

VII/1

Rane Arroyo

Grant Campbell

Nona Caspers

Roseann Dabasi

John M. Ison

Greta Gaard

B. R. Harriman

Robert Leone

S.E. Mead

Laura Migliorino

Christopher Moes

Deborah Parks-
Satterfield

Gary Eldon Peter

Vicky Phillips

Steven Riel

Glenn Sheldon

Christopher Thomas

Janis Totty

Jen Wright

Evergreen

CHRONICLES

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Winter/Spring ■ 1992

*A Journal of
Gay and Lesbian Literature*

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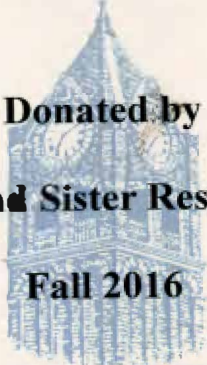
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EVERGREEN ■ 1

The Evergreen Chronicles

A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Literature
P. O. Box 8939, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55408-0939
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Editors' Preface

It's been a rough season. In Minneapolis this summer, John Chenoweth and Joel Larson were murdered by gay bashers, and City Council member Brian Coyle died of AIDS related complications. In St. Paul, the fight started again to repeal the sexual orientation clause of the city's civil rights ordinance. The gay and lesbian community has felt under seige.

Perhaps by the time this issue of *The Evergreen Chronicles* reaches you, the police will have arrested the murderers of Larson and Chenoweth. The St. Paul ordinance has indeed weathered the storm and remains on the books, and Brian's successor (a progressive non-gay man) has been chosen. We've lost a lot here in the last year. It seems we have begun to heal in Minnesota—or maybe we're all ready to retreat from the world into our igloos. One motif running through this issue of *Evergreen*, the first number of our seventh year, is the search for peace and the search for a loving, caring community: Grant Campbell's "Making Peace" concerns a single man's difficult life and his momentary salvation; other pieces deal with individuals connecting to others through community celebrations and acts of singular kindness. At this time in our history, it's important for all of us to realize that despite the difficulties we face, we can survive. Together.

You'll notice some differences in *Evergreen* this time. Our new design was developed by our new Art Director, B.R. Harriman. Harriman has revamped the entire magazine to make it more attractive and enjoyable for our readers. We can thank him as well for enlisting the support of Howard Leibhaber, of Smart Set, who gave us a substantial discount on PostScript output for this issue. We will continue to improve the production of the magazine with the next issue. We welcome also new editor Greta Gaard, who teaches at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. By way of introduction, we've included Greta's short story, "Solstice Phoenix," in this issue.

Finally, we have a question to pose to our readers. Over the past few months, the staff has discussed the subject of bisexuality: that is, should the magazine change its subtitle to specifically include bisexuals? (One discussion led to the change from "A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Writers" to "A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Literature.") Several staff members support the idea while others are opposed for various reasons and to various degrees. We invite you, gentle reader, to respond. Should *The Evergreen Chronicles* change its stated guidelines and subtitle to specifically welcome bisexual people? Please send us your thoughts, ideas, etc. We may decide to publish some of them in a future edition.

Jim Berg
for the editors

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Evanston, IL 60201

The Evergreen Chronicles Submission Requirements

The Evergreen Chronicles, while rooted in the Midwest, draws its artistic talents from a national audience of lesbian and gay writers and artists. No one theme is required, but works must have a lesbian or gay appeal. The subject matter need not be specifically lesbian or gay, but we look for work with a deep sensitivity to the lesbian and/or gay experience. We are interested in works in a wide variety of genres.

Please send 4 copies of your submissions for the editorial committee. Include your name on each page. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return of submissions, as well as a short biographical statement describing yourself and your work. Artwork cannot be returned.

Prose: Submit double-spaced, typed stories or plays up to 25 pages in length. Limit - 3 pieces.

Poetry: Submit single-spaced, typed poems. Limit - 10 poems or 10 pages.

Artwork: Send a clean, reproducible copy in black-and-white up to 8-1/2"x11". Photography submissions should send an 8"x10", black-and-white, glossy print. Other media should submit photographic reproductions of artwork in 8"x10", black-and-white, glossy format. **DO NOT SEND ORIGINAL ARTWORK**—artwork cannot be returned.

Writers and artists chosen for publication will receive a complimentary issue of *The Evergreen Chronicles*. Buys one-time rights.

Deadlines: Summer/Fall Issue (June): January 1
Winter/Spring Issue (December): July 1

Send Submissions to: *The Evergreen Chronicles*
Managing Editor
P. O. Box 8939
Minneapolis, MN 55408-0939

On Being Gay

Christopher Thomas

Perhaps I'm best explained
by the games I played
the year puberty bloomed
like an Amaryllis,
or the sudden hired hand
I caught fumbling
at his jeans -
watching in a trance until
his lovely apparatus
inched up past his buckle.

He was a moon-mind
filled with moon madness.
The embers of his smile
caught my innocence off guard
and sucking my first cock in the loft.
He was everywhere delicious.
We danced without moving,
proclaiming what the glands know
about the illiteracy
of a young heart.

just a cow breeder's daughter

Nona Caspers

Why can't you act like your sister who sits quiet with her legs shut. I didn't know my legs were open are they open? I looked down and sure enough each leg had gone off in a different direction and before you knew it I was talking like a whore. You talk like a whore like a man you look pretty but you talk like a whore like a man you walk like a cow in that dress, she said, you wear the dress but you walk like a cow.

My father is a cow breeder he's a technician Mom said and she showed me how to spell the word TECHNICIAN so I could write it in the space on all the forms at school where they ask what your father's occupation is and if you are a boy or a girl, always in that order. My father is a TECHNICIAN I wrote and the teacher asked, But what kind what does he do? I looked around the room with my hands under the desk and each leg off in a different direction and I said, He gives shots to cows, I said, and she said, Oh he's a Veterinarian, she said and I wanted to say yes but I didn't I said, No. He breeds cows.

Then my mother taught me a different word—ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION—and I learned how to spell it but I didn't know what it meant all I knew was that I'd gone with my father to the farms in his blue coveralls and watched him put the long plastic glove on his arm and stick it in a cow to give it a shot. And he said, I'm a Cow Breeder.

Act like a lady, Mr. Ricklick said as I stood leaning my pelvis on the front of his desk and I wondered what exactly he meant and he wondered why I didn't know. I didn't know why I didn't know. I never seemed to know how to act and my sister brought a book home from college and she put it on my head, she said, Walk across the kitchen pull your stomach in and don't arch your shoulders. She put the book on my head and it was heavy with words. I did it perfectly but when she took the book off I ran outside into the night to play tin-can-alley with the neighbor kids. Nobody had books on their heads. I could never have ran in free with that book on my head or without opening my legs.

The Teachers told me to stop talking so loud and laughing so loud but in my house you had to talk loud if you wanted to get your share of the Dad's Root Beer and have Dad himself say, Tell me your stories. And if I got an A I got a dollar so I wanted the Teachers to like me because I wanted to buy bubble gum and there was a way to chew it

without making any noise or showing that you had a mouth at all. My sister learned how to do it but I couldn't so Mr. Hegle the American Government Teacher told me I was a pig. He told me I was a goddamn pig because I didn't chew right or talk soft and I laughed so loud at a lot of things in his class because a lot of things in his class were funny.

My mouth was too big. They all said it was big. Way too big for a girl. Bigger than the classrooms at school. Bigger than the whole playground. I could fit the swing set in my mouth so the boys at school tried to stick a worm in it. They dug one up a long pink one and then they all chased me. I ran as fast as I could in my flouncy polyester dress and new shoes with plastic heels and tight pointed toes. I ran as fast as I could in those itchy panty hose with my long hair flying in my face the barrette sliding out (I couldn't stop to pick it up and my mom just bought them). When they caught me I kicked and screamed I kicked my legs out at them my dress flew up and the whole playground could see my underwear but I kicked and yelled with my big mouth and they couldn't get the worm in it.

Then all the rules changed, they said, Screw, they said, Screw it screw boys it's what women do, they said, You don't have to keep your legs shut, they said, You are free. It's the Sexual Revolution honey chicky baby come on open your legs don't worry 'bout that Lady stuff it's all a bunch of crap you can do what you want so open your legs open wide.

I shut my legs. I crossed my legs. And they said Weird and they said Frigid and they said Faggot. A whole group of blonde blue-eyes Arkansas girls said faggot and threw combs and wet tissue at us and we grabbed our clothes and ran out of the Harrison pool as they chanted and cut us with their soft-blue-lady-girl-eyes. And I said FUCK!

My younger brother told me not to say FUCK! It was really unbecoming what man would want to kiss a mouth such a dirty big mouth that said FUCK! The mouth of a woman should be soft and sweet as papaya dipped in honey Yes uh hmm how do you feel tonight Oh that's too bad how could she do that to you. A mouth that could slide. A mouth that could fit. A hollow mouth.

My father wanted me to race him on my bike so I did and I won and I stank. You stink like B.O., he said, God you stink can't you do something about that smell and I sank. I sank into my tee-shirt and jeans I sank into my sweat and my mom bought me some roll-on deodorant and told me to use it but I'd forget and the goeey ball got clogged and I broke into a rash and I sweat. I sweat and I stank and my brothers said ich as they lifted their weights and dripped salt on the floor and nothing I did stopped the odor completely and everything I liked made me sweat. Even cheerleading made me sweat

and the other cheerleaders sweat but none of us told.

My mother said, You're asking for trouble, as I ran out of the house in a scooped neck summer smock and I wasn't sure if she meant I'd catch a cold or a penis and have babies and end up like her with wide hips. So I stopped eating and everyone was happy. My Teachers were happy, my father was happy, my brothers were happy but I wasn't happy so I ordered a pizza and the man in the suit at the table said, Don't touch your food with your fingers. Keep your fingers clean off the plate and don't lick them, he said in a whisper.

They said I should be a nurse, Don't you want to be a nurse? and I said NO, but they said I'd make a good nurse because when my dog got hit by a car I held her in my lap with blood on black fur and my thigh until stiff. Then they said, Be a Teacher don't you want to teach little kids? and I said NO, but they said I'd be a good Teacher because when I babysat the kids in the neighborhood I'd make them sit quiet in rows and read books and if they didn't I send them to bed. They all said I should be something until I got married and my mother worried because I still didn't act like a Lady and the roots of my hair were not as blonde anymore but my father said, At least she doesn't give away the milk free. ■

One Man's Biography, One Man's Autobiography

Glenn Sheldon

He says I am his codependent to heaven.
I say he romanticizes such infinities.
He says each of us walks away from our Bethlehems.
I say my house of silence is empty.
He says I fear the familiarity of my own voice.
I say his poetry tips over his own words.
He says I am a man who's forced to change changes.
I say he's joined one too many cults.
He says my ego is anorexic or bulimic.
I say he has one too many mouths to shoot off.
He says that sex used to be like darkness igniting.
I say that the sun revolves around the sun.
He says that I insist on intimacy or else!
I say he mistakes his dictionary for a bed.
He says I'd probably wear a tie in the tropics.
I say at his autopsy they'll find only stone.
He says all my tattoos are probably pen names.
I say he'd make a good cross behind a martyr.
He says my bed is too warm in the winter.
I say he is too soused to come near my cigar.
He says my poems are like DC-10s...crashing.

SPECIAL REPORT

"We interrupt this poem to bring you the critics."

Ms. Z: By the time I'm done decoding, there's no poem left.
 Mr. X: It's not up to par; it's no "Death in Black and White."
 Y (pseudonym): This poet always delivers quality. Why bring
 Mr. Sheldon in on it?

SPECIAL REPORT

"We interrupt the critics to bring you a poem."

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Your bed is a raft: a buoyant thing.
 You want me to be the oar.
 We breathe water before we breathe each other.
 First you are fisherman, then, the net.
 I awake to find I was never,
 never meant to hold on to "you" or "we."
 I never meant to get caught.

I say I wrote that on March third, 1984.
 He says it's no "Death in Black and White."
 I say he flatters me with his poetic regrets.

SPECIAL REPORT

"We interrupt art—be it good art or bad art—
 to bring you an arsonist..."

THIS POEM JUST BURNED DOWN TO THE GROUND

"We now resume our regular programming."

LIFE IN BLACK AND WHITE

(Critical Restoration of "One Man's Biography,
 One Man's Autobiography")

He says I could row him up the river of heaven.
 I say that the infinite is envious of us.
 He says we are each other's affirming mangers.
 I say my cabin of camouflage has crumbled.
 He says he is the wild air feeding my fire.
 I say that his right eye is bloodshot with desire.
 He says he sleeps with the angel inside my atheism.
 I say my body apexes in its partial eclipse.
 He says he resents sleep for lack of my consciousness.
 I say that our tight jeans envy our bodies.
 He says the taste of a man is like a peppermint wafer.
 I say I always sing sweet blues in the morning.
 He says my ego is like a religion, an addiction.
 I say the sounds of our moans build galaxies.
 He says the blooming irises call out our names.
 I say that his heart swells like an overfed dove.
 He says our love is like a gluttonous thief.
 I say there is no me left to be taken so feast!
 He says that trees breathe by tightening their barks.
 I say there can be no shame to such movements.
 He says I fear to awake without you here.

SPECIAL REPORT

"We interrupt this poem to bring you a poem."

GIVING IT UP

Night is the moon's own
 Bandage for vicious wounds.
 We are pretty dolls that God
 Spent time winding for us to unwind...
 Blood is rare—none die willingly.
 There are those who do not fear flesh;
 They are the violent virgins.

I say that this poem is too short, like our nights.
 He says that the ultimate compliment is horizontal.
 I say let's let our cocks shoot themselves off. ■

Why I Didn't Write This Poem

Rane Arroyo

*

The cat is scaring away birds
feeding on seeds I threw on
the porch even though I know
it's going to be a mild winter

*

a man steps out in underwear
sits on his porch and smokes
a cigarette and points at me
and the black cat as if to
say, so I'm not alone, the Earth
was destroyed last night
only in my dream, I shiver too

*

Maintenance men kick open
my apartment door to make sure
thieves haven't broke in during
Christmas vacation and I have
to show my in-state I.D.s to
prove this is my place, my poem

*

The Wedding Story

Deborah Parks-Satterfield

Right in the middle of Yahtzee Annie and Jill announced that they were getting married! "After being together for 16 years," they said, "it's time we publically acknowledge our relationship and made another step toward a more global way of thinking." "Global, huh?" I snickered, "before you tell Zimbabwe why don't you tell your parents?" Somebody kicked me under the table, then everybody was quiet.

I sat there and sizzled, silently! Were we fast becoming a Lesbian nation of Lucy and Ethels, Rhoda and Marys, or worst of all June and Junes, prancing around in house dresses and pearls waiting for some fool to walk through the door saying, "Honey, I'm home!?"

"I don't know why you think this is necessary!" I blurted. "I *know* you've been together for 16 years, *you know* you've been together for 16 years, even the *postman* knows you've been together for 16 years! So what's the point?!" "We feel..." (watch out for any sentence that starts with 'we feel')... "that having some sort of ceremony is an important political and personal statement of our commitment to each other." Jill intoned in her best, I'm-just-trying-to-educate-you voice. "You know, as well as I do, that there's no legal or moral support for us out there. We *have* to find ways to affirm and empower ourselves." "Right!" I yelped, "You just want presents! You two are exactly like that Het yuppie trash! Is the Mayor of Munchkin City gonna perform the ceremony?! Get a grip on reality girls, marriage is not the answer to empowerment!"

Everyone was so engulfed in ecstasy, at the prospect of a lezzie wedding, they totally ignored me! I proceeded to go on and on any way. I ranted and thrashed around the living room like Godzilla. They laughed and floated off into the dining room, waxing organic about macrobiotic wedding cakes, the moon and love, babies and 2nd mortgages. I hollered, "That's it!" and threw the dice across the room. All 5 dice smacked the wall and landed on the floor in a perfect Yahtzee, all sixes. Everybody took this as a blessing from the Goddess. It was my "lucky" toss so, of course, they figured it only made sense that I should be maid of honor.

"Are you all out of your minds?! I haven't set foot in a church since my First Communion when my veil got caught on the holy water font and tipped the whole damned thing into Sister Timothy's lap! AND I have never dressed up in anything froo-froo, lacy or mint green! Next,

I suppose you'll want me to go to a department store and have my face done by some woman with big hair!"

"Come in here, hush up and sit down!" commanded Annie, "you know, you watch too much T.V.! We're planning on doing it up nice in a really centered and womanly way. We're having the ceremony on that land we bought up north, in the clearing I told you about."

"Me? Outside? In the woods!" I shrieked, "you know I don't do dirt! We-l-l-l, you're not gonna catch me jiggin' around with my chest flappin' in the breeze like some damn wood sprite. I will be keeping all my clothes ON thank you! And if I SEE any naked breasts I'm leaving!"

They just smiled and kept planning.

On the day of the blessed event, I'd agreed to give a ride to a couple I didn't know, who were close friends of Jill's. When I picked them up, that morning, something told me I was in for a rough trip. As I honked the horn a pair of thin, blonde, very white women skipped down the walk. They were dressed as if they'd been caught in explosions at Pier 1, L.L. Bean and Banana Republic. They looked ethereal, ethnic, gauzy yet practical all at once. This pair also reeked of Patchouli oil! I, on the other hand, reeked of OFF. I'd sprayed on so much insect repellent my pants were clinging to my legs and my butt was permanently glued to the drivers seat! "Hi, and blessed be!" they chirped in unison. "I'm Birchbark and this is my friend Autumn Wind. What's that awful smell? We both have allergies." I thought for a moment then replied, "I'm a Voo-doo princess and what you're smelling is the ju-ju bag I have in my purse."

"Oh," Ms. Wind said, as if she was speaking to a retarded child, "we respect all religions except Christianity of course, so it's o.k. We'll just hop in the back and open the windows."

"Good."

My companions sang Kay Gardner songs for the next 100 miles till they fell asleep or passed out, I couldn't tell which. I almost got pulled over for speeding, it was either that or o. d. on patchouli.

We arrive at the wedding site, trekked in about a quarter mile and came to a beautiful clearing. The trees surrounding it were decorated with fresh flower garlands and the smell of pine was everywhere. In the very center of the clearing stood a waist high stone altar. All around the altar, growing right out of the ground, were hundreds of day lilies, black-eyed susans and other summer flowers I'd never seen before. I was overcome! This skulking euphoria crept up on me! Suddenly, I was seized with a woodsy, organic, crunchy granola kinda bean-sprouty feeling! I mean I was actually starting to understand why people liked to be outside. Just as I was beginning to relax a half-naked ephemeral flit danced up to me and tried to mash a halo of dried

flowers onto my head!

"Do I look like a Smurf?!" I screamed. Ms. Flit ignored my protests and continued to leap about and grin.

"Do you understand that dried flowers and nappy hair do not mix?! I don't wanna be pickin' that shit outta my hair for the next week!" But she was high on life and obviously locked in 'don't-worry-be-stupid' mode. I know you," she said delightedly, "maid of honor, perfect Yahtzee, all sixes!" She waved the crusty halo in front of my face and whined, "Everyone in the wedding party is wearing these! You can't be the only one not wearing a halo! We're videotaping the whole ceremony and it just wouldn't look right! Come on, let me help you tie it on." I genuinely wanted to be a part of one of the most special days in Annie and Jill's lives so I gave in and stood still while she tied that stupid crumbly thing to my head.

"Oh, and the gift table is on the right, food far left, Brenda's giving neck rubs behind that oak and Pilar is reading Tarot down by the creek, enjoy," she called over her shoulder as she skipped off to find the next victim.

The day was moving into afternoon and all I wanted to do was sit down and eat. As I walked across the clearing a realization hit me. Women were seated directly on the grass. No blankets. No lawn chairs... nothing. I was in a panic! I can't sit on grass! Things live in grass! Animals pee on grass! Maybe it wasn't to late to find Birchbark and have her whittle me a chair! What was I supposed to do? Frantically, I searched the group for some sign of Annie or Jill, but no luck. Well at least there was food here, when in doubt eat.

I assumed the spread would consist of your average dyke fare, you know, wheat-free this, rice-flour that, tofu-ridden this, carob-laden that and the ubiquitous blue corn chips. I knew it would be futile to look for a chicken. Unfortunately, when I arrived at the table, none of the food resembled anything I'd ever eaten! Among the entrees was a black paste surrounded with gray crackers, fat purple things floating in purple liquid, a gelatinous steamy casserole and some crunchy red stuff that women kept popping into their mouths and commenting on how yummy this batch tasted, this time. In the center of this repast sat a huge, brown mound. Now, THAT was either the wedding cake or beavers had crawled up from the creek and began construction of their new home right in the middle of the table. I was starving! I would've danced the mambo butt naked across Montana for just a Ritz cracker and a slice of cheese!

I had to find Annie and Jill! My blood sugar level was dangerously low. I wobbled around the perimeter of the clearing, feeling almost drunk and bumping into other guests as I mumbled,

"HaveyouseenAnnieorJill?" I stumbled back over to what was loosely referred to as the food table and discovered that someone had brought a plain mixed green salad. Mine! Mine! I swooped down and hung over that bowl like a vulture! Finally, my head started to clear and my eyes unglazed. I leaned against a tree and was drifting into that full-tummy coma when someone shrieked, "Oh, my Goddess!" The noise came from the direction of the creek, so everyone made a mad scramble for the water! Once there, we encountered a large Black woman in a bright yellow toga pacing, leaping and yelling under a gigantic maple. (She too, was wearing crunchy dried flowers on her head.) Ms. Yellow Toga was hopping, running, babbling and pointing up into the branches. "My poor baby," she moaned, "my Terpsichore, my darling! I told her not to go up there but she just insisted! I turned my back for one second, one second! She's not healthy at all, you know, she's due for her asthma shot at 4:30 and it's already 5 o'clock, oh, Goddess what am I going to do?!" Her voice trailed off into a distressful moan. I looked around and couldn't believe it! We were all just standing there unmoving, like a pile of Lincoln Logs! Well, I'd had my vegies and I was fired up! I was prepared to do what ever it would take to save that little lamb! I'd lower myself into the well like when they rescued baby Jessica or I'd sit out on the ice all night like they did with those stranded whales! "What is the matter with you women!" I cried, "let's help the sister get her child out of that tree!" I started forward expecting them all to follow, when someone whispered in my ear.

"It's not her kid, it's her cat."

"Say what? Why would anyone, in her right mind, bring her cat to a wedding?!"

The woman who'd whispered to me straightened up and fixed me with a look like Superman doing X-ray vision. "You sound quite hostile and just a little judgmental. I think your aura needs cleaning!"

Before I could tell her to go get the Dustbuster someone hollered "Stand aside!!" As we all stepped back Birchbark made a running start and hurtled herself onto the tree! She was plastered to the trunk and kind of hung there for a moment then shinnied up, turned, gave the "thumbs-up" sign and disappeared into the branches. What a woman!

We stared up into the tree for what seemed like hours. My neck was killin' me and I still couldn't see the little beast. Then I spotted her. Contentedly nestled on a branch was a snotty-looking Siamese that had absolutely NO intention of coming down to earth in this lifetime. Poor Birchbark was wedged up there doing that "nice kitty," "heer kitty" baloney. Each time her hand got close enough the little rat catcher would mutate into Pussy from Hell. Then she'd go back to politely cleaning her whiskers. The situation was reaching maddening

proportions! I looked down and there at my feet was a fat, heavy-looking pinecone. I picked it up and thought, maybe I'll just give little Terpsichore a hand. As I said earlier I do not function well in the out-of-doors and I am certainly not athletic. I wondered if I could put some serious velocity on that pinecone without hurting the impudent little puss. I knew I'd probably bring the wrath of the whole dyke universe down on myself but... I took aim and let that prickly baby fly! Bullseye! When the cone made contact with Terpsichore's fuzzy flanks she leapt, all teeth and claws, a parabolic trajectory soaring over our heads! Before you could say "inappropriate" she landed WHAM! right in the middle of the gift table! Vibrators, power tools, sensible cotton underwear and tie-dyed jog bras flew in every direction! In the ensuing confusion I escaped from the crowd and sprinted for the altar. If they were going to kill me we might as well turn it into a ritual. My freeze-dried crown bounced merrily as I ran straight into a teeny, birdlike woman dressed in black. I was stunned! How could retribution have arrived so quickly?! After all I hadn't done any serious damage. Terpsichore walked away from the crash shaken but intact. Even so guilt hung around me like undissipated gas. I fell to my knees on the clammy turf, stammered out the whole story and begged forgiveness.

"For heaven's sake, get up. You must be Catholic. I get that response quite frequently from Catholics. You'd think I'd be accustomed to it by now."

"Wait a minute," I growled, "just who the hell are you anyway!"

She pointed at her clerical collar and said, "Reverend Ramona, I'm here to perform the ceremony."

"What?! You mean you've actually talked to Annie and Jill today?!"

"Oh, sure, they're in the Winnebago down on the other side of the creek. I've been doing a little impromptu counseling with them to alleviate stress... cold feet, you know how it is."

"Trailer, they're in a trailer?"

Before she could utter another word I flew down the path and across the little footbridge that spanned the creek. I arrived at the trailer and breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, some sanity amidst this chaos, an oasis of calm, a snug harbor... a REAL toilet. I flung the door open and the atmosphere was, how shall I put it, a little thick. Jill was stretched out in a hammock sucking back one pop after another, eating big floppy slices of pizza and chain-watching Madonna videos. Annie paced back and forth with her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"The wedding is OFF!" These words popped out of Annie like little explosions. "I think we must have been in the grip of some serious PMS when we decided to do this number!" She paced back and forth spitting the words out as she walked while Jill just munched away.

"I mean, really, you were absolutely right! Aping heterosexuals is not an act of empowerment, it's an act of stupidity! I don't know what we were thinking! We have been in here all damn day trying to sort everything out. I'm sorry, Deb." I felt like a sandbag with the edge torn off. My whole body sagged. The tears gathered in the pit of my stomach and started that slow roller-coaster climb to my throat. Then I got a good look at myself in the mirror. My halo, which, by now, was completely destroyed, was down around my neck. I was marinated, from head to toe, in leaves, mud and grass. My blouse twisted East, my slacks twisted West and there were cherry-tomato seeds stuck to the corners of my mouth.

"Yeah," chomped Jill, "we know you're upset, so are we but..."

"Get out of that hammock!" I growled through clenched teeth, "put that pizza down and turn that T. V. off! This event is going to continue as planned and do you know why?!" (By now their eyes were as wide as banjos. They thought I'd lost my mind!) "Because I came all the way out into the wood for you two today. My hair is full of crunchy dead flower crumbs, my clothes are ripped to shit, the dyke tribunal has put a bounty on my head for cat torture and I STINK! Now, you are gonna get your butts out there and smile and be happy dammit!" There was a long pause. They both just stared at me. Then Jill sighed. "Geez, Deb you always know just the exact right thing to say in a crisis situation." They stood, hugged each other, brushed off their matching tuxedos, hugged me, then, hand in hand, walked out the door.

I picked up a piece of pizza, stretched out on the hammock and turned on the T.V.

After all, I could always catch the wedding on video, right? ■

About Beets

Roseann Dabasi

A tale that begins with a beet will
end with the devil.

(Old Ukranian Proverb)

You are almost asleep as
I read to you from Tom Robbins

Jitterbug Perfume

about Beets-

You do not like beets and
so do not understand
their mystique.

I like beets

in the hot summer
with plenty of butter.

I like it that they bleed
that the water they are cooked in
turns a red soaked stain.

I like digging beets from the
warm earth

Fingernails caked with dirt and grit
It's fitting that beets with all
their blood

are born of black humus.

"Red Sugar Beets"

I say it several times

"Red Sugar Beets"

even its sound is tempestuous
a bit lustful.

I stare into your face
and realize it is not the face
of a beet lover.

There is no roundness
no redness
no indication of a history
of beet eaters.
only Blue eyes
and Blue eyes.
My passion for the beet
remains lonely.

I kiss you
once—then twice
yours are lips that
I cannot forget
and so I hold you
wistful.

■

Walking Your Baby Back Home

Robert Leone

It's just an ordinary photo in a cheap red frame. The glass has to be cleaned every couple of weeks because of grease splatters. That's because I keep it in the kitchen on a shelf over the stove. Just a few days ago John—the man in the picture with me—smiled. He was probably always smiling, I just never noticed; it's not a very big smile. He's sitting on the back steps of an apartment building on Valencia Street with me behind him, a step above. My hands are on his shoulders as if to keep him from floating away. My smile is much easier to spot, it's big and not too sincere. I see John's smile now when I'm scrambling eggs or boiling water for coffee—it's not that easy to find but it always cheers me up when I do find it.

"I spend all my time watching the damn TV and my father won't stop blowing on that lousy flute," John says.

"It's driving me nuts."

"You should go out more. Get away from him for a while." I suggest.

"Go out more! Are you nuts? I can barely walk to the bathroom now without falling over and this one wants me to go out more. Maybe I should do laps around Dolores Park until the ambulance arrives, what do you think Tony?"

A red flush creeps up my face. I blew it again.

"I'm sorry, I was trying to help."

"Well don't. Just shut up and listen once in a while."

Fortunately the door to the bedroom is closed so no one can hear unless John's father has his ear plastered to the keyhole which is unlikely. I fumble around with the books and pill bottles on his bedside table, pretending to straighten up the mess. John's bony fingers pull a Marlboro from the pack stashed somewhere in his rumpled blankets. He lights up and inhales briefly, precisely, then drops the burnt match in the ashtray.

"You know," John says, "the old man has only been here two weeks and already I'm sick of him. He's either practicing his flute or trying to get me to eat something awful that he cooked himself. This morning it was lumpy oatmeal with a banana in it and a cup of Ovaltine for Christ's sake."

"You're the one who asked him to come," I point out.

"Thanks for reminding me," he says, taking another drag on the Marlboro. "Yesterday on the way to the clinic I was trying to show him

how to drive my car—he's not used to a stick shift—and darn it, he just wouldn't listen to me. Had to do it his way, which meant we did a bump and grind all the way down Mission Street."

John inhales one last time and crushes the cigarette out, then fixes me with his clear brown eyes.

"I'm too tired to talk anymore now Tony, will you come back tomorrow?"

"Sure, I'll be back around three, after work."

I kiss him lightly on the forehead; already his eyes are beginning to close. John's world is shrinking fast. It's just the three of us really, me, Pop and Buster, plus visits to the clinic at General Hospital. His energy is low and he doesn't weigh much any more; bones stick out everywhere. The first time we met we talked nonstop for two hours. It didn't take long for us to realize that we liked each other. Since then we have seen each other every day. Sometimes we barely talk, other times we talk a lot. At the volunteer training they told us that silence is OK and you don't have to make noise just to fill up time. We seem to meet in a vacuum. It makes no difference to us what Reagan is up to or what color Madonna's hair is this week. I wish I could do more for John; help him. Usually I take a few deep breaths until the urge passes.

They're not exactly music yet, those flute sounds drifting in from the front of the apartment. Maybe someday but not yet. I've just let myself in and drop down into a chair in the living room. John's little black dog jumps up into my lap demanding to have his belly rubbed.

"Hey Buster, what's goin' on? You're a good doggy aren't you, a good little slobbery doggy."

He tries to French kiss me but I resist. John wobbles in from the bedroom at the sound of my voice.

"Quit fooling with that dog and come in here, will you?" He says irritably, motioning to the bedroom. "At least we won't have to listen to that awful racket."

"I brought you something."

Shyly I stand up and pull out a small bunch of daisies, half stuffed in my backpack. John touches my arm awkwardly, takes the flowers and puts them down on the coffee table. We hold each other for a moment, too embarrassed to say anything.

"Thank you," John finally rasps in my ear.

He shuffles into the kitchen for an empty jar and sticks the bright yellow and white flowers in one at a time, breaking off excess leaves that will only wither and smell bad in a day or two.

"How are things going with your father?" I ask, getting right to business.

"Terrible. They couldn't be worse, actually. I wish he would leave

me alone and stop playing that damned contraption of his. I swear he's practicing for my funeral. This vision keeps running through my head of him seated next to my coffin playing 'There's a new day dawning.' I don't even know if you can play that on the flute. It's all too excruciatingly gruesome."

"What did you expect, dear heart? There he was enjoying a lovely retirement fishing or golfing or whatever it is people do in Illinois after they've hit 65. Then you call with some story about being at death's door and out he schleps ready to wait on you hand and foot. He gets an E for effort as far as I'm concerned."

"Yeah well that may be but I'm the one that's dying, not him. Why do I have to give him an E for effort, huh? Answer me that. I don't have to give him any goddamn E for effort."

"You do make a lot of noise for someone who's on the way out. I thought it was a much quieter process. An occasional moan, some discreet coughing into a white linen handkerchief."

John smiles very faintly.

The next time I visit John he's in bed reading. Buster is snuggled up at one corner of the bed, his eyes half closed. I plop into a lumpy old chair positioned nearby especially for visitors. Almost immediately there's a soft knock on the bedroom door. Without waiting for an answer Pop sticks his kindly old face in.

"Well boys I'm off to the Safeway. Anything you want?"

"I hope you're not making that tuna casserole again," John says. "I'm not sure but I think it lowered my T-cell count last time we had it. Probably just a few points though. I know there's a lot of good stuff in there like Velveeta cheese and pickle relish but honestly Pop, I can't take it again so soon."

Pop pulls his peaked cap down a little lower and narrows his eyes as if to protect them from an unexpected gust of wind.

"I was thinking of baking a chicken with some potatoes and string beans, how would that be?"

"Peachy."

Pop closes the door quietly and the three of us are alone again.

"God you can be vicious in the face of a tuna casserole," I say.

"Stay for dinner Tony, I'm sure there'll be plenty to go around."

"Can't. I have class tonight, and I have to get some groceries myself or I'll be stuck eating out all week."

"Gee that's tough," John bristles. "Going out to a restaurant, talking to people, ordering exactly what you want and having it brought by a waiter who won't hover around watching every bite you take. Sounds like absolute hell on earth."

"Aren't you making this out to be a little worse than it is?" I blurt.

Instantly the air in the room begins to crackle. A strong desire to flee grips me, but like Dorothy in the face of the tornado I'm unable to make the right move. All I can do is clutch little Buster, who has climbed into my lap, and wait for the twister to reach the farmhouse.

"No I don't think I'm making it out to be worse than it is," John replies, starting out slowly, coolly. "But I'll just fill you in on the details, in case you missed something."

"No John, really, don't trouble yourself. It's not necessary honest. And I've got this darn class..."

"I insist," he hisses. "It's no trouble. You can just sit there and listen until I'm finished, it won't take long. I'm 32 years old, Tony, and just marking time. A 32-year-old dead man with a nitwit father who I never got along with even when I was well and now is trying to force feed me with good home cookin' to appease his guilt. And then there's the other one."

I hold my breath, even Buster is still, his ears flat against his head.

"He's in it to serve himself too. Do good works now and go straight to heaven, no detours. But the problem is she's a dizzy queen. A dizzy queen with delusions of Flo Nightengale. Says the wrong thing, does the wrong thing. I'm sick and tired of all of you. That dog is the only one who's any use."

By the time he stops speaking his eyes are wet and shining with anger. He looks over at me. I want to hug him real bad but stay rooted to the chair. Quick as a flash he blows his nose and fires up a Marlboro, the storm is over. Buster springs from my lap to the bed and gives John's face a few licks.

"Get down from there you slobber puss. I don't have anything evil to say about you now, but don't push it."

I sit there dumb as a rock.

"You seem to be really angry with your father and me, do you want to talk about it some more?"

John looks at me like I had just recited the pledge of allegiance backwards or something.

"I'm sorry Tony, it's not your fault and no I don't want to talk about it some more."

Now seems like a safer time for a hug so I get up and kneel on the bed, squashing Buster's tail in the process.

"You're killing my dog, you dizzy queen."

John pulls me gently down onto the bed. Buster, recovered from the attack on his tail, does his best to lick us both. We hold each other quietly, without moving. In a few minutes the room becomes shadowed, dusky.

John's father is back from the Safeway, I can hear him putting

groceries away. It reminds me of being a kid, safe in bed for a nap. Mom would be busy in the kitchen getting a head start on dinner so she could relax before my Dad got home. I want to know what John is feeling but I don't ask. Instead I get up, straighten my clothes and get ready to leave.

"I'll walk you to the bus stop," John says to me as I put on my jacket.

"Don't be silly, stay in bed and rest."

"I've got lots of time to rest, I'd like to walk you to the bus."

It's a warm hazy fall evening as we walk to the corner. The Mission Street bus is just pulling up. We look at each other one more time.

"Thank you for walking me," I say. "It was really nice."

John smiles at me as I board. Inside a bunch of kids are playing together in the back seat, a riot of boisterous high spirits. They pay no attention as I sit down quietly near them. I look out the gritty window and see John, hunched over, with Buster at his heels, making his way slowly back home. ■

Lady In Satin

John M. Ison

Hollywood meets Whitley.
Rap blasts through Camaro windows
as drivers whistle at snakeskin boots pirouetting
on Jack Palance's star.
Storefront signs rain neon on sidewalks
and form puddles of ice.
Against a Frederick's backdrop of mannequin love
a black man tramps in holy Converse sneaks
and sells his wares.

He stops you while you wait for the Number 26.
Reminds you he used to sing in nightclubs
but now he studies art at an unaccredited school.
Five dollars will get you a sketch of his idol,
Billie Holliday, etched from her bio, with love.
Her scarred image, twice removed from the source,
defies focus.

You don't have a five, but a dollar, he says,
will buy a serenade of Billie blues.
He takes it, top-throat. Willow, weep for me, he pleads.
It prickles down your back like angora worn in summer.
Wi-hu-looa weefo-mee.
You're six years old again, peering into the back-door darkness,
listening for the crinkly mewl of the kitten Daddy gave away.

Your bus arrives. You turn from his closed-eyed stare
and count the number of empty seats.
Wait, one more, he begs as the driver closes the door. "Just
crooning for the crowd." He continues. "You've changed..."

As you ride past Whitley, you hear Billie picking up the cue.
Traffic noise dissolves into the swelling strings of
"Lady in Satin."
Through the window, you watch him.
He lip-syncs to the voice in your ear.



Laura Migliorino

Who Will AID(s) My Brother Now
diptych pastel, oil on paper

I Want To Be Your L-O-V-E-R

Vicky Phillips

Sam sits in the flabby, overstuffed, plaid chair, her head bowed, her feet tucked beneath her. She glances up occasionally and looks at Cecilia, who is slouched on the sofa, but mostly she inspects her feet and picks roughly at the laces of her new brown leather ankle boots. Cecilia is slouched on the sofa, legs spread, palms moving across the nubby fabric in search of her pack of Camels. Cecilia's living room, where they sit, is dark and shadowy, because although it is almost noon neither of them has raised the shades. Usually Sam comes over early in the morning and raises the shades, moving through Cecilia's apartment in a whirlwind of sound and light so that Cecilia awakens to the sounds of paper smacking wood and windows creaking and splintering as Sam forces them open, her breathy voice muttering disapproval: "Goddamn—never understand how you can live like this. Like some goddamned blind gopher. Hell—people need light."

But today is different. Today, Sam let herself in quietly and much later than usual. She came into the living where Cecilia had been sitting all morning—just sitting and smoking—and began on Cecilia rather than the shades. Sam and Cecilia have been dating for three months now, and Sam thinks that's long enough. Sam wants to get married, and she is at Cecilia's this morning to make this clear; as if it weren't already clear to Cecilia from the way Sam has been acting lately.

Sam twists her body into a knot of arms and legs, a pose learned in yoga which is supposed to aid relaxation, but looks to Cecilia, who is not a limber woman, as though it must engender pain. Sam sucks on her cheeks and then begins again. "I'm too available; that's it—isn't it? You don't want me because you can have me. I should be more like the ice princess. Then you'd think I was something. Something hot. Something sexy. Something too good for you." Sam pauses and examines Cecilia's face for some indication of the truth in what she is saying, but getting no response (Cecilia's face is expressionless), she continues. "That's it. I should be like—"

"Annie?" Cecilia offers with a sigh. "You think you should be more like Annie?" Annie is Cecilia's ex-lover, whom Sam has never actually met, but is very involved with nonetheless, because Sam is trying to love Cecilia and Cecilia is still very much a mess from her seven-year affair with Annie.

"Yes," hisses Sam. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? I think you can

only love me if I have the guts to treat you like you don't deserve it."

"Not particularly," Cecilia mumbles as she gets on her knees and begins to palm under the sofa cushions in search of matches for the cigarette which dangles from her lips. "Not particularly." Cecilia does not want to talk about love or Annie or Sam. She wants desperately to smoke another cigarette, and if at all possible to cease having feelings of any kind. Searching under the cushions, Cecilia finds a clipped newspaper ad for a 1982 Jeep and a quarter. "Yours?" she asks, offering the ad to Sam who has been shopping for a Jeep in her spare time.

Sam snorts and waves her hands. "Don't change the subject. We were talking about love." Then a pause. "What's wrong with me?" Sam asks in her little girl voice. She bows her head and picks at her boot laces. "Just tell me. Is there something wrong with me?"

Cecilia sits on the couch, her hands between her knees. She runs her fingers around the slick cellophane edges of her pack of Camels. "Don't bait me," she says. She looks at Sam and shakes her head. "Don't do this. There's nothing wrong with you. You're fine. We've been over this. It's me. I just can't—"

Sam unfurls and throws her legs across the chair arm. She kicks her feet. "Right! Right! Right! You just can't commit. You need time to find yourself. Well—I'm sick of it! You can't just run away from life like this. You have to be in a relationship to learn about relationships."

Cecilia finds some matches, a paper book which advertises a toll number for a psychic named Mariah, who for ninety-five cents will make manifest the inner secrets of any caller. "Right," Cecilia thinks. "A big black hole. Nothingness. I know what my inner secret is, and I don't want to see it." Cecilia lights a cigarette and flips the match across the room. As the smoke hits her lungs she relaxes into the sofa. She smokes for a while before talking. "Sam, I just can't. Not now. I do love you—"

"Horse shit!" Sam screeches. "You love me like what? A sister? Oh great. Just what Sam needs. Another lesbian sister. We haven't made love for weeks. Just like that!" Sam snaps her fingers for emphasis. "Just like that!" She snaps her fingers again. "Sorry, Sam! I don't feel sexual."

Cecilia winces and smokes harder. What Sam says is true, and it hurts. Cecilia does not feel sexual. She feels like shit and nothing more. Annie left her for a balding man with a car phone, a penchant for football, and the cruelest lips she'd ever seen, and then her father, whom she had not seen for several years, dropped dead while driving his Cadillac, and Cecilia, the only child, found herself back in Indiana burying a total stranger. Cecilia, who is thirty, is beginning to understand that loss and death are the punch lines of life, and she is having a hard time accepting this. She tells Sam these things. She tells Sam she cannot love her because every time she looks at her she sees a

body which will someday become a corpse, either physically or metaphorically, and she, Cecilia, just can't take it any more. "It hurts," she tells Sam.

But Cecilia does like being with Sam, loves it even in a terrified sort of way. With Sam, every thing is immediate, and now, and important. Sam is alive and when she holds Cecilia, Cecilia feels like she almost has a form. Cecilia has told Sam these things, time and again, and Sam has told Cecilia time and again, "That's supposed to make me feel better? Well—I don't want to be your shell. Your mold. I want to be your lover. Your l-o-v-e-r. Do you understand? Do you even know what that word means? Do you!?"

Sam stands and goes to the window. She yanks on the shade and the dry yellowed paper snaps up. Cecilia is blinded by a fist of morning light and immobilized by the sound of Sam walking across the carpet. Scuff, scuff, Sam moves quickly, yet lightly, on the slick soles of her new boots. As Cecilia's eyes adjust to the light she sees Sam's outline develop in the doorway. "I'm going," the outline says, developing a little further until Cecilia can see the dark ledges of Sam's eyes and full lips. "I'm going, and I may or may not come back."

Sam does return, letting herself in quietly, way after dark, some time around midnight. Cecilia is lying in bed where she has been chain smoking and reading the biography of Carson McCullers. In the book, Carson is described as a petulant brat who dressed queerly in her husband's oversized shirts and black ankletop tennis shoes, her main pastime, after drinking, being the relentless pursuit of straight women in the hopes that one of them might love her, or failing that, at least adopt her, or better yet, save her from her own twisted desires. Cecilia is finding the parallels between her life and Carson's very unsettling. Cecilia knows she did a lot of begging with Annie, a lot of knee crawling; but at the time it had seemed appropriate because it had felt familiar, and Cecilia, for her part, had a tendency to go for the familiar.

Sam sits on the edge of the bed, next to Cecilia, and flips her hair with her fingers. After a while she picks Cecilia's lit cigarette from the ashtray, inspects it, then stabs it out against the glass. Cecilia, who is very attached to her cigarettes, looks at Sam in a concerned way. Sam sighs. "That is a nasty habit," Sam says as she points at the ashtray.

"Hi," Cecilia says.

"Hi yourself," Sam says. "I'm back." Sam presses her palm to her forehead and brushes her bangs as she speaks. She looks around the room, which is littered with books, and coffee cups, and twisted clothing, and feels once again that this room is very reflective of

Cecilia, whose life is a wreck. Sam would like to tidy up the room just as she would like to tidy up Cecilia's life through the process of love, but Sam has been in therapy recently and is just beginning to feel that maybe she has more to do with her life than be a one-lesbian salvation army.

Cecilia closes her book and focuses on Sam.

Silence.

"Don't you care? I mean, that I came back." Sam is speaking in her little girl voice again.

Cecilia smiles slightly, showing a white silver of teeth. She takes Sam's hand and squeezes her fingers. "Of course I care. I'm impotent, not heartless."

Sam balls her hands and punches Cecilia's shoulders, knocking her flat to the bed. "Then act like it!" she says. She kicks off her boots, strips her sweater over her head, and climbs under the comforter with Cecilia. She rubs her cheek against Cecilia's. "You're horrible," she whispers. "Someone should turn you in to the lesbian police."

Cecilia nods and tousles Sam's thick hair. She is glad that Sam has returned, though she does not understand why, because this thing of being sought after and desired is something that has never happened to her before, and it feels so unfamiliar that sometimes it makes Cecilia want to cry. "Maybe you should leave me," Cecilia hears herself say. Then, seeing the hurt look on Sam's face, she quickly adds, "but I don't want you to."

Sam lifts her cheek from Cecilia's shoulder and props herself on her elbows above Cecilia. She gazes into Cecilia's eyes, which in the dark look like gleaming blue marbles, and walks her fingers across Cecilia's forehead. "Too easy. You'd like it too much. I leave you and you get to be alone feeling sorry for yourself. What a bunch of bull! You think I'd let you enjoy yourself like that?"

Cecilia laughs. "No—I think you want me to suffer."

Sam narrows her eyes and flips her fingers across Cecilia's chin. "Damn right, I do."

That night, Sam sleeps behind Cecilia, her arms curled around her waist, her lips pressed to the nape of her neck. Cecilia falls asleep to the rhythm of Sam's easy, shallow breathing. Cecilia dreams that she and Sam have a house on the beach, and while Sam is out buying furniture for the house, which is barren, Annie appears and decorates the kitchen in sky blue (a color Cecilia hates), with faux marble pedestals (a concept Cecilia hates even more).

"Look," Annie moves her arms to indicate. "Look what I've done for you." Annie takes Cecilia's hand and leads her around the kitchen

which expands as they move. "Everything just for you," Annie says. Annie's boyfriend appears at her shoulder, a car phone stuck to his head. "For you," he nods. "We thought you'd like it."

Cecilia shakes her hand from Annie's and runs and runs, but she does not move. Her legs whirl like those of a cartoon character. Annie and her boyfriend join hands. The boyfriend has ceased talking on the car phone and is now tonguing it. "Get away!" Cecilia screams. "You don't live here. Get away!"

Sam shakes Cecilia awake.

Cecilia sits up and covers her face with her hands. She is breathing hard from all that running. Sam places her fingers to Cecilia's lower back and presses lightly against her kidneys. She knows Cecilia likes to be touched like this when she is frightened. "Bad dream?"

Cecilia looks at the ceiling and palms her cheeks. "Nightmare."

Sam strokes Cecilia's back, then moves up and massages her neck. After awhile she gets out of bed and belts herself into one of Cecilia's kimonos. She goes to the kitchen.

Cecilia lies on her back, her knees up and bent. She smokes and listens to the pans clatter as Sam sorts through them looking for the right one. Sam is like this, fussy about what food is prepared in what pan. She has assigned a function to all of Cecilia's pots and pans and gets very animated if Cecilia violates the assignments. "Not that one!" she'll scream, jerking the pot from Cecilia's hand. "Not for tomato sauce!" Sam, who was once a chef, is fussy like this about kitchen utensils.

When Sam returns, she is carrying two mugs of hot chocolate. Cecilia cannot see Sam because she is lying on the far edge of the bed, buried beneath the covers, her back to the doorway; but she can smell the hot chocolate. Cecilia is lying this way because she is scared—of the nightmare, of death and loss, of Sam and her hot chocolate. If this keeps up, Cecilia knows she will fall in love with Sam. So Cecilia burrows deeper and shuts her eyes, hoping to fool Sam into thinking that she is asleep or perhaps even dead.

Cecilia hears Sam sigh, then the lights click off. She feels a cold wave hit her backside as Sam lifts the comforter and crawls in next to her. Sam folds her body into Cecilia's and plants a kiss to the nape of her neck. "You don't fool me," she whispers. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Sam continues to see Cecilia, though not as often, once a week, twice a week, maybe, if her painting is not going well. She brings her paintings to Cecilia, and Cecilia looks at them, telling her where they need work. Sometimes Cecilia, who has no training in the visual arts,

stands back, rocks on her heels, crosses her arms, and says un-artsy things like: "Wrong color. Too light. Too dark. Gives me a headache. Boring to the max."

"Fuck you, too, Picasso," Sam cries as she takes her paintings and crams them into a mildewed canvas carrying portfolio. "Can't you say anything nice?" But Sam always come back with the paintings in question revised. (Sam hates to revise her work, and both hates and loves Cecilia for being so honest with her.) She shows the new paintings to Cecilia and says, "Fuck you, again, sweetheart. Fuck you for being so damn right."

Sam and Cecilia rent foreign films—Swedish, Spanish, French—Sam checks them out indiscriminately, then the two women lie on the couch entwined, eating pistachios and arguing about the deeper meaning of the fleeting images. Sam rages about life and death (Cecilia notices that all these foreign films are about life and death), then Sam gets on a roll about how Cecilia should get on with her life and stop moping. "Get with the program," Sam says—and she says it a lot.

While Sam rages, Cecilia cracks open pistachios with her front teeth, secretly pretending that she is a squirrel. She does this because if she pays too much attention to Sam and the beautiful way that Sam rages through life she is afraid she will end up in Sam's arms again. When the pistachios are all eaten and Sam comes to sit in Cecilia's lap, Cecilia backs off, makes jokes, and expends a lot of time smoking cigarettes. When Sam kisses Cecilia, Cecilia gets up to look for more cigarettes, or make tea, or search for matches. "Just a minute," Cecilia is always saying. "Give me a minute."

But when Cecilia returns with her tea or the matches or the cigarettes Sam is sitting with her knees crossed, her fingers tapping her palms. "I don't think you're funny anymore," Sam tells Cecilia. "I don't want you touching me unless you mean it." Cecilia and Sam stop touching, but Sam keeps coming over, so Cecilia lets her read her stories.

When Sam reads Cecilia's stories she frowns a lot, sometimes stopping to chew the ends of her hair. "Bad," she guffaws. "Oh, God, this is just awful."

Cecilia hands Sam a red pen and watches as Sam marks away. "Unbelievably bad," Sam murmurs, moving through the pages. Sam tells Cecilia that her stories fail more than they succeed because in every story there is at least one character who is so alive as to be lovable, but then all the other characters mess up the story because all they ever do is sit around and chain smoke and mope and feel sorry for themselves. "Ring a bell?" Sam asks, raising both eyebrows and shaking the red pen at Cecilia. "Sound like anyone we might know?"

Cecilia knows that Sam is right, of course, Even on paper Cecilia cannot allow any aspect of herself to become too involved with life or love. Cecilia goes back to her word processor and tries again, and again, and again. Sometimes she feels like a God trying to breath life into paper dolls. She succeeds in that she creates some characters who can and do have relationships; however, every story she writes ends tragically with death and/or disease.

Sam reads these new manuscripts, then dumps them in a pile on Cecilia's kitchen table. "You're getting better, girlie," Sam says as she sticks both thumbs up. "Stick with it."

In the early autumn, Cecilia and Sam go out to buy biodegradable dishwashing liquid (Sam insists Cecilia use only biodegradable and Cecilia is tired of resisting Sam who is very bull-headed about this issue); but on the way to the whole foods store they pass a pet shop and Sam, who is driving, screeches to a stop. She looks at Cecilia. "You need a pet," she says. "Pets are good for depression. I saw it on *60 Minutes*." Before Cecilia can object, they are in the pet store, and Sam is coming at her with two Siamese kittens who look to Cecilia to be rabid or at least insane because they are clawing the air and hissing. "We'll take these two," Sam says to the store clerk. "They look lively."

Sam and Cecilia buy matching pink collars with blue rhinestones and take the kittens, whom Sam has named Si and Am, leash walking in the park near Cecilia's apartment. Si is Cecilia's kitten, and she is a foul tempered sulker. Sam's kitten, Am is the lively one, always jumping in circles trying to chew through her leash. Sam and Cecilia have to keep the kittens separate when they play because Si is a little bigger and likes to chew the ends of Am's ears. Am goes dog-eared quickly at the mercy of Si's teeth. The kittens grow into cats quickly, but their dispositions do not change, and Si does not cease chewing Am's ears. Cecilia and Sam eventually decide that Si and Am like their relationship, ear chewing and all, so they leave them alone and let them have at it.

In the park, on Saturdays, Sam teaches Am to retrieve small sticks. Cecilia tries to teach Si the same trick, but Si just sits in the sun licking the pads of her paws, looking at Cecilia like she is insane because doesn't she know that cats don't fetch. Cecilia cuffs Si's ears and calls her grumpy. "Grumpy! Grumpy! Grumpy!"

Sam, who sits on the park bench next to Cecilia, throws her scarf across her shoulder and picks at the bunched leather tips of her gloves. "Look who's talking," she snorts. Sam cradles Am in her arms and rubs her belly roughly. "How'd we get such grumpy girlfriends?" Sam coos to

Am who only yawns, the pink serrated roof of her mouth gleaming in the faint sunshine.

Alone, Cecilia keeps dreaming. She goes to visit her father's grave where she discovers that a periscope has been installed so that if she drops in a quarter she can peer down into the grave and watch as her father turns, trying to get comfortable. Cecilia wonders if she should tell someone (but who?), that her father, while buried, is still moving. As she wonders this, her father turns his face to the periscope. "Go away," he says. "I never did like you."

But Cecilia keeps watching her father until she runs out of quarters and a metal lid clicks across the eyeglass, obscuring her vision. Then she picks up a lawn rake and starts to dig at the grave. She knows it is strange that she is digging with an instrument which will not break the dirt (the fine, green, metal teeth snap and bend under the pressure she applies), but she is helpless to stop all the same.

Sam comes to the graveyard walking Si and Am on their leashes. "We're here," she announces, stooping to unclip the leashes. Si and Am lie down on the grave and start kissing each other. Cecilia puts aside the rake and stares at Sam whose back is turned against her. "What happened to the cats?" she asks. "Why isn't Si chewing Am's ears?" Sam turns around. She has Sam's body but Annie's face. "Things change—if you let them" she says.

Cecilia dreams and dreams and dreams. Her dreams get very crowded.

Annie picks her up from the bus stop in her boyfriend's red BMW. Cecilia crawls into the back seat, but after a while she wants out because everyone is in that car. Annie's boyfriend is sitting on her lap, talking nonsense about football and foosball and hardball into the car phone, and the cats are sitting in his lap chewing each other's ears, and her father is in the front shouting directions, and her first lover, Janice, is sucking on her fingers, and Sam is outside running alongside the car, waving her arms and shouting. Cecilia can see Sam's lips move, but the windows are up and there is too much noise in the car, so she cannot understand what Sam is saying.

They head down a hill much too fast and Sam hangs onto the outside of the car, her cheek pressed to the window glass. She looks frightened, but she does not let go. "Hang on, Sam." Cecilia whispers.

Everyone in the car, including the cats, stops fighting and chattering and turns to look at Cecilia. "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" they ask in unison. Cecilia flings her arms, throwing Annie's boyfriend off her lap. Annie loses control of the steering and the car careens off a cliff into the ocean. Cecilia stands up on the backseat and her head pops

through the roof of the car. She spreads her arms and shouts. "I SAID, HANG ON, SAM!"

But Sam is gone.

The car lands in the ocean, but does not sink. Annie regains control of the steering and begins to drive up and down the crests of the waves. Cecilia bursts into tears.

Walking in the park, Cecilia tells Sam about the dreams. "They scare me," she admits. Cecilia stops walking and stands on a slope which faces the city. She rubs the back of her hand to her forehead. "They fucking scare me."

Sam places her hand to the small of Cecilia's back. She does not speak for awhile. She just stands next to Cecilia. When she speaks, the words come out softly and carefully, as though she is speaking to a child. "I have to go to Los Angeles," she says. "Gallery opening."

Cecilia retracts her hands and places them in her jacket pockets. She rocks back on her heels, thinking how big the city looks from the slope. She tries to locate her own apartment building, but the view is blocked by too many taller buildings. "Don't leave me, Sam," she says. "I'm scared."

Sam places one hand to Cecilia's back and takes her chin with the other hand. She turns Cecilia's chin until their eyes meet. "Butch up," she says. "I'll be coming back."

Cecilia smiles slightly, then looks away. "You're not going down there to die or get a boyfriend?"

Sam smiles. "Highly unlikely," she says, "Sam has been a healthy queer since kindergarten."

In the dead of winter, with Sam gone, the dreams cease suddenly, and Cecilia sleeps long hours in total darkness, with Si and Am curled in balls on her belly. Outside, rain sheets the windows; stray, pink-eyed cats slink from the bushes in the park to eat fish heads which the cook from the Pacific Seafood Cafe across the way slides out the back door on waxed paper; clocks tick; people run through the rain for their buses; the baby next door gets colic, then recovers; Chinese girls bounce blue rubber balls against Cecilia's front door; messages pile up unanswered on Cecilia's machine.

It is winter, and when Cecilia is awake she writes into the darkness; carries the cats through the rain to the park in the pockets of her oversized pea coat; gathers pine wood limbs which have been split from the trees in the park during the storms; and builds fires in the living room, where she sits with the cats, the three of them shrouded in blue curls of cigarette smoke. Cecilia drinks strong coffee and tells Si

and Am that it is winter, and that Sam has gone to Los Angeles to sell her art.

Sam sends postcards: aerial views of the smog; a picture of Bette Davis; an announcement of one of her openings. On the back of the cards Sam scribbles little messages in her peculiarly looped handwriting: SAM IS NOT DEAD. SAM IS STILL QUEER. SAM LOVES YOU ALL. LOS ANGELES STINKS. SAM IS STILL NOT DEAD. SHIT DOESN'T HAPPEN; IT COMES FROM ASSHOLES WHO LIVE IN L.A. Cecilia reads these cards to Si and Am and then tapes them to the refrigerator. Cecilia sends Sam new manuscripts and Sam returns the manuscripts with notes in the margin. HOT SHIT is her most frequent comment; that, and OH MY GOD, BABY, YOU CAN WRITE.

In the early spring, Sam returns in a Jeep, a red one, having sold several paintings. She goes to get Cecilia and Si and Am, and surprises them by taking them to the desert. Cecilia has never been to the desert so she is surprised by the beauty. She sits on the edge of her seat, with her window down, with all the windows down, and screams at Sam about how beautiful it all is. Cacti, Sam's favorite flower, bloom in waves across the taupe valleys. Si and Am sit in the backseat, sniffing, occasionally climbing onto Cecilia or Sam's shoulder to get a better view.

Sam takes Cecilia rock climbing and shows her how certain cacti can take root in the finely soiled crevice of rock. "Survivors," Sam, who grew up in the desert, announces proudly, poking her palm against the needle of the cacti. "These babies would never take no for an answer," Sam coos, glancing at Cecilia. "Never in a million years."

When Cecilia gets thirsty, Sam shows her how certain cacti can be cut at the base to produce liquid. Sam hands Cecilia a piece of cacti, instructing her to suck. The meat is sweet and stringy, sticky like mango. Cecilia is amazed that Sam knows these things and finds herself watching with new interest as Sam turns from her to bend and suck a cactus.

Sam and Cecilia sit on a blanket laid in the sand, next to one another, eating lunch (Sam has prepared it), and watching the cats. Si loves the sand. She pounces, and purrs, and rubs her sides into the warm roughness. Am seems confused, disoriented. She steps gingerly across the sand, stopping with each step to shake her paws. She looks at Cecilia and Sam questioningly, then tries again. Sam shakes her head. "Just do it!" Sam shouts at Am. "Watch Si, and then do it!" Si bounds across a dune, out of sight. Am, as though influenced by Sam's words, and determined not to be left behind, bounds after her.

Sam and Cecilia sit looking after the cats. It is hot, though pleasant in the sun. Sam is wearing a blue leather baseball cap, a white tank top, and short red shorts. Because she has been in Los Angeles she is already tanned so that when she smiles her teeth flash white. Cecilia watches as Sam finishes her food, then assumes the lotus position, her eyes shut, her wrists easily crossed. A shadow falls from her cap visor making her look serene, yet mysterious. "Sam?" Cecilia says.

Sam opens one eye and lifts her wrists, but stays in the lotus position. She inhales deeply. "Yes?"

"Can I kiss you?"

Sam inhales again. "Why?"

Cecilia examines her fingers which gleam like white bone in the strong sunlight. She looks off toward the dunes, but the cats are not visible. "I want to be your lover. You know: L-O-V-E-R."

Sam opens both eyes. "L-O-V-E-R?" She uncrosses her legs and leans back on her hands. "L-O-V-E-R?"

Cecilia places her hand to her forehead and shades her eyes from the sun so she can see Sam better. "Yes," she nods. "Do you know what that means?"

Sam smiles. "Come here and show me," she says, holding out her arms. "I think I've forgotten." ■

You

S. E. Mead

were in your young skin, that
all-over shimmer: dew breath
roseate tabula rasa
for we needed to begin.

Old friends
didn't like it, fearing loss of
a confidante. "Hold back,
hold back."—All the whispers
of judgement reserved, I knew,
for when I'd be a self made true.

Still it was
kicking a habit:
years of playing the earnest
listener, pet eccentric, hangdog
mascot for that slowly
painfully drifting apart set of
hearts. Your heart
was an island

map for a new clan
& I rowed, had to grope
& eventually tread water
because arms
are rarely long enough unless
our own want to grow
& can.

So reach & we
will teach each other
the lesson of expansion, that
the breath of our skin
may one day belong
in the touch of somebody
else &
that the somebody else is
a shelter we give, gave, got
in you in you in you ■

Sun Country

Gary Eldon Peter

This is supposed to be my winter vacation, but today in Florida it is 55 degrees. I've been huddled by the pool, reading a *People* magazine, trying to keep the pages from blowing while I balance a cup of coffee on my lap. It is my last day here, the warmest day all week, and I am determined to be in the sun. I brought only one pair of jeans, no jacket, everything else t-shirts and shorts. So I borrow my father's windbreaker and hooded sweatshirt that he wears back in Minnesota when he rakes leaves in the fall.

I'm visiting my father at the trailer park where he lives from January through April. Before I left Minnesota I told my friends I was spending a week at my father's "place" in Florida, but I didn't tell them where. I wanted them to think that I was staying in a gleaming art deco condominium complex in Miami Beach or gold villa in Naples. I didn't want them to know where I was really was, that I was staying in a trailer in Avon Park, Florida, seventy miles south of Orlando on Interstate 27.

When I first arrived earlier in the week my father took me for a drive around the city, pointing out city hall, the new Winn-Dixie and other attractions with the pride of a long-time citizen. The black people in town are rarely seen and the snowbirds like it that way, he said, as if he were challenging me to take issue with such a statement. I just smiled, trying to be an agreeable guest.

I pull the windbreaker tight around me and zip it all the way up to my neck. The wind has changed direction, blowing twigs, leaves and my empty styrofoam cup into the pool. "You just never know about Florida," my father said yesterday as we stared out the window, watching the rain. "Last week it was 85, every day, not a cloud in the sky." "Well, I'm really glad I spent \$350 on air fare to sit in a trailer all week," I replied, laughing. He laughed too, but then was quiet for a while, and I could tell I'd hurt his feelings. I tried to make it up by telling him how nice the trailer looked, what a great housekeeper he was. "Not much else to do some days," he said, "except clean."

I give up on my *People* and walk back to the trailer. He's left me a note on the kitchen counter:

IN THE CLUBHOUSE — PLAYING SOME POOL
COME ON OVER!!!

I debate whether I should join him, or ignore the note and pretend later that I didn't see it. This is day six of my seven-day vacation, and I haven't spent this much time with my father since before I left home for college.

I find him in the recreation room, chalking up a cue. "How was the pool?" he asks.

"Cold. Where is everybody?"

"I think they took a busload over to Tampa. They have a Senior Citizen's special at Busch Gardens. Twenty-five percent off admission and they give you a free cap. Or maybe it's a free mug, I don't remember."

My father, having taken an early retirement, seems out of place here. When his neighbors stopped by yesterday afternoon for cocktails and crackers I found myself counting the lines on their foreheads and noticing that he had none. They kept saying how they couldn't believe he could have a grandson who was thirty years old. "No," I corrected, "I'm the son. The youngest." Then they laughed and asked me where my wife was, how old are our children. My father shot me a nervous glance as I ducked into the kitchen for more crackers and dip. It seemed that he hadn't quite gotten around to telling his neighbors, who he introduced to me as "my best friends here," that his only son is gay.

"You could've gone," I say. "You don't need to entertain me."

"No way," he says as he leans down to take a shot. "I've been to Busch Gardens already. Tourist trap." He connects with the ball and it rolls into a corner pocket. "Wanna play some eight ball?" he asks, drumming his fingers on the side of the pool table.

"No, thanks." I remember him trying to teach me pool when I was seven, how I kept missing the cue ball and knocking the other ball over the side whenever I tried to make a shot. After I chipped the striped thirteen ball we gave up on pool.

"Oh come on," he says.

"One game," I say as I take a cue down from the wall. "Now whoever hits the eight ball in loses, right?"

"Right, but just be sure to keep the thirteen on the table," he says, chuckling. "I don't want the park to charge me for a new one."

I smile and pretend I don't know what he's talking about. "Break?"

"No, be my guest."

I walk over to the end of the table, rack up the balls and take aim. Two solids speed into opposite corners and another spins into a side pocket.

"Where in the world did you learn to do that?" he asks, his eyes wide.

"No where in particular. Places, I guess."

"Places where you and your friends hang out?"

"Just places," I say, my voice edgy. "Bars. Didn't you ever play pool in a bar?"

"Look, I was just asking. I didn't mean to—"

"Let's just play, OK?"

I beat him, two out of three.

After our pool game my father decides that his car needs vacuuming, and that my rental car could probably use some going over as well. "We wouldn't want them to charge you when you take it back tomorrow," he says.

As I stand inside the kitchen and watch him work I notice that since the funeral he's lost a lot of weight. I check the cupboards, to make sure that he's shopping and eating. He has stocked up on soup—chicken noodle and tomato - and Hamburger Helper. But when I check the refrigerator I can't find any hamburger. I wonder if I should offer to show him how to make it.

But since it's my last night I take him out to dinner, to an all-you-can-eat place in a strip mall a few miles from the trailer court. After we've had our fill of the salad bar we go back for shrimp, roast beef, chicken, vegetables and potatoes. We end up sitting across from two couples who live a few trailers away from my father. They are laughing, talking about a golf game they played earlier in the day. They wave at us and nod, and a few minutes later I see one of them - Mrs. Sanders, from Galena, Illinois—pointing to me and whispering to her husband. I strain to hear what they're saying about me. All I can make out are words like "son," and "visit" and "youngest." Mrs. Sanders nods at me again and smiles.

Everyone in the restaurant is old, except for a couple of families with toddlers in high chairs who sit eating jello and peas with their fingers. There are no thirty-year-old men having dinner with their fathers.

"I remember bringing you kids to restaurants at that age," my father says as he butters his bread and folds it over. "Talk about a production. We'd get you all dressed up, packed into the car, and then we'd coming traipsing in, all six of us. Somebody was always whining about that they wished they got what somebody else got or spilling or dropping their silverware. After we got home and got you kids to bed Mary swore we'd never go through that again."

Hearing him refer to my mother by name makes her seem like somebody else, like a distant aunt or a friend of the family. It is the first time he's mentioned her since I arrived five days ago. My father looks away, mumbles something about going for some dessert, and gets

up from the table.

He comes back to the table carrying two bowls of ice cream topped with chocolate sauce, nuts and whipped cream. "Your favorite," he says as he sets one before me and smiles. We eat our dessert in silence.

After dinner we bundle up and take a walk around the trailer park. Even though it is barely 7:30 most people are in their bathrobes and nightgowns, their figures outlined by the glow of their television sets. Occasionally we pass a bridge game in progress, the players crowded around a kitchen table sipping drinks and eating potato chips.

After a half a block I realize I'm about five strides ahead of my father. I can hear him breathing hard, trying to keep up.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Are you all right?"

"Just this bum knee again," he says, trying not to limp. "That quack doctor told me to lay off the golfing for a few weeks, or at least use a cart. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"What's wrong with using a cart?"

"No exercise, that's what. What's the point of golfing if you can't walk? And some of those guys out there drive like idiots."

I change the subject. "Maybe we'd better head back to the trailer. Can you make it alright?"

"Of course I can," he snaps. "I'm not a cripple yet."

When we get back to the trailer after our walk my father makes himself a whiskey and 7-Up. Each night, at about this time, he drinks two of them; it seems to be part of his routine. The last time I'd seen him drink was when I'd visit on weekends, after my mother's chemotherapy started. Then he was drinking juice glasses of vodka and bourbon from bottles I thought I remembered seeing as a child. It made me wonder how long liquor is supposed to last. As I watch him stir his drink with a teaspoon I try to recall the seven signs of alcoholism, or however many there are, but only one comes to mind: the alcoholic often drinks alone.

"What do you feel like watching?" I ask him as I turn on the television and flip the channel from station to station.

"Doesn't matter to me," he says as he settles into his recliner with his drink and picks up the newspaper. "I'm just going to read anyway."

On the educational channel there's a special about AIDS. As the narrator talks about modes of transmission; opportunistic infections, and death rates, a man that looks to be in his early thirties winces as an off-camera nurse sticks a needle into his arm and fills a test tube full of blood. I imagine the man sitting in a doctor's office later on, waiting for the news. I wonder if the man will be going through it by

himself, or if someone will be there with him. The program ends showing a young man walking down the hall pushing an IV pole. A middle-aged couple walk on either side of him, holding him around the waist. They are his parents, I suspect, at the hospital to watch him die.

I turn away from the TV to my father. He quickly picks up the newspaper from his lap, rustles the pages, and holds it close to his face. His hands tremble as he grips its edges.

"Whatever happened to your friend, that guy you had your apartment with?" My father asks from behind the newspaper. "Wasn't he in the hospital or something?"

"He's gone."

"What do you mean, gone? Moved?"

"Dead. I mean, he died. About a month after Mom. They were in the same hospital."

My father turns the page of his newspaper.

It is Saturday morning, time for me to drive to Orlando to catch a plane back to Minneapolis. The sky is blue and cloudless, and the sun is already beating down as my father and I load the trunk with my dufflebag and suitcase.

"Eighty-five today, according to the paper," he says as he wipes a smudge off one of the headlights.

"You just never know about Florida," I say, smiling. "What do you think you'll do today?"

"Oh, maybe change the oil in the car, maybe try to find someone to play nine with later on. I should probably run to the store, pick up a few things."

"Do you think you'll be all right?"

"What do you mean?" he asks frowning.

"It's just that... never mind, I guess."

He and I stand there, hands in our pockets, not looking at one another. I look down the street and watch a couple riding three-wheel bikes.

"Well, I suppose," I say, sighing.

"Yeah, you want to give yourself plenty of time to check in."

I get into the car and roll down the window. "Thanks for everything."

"You bet. Drive careful."

I back out of the carport and drive slowly down the street, past the rows and rows of trailers. I look in the rear-view mirror and see my father standing at the edge of the driveway, waving. I flip down the visor to keep the sun out of my eyes, turn onto Interstate 27, and head north. ■

Maine Sleeps

Christopher Moes

Maine sleeps

At sunset

Under thin orange sheets.

I drive along seams

unfolding across dark blue hills

Like bodies, resting among weary towns.

Livermore Falls sleeps,

Or perhaps it's been asphyxiated

From the fumes of International Paper.

Farmington's eyes

Are just closing

As the last color bleeds.

When I am on the other side

Its breathing is steady.

I want to slip a mirror

Under New Vineyard's nose

To make sure it is still alive.

(There are more people in the cemetery than in the town.)

How can they sleep inside when outside the sky has frozen
into so many lights.

Mr. Sugar Packet

Christopher Moes

Mr. Sugar Packet returned to Holland,
Looking like the fur of the lion
Or just thinking that way,
But at least he was thinking.

And in the winter he returned to Cambridge
(His hair color matched the beating of my heart)
His eye lashes drew lines
In the light midnight snow.

His dreams were like that,
I know because I was in some,
But I always had a strange feeling
That I was being watched.

"And if I know you then," he said
"We can go to England."
The words were mine,
I had misplaced them in his mouth.

He used to migrate,
But he would forget which way to go,
And one winter woke, his feet frozen
To the surface of a pond.

Philadelphia's zoning laws
Kept him from his dream house,
But the house was made of iron
With plastic snow on the roof.

The wind ignored him,
It was always thinking of the past,
Drifting like luggage
Tired of sleeping in a cargo bin.

And I waited and I waited,
But Mr. Sugar packet never returned.
I wonder if it was something I said,
Or the color of the coffee in that cafe.

Solstice Phoenix

Greta Gaard

Duluth is a modern vestige of a booming nineteenth-century shipping port. Narrow three-story houses huddle together on the hills overlooking Lake Superior. The long grey winters have taught residents the virtue of endurance and the necessity of friendships in surviving sub-zero temperatures. While splendid Victorian mansions populate the once-affluent neighborhood of Kenwood, their worn exteriors attest to the faded glory of days well past. Their interiors are now subdivided into flats, whole families living in once-splendid drawing rooms, and sharing a bath down the hall. Lester Creek House is one of these mansions.

For the past decade or so, it has been occupied by a lesbian collective, whose membership changes with the residents' lives. Carpenters, musicians, plumbers and nurses all share in household duties. Every winter at solstice, invitations are sent to the entire women's community for the annual pagan ritual. Guests are requested to bring a gift to exchange, and a meal to share. It was to this gathering that I decided to bring my new lover—anonously.

"Whoa," I commanded my truck, pumping the brakes as we slid down the icy slopes. "There's going to be a lot of people there, and I'm just not ready to make a public statement about our relationship. It's too new; I don't know what statement I want to make yet. So although we're riding there together, I want to attend the party single."

The unspoken fact, known to us both, was that I wasn't willing to tell my best friends, Robin and Inez, that I had decided to see Jody against their advice. According to them, rumors depicted Jody as a terrible flirt, whose playful innuendos had ruined several relationships in the community. In fact, it was easy to believe: Jody's clear blue eyes, sandy curls, and easy smile were a tempting combination. Yet I wondered whether it was really Jody's looks or rather their effect on other women which had caused her current reputation. Still, since Robin and Inez had warned me against Jody, I felt I would have to choose between their friendship and this woman: and I wanted them both.

"Then what am I doing, going to this?" Jody blurted out.

We circled the blocks surrounding the house and found them to be parked solid.

"Oh, well," I concluded, and pulled into the driveway at Lester Creek House, blocking in three other cars. "If someone needs to get out,

they'll make an announcement inside." I shut off the ignition and alighted carefully, then reached in behind the seat and pulled out the tureen of soup and ladle. Jody carried our gifts: mine was a string of bells; hers, a package of scented potpourri. We walked apart up the cobblestone driveway to the double doors of the old estate.

In the entry, we were formally greeted by three of the house residents. One relieved me of the soup; another took our gifts; and the third took our coats and handed us candles, which we were directed to place anywhere inside the house. Jody entered the dining room at once, leaving me to stand in the entry, holding my candle.

The entire house was aglow, the oaken walls and leaded glass windows giving back reflections of warmth from the white tapers burning atop every available ledge. Enchanted, I wandered through the spacious rooms, past knots of conversation, watching, watchful. In the bay window stood the tree, strung with tiny white lights—the household's only concession to electricity that evening. Mismatched armchairs of different shapes and heights were scattered throughout the living room, each one draped with an India print bedspread or Mexican blanket. I continued on past the living room and through a wide doorway to the formal dining room. A piano was pushed against one wall, while built-in buffets and cabinets lined the other two walls. Across the front of the room, tall windows looked out on the icy twilight over Lake Superior.

Danette was seated on the register near the piano, for warmth, and called to me.

"I am the ghost of Solstice past!" I greeted her, gesturing with my candle. Then I knelt beside her.

How was her woman-identified culture class coming along? I asked. Danette liked the class but felt left out: sometimes she hated having to think about lesbians and their unique culture. Her professor, Solveg, was at the party, she added, looking around.

"Perhaps it has less to do with lesbians and more to do with you," I suggested lightly, alluding to an earlier conversation in which she had revealed doubts about her own sexual preference.

"Now I know why I've avoided seeing you," Danette said simply. "You remind me of things I'd rather not know."

I reflected on the similarity to my own situation that evening, and nodded silently.

Danette seemed to gleam in the candlelight: the flames leaping off her auburn hair, flashing in her golden-brown eyes, the dazzle repeated in her glossy lips and fine white teeth. We sat in silence for a moment.

In front of the bay windows facing the great lake, Gudrun stood alone, staring at her own reflection. In a moment, Solveg entered the dining room from the kitchen and, seeing Gudrun, approached her and put her arm tenderly across Gudrun's shoulders. Gudrun flinched, then shrugged away the arm. Kneeling beside Danette, I realized that their movements, their gestures and slouches all revealed the postures of a lovers' quarrel. Throughout the fall, Solveg and Gudrun had been separated while Gudrun waited in New York for her immigration papers to be certified. The distance had placed a terrible strain on their decade-long relationship, and their differences were deep-seated. Gudrun could no longer bear to stay in Duluth, for though she was a scholar of greater stature than Solveg, she had been unable to find any but part-time teaching. Columbia University in New York wanted her. It was the same struggle couples everywhere face: love or career. From their postures, and the way that each woman stared moodily past her reflection in the window, it seemed clear which choice had the upper hand. I felt the sad inevitability of it all.

"It's time to form a circle," Linda announced, entering the dining room and pulling a small round table into the center. "Everyone in the dining room, please!"

I took my place against the wall as the women packed in to the room. The round table was covered with pine boughs, with thirteen unlit tapers arranged in a circle upon it. As more women poured into the room, I looked up to see Jody standing only four people away from me.

"Everyone hold hands," Linda commanded, bustling about to maintain a space around the pine-covered table.

In the presence of all these women, the sheer heartlessness of my desire for anonymity, and the impact it must have had on Jody, became painfully clear to me. I held out my hand to her, which she acknowledge with raised eyebrows, but after a moment, she accepted my outstretched hand and stood beside me. The women had stopped shuffling now and waited quietly.

"We celebrate Solstice," Linda began, "as the longest night of the year. Traditionally, the night and the darkness have been associated with the feminine, and we celebrate this night as the seasonal height of womanpower. LaVonne will read to us a little bit more about the history of solstice," Linda concluded, turning to LaVonne, who stepped forward shyly.

LaVonne was the newest resident at Lester Creek House. I had only seen her twice before: once at the bar, and once at a party. To both

events, she wore her hair in dreadlocks, and sported a black leather jacket with zippers and snaps—not the kind currently in fashion, but the real kind—and a button which said “End Apartheid.” Her dark skin, wide-set eyes, high cheekbones and full lips made it difficult to tell whether she was Black, Mexican, or Native American. In all the places she appeared, she wore her defiance like armor. It wasn’t until much later that I learned she had fled to Duluth as a haven from cocaine and prostitution. Tonight, doffing her black leather exterior, she wore a long-sleeved thermal undershirt and faded jeans. In this new culture of acceptance, it seemed, she was suddenly disarmed and fragile.

“On solstice,” LaVonne read, “we light a fire, kindled with the remains of the solstice fire of the year before. We feed the fire with oak and fruit wood. We leap over the fire, making a wish for the coming year, a wish for change. Through ritual we make something real—our conscious awareness of what is happening inside us is expressed in a tangible way. Through ritual we explore our relationship with nature, our source, our relationship with ourselves as we develop, and our relationship with our community.” LaVonne paused to clear her throat. “A ritual may be a communal celebration, a time to reunite our community, to reaffirm our commitment to each other and our way of life. We share and replenish our energy. We indulge in playfulness and fantasy, we let down barriers, abandoning restraints—we are freed, we are healed.” LaVonne finished with relief.

“Thank you, LaVonne,” Linda took over once again, turning to survey the circle of women. “We stand in a circle to symbolize women’s energy. These thirteen candles on the table represent the thirteen women needed to compose a witches’ coven. On the tree in the next room, we have hung thirteen notes which describe things of value to all of us. Would some women in the back go to the tree and each take a note, come to the table, and light a candle after reading her piece of paper?”

There was a murmur of movement as several women in the back disappeared in accordance with Linda’s request. After a few moments of politeness and deference, the first woman came forth and took up the box of fireplace matches to light a candle.

“Growing old together,” she said quietly, but her voice carried throughout the room. She placed the spent match in the candleholder and returned to her friends in the circle as the next woman approached.

“Health.”

With each candle, the women became less tentative about how to proceed, and the values we held in common resonated and gleamed with the candlelight.

“Laughter.”

“Hope.”

“Children.”

“Lake Superior.”

“Awakening.”

The next note was brought forth by Nadia, a fifty-year-old woman who lived alone half an hour out of town, in a cabin without running water and a wood-burning stove for heat. Though she was somewhat of a matriarch in the community—head of the coffeehouse collective, organizer of the lesbian center—her solitude enveloped her like a nun’s robe. She wore the usual red slip-on canvas shoes (Montgomery Ward’s five-dollar special), a grey pullover hooded sweatshirt, and baggy jeans which emphasized the gangliness of her form. Her shock of grey, frizzled hair, home-cut, curled and dove atop her gaunt frame, while the candlelight reflected in her spectacles.

Nadia was the first woman to recycle a match. She took the burnt matchstick from the last candleholder and used it to bring a flame to the next taper. Nadia spoke softly. “Passion.”

There was a chuckle in the room. “Fashion?” someone repeated incredulously, watching Nadia’s disappearing back. The joke was picked up and tossed to Nadia, who caught it deftly with a gesture towards her red slip-ons.

The candlelighting continued, each woman now following Nadia’s example and finding a charred matchstick to reuse.

“Dreams.”

“Vision.”

“Music.”

A tiny woman clad from head to toe in black, silver-studded leather, did not see the irony of her message. “Animal friends.”

“Community.”

And all the candles were lit.

“Would anyone like to say something?” Linda invited.

A woman with long sandy hair stepped forward. “Whatever bad happened to you this year, let it go tonight. You die tonight and are reborn tomorrow.” She stepped back in the circle, and there was a pause.

“Let’s send energy to Meridel LeSeur,” suggested a voice. “She had a heart attack this week.” And the women were quiet for this transmission of energy from the circle of light to this elderly leader.

“I want to thank the community for your support,” said another woman. “After a six-year battle with my ex-husband, I will be able to see my son for the first time this Christmas.”

When it was clear that no one else would speak, Linda resumed, "Outside, we will build the traditional solstice bonfire. Sometime during this evening, you are all encouraged to leap over the bonfire. As you leave the ground, you will be leaving behind the old year. Sailing over the fire, you will be cleansed, and you will land in the New Year. Meanwhile, please help yourself to all the wonderful dishes on the buffet table."

Satisfied with her role, Linda disappeared into the kitchen, and the circle dispersed in a move towards the living room where the buffet had been set. Always one to avoid a line, I sat down to wait until the majority had served themselves. Selecting an armchair by the window, I looked out onto the frozen ground. It had been especially cold that week, and that evening the actual temperature read -27, made even more biting by the wind.

Up at the buffet table, Jody spilled her fully-laden plate, and someone called for paper towels.

At the last the line diminished, and I decided to go get supper. The dishes had been somewhat plundered, but there was still enough of each to go around.

Pointing at a tomato-sauced rice casserole, I asked, "Is this dish vegetarian?"

Linda paused momentarily between bonfire and buffet. "Eat at your own risk," she replied curtly. "We put no restrictions on the type of food people could bring."

I made a mental note that Linda must be a carnivore, and used the wooden spoon to pick apart the casserole in search of fleshy chunks. Finding none, I decided to take my chances, and scooped the sorted-through portion onto my plate.

Progressing around the table, I came at last to my soup tureen, which was the site of every cook's nightmare: it was full, untouched. In dismay, I realized that the ladle originally intended for my soup had been used to serve out a nearby casserole; it lay now in the well-scraped pyrex dish, covered with white sauce and broccoli. I took the handle and rapped the ladle smartly against the pyrex, shaking loose globs of food. Furiously, I carried the ladle to the kitchen as I had carried the candle—aloft and flaming. Cheryl was in the kitchen, and while I was washing the ladle, she found me a stack of bowls which I took back to the buffet table and sat in plain view beside the soup tureen. Somewhat calmed, I served myself a bowl of soup, picked up my plate, and faced the dining room.

At one of the many tables, Jody was seated with her roommates and friends. At another, my friends Robin and Inez sat alone. I decided to join them.

The conversation that ensued was as lifeless as any we had had. Robin was depressed: her roof was leaking; the mail carrier had twice refused to deliver her welfare check because she hadn't shoveled the snow from her walk; and just yesterday, it had gotten so cold in her basement that the clothes in her washer had frozen solid and stopped the machine. Inez, as usual, interjected little jokes about life in general and life with Robin in particular, but revealed nothing about herself. Furtively, I glanced over at the table where Jody was seated.

At that moment, Jody excused herself from the table and picked up her plate as if to return to the buffet for seconds. There was a movement of glasses and plates as the tablecloth yearned towards Jody, who stopped just short of upsetting a cup of hot herb tea into someone's lap. I looked away quickly.

At another table, Kate and Carla were engaged in animated discussion, their hands and fingers flying as they signed to each other.

Finished with my meal, I excused myself from Robin and Inez, and wandered into the old kitchen, where several women were in various stages of washing dishes. The system, I was told, was to wash your own plate, cup, and silverware, thereby eliminating this burden from the cooperative residents.

Mary, a member of the household, was washing her dishes beside me. Drawing a conversational blank, I decided to ask her where the bathroom was.

"There's one on second floor and another on third—take your pick," she told me generously, adding, "Of course you know there's a ghost in this house."

"Really?" I asked, not well pleased. "Does it haunt the second or the third floor?"

Mary smiled mischievously. "People have seen and heard it on both. It's a friendly ghost," she added, relenting at the look I gave her. "Why don't you look for it on your way to the bathroom?"

I smiled noncommittally and returned my dishes to the cupboard. "Thanks."

The wooden staircase was crowded with women, candles, and empty plates. I edged my way past them and up to the second floor landing, where I paused to explore. Three doors, apparently private bedrooms, were firmly closed. From a fourth room, light and conversation streamed out of an open doorway. Curious, I entered the room.

Piled on the bed was an array of coats and scarves. The only other piece of furniture in the room was an elegant antique vanity table with a tall mirror in its center. One woman adjusted her jacket while two others looked on.

"Have you all leaped over the solstice fire and made your wishes?" I asked them generally, searching for my coat in the pile.

"Not me," said Lori, the tall woman who was adjusting her jacket. "I'd never make it over."

"Sure you would," I challenged her. "Those long legs were made for leaping."

"Or something else," chuckled another woman.

I found my coat at last. "Well, wish me luck," I said, and left the room to the women.

In the kitchen, Jody carried her dishes to the sink and plunged her hands in the sudsy water.

"Enjoying the party?" the woman rinsing next to her asked.

Jody looked up. The woman beside her was Robin. "Um, yea, sure," Jody stammered. "Are you?"

Robin nodded and put her dishes in the dish rack.

"I didn't even realize it was you," Jody offered.

"Well, that's okay," Robin replied gently. "I think we were thrown here together for a reason." She paused. "We're both bigger than this, Jody. Solstice is a time for letting go of the old and bringing in the new."

"I hear you," said Jody, relief bringing a warmth to her cheeks.

"Maybe we could get together sometime and work this thing out, one-on-one," Robin continued.

"Let's do it," Jody accepted her simply. Then she felt a dampness at her waist, and looked down at the overflowing sink. Both women's hands shot forward to close the faucets and collided midway.

Upstairs, the third floor landing seemed much smaller than the second. Opening each one of the closed doors, I found the bathroom, threw my coat on the floor, and closed the door behind me.

Outside the house, three coatless women linked arms and ran shrieking down the slope to leap the bonfire.

"I am the ghost of solstice past," I asserted to the shadows of the third-floor landing. An answering creak resounded from behind one of the closed doors. Clutching my coat, I turned and descended the stairs, restraining the impulse to take them two at a time.

By the solstice tree, I rejoined Danette and Nadia, who were looking out the bay windows onto the bonfire below. Buff, Kate, and Jody panted and slapped their arms next to the fireplace nearby.

"I'm going to jump," I declared to Danette, who seemed lost in the folds of the armchair. "Would you like to go with me?"

Danette smiled and declined. "It's 27 below," she objected. "I'd rather watch."

Jody stepped forward. "I jumped with Buff and Kate," she said proudly. "We were the first. We didn't even have jackets. Do you want me to go with you?"

"No thanks," I said, a little too quickly. "This might be a good thing to do alone. How do you get out?" I added, trying to appease her.

"Over there." Jody pointed to a door of the living room, barely concealing her disappointment.

"Thanks." In four steps, I was out the door.

The blast of icy wind that greeted me made me gasp. I hurried down the stairs to join the line of leapers.

"This is insanity," the woman ahead of me announced. "Whose idea was this, anyhow?"

"Isn't that always the hardest thing?" another woman laughed in answer. "We chose this ourselves."

I said nothing, shifting from leg to leg to keep warm.

Facing the solstice fire, two women struggled to secure a crown of pine boughs onto the head of another woman. A door slammed above us, and Betty came scurrying down the stairs, protected only by a suit jacket.

"Th-this is all I brought!" Betty chattered in explanation.

"Then come now," the women at the head of the line urged her. Betty was taken between two women, one of whom wore the crown. "NOW!"

Slipping and gathering speed on the icy slope, the three women ran and jumped over the bonfire, travelling well into the darkness before they could stop. Only the crown-bearer returned, breathless and laughing, to hand the pine crown to the next leaper.

What are they wishing? I wondered silently as the line diminished. Out with the old, in with the new. The phrase kept repeating itself in my mind. Forgiveness of past mistakes.

And then it was my turn. Placing the pine-bough wreath on my head, I realized suddenly that most all the other leapers had gone in pairs. Out with the old, in with the new.

From behind the lace curtain, a woman leaned against the windowframe and looked out at the bonfire.

Gathering my coat up above my knees, I began running, slipping, leaping, soaring, landing, sliding, slowing, turning, running back to the waiting solstice leaper. Not until I climbed the steps to the house did I realize that, obsessed with the solstice slogan, I had forgotten to wish for anything.

Inside the house, women were opening their gifts. Robin approached me as I unzipped my coat.



Jen Wright

Untitled
charcoal on paper

"I don't like mine," she complained, showing me a Patsy Cline cassette I had coveted. "You pick something, and if you don't like yours either, we'll trade."

"Okay," I agreed, throwing my coat across a chair. I knelt beside the tree and began feeling and shaking the packages. One of them emitted a muffled jingle, and I chose it immediately. The paper fell away, revealing a marionette-like wooden cat suspended from a stick. In its paws were two bells.

"I like mine," I said apologetically to Robin.

"Well, have mine anyway," she replied, handing me the tape. "I can't stand country-western."

"Thanks!" I looked full at Robin for the first time that evening. Robin noticed.

"You know," she began, when Inez called her from the other room. "I'll be back," she assured me, moving away and leaving me with the wooden cat-and-bells in one hand and the cassette in the other.

"What did you get?" asked a voice behind me, and I turned to face Jody.

"These," I replied, showing her. "What did you get?"

Jody showed me a cloth sack tied with a ribbon. "Potpourri," she grinned ruefully. "Shall we go now?"

"Sure," I said, looking back to where Robin had gone. "Give me five minutes to gather my cookware, and to warm up the car."

Jody frowned. "Can't I help?"

"That's okay," I said, backing away to get my coat. I pushed my arms through the sleeves and stuffed my presents in the pockets. When I turned around, Jody was gone.

On the buffet table, I found my soup tureen empty at last, with the ladle inside it. The lid, however, was nowhere in sight. I scanned the table, the radiator, the window shelves—nothing. Exasperated, I returned to the kitchen.

"Have you seen a lid to this pot?" I asked Denise, one of the residents, and held up the tureen.

"Let me look around," she offered, and began opening and shutting cabinet doors.

I glanced into the hallway, past Robin and Inez who were standing next to the stairs, and saw Jody, her jacket on, preparing to leave.

I couldn't let her wait for me in the cold. If I called to her, Robin and Inez would surely hear.

"Jody!" I called urgently, in a low voice, envisioning my word sliding past Robin and resounding only in Jody's ears.

Jody jerked her head back and saw me.

So did Robin.

"Found it!" proclaimed Denise, handing me the lid.

"Thanks," I muttered, fitting the lid atop the tureen. Then I looked up again. To reach the door where Jody now waited, I had to cross through the hallway, past Robin and Inez. There was no other exit.

"Good night, Robin. Good night, Inez." I slid quickly past them, gesturing with my soup tureen. Then I grasped the front door handle in one mittened hand, and found I could not turn it.

"I'll do it," said Jody, behind me. "You've got your hands full."

"Goodnight," said Robin, looking squarely at Jody and me.

"Goodnight," I repeated, getting through the door at last. Jody closed the door behind us. Together, we crossed through the porch and out into the night, where icy winds embraced us. In silence, we walked down the stairs to the driveway. Beneath our feet, the snow crunched and squeaked.

"What a night," I groaned.

Jody was quiet a moment, then replied, "You can't live a lie."

"Too bad," I retorted coldly.

Jody froze.

Briskly, I walked on alone with my soup tureen. In my mind, the image of a single woman, crowned with a pine bough, resurrected itself. With sure strides, the woman ran and leaped into the bonfire.

I stopped walking, and remembered the solstice slogan.

If the woman were to survive the flames, she would have to emerge in another form.

I turned and walked against the wind back to Jody, who was still standing fixed at the front of the driveway.

"Let's start over, from the beginning," I said quietly. "I can dismiss the rumors about you, if you can overlook my behavior tonight."

Jody raised her eyebrows, but the warmth returned to her eyes. "That's a pretty big leap of faith," she replied cautiously.

I paused to pick out some pine needles from her hair. "Not if we jump together." ■

Just Before

(from *Triptych Within A Snapshot*, 1967)

Steven Riel

You there, bespectacled already & only
in the second grade, no longer the dreamy-eyed
toddler with Maybelline lashes
who'd stare back at the camera or glance
quizzically off to the left. Adrift,
you felt it no longer mattered where you looked—
no one cares about odd little boys
who pretend they're grouse, build roadside nests,
wave their wings at neighbors while brooding
over a clutch of stones. It no longer mattered:
the flash's glint on your bifocals hid your gaze,
which turned inward as you waited
for some Superman to see through your homeliness
once two front teeth had replenished your smile.
Murkily you gathered there was more to
completion. The fairy godmother furnished
Cinderella with more than a gown—
things were clearer with glasses, &
you didn't like what you saw: your fledgling
body like skin on a hanger,
your sissy recess ways reviled;
you didn't like that it mattered, it mattered—
you'd have to learn to be somebody else
for them, understudy them
throughout your downy years,
years of wishing
as snow melted inside your boots
that someone would wave a beaded wand
instead of a Polaroid at you &
bring into focus your beauty,
your still-blurry daydreams
of what it was like
with the Prince
just before midnight. ■

String

Janis A. Totty

1.

Standing in the feet
of her own long shadow,
she says she is afraid.

Tells my mother this when they
meet at the fence, sheets
she has pulled from the line bunched
against her. They wrinkle, droop
like bloom toward the earth,
she will not let them touch.

She is afraid, your mother, you
are becoming something leans
my way too much, is worried
you will grow that way,
when you should be finding
also other friends.

2.

We pretend we
are tiny, are trying
to live in a world
of things now dangerous, used
to be ordinary, before
we got shrunk.

We give ourselves brave names
to make it, smoking hero sounds
of glory, like "Steve," and "Rick."
For hours, we rescue each other
in the green stain of the yard.
I wrap your wounds in dandelion
petals; you pull me out from crushing
under a clothespin.

Together we notice
how in this careful lawn
there are weeds growing
up everywhere.

3.

*We have a new
rule, girls.*

She won't look at me.

*And that is
when you are in here, the
door to this room
stays open.*

She won't look at you, either.
Her eyes search instead the flat
wood of your bedroom door
as if she has never seen it.

I sit and go heavy, go
back deep down away, leave
on the bed a mud girl someone
has weary packed into the rounded
forms of human—mouth a dust
stable, tongue a dull plank.

You turn, twist, pull
with all your might
in an endless swim upstream
I have seen you try before.

*Why can't I close it
We can close it
Why can't I*

But even you, pumping
comet girl, can't answer
good enough the question, *what
are you doing that you need it
closed, anyway, there shouldn't be
anything to hide.*

She walks away.

I wish so bad I could take you
inside that door right now, show you
how the swirling grain tides gather,
then spread out. I wish I could
jump in with you, see you shine.

4.

This woman
who all day women
come to see, one after
the other for her hands
on their heads they wait
for her—redolent, soft
and wise, listening to them,
making them feel beautiful.

I thought I was the only one
who hid the scorch of shame, thought
this beauty-shop woman must
not, did not know why she
cleaned that house morning,
noon and night.

5.

Also other friends, you
should be finding, but now
it's string you're after.

Now you've gone down the basement
stairs, through you mother's
beauty shop, past red and black
vinyl chairs, hairdryers tilted
back, sliding stacks of magazines,
and on the walls, one man, tacked,
a star. The way to your father's closet.

You're not supposed to be in there.
But it's where you saw him disappear
the round wind, up on a high shelf,
so you'll climb. We've decided.
I wait in the yard with my two
tin cans, consider the distance
from your bedroom window to mine—
brick peas fence grass juniper brick

I wonder will it be enough to reach across
across, to carry, but then
you come back, swinging off the door's
hinges barely holding, shouting
into the bright hot shape of afternoon.
The ball of string; we've got it.
We're gonna talk all night.

6.

Tough weed, this
voice, this gut stalk
to survive the culling
hands, the nail-lip
accusations. Improbable

journey, this too-deep
voice, this too-much love,
and string.

Afraid to speak, as if
the fragile cannot bear
the sonorous; afraid
to think my own mind's
thoughts, as if I have forgotten
the concentric, then breakaway
life of wood; I remember
night—

*Is that you laughing?
Put the can to your ear.
Now do you hear me?*

I remember the black
star bowl of sky, a string's
astral weave, float back, how by sun's
fire we rolled it in,
our own long shadows taking us home.

Making Peace

Grant Campbell

A ghost appeared beside Martin Legge's tiny bed in the small hours of the morning. The figure leaned over, laid a hand on Martin's beard, and said, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." So Martin got out of bed, stepped into his slippers, and began to walk. He opened the front door of his apartment and walked down the hall until the light over the waste-disposal room woke him up. He blinked and looked around; there was no one in the hallway. He turned and shuffled back to his front door, which had mercifully remained open; he shut the door behind him, and went into the bathroom. His toes were cold. He stared wistfully into the mirror until he was sure he was awake. Eventually, he yawned, switched off the light and went back to bed.

No sooner had he closed his eyes when he felt a warmth on his beard. Opening his eyes again, he saw the apparition bending over him, chuckling slightly.

"Sorry about that."

The apparition's hand had moved over Martin's mouth, and the gentle, firm pressure prevented him from replying. Martin raised his eyebrows slightly.

"I really am sorry," said the spirit, looking contrite. "Just a bit of fun. I've always wanted to say that. Didn't think you'd really do it. Can I trust you not to shout? You might wake up, and I'd have to start all over again."

Martin nodded, and the spirit lifted his hand from Martin's mouth. The young man slowly sat up and swung his spindly legs over the edge of the futon. The spirit, after jabbing curiously at the keyboard of the computer on the desk, sat on the bed and studied his host, taking in the tousled, thinning hair, knobbly knees and thin shoulders. As Martin stared back, the ghost's fingers crept involuntarily to his own ample waist.

After a brief silence, Martin spoke. "Do you mind if I ask you who you are?"

The apparition winced. "Awkward question, actually. We don't usually let that out until much later. Died thirty years ago. No one in particular."

"Why are you here?"

The ghost shrugged and smiled, his eyes bunching up around the corners; he crossed his thick and hairy arms against his scarlet polo shirt. "To say hello."

"Say hello?"

"Sure. Why not?"

It was Martin's turn to shrug. "I'm not complaining. It's just that I thought ghosts always had a message to give."

"You mean like Scrooge?" The ghost lowered his voice for dramatic effect. "I am the ghost of Christmas past!" He laughed. "No. No message. Just thought I'd drop by, see if you needed anything. Perhaps I can help."

Martin rubbed his eyes again. "Would you mind if I got a cup of tea?"

"Hmm," said the ghost nervously. "All that moving around might wake you up."

"I'm getting cold. That's going to wake me up soon."

"Oh, well then. Get into bed right away."

"What about my tea?"

"Allow me. Snuggle up and keep warm."

Martin got back under the comforter, and rearranged the pillows against the wall, so that he was sitting upright. Meanwhile, the ghost went into the kitchen and picked up the kettle.

"AGGGHHH!!!"

Martin jumped. The room wavered briefly, but he held himself still, and the sleep continued. The ghost reappeared at the door of the kitchen, breathing heavily.

"What happened?"

"Sorry about that. Still asleep?"

"Yes."

"Thank goodness. Not my night, is it?"

"What happened?"

"Cockroach. Hiding under the kettle." The ghost shuddered. "God, I still hate those things. Don't have them in the hereafter, you know. Look, do you really want tea?"

"I don't mind."

"Here. Shove over." The apparition clambered onto the futon, settled down next to Martin, and put an arm around his shoulder. Martin's skin prickled with sudden warmth. "There now. How does that feel?"

Martin leaned against the apparition's chest, and let his patron stroke his beard gently. "Nice." His eyelids fluttered and dropped. "Very nice."

The ghost looked down at him with wide eyes. "You're purring, Martin. I can feel it." He laughed. "How wonderful."

"I thought ghosts were cold. I thought they felt like drafts and icy winds, and made fires go out."

"Some are cold. I've met dead people that travel on skates. But I was a nice fellow, when I was alive. Not the brightest or the bravest, perhaps, but warm. I used to laugh a lot." He squeezed Martin closer, and ran a hand through his hair. Martin sat silent, relishing the contact, leaning into the stroking gesture like a cat. Presently the ghost stirred. "Feel good?"

"Mmmmm."

"Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me how it feels."

"It helps, that's all." Martin pressed closer against the warm body. "It just—helps."

"Anything else I can do while I'm here?"

"It's time to spray the cupboards again."

The ghost stiffened. "I'm dead. I don't do that kind of work."

"Just kidding."

"Here's something I've always wanted to do." The apparition scrambled to his knees. "Lie down and roll over."

Martin did as he was told. The ghost lifted a leg and straddled him awkwardly, then dug his warm fingers into the muscles between Martin's shoulder-blades. Martin gasped. "That feels wonderful."

"GOD, you're tense!" The fingers probed the knotted muscles and found a spot above the left shoulder blade. "What's this from?"

Martin grunted in pleasure. "That's our receptionist. She yelled at me the other day."

The ghost moved up to Martin's neck. "What about this?" He slowly closed his fingers.

"Ow! My bills. My goddamned bills."

"What kinds of bills?"

"Big ones." Martin clutched the pillow, while the apparition shoved relentlessly. "Cable. Utilities. Student loan. VISA. If you really wanted to help me, you'd take away my credit cards."

"Sorry. They aren't allow in the hereafter. Can you picture Jane Austen with a VISA card? Every other day we'd be dragging her out of Fabric-Land."

Martin groaned. "How am I going to pay all those bills?"

The ghost thought for a moment. "A stitch in time saves nine. A penny saved is a penny earned. Never put off 'till tomorrow what you can do today. How the hell should I know? Do I look like an economist?"

Martin laughed, a full rich laugh that came up from his belly and out through his shoulders. "You make me feel good. That's enough for me."

"You're starting to relax." He paused and ran his hands over the pimply skin. "Here's a good patch." And his hands strayed down to the small of Martin's back.

Martin tried to squirm away. "Don't. It's okay."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Martin. I'm a ghost. What do you think I'm going to do?"

Martin tried to roll over. The ghost held him down, gently but firmly, and probed the knotted tension just above the tail-bone. Immediately Martin twitched violently, with a yell of pain.

"Shh shh shh." The ghost retreated, and gently massaged the surrounding areas. "Tighter than a drum down here. What's this all about?" He pressed his thumb into the center of the knotted muscle.

"STOP IT!" Martin wrenched himself around savagely. "That hurts! Don't you understand? It hurts!"

"I want to make it better. What caused it, anyway? Your ex-boyfriend?"

"I wouldn't give him that satisfaction."

"Then what's made you so sore? Parents? War? The recession?"

"A baseball bat."

The ghost's fingers froze. "A what?"

"Baseball bat. A week ago. Outside my building. This is not a nice neighborhood."

The spirit raised himself painfully and clambered up beside Martin. He gently wrapped Martin in his arms and stroked his beard once again. "I'm sorry."

Martin pushed his hand away. "Don't. You'll make me cry."

"So cry." The ghost held him close and kissed his thinning hair.

"It's not important," said Martin through clenched teeth. "Small potatoes. Other people have it worse."

"I'm not other people, Martin. I'm a dead man. A ghost. Big things don't matter to me anymore. I fought in World War One. I heard the Hindenberg blow up on the radio. I remember Lindbergh, Pearl Harbor, Normandy and Sputnik. Do you think I care about that now? All that remains are the small potatoes. Cockroaches. Beards. Purring. Back rubs." He paused. "And now, a baseball bat."

By this time, the tears were running down Martin's face, and his shoulders had begun to shake. The ghost wiped the cheeks with a calloused thumb, then drew Martin into his chest again, cradling Martin's head. Martin cried for a long time before he finally calmed down. The ghost reached over and pulled some Kleenex from the box on the bedside table, and made Martin blow.

"Feel better now?"

"Better."

"That's good."

Martin thought for a moment. "What's it like, being dead?"

"Very pleasant. You spend a lot less time looking for a bathroom."

"Are you on parole, or something?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is this penance? Do you have to serve a term as guardian angel to some loser before you qualify for the big promotion?"

The ghost frowned, and shook Martin's shoulders none too gently. "That's a vulgar remark. Not kind to me, or to you. I was a good man, Martin. Oh sure I had my fights and my little cruelties. Still, I did my bit. And you're not a loser, either. I envy you, you know. Baseball bats notwithstanding, you have more chances than I did."

"Did you live alone?"

"All my life. Ran a hardware store in Orillia. Had a small house. Garden. Just a block from church. Lived there 'till I was seventy-five, then got into a small place in Toronto. Three years later, I got lucky. Taken off by a good, clean heart attack: no pain, no fuss. I slept for a year, and then booked myself on the standard tour."

"The standard tour?"

"Let's face it, Martin. Unless you've died suddenly and very young, by the time you go you're sick of life on earth. You want to travel, see new places. The first term in heaven is like being on that starship that boldy goes where no one has gone before. Then, for the second term, you want to go back to Earth and do the things you've never done. In nineteen-eighty-three God sent me to San Francisco, for refinement school. I learned all about modern gay life there." The ghost paused for a moment, eyes closed.

"I had so much fun, you wouldn't believe. I though my eyes would fall out. The men, the men. The beautiful, gorgeous, tanned, bronzed, pumped-up men! Not to mention the sunlight. Variety. Noise. And the shopping! I mean, look at the clothes I got!" He jumped off the bed and stood with arms wide and eyes shining. "I used to think jeans were all alike. But look at these! They way they fit! They way they hug my legs and make my butt round and my crotch full! I never dreamed I'd ever wear something like this." The ghost noticed the corners of Martin's mouth twitching, and he blushed. "Oh, sure. Laugh. I know it must sound silly to you. But remember, I was born in 1882! I never dreamed I'd look at myself and feel so good, so full and—and proud!"

His eyes wavered and dropped. "After awhile, though, it nearly drove me nuts. You see, during that second stage, you're invisible." He sat down heavily on the futon and took Martin's hand. "The epidemic had started by then. I watched the men die, and I watched them survive, even while they died. I stood beside them in rallies and

assemblies, with a century of experience, unheard and unseen. As they fought for rights, for a voice, for a cure for what was happening to them, they looked right through me, as if I wasn't there!" He kissed Martin's hand and ran it gently along his cheek. "Even in the saddest moments, I'd be jealous. I'd watch a man holding the hand of his dying lover, and envy the grief he felt." He turned to Martin and smiled sadly. "And through it all, the only thing I could do was learn how to look good. While all those men were dying, I was learning to be vain. And no one could see or hear me."

Martin put his other hand over the ghost's, and squeezed. "I can see you. I can hear you." He chuckled. "Nice clothes. Great butt." He reached inside the red polo shirt and caressed the hair on the ghost's chest. Leaning forward, he grinned and whispered, "Want to do more than stroke my beard?"

The ghost didn't smile back. He simply took Martin's head between his hands and said "Yes," solemnly.

Martin lay on top of the ghost, enclosed in his thick arms, head lying on the ghost's broad and hairy chest. The ghost lay with his legs wrapped around Martin's torso, running his hands through Martin's hair, and down Martin's back. For a long time, the small apartment was silent. Then Martin looked up. "Feel good?" he asked.

The ghost didn't answer. Martin reached up to stroke the cheek, and found it damp. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The ghost smiled faintly. "I'm just happy."

Martin raised himself on his elbows and looked at the ghost curiously. "Why can I see and feel you?"

"I've moved into the third stage of heaven, now."

"The third stage?"

The ghost kissed Martin's forehead. "After a few years, I was accepted into the third term of happiness. It's hard to explain, but in the third term, I get to move back towards something in my past that I want to reclaim. You're a part of that third stage."

"How?"

"You remind me of someone."

"Who?"

"A rover. A traveller. Nineteen-twenty-five. Pulled down my porch in the summer, then walked away."

"I don't understand."

The ghost leaned his head back against the pillow and closed his eyes. "That old house," he said finally, stroking Martin's hair absently. "It was built to last forever. But no one had taken proper care of it. So when I bought it, the porch had become rotten. I ignored it for as long

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as I could, 'cause there were lots of other things that needed doing. Then old Mrs. Sanders put a foot through it, one day, while dropping by with one of her godawful casseroles. Fell backwards, all two hundred pounds of her. Broke a leg, and never said a word of complaint. You can imagine how I felt.

"I thought, I can either pull it down, or I can repaint it, replace the broken board and hope for the best. But the thought of Mrs. Sanders breaking another leg was too much, so I figured, all right, it's time. So out I went, with my crowbar, my saw, my hammer, and set to work. Figured, couple of hours hard work, and gone she'll be. Well!" The ghost chuckled. "Didn't I learn a thing or two?"

"Take longer than you thought?"

"Two days later, I'm still hacking away. That thing was built like one of those cathedrals. It had struts, and buttresses, and planks and joints and what-have-you. Finally, Harry, who taught over at the school, came by and offered me his brother."

"His brother?"

"To help me. He was visiting on his way across Canada, and he needed a bit of money. So I told Harry to send him over the next day. Next day, eight o'clock sharp on a Saturday morning, while I'm still asleep, and deep in a wet dream, the back doorbell rings. I stumble down, wondering who the hell could it be, and there's this young guy, with a furry beard, and the sweetest, most solemn puppy-dog eyes you can imagine." The ghost scrutinized Martin critically. "He looked like you. Same eyes. Same beard. And skinny: not enough meat on him to make a noise in the pan. Slender. Wiry."

Martin sighed.

"Well, you never saw two guys sweat and strain the way we did over that porch. But by noon, it was mostly kindling. He hardly said a word. Shy, withdrawn. But if I cracked a joke, he'd smile the greatest smile you ever saw. Like—" The ghost waved his hands. "Like—oh, forget it. How do you describe a smile? Anyway, we worked and worked. And around about noon, I said, that's enough. Let's get a drink or something."

The ghost was silent for a moment. "We went in, and got ourselves something to drink. He stood there in the kitchen, no shirt on. Flies buzzing everywhere, and so hot I wanted to pant like a dog. But it felt so good! Mid-June. Sun on the lake, sun on the trees. Having company on a Saturday. Working with wood for four solid hours. A winter's worth of kindling in my shed. Smell of the grass. Feel of my chest, heaving from all that effort. The sight of a half-naked man leaning against my kitchen counter.

"His head was thrown back, looking at the ceiling. I couldn't help myself. I went over to him, and wiped a drop of sweat that was running down his neck. He lowered his head, and looked at me. Before I knew it, we were up in the bedroom, and I could smell the flowers from the garden below, and hear the bees nosing about in the blossoms, and taste the hot skin that had been out in the sun all morning." The ghost sighed. "I'd never known anything so wonderful in all my life."

Martin thought for a moment, feeling the hand on his beard, the chest against his face, the arm around his shoulders. "So where do I come into this?"

The ghost didn't answer right away, but lay there with his eyes closed. "After it was over, he got up right away, and put his clothes on and left. I never saw him again. He never came to be paid for his work. And I finished the porch myself, and grew my flowers, and sat on the porch and smelled the flowers and thought about him. And life went on, and eventually I grew old and I died. As I sat on my porch through all the long years after that, I wished with everything I had that he'd stayed for ten more minutes, cuddling with me. I had sex with men during in my life; more than you might think. But I lived for seventy-eight years, and never hugged a man, never nestled in close to him. God, I said, if you take me to heaven, let it be a place where I can hold a man close and cuddle him and stroke his beard. So, when God moved me on to the third stage, he let me find you, and come to you in the dead of night, when you needed comfort, and let me hold you and kiss you and rub your back and listen to your troubles."

"Mmmmm." Martin's head sank lower on the ghost's chest.

The ghost raised Martin's chin. "Moving out of REM sleep?"

"I'm afraid so. Will I remember you in the morning?"

"The way you'd remember a dream. Martin, I'm scared. There's not much time."

"What's going to happen to you?"

The ghost's voice cracked slightly. "Something strange. Incredible. God knows. The fourth stage."

Martin reached over and turned out the light. "Lie down," he ordered.

The ghost obeyed. Martin rolled the ghost on his side, and then settled down behind him, with an arm around the ghost's waist. He kissed the back of the ghost's neck. "It'll be okay," he whispered. "You're a good man."

They lay there in silence for a while. "Is this what you and your lover used to do?"

"It's called making spoons. How does it feel?"

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"Don't let go. I'll disappear as soon as you fall out of REM. This will be my last memory of earth."

Martin felt the sleep reaching out to grab him like an undertow off a deserted beach. He summoned all his energy for one last effort. "Hey, Robert."

The ghost twisted abruptly around to look into Martin's face. Even in the dark, Martin could see the amazement in his eyes. "How did you—"

Martin smiled, and kissed him gently, very gently on the lips. "We did a nice job on that porch." ■

Trumpet Call of The 7th Angel

Deborah Parks-Satterfield

you blew through me today
that's how i knew you were dead
you left
so
suddenly, my heart is heavy with the sadness and the
knowledge
i am empty and full of you
all at once... putting one foot in front of the other is a chore
the idea of joining you crosses my mind like the
chaotic exit of bats from a cave
but i promise not to bind your soul to earth with my grief

you were hard and gentle and wild
my mouth is full of kisses for you and
i will love you and love you and
love you
till

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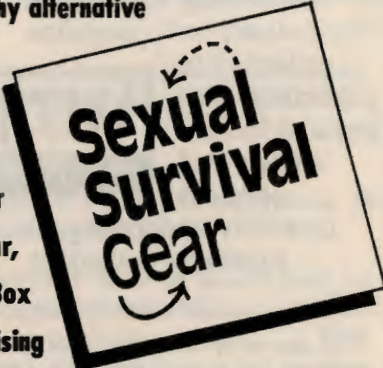
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