You sound like my old man.” His stepfather was a mystery to me, and I hoped he wouldn’t be a kink in the works. “Petey Ledoux said not to be fooled. The storm is going to slow down and then come back with a vengeance. He’s talking two feet. Got far to go?”

“Just up to Chesterfield.” I looked at the sky again. It wasn’t hard to read. Still, I hoped the weather guru was wrong. Connor came over and began brushing the snow off the rear window of my Pontiac.

“What’s great about a pickup is not many windows to clear off,” he said.

“I never thought of it that way.”

He was being meticulous – wiping the taillights with his gloves.

“Did you grow up in New England?” he asked.

“Yeah, down around Nashua. Guess I’m just used to scraping. I don’t mind it much.”

“I grew up in Nashua,” he said. “What’s your last name anyway?”

“Lemay.” I was sorry I used that name the second I said it. The Lemays lived upstairs from us when Connor was a baby. They’d call the cops when Beth and I got out of hand. Connor put out his hand for me to shake.

“Well, George Lemay, I’m Connor Griggs. Good to meet you. We ought to play on the same team some night instead of always guarding each other.”

“I’m all for that.”

He’d had his mother’s last name from the day he was born. Beth considered it a “slap to the face of the patriarchal system,” and yet she would tell you that the reason she loved the name “Connor Griggs” was because it sounded manly. I thought she’d been reading too much. The patriarchal system? Give me a break.

It’s possible that Beth had told Connor I was dead – she loved being dramatic. I hoped she hadn’t, for his sake. I thought it would be harder

for him if I was suddenly not dead, instead of suddenly no longer a drunken bum who’d abandoned his family. Either way, it wasn’t going to be easy.

We finished scraping my car.

“I knew some Lemays,” he said. “They lived in our building. My mom told me that Tina Lemay was my babysitter.”

“No relation,” I said.

He got into his truck and rolled down the window. “My girlfriend’s out of town and I’m going down to the pub for a beer. You interested? They’ll have the Celtics on TV.”

“I’m not a drinker.” It’s now my pat response. I hate saying I’m an alcoholic; I’ve been saying that and hearing it at meetings for years, and it still sounds pathetic – like you have no control.

“Well,” Connor said, shifting into drive, “see you next week, then, eh? Safe trip.”

He was old enough now to decide whether or not he wanted me to be in his life. I wanted to scream to Beth and to anyone that would listen, to Connor especially. “I’m not dead dammit, and I’m not drunk either!” It bothered me to watch him drive away – like I’d missed another chance. I followed him out of the parking lot.



People do funny things in their cars in bad weather; they take chances they wouldn’t take on a smooth, dry road. For a couple miles I was behind a wrecker that was towing a red Ford Fiesta. It looked like the car Beth used to drive, only hers had a rear bumper and a windshield that wasn’t shattered.

Beth had gotten pregnant at the end of our senior year of high school. She came over on a summer evening, driving her parents’ car. The air smelled like the grass I’d just cut and the sky was pink and blue – hanging there above her head as she approached me. She didn’t seem to mind that I wasn’t wearing a shirt and was sweaty and smelly from doing chores.

“Congratulations, Dad,” she said, and hugged me like she had when I was on top of her in the back seat of the car. She’d gone for the test and it had come back positive. I was more confused than anything else,

like when you're looking at something you've never seen before, some object you don't know the purpose of, and you can't tell if you're holding it right side up.

"I want the baby," she said.

I was nodding, trying to assimilate what until then had just been a sense that she'd had. She led me into the house and then into my room. She pulled the sleeveless dress over her head and lay back naked on my bed with her arms extended. Her long hair was pinned up and there were tiny beads of sweat on her forehead. She looked happy, vulnerable.

"Come on, Ted. We don't even have to be careful," she said. "As if we ever were."

The night of the wedding – a justice-of-the-peace affair that took ten minutes – we got drunk on champagne and made love in the hotel room. After a couple months, Beth's belly felt like a basketball between us, and she got worried that sex would hurt the baby. How you can have love with no sex is something neither of us ever figured out. Sex was the best thing we did, and when that was gone, we filled the time with bickering. We'd make out occasionally, but that was it. She said she felt ugly and lumpy. It set the tone. By the time the baby was a few months old we were pretty much a done deal.

Beth liked to drink. I liked to drink a lot. She said that I changed when I drank, that I became angry. I'm not sure how she knew that I changed, because we drank every day and I was angry most of the time anyway. We ended up fighting about the fact that I was angry. I must have heard, "Why are you so mad?" a thousand times. I could rattle off a string of reasons why I was mad – that the landscaping job sucked, that I wished the baby didn't cry so much, that we hadn't fucked in months, that the landlord was an asshole, whatever. She didn't hear it.

"But why are you so mad?"

Her frustration and my anger chased each other around the small apartment, careening off the walls and smashing into things. One Friday night, Beth and I really got into it, and Connor cried like he always did when we fought. He didn't just cry; it was that hiccupy thing, gasping for breath, high-pitched wailing. We weren't really paying attention to him; he simply provided a cranky, aggravating soundtrack to the business at hand.

At one point, I sat at the table and Beth stood over me screaming about what a lousy father I was, what a shit, what a loser. I pushed her away from me and watched her fly across the room, a look of horror and surprise on her face. I wanted it back instantly. It sounds pathetic to say it now, but I didn't want to hurt Beth. I didn't want to ever see that look on her face. I especially didn't want to be the one who put it there. She tripped backward over the leg of a chair, bashed her head against the door casing and landed on her left wrist, crushing the bones. I knelt in front of her, apologizing, shocked by the impossible angle of her twisted hand. She pushed me away with her feet. Her face was distorted with pain and the good hand cradled the other arm as though she was having trouble believing that it was part of her.

"Get away from me," she said. "You've really done it now, man, you've really done it now." She had an operation to repair the wrist. I'm not sure how long she wore the cast because after she figured out how to do things without my help, which was only a matter of days, she told me to leave. We kept in touch long enough to divorce, and when that was finalized she suggested I go far away and never come back, never be in touch. Connor would never have to know anything about me. She'd think of something to tell him. It seemed like a good idea at the time, as good as any I had. So what kind of a father agrees to something like that? A confused one, young and drunk and irresponsible, happy to get off the hook. Yours truly, Dad.



I moved to northern New Hampshire and kept to myself. I worked rolling logs at a sawmill and then as a gopher in a lumberyard. No one knew me or cared where I came from, and that was the way I liked it. I thought of Connor on birthdays, his and mine and Beth's. I suppose I thought it would be best for him if I just stayed out of his life. Pretty good willpower for a lush.

Right around the time Connor entered high school, I started going to AA meetings. I got a subscription to the *Nashua Telegraph* and had it delivered to my apartment. I cut out all the photos and box scores from his days on the freshman team to his successes as the captain of

the varsity, which he led to the state tournament. The clippings are in a manila envelope in the top drawer of the bureau. The more time I have sober, the more I want to know my boy as something other than a collection of newsprint.

As I steered into town, I could have been an advertisement for my store – almost everything I was wearing came from there: the blue, baseball-style Thinsulate hat with the earflaps; the mittens with the pouch that folds back and transforms them into fingerless gloves; the light, mid-length black parka made of a space-age material that resists wind and cold. Yes folks, here's the estranged dad about to tell his son a long-held family secret, looking dapper and keeping warm in his *Work 'n Wear* outfit. The ad wouldn't be able to show how my stomach was churning, and how, for the thousandth time, I was doubting myself about what I planned to do. Should I just leave the kid alone? I was hoping he would hug me and want to know his father, but I wouldn't blame him if his impulse was to smack me and walk away. Damn. I took a deep breath and plowed onward.

Durham is one of those towns that's dominated and defined by a college. The center is two blocks long – two blocks of bookstores, markets, cafes, laundromats and bars. It seemed as though most of the establishments were still open, their lights glowing yellow in the winter night. I thought of the few houses I'd seen on the drive in, some of them miles from the next one, the same yellow light emanating from their warm interiors. In my mind, they each had a family inside, a fireplace, and a dog.

I parked a block away from Connor. In his pickup, he had no trouble making it over the mound of snow that the plow had left in a line next to the already parked cars. My Pontiac was a different story. I tried to parallel park and ended up rocking back and forth several times before the right rear tire uncovered a patch of ice and spun without getting a purchase. I was halfway out into the street. Connor must have heard the revving engine and the spinning tires because suddenly he was in front of me yelling, "Reverse, George, reverse!" I put it in reverse and he pushed. The car slid easily into the space.

"Glad you changed your mind," he said, as I got out and locked the door. I was glad, too. The kid was friendly and polite and easygoing,

which either meant that he was well-adjusted and could handle what I wanted to tell him, or his balance would be thrown off and it would screw him up forever. He wasn't like me, I knew that. I was an angry wise-ass at his age, and college hadn't been an option, money-wise or brains-wise. The only way I would have made it was through basketball, but being a star on a team from a tiny high school doesn't usually translate into a scholarship. It was something that Connor had learned too. You might get a good look, an invitation to a tryout, but you still had to come up with the cash. Plus Beth and I had been dealing with the little matter of a child – this one, the one who was walking next to me.

The storm didn't seem to be hurting business in town. The bookstore was open, and the bell above the door jingled each time someone came in or out, a faint chime in the blowing snow. The tables near the large window of the pizza parlor were surrounded by students, barely visible behind the fogged-over glass. A guy and a girl on cross-country skis and wearing silvery outfits and earmuffs, pushed and stabbed their way down the snow-covered sidewalk. The wind blew cold.

"Still think it's gonna stop?" Connor spoke through his scarf as we headed down an alley formed by two large brick buildings covered with graffiti.

"Hope so. I've got a drive ahead of me."

The entrance to Poor Richard's Pub was at the end of the alley. Two large windows framed the thick, ornately carved door. The glass was cluttered with green construction-paper Christmas trees, each with someone's name and a dollar amount written in. The wind gusted behind us and swirled in a miniature freezing tornado. In my head I was rehearsing a small speech: "I'm your father, let's go someplace quiet and talk about it." It would be casual, like I was telling him about finding a wallet on the sidewalk, and the wallet was bulging, but I was carrying it around in my back pocket and hadn't looked inside it yet. He'd already opened the door and was holding it for me.

Poor Richard's was busy and loud. People raised their voices above a blaring jukebox, and it smelled a little like chicken wings, a little like puke. I took off my hat and shook it, then followed Connor to the end of the bar. He took a left and waved to two guys at a table in the corner. One of them got up and reached for Connor's hands.

“Aw, honey, your paws are frozen. Let me help.”

He rubbed Connor’s hands and exhaled on them like you would if you were going to polish your glasses. His hair was short, yellow like the yellow on a parakeet, and brushed straight forward, ending in a tight curl on his forehead. He had a stud in his nose and was wearing mascara and gray eye-shadow. When he saw me standing there, he extended a hand and we shook.

“I’m Casey,” he said, “like the engineer, not the Sunshine Band.”

Connor said, “Casey, that is so old.” Then to me, “He’s been using that line since last year when we were roommates. I’ve heard it a thousand times.”

“Now Con-man,” Casey said, “I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate. You know why I say that about my name. I don’t want people to think I go by initials. That is *so* affected.” He drew out the word “so” while his upper body swung forward and back in an “S” shape. His head looked supported by springs.

The other guy’s name was David and he didn’t get up. When I shook his hand it felt colder than mine. He was pale, way too pale.

“I’m George,” I said, “like Foreman, not like Boy.” It just came out. I hadn’t meant it as an insult and they didn’t take it that way.

“Well, hello, Mr. Foreman, please don’t hurt us,” Casey said, cowering in jest.

Connor smiled. David eased himself out of his chair, stopped for a moment as if getting up had thrown off his balance, then shuffled over to the jukebox. The three of us sat down. Connor had mentioned a girlfriend when he invited me to join him, so I wasn’t jumping to conclusions. Considering how pleasant he seemed, it didn’t surprise me that he had a variety of friends. There are a few gay guys at my AA meeting. They always seem to tell the saddest stories, but they always seem to get a laugh out of us too.

“George plays basketball with us,” Connor said. He took off his coat and hung it behind him on the chair. I did the same. “He comes from Nashua.”

“You mean Nausea?” Casey said.

“I’m actually from Ludlow,” I said, “but I lived in Nausea once. What are you guys drinking?”

I took their orders, then went over to David at the jukebox. He was maybe five-foot-five if he stood up straight, which didn’t appear to be his habit, and his head was shaved on the side I was facing. When he felt me next to him, he looked in my general direction with one sleepy eye, the other one covered up by straight brown hair that lay on his cheek.

“Got a buck?” he asked.

“Sure.” I handed him one.

He took it and fed the machine.

“What are you drinking?”

“Jack,” he said, without looking up from the catalog of songs.

I got the drinks, two beers and the Jack, and delivered them to the table. Then I went back for my coffee, dodging a couple dancers along the way. The dancers were as old as me, and they were jitterbugging to “Dock of the Bay,” however that’s possible. It wasn’t pretty. I’m not crazy about being in bars, smelling the smells and thirsting for the alcohol. I still want it, that’ll probably always be true, and it would be easy to backslide. But I actually craved coffee, and it smelled good and tasted like it was only a few hours old.

“You live around here, now?” Casey asked me.

“In Chesterfield.”

“Oh, Chesterfield. Remember those cigarettes? I always loved that label. Those were good smokes. They still make those? I don’t know. Ooh, can I have one?”

I gave Casey one of my Winstons and lit it for him. I don’t smoke all that much any more – just in bars and at meetings. Joyce and I are working on quitting together, so the new baby won’t think the house is an ashtray.

From my chair, I could see the TV. Boston was losing to the Miami Heat in the last quarter. Connor was watching too, and we small-talked about Big Baby’s poor shot selection and the grace and style of Dwyane Wade, who was single-handedly destroying the Celtics. David returned as Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing” started playing.

“Dance with me,” David said to Casey. “I played this for us.”

“Sure, honey, if you don’t fall asleep on the dance floor.”

Casey and David started double-clutching over near the jukebox. David looked like he could barely stay upright, his head on Casey’s shoulder.

Like he was reading my mind, Connor said, "David's been sick. He seems better now, believe it or not. At least he gets out occasionally."

David was caressing Casey's backside, a hand on each cheek. I turned back to the game. A blur rushed past on my left, and Marvin Gaye got jarred and stopped singing.

"Take that shit somewhere else!" It was a white guy with a hairstyle that looked an awful lot like Casey's. He was twice the size of Connor's friends. Casey was fretting over David, who was bent double and holding his back where it had slammed into the jukebox.

"You hurt him, you fuck," Casey screamed. He took two steps forward and slapped the attacker's face. The guy pushed him, and Casey came crashing into Connor, knocking him off his chair. Connor got up, righted his chair calmly, then walked toward the bully in the Polo shirt.

"These are my friends, pal, and if you don't like them, maybe it's you who oughta take your shit somewhere else."

He was so cool, facing up to someone who outweighed him by fifty pounds. In my younger days I would have been all over that guy, flailing and scratching, doing whatever I could to gain an advantage. I don't remember ever trying to settle something by talking it over.

"This isn't your fight," the guy said to Connor. "Stay out of it, pansy-ass."

"You're wrong there, moron," Connor said. Now we were getting somewhere.

"Who you calling, moron, faggot?"

They pushed each other and Connor ducked under a sweeping left hook. I couldn't believe the guy was actually throwing punches. When the goon righted himself after missing wildly, I was standing in front of him. I kicked sharply at the side of his knee and it buckled beneath him. He went down screaming and holding his leg. It was a trick I'd read about in a detective novel, only the guy in the book used a baseball bat instead of a foot. It still worked though, and it was a fine thing to see that ape writhing around in the peanut shells that littered the floor. Campus security arrived shortly afterward, and they led him, limping and swearing vengeance, over to a neutral corner. The bartender yelled to him that after he recovered enough to leave, he was banned for life.

The guy called over his shoulder, "Right on, fucker, I don't go to gay bars anyway."

"Bitch," Casey said. He spat on the floor.

It took a few minutes for things to settle down. After the security cops were done questioning the big guy, two of his cohorts supported their limping friend, and led him to the exit. He'd put on his hooded sweatshirt with the school's mascot on the back – a tiger – and was still growling when the door opened and the cold blew in. The whooshing wind obscured most of his final statement – something about pansies and lesbos. Connor was over by the bar, talking to the cops. David was groaning while Casey held a baggie full of ice against his back. Casey was livid.

"Lucky for King Kong I didn't have my gun," he said.

"You have a gun?" I asked.

"Oh yes, exclamation point. I'm a Pink Pistol, daddy. We can't all just sit around waiting to get bashed. Next time, he gets it, I swear. I've got a bullet with his name on it."

Casey was as dramatic as those guys in AA, but I believed him. He looked at me intently and his face relaxed. It reminded me of that trick you do with kids, the one where you move your hand up and down in front of your face, and each time you do, your expression goes from a frown to a smile and back again.

"You and Connor are a good team," he said.

A security cop approached us with a memo pad and a drawn pen. It looked like this incident was going to be handled without the aid of the town police.

"Are you George?"

"Yessir," I said, and got up to face him. It was Joyce – "Miss Never-Met-A-Cop-Who-Wasn't-On-A-Power-Trip" – who'd suggested I be a little less hostile while talking to police and authority figures in general. I did my best.

"Last name?"

"Lemay." He wrote it in the book.

"So you were involved in the altercation?"

"Just the end of it."

"Why don't you tell me what happened." His uniform jacket didn't look warm enough for the weather we were having. He still had it zipped up under his chin, and the fake fur collar came around his neck to meet the ends of his sparse mustache. I was wondering if his boss knew that *Work 'n Wear* gave discounts to service people.

I described for him what was an obvious case of gay-bashing, right up to the moment when I tripped the guy with the bad attitude and he fell on his knee.

"You tripped him?" The cop looked up from his book. "That's not what he said."

"That's what I said. I tripped him."

"Well, the guy you tripped happens to be Walter Kissell, who plays for the football team. You might have read about him in the paper."

"I don't follow football."

"He's the starting right guard, here on a full scholarship, and he says you kicked him and he felt something pop."

"Right Guard?" Casey said, "sure didn't smell like it."

I laughed, but the cop remained serious.

"I tripped him," I said, "that's all. They give full boats to idiots who start fights with people who are minding their own business?"

He looked at me for a few seconds before he answered.

"You know, I haven't seen you around here before. Mind if I see some kind of identification?"

"Sure," I said. "Hey, will you come over here for a minute?" I led him to a spot near the jukebox. "My name is Ted Shepard, and I only come around once a week or so. I use a different name because I met a woman here and don't want my wife to find out." He smirked and nodded, then copied down the information from my driver's license.

"Well," he said, "your secret is probably safe. We won't need you anymore, unless, of course, Mr. Kissell presses charges. We'll let you know."

Connor walked toward us as I shook the cop's hand. The cop was my friend now that he thought I was cheating on my wife. Connor raised his eyebrows and shook his head as we started back to the table.

"Oh, Mr. Shepard," the cop said, "that's your current address, right?"

"Yup."

The cop walked off scribbling.

"Mr. Shepard?" Connor said.

"Yeah." I looked at him to see if he recognized the name. I didn't think Beth would have ever mentioned it. Funny, I came here to tell him something, and now I was worried he was going to figure it out for himself.

"So, who's Lemay?"

"Oh, he's a spy." I knew it was lame, but that's what came out. "I'll tell you about it some other time." I looked around at our table. "Who wants another drink? I think you all deserve one. I gotta go, but I'll be glad to treat before I shoot out of here." No takers.

David was shivering and holding on to his back. The bartender straightened some chairs, shoved the jukebox back into its original location, and fed it some quarters. He announced that the next round was on the house and a cheer went up. Michael Jackson's "Beat It" started playing. Casey put on his coat and then helped David with his. I thought of a flight attendant giving instructions, "Put your oxygen mask on first and then assist your child with theirs." David's head was down and Casey held him as they said goodbye and left. David was going to be black and blue in the morning. I used the men's room, then returned to the table and put on my coat.

Connor and I went outside together. I had a brief moment of pretending we were going home to the house we shared. Usually when kids go off to college is when the parents start losing them. In our case, I was hoping to get him back. The snow was steady and accumulating. It looked as though the weather guru had been right. Connor once again helped me brush off the windows of the Pontiac.

"So, who are you really?" he asked, like it was a riddle he wanted to solve.

I looked at him. It just wasn't the right time.

"Ted Shepard is who I am, really, but no one has to know that." I was thinking about his mother and how pissed she'd be if she thought I was butting in. Of course, every time I think of Beth, she's pissed. It's not fair to remember someone from twenty years ago and still see them as they were then. I hoped she had the same feeling about me. The name Shepard didn't seem to mean anything to Connor.

"You in trouble?" he asked.

“Nope, I don’t think so. Not unless a certain football player presses charges.”

“Then how come you use a different name?”

“Personal reasons.” Man, how stupid I must have sounded. “Really, I’ll tell you about it. Can we sit down next week over coffee or something?”

“Sure,” he said. “There’s no practice next week so we could meet before the game.”

“All right then, let’s do that. How about I meet you at the pizza place around six?”

“Sounds good,” he said.

After I got in the car, I rolled down the window and Connor leaned his arms against the door.

“Thanks for your help, George, or Ted, or whoever you are. I don’t think I could have taken that guy alone. I was just kinda reacting without thinking about how big he was.”

“My pleasure, son.” I said it with a John Wayne accent, but it didn’t sound funny. “Gotta go.”

“Good night. Safe trip.” He tapped on the roof and then moved away behind me. He waited there, and I know it was to make sure I got out without getting stuck. Thoughtful guy, my son. I looked at him in the rearview mirror, standing there by himself, and I felt like we were connected now by something more than blood, more than those things you have no control over. 