
Shoreline

Fall 1988



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As Time Goes By

The lingering odor of poached eggs and hash seemed to hang in the air. Stale cigar smoke mixed in and created a dreamy, ethereal atmosphere conducive to lengthy ponderings. The volume of the T.V. set was at its maximum.

Norm probably left his hearing aid on the dresser. He forgets occasionally. Just a little more now than he used to. We all forget sometimes. Don't we? I think I'll go look for that hearing aid.

Pat Sajak turned to Vanna, who smiled, turned a letter and smiled again.

"I'd like to buy a 'C' please."

"Where are your dentures, are they in?"

"Yeah, they're in. What kind of question is that? Why didn't he ask for a 'T'? He would have made a grand."

"I'll get the Dentu-grip. That clicking is so annoying. I was about to call the cable company."

"Huh?"

The heat in the elderly housing community is treacherous right about now. It's something like a dry sauna; if there is such a thing. It makes your skin turn pink, flake and peel. But with Norm and his circulation and my legs, I guess we'll get used to it. It must be at least 100 degrees in this room and heck, it's probably only sixty-seven outside. Well, that's what Channel Seven says,

but Norm watched Channel Ten and they say sixty-five. Who can you believe these days? What ever happened to accurate weathermen?

I remember when the seasons were easily recognizable; winter was winter and spring was spring. I remember that it was sixty-six on our wedding day back in 1935. Or was it 1936? We'll anyway, it was beautiful and mild. Things were growing, just getting used to their new, green down: grass, leaves, youth. Things were new and people were newer. More alive. Not like now, when it's a trial to raise your brittle body out of bed in the morning. Things flowed back then, they even said I glowed. Is it only fifty-one years? It seems longer.

The flowers were fresh that day. My mother arranged them just so. Glads, daffodils, irises, tiny sprays of baby's breath. Fresh. We got them from Mother's garden. Things miraculously flourished there. We didn't have much money then, but store bought flowers were not special enough.

I wore my mother's wedding gown that day. That's right. To hell with them. Let them snicker. Ivory satin and silk brocade. Very tasteful. A sweetheart neckline and a cinched bodice with a little bustle. I was breathtaking. Like Bette Davis. Even Norman thought so. I could tell.

"Alice, you look damn nice." That's what he said. My hair was put up in rags the night before, a ritual that Martha and I loved. Chat-chat and giggles. Martha was my dear friend. Breast cancer. Only six months. That was it. I miss her. She wore pink taffeta that day and swished as she walked. The suburban highlights shone in the sun, outside of the church. My hair held up O.K. that day but not half as nice as Martha's. "Alice, don't forget to put that seductive red lipstick on. You know, the one I hate." More giggles.

Norman never looked more handsome than on that day. I truly fell in love with him 100 times over. The pin stripe suit looked a little restricting, pulling across his sprawling chest. "I can't stand these monkey suits," he joked with that sloppy grin. His jet black hair, with the straight part down the middle, was greased slickly down behind his ears. He had so much trouble with that cowlick though. It only made him look all the more endearing. His eyes shone like his hair, gleaming. Such a contrast, those slate blue eyes inviting me down the aisle to stand next to him.

As I walked down the aisle, I was only faintly aware of the incense that reeked from the hymnals and the priest's vestments. Who could have possibly died on my wedding day? The sun shone mistily through the windows, watercolors dancing on my gown.

It went by ever so quickly. The ceremony, the champagne, the tiny

finger sandwiches that Mother had made, even the patience to cut the crusts off, the sinfully rich cake, the rice. The flowers were wilted, now snugly pressed in the Bible on the coffee table.

Uncle Arthur came to my wedding. Staid, stuffy and dignified Uncle Arthur. His blue serge suit smelled of moth balls. It was probably years since he had worn it. He danced around the hall with Mrs. Taylor, the widow from next door. Her print dress swirled around her knees. Every so often, a twist and an inch of flesh showed above her stockings. They giggled like two misbehaving children, sipping coyly from their punch glasses. Norm liked Uncle Arthur. Maybe it was the envelope Uncle Arthur slipped into his pocket.

Our honeymoon was not the type that travel editors rave about. No Caribbean cruise, no Bermuda or tour of Europe. With Uncle Arthur's envelope we foresaeked dinner plates and silverware. Hideaway Hills Lakeside Cottages. It was all a big secret. Everyone had already assumed that there was a honeymoon and a wedding present to come. We'd get by. We did. We ate off of paper plates for a month. We arrived around dusk. The pink and purple hues danced on the serene little lake. The cottages weren't very big. We needed this time alone. I know we did, it wouldn't last forever. The most traditional thing that day was being lifted over the threshold, not the

cottage. Norm, however, caught my leg on the door and a run ran up my thigh.

The cottage held just a bed, dresser and a nightstand. A lamp next to the bed was adorned with a dingy yellow shade. A fly clung gingerly to it, dead.

"So Alice, was this worth breaking into the envelope?" he let out a little chuckle.

"I think I'll get us a few gingerales." It was a little frightening, standing there in the cottage. I was feeling a little jittery but had that warm, tingly feeling inside. A reassuring warmth.

I had a midlength flannel nightie, trimmed with lace. It was a lovely shade of yellow, soft and comfortable. Norman climbed into bed, soundlessly, and reached to shut off the lamp, not before brushing his lips across my cheek.

"Night Alice."
"Goodnight, Norman, dear."
Someone fluttered inside.

A few months later, a wedding present arrived. A spark of joy, hope: Doris Elizabeth. Doris Elizabeth with her tiny toes and fingernails thinner than paper, tiny little seashells. She arrived early. It was snowing fiercely that day, billows of white. Her cry was just a whisper of breath, emitted from reed thin lips. Bluish, pale, papery lips. She was grabbed from me then, a firm swoop, a tuft of jet hair flashed by.

"You did just fine, Alice."
"My baby, please can I...?"
"She'll be fine. Minor complications. Be a brave girl and go to sleep now."

Things were foggy for days. No Doris. Never again. Time was empty for years after that, hollow motions, just to get on with it. Doris Elizabeth lies next to Mother. Daffodils, crocuses and hyacinths littered the ground. There's a simple stone. A granite stone of pink, not gray. I reached down to brush away freshly cut grass. A splash hit the stone.

"Werent't the flowers dainty, Norman?"

"What's the matter Alice?"
"Those daffodils...."

"Alice, are you O.K.? Do you want a pill?"

Norm seems to be falling apart all over these days. But I still love him. I'm a little sick of him, but I still love him.

"That Vanna White is something else."

"No one would be caught dead in a dress like that. Her with her 'come hither' eyes. She's just asking for trouble, Norm."

"Alice, do something about that goddamned dog. He's probably got some contagious disease and one day we'll kick, just like that."

Norm made a feeble attempt to snap. Arthritis wouldn't permit it. The once nimble fingers that created dollhouses, that once held hands tenderly were disfigured, stiff and knotty. They could neither squeeze, snap nor caress. Those hands that once soothed, now put pills

into his mouth. They grasped a spoon to stir medicinal concoctions. They sat folded in his lap.

"Alice, do me a favor. Get me my sweater, I feel a little chill." He was feeling chilly most of the time. Poor circulation will do that. Poor circulation put a damper on a lot of things. "Hurry up Alice. Before Jeopardy comes on. It's just not the same without Art Fleming." I left the room then. I grabbed Norm's moth-eaten sweater that had seen better days. But I rested it on the bed instead. I reached for the old afghan that I had knit one Christmas, when things were a little lean. I caught my reflection in the mirror. The mirror stood over the bureau that my father had made, molding and nurturing the wood into shape. I noticed that the liver spots

Roberta Bradshaw

piano keys

all the relatives say
I am just like her
the way two piano keys
side by side
ripple in scales
but dissonant when a careless hand strikes them
at the same time

Nancy J. Hoffman

were there all right and the white hair, now silvery soft. I reached into the top drawer of the bureau and took out a tiny flask of Chanel No. 5 and dabbed a little on my wrists and behind the ears. A little blush on the pallid cheekbones and a transcendence from age: red lipstick, for special occasions. From the bedroom I could see Norman facing the television, a silhouette with the lone tuft of hair jutting triumphantly upward. No longer black, the cowlick, a little boy's cowlick, was white washed gray. I sat on the couch. I gingerly edged nearer to him, timid at first. I reached for the remote control and pressed "off." I glanced at Norman, for a moment, saw through the thinning hair and the cataracts, right into his heart.

"Happy Anniversary, Norman, dear."

Limbless

How am I to hold you,
If I haven't any hands?
Shall I simply stand numb--
Wait patient and count to ten?

I lack legs
I cannot walk to you
And besides,
You are leagues away.

No arms, like hands--
Again, I cannot hold you.

My love is limbless.
No way to show you.
I'm limbless--
Mute.

I cannot whisper.
I cannot enunciate.
I am alien.

Tracy Jordan

Tommy

He's 33 in a 45 world
Peter Pan plays on
Like a record
stuck in a groove he
 spins
Distorted lyrics echo in the hall
 want candy mommy
How time
does not fly for him

Routine-careful
Do not skip Sesame Street Mr. Rogers
theme songs blare
Excited, jumps up
never high enough
He flaps his arms though
and paces, rocking
 he spins on

Tommy has a job
Eighteen he folds laundry
 breathing the clean
Studying the creases in warm colors
 hum hum
He hears
 the dryer
 spin

Marshall Tanner

Kevin

Holding his mother's magazines upside down,
he stares at a woman in a strapless crimson gown,
and prays her breasts will fall into his eyes.

Pat Hanley

Untitled

The sky is dark
But the stars shine bright
The air is cold and crisp
Everyone's asleep, almost
I'm awake
I'm alert
I scurry around the city
No one sees
No one knows
I'm over here
Then over there
I am alive
I am secret.

Annie-Laurie Herman

last leaves

she lay quietly dying
numbed to oblivion with stranger's medicine
face slack, no expression
she was paler
even than the hospital gown
the last vestment
of old age

she did not struggle
the part which was her being
suspended until the cold season's wind
swept life from her grasp
outside the window
groundskeeper bent
in sweaty frustration
the maple's last leaf
tarnishing his ideal lawn.

Nancy J. Hoffman

To Leafy-be

I really wish that I could be a leaf.
I've half a wish to go and play one now.
To climb a tree and never to come down.
To live my whole life long up in a tree,
And all that time to know just what to be:

To leafy-be, to leafy-be, to photosynthesize!
To live a life

That seems just right,
Just made to shape and size.
And in the fall,
When fall I must,
To fall so gracefully.
To swoop and swirl and swing about!
To wheel orchestrally!
And then to lie, my life fulfilled,
When none can ask of me:
What were you like, what did you do,
What did you come to be.

To just not have to wish to be a leaf.
To be a leaf and just not have to wish.

Gary D MacDonald

The Unknown

And so there you sit,
Emanating warmth, security and all I know.
From your lips comes "I love you."
From your eyes comes a silent question.
And I, preferring the unknown,
Turn away.

And so there he stands,
Stone still and uncomfortable.
On his lips, a lazy smile;
In his eyes, a challenge.
And I, preferring the unknown,
Fall into his embrace.

Amy C Gerold

The Triumph of Triviality (nautical memories)

It is late and I'm so tired
of the muddling greyness
of my everyday and the racket,
my husband's snore
as he gulps sleep. My eyelids, pull like magnets, then-
I slide, slide . . .
into the spiral shell of a dream:

I am old, very old.
My eyes, two sickly starfish
that wallow in the puckered sandbar
of my face.
My knotted fingers curl palmward
like the claws of some frightened crab,
that weaves toward a crust of belly.
White wisps of hair settle as the
ethereal foam the sea hurries toward
a shoreline.
And the saturated brain that sags
in the skull's weak clutch,
fishes out a mosaic of memories
from its wrinkled net.
One flounders on the mind's hook,
burns brightly after the struggle out
from the ocean of a deep subconscious:

The dappled walls of our bedroom
swirl with coils of light,
the only element astir besides
the sleepless anchored tick-tick
of the pink alarm clock.
My man drifts in the current of sleep.
His chest and its gush of black hair
trembles at its curled tips as the

hull of ribs heaves with each wave
of breath. And I sink against the
mossy vessel of warm flesh, to hear
the quiet burst of life, the steady
motor that propels each red tributary
with its shipment of air
to the pulse of venous latitudes
and longitudes.

And this splash of memory
scatters the misty lifescape,
so now there is the navigation
towards a new horizon--
Looming images take on form,
not of the great cliffs of life,
those hulking presences that squat upon the shore's broad back,
But those priceless trivial moments,
like the silver scales of a small fish
that flings skyward the shining rivulets
of the sun,
like bits of strewn seaglass
that capture patches of rainbow.
It is now morning and I slide,
slide out from the roof of the oyster
to find a glimmer, the concretion
of a pearl-to-be, stored in the
soft mollusk of the heart.

My mate snores peacefully,
and the undulation of music
curves gracefully
above me,
upward swell,
then over
Like a blessing.

Nicole Ann Ditz-Borges

APPENDERE IL PAPA (HANG THE POPE)

"There is no God, you dumb son of a bitch. Science disproved it. Everyone knows it! But you still keep fuckin' going on and on. There is a God. God is love. His law is your law. God is life. God is your salvation. Right now, Holy Man, I'm your salvation. I am the law, and the law says you're going to die. One hour left. Any final desires you would care to fulfill?"

No reply.

"Anything, anything at all. Just tell me, that's what I'm here for. I'll make sure you're comfortable as you need to be before... well, you know. So, what would you like?"

Nothing was said.

"Are you fuckin' deaf? I asked you a question! Oh, I'm sorry. Where are my manners? Let's try this. Would you care for anything your Holiness? Heesh! Mr. Savior? What is this, you don't talk, you don't move, you barely fuckin' breathe. You look like a damn puppet. Do I have to shove my hand up your ass to make you talk? No, I think that might just get you off. Come on now Pope, I said speak. Speak. Speak Pope. Be a good little savior and speak." Alberto knelt down making face to face contact, looked in his eyes and sneered. "Maybe Joseph can get something out of you, you bastard." Alberto stood up, spat, laughed aloud and began pacing the empty room.

"My name is Joseph Pessulo. My occupation is Chief Administrator of Capital Punishment for the Province of Italy. Pope John Matthew the Eighth has remained intractable in his opinions of territorial advances in the name of quote God, unquote. The God in question is a theoretical being relating the Roman Catholic concept of religion. The recent evidence against the existence of this God has only intensified the unrest among the Catholic population and the world as a whole. Pope John Matthew the Eighth has neither prompted any action to settle the dissemination of Catholic territorial bounds, nor has he denounced his position on a now proven myth, a myth that has taken the lives of

millions, dating back to the age of the feudal laws and crusades, up to the present. Due to the preceding chain of events the Province of Italy in conjunction with the United Nations, has found Pope John Matthew the Eighth guilty of treason, not only to his homeland, but to mankind in general for his pacifistic attitude in a time of crisis and confirmed falsification of religious beliefs. Pope John Matthew the Eighth has been sentenced to execution by means of hanging. This event will take place in the center of Vatican City, roughly sixty minutes from the end of this telecast. I now must leave in preparation for the execution. I will

answer questions from the media after the ceremony has taken place. Thank you for your time. I will now turn you over to your local broadcaster."

Joseph left the broadcast room surrounded by an array of polizia. He was rushed into to an awaiting limousine and taken directly to the Vatican through a route sealed off to the public. As a chauffeur opened the door, Joseph was desecrated by a predominantly native Italian crowd along with several hundred tourists all chanting in unison. APPENDERE IL PAPA. Disregarding the turmoil, he entered alone into the Vatican. His walk echoed through the empty corridors as he came closer to meeting his assignment with each step. He had always imagined the glorious beauty of the Vatican and would still have to. Its floors, left dirty and bloodstained, its furniture slashed, shattered or stolen, its walls stripped of priceless religious portraits and repainted with the words "liar" and "betrayed," the once meticulous Vatican was raped by the Catholics of Italy just as their independence and individuality was raped by the laws of the church.

"Fuck you and your lies!" Joseph heard in nearing his destination. "There is no God, no fuckin' God! I know it, the people know it. Even you probably know it. You've had too much power for too long! You don't want to give it up! You're only in it for the glory and you know it! You got your glory, but I'll take your life. You're pathetic.

You're too fuckin' pathetic for words. You think you're so high and mighty. I'm going to..."

"Going to what?" Joseph said, disturbing the monologue.

"Kill you, Joseph Pessulo, John Matthew the Eighth. You can call him Johnny."

Joseph stood, nodding his head repeatedly over the white robed figure who did not acknowledge his presence.

"It's time," Joseph said.

"May I have a moment alone?" John Matthew spoke in an undisturbed tone.

"So, the Holy Man can speak. Imagine that! I thought his speech was stripped along with his identity. It's a miracle!" Alberto mimed the sign of the cross from head to chest and shoulder to shoulder.

"He made a request. I have to honor it to the best of my ability. I must stay in the room, but I'll respect your privacy. Will you excuse us, Alberto?"

"I'll inform the media that the execution of Johnny is about to take place."

Alberto left to fulfill his duties leaving Joseph and John Matthew alone and silent. Joseph sat down, folded his arms, tilted back his head and slumped low in a chair as he watched John Matthew with equal amounts of distaste and bewilderment. He wondered what thoughts a man of his stature would have before death. He neither asked for explanations nor showed any type of inquisitive expression. With an I-

thought-so attitude, Joseph rolled his eyes and dropped his head even further back as he watched John Matthew kneel down, close his eyes, clench his rosary and slowly bring it up to his lips. Time passed, Joseph became restless. He stood up and made his way to a window to view the crowd nestled into Vatican City. The masses, the media, he thought, all there for one reason--to see a once beloved man hang from a band of sisal fibers.

Sure, there were still some believers scattered though the huddle but they were easily suppressed and even more easily silenced. "My father used to tell me, 'don't worry, Guiseppe, no matter how tough things are, the Lord will provide, keep us safe.' I believed him, trusted his judgement. He was my father, how could he be wrong? We did all right, for a poor family. We always had food, shelter. It may not have been the best but we survived. When my sister grew ill, my father said the Lord would heal. We prayed, believed. She became healthy, turned into a fine young woman. I loved my father, but he was wrong. Coincidence, maybe, luck definitely, but divine intervention? I don't think so."

"All you have to do is denounce your God." Joseph said several minutes later. "Apologize to the world. It's your religion that caused all the upset. I'm sure if you said the proper things to the right people you could not only save your life but the property and lives of others. There's no use in fighting any

more, no one is on your side now. All those people out there, your once loyal followers, they're here to see you die, because they now know the truth. They have all the proof they need. Do you really expect them to choose your theory over a scientific fact? How can anyone believe? "Do you still believe?" John Matthew asked with his head still bowed and his eyes still closed.

"Come on, Savior, it's neck stretching time." Alberto said as he banged open the door, disturbing Joseph's concentration on the crowd but leaving John Matthew's meditation intact.

"Is everything ready?" Joseph asked.

"We can proceed with the festivities as soon as Jesus Junior opens his eyes and takes that shit out of his mouth. Did you hear me, Holy Man? I said, quit sucking that damn cross. Do you really want something to suck? Do you? Answer me, bitch. If you need something to suck, I've got something you might like. I was never blown by a Pope before, maybe now's a good time to start."

"That's enough, Alberto. Just do what you have to do and get it over with."

"Put your fuckin' hands together so I can cuff you."

"You don't need to cuff him. He's not going anywhere."

"It's government policy." "There's no need for it."

"I say there is."

"He's got no weapons, he can't run."

"I don't care."

"What's he going to do?"

"I want him cuffed."

"At least let him walk with some self respect."

"No."

"He's not a real criminal."

"No! Now you're wrong. He is a criminal. According to the state, according to the Province, according to the people, this man is a criminal and he will die just like any other criminal."

"We haven't hanged anyone in years."

"That's because hangings are given to those special people, the ones who piss me right-the-fuck-off with their ideas and their followers and everything else that makes my job all the more aggravating. Not only are you wrong, you're out of line. I am the Polizia Commissioner. I am in charge. I tell you to hang, you hang. Know your place in life!"

John Matthew lowered his hands in front of his chest while still holding the rosary.

"That's more like it." Alberto said as he walked over and began to restrain his wrists. "You never saw a hanging, did you, Joey? It's fuckin' great. The bottom's going to drop out, he'll fall a few feet, then he's going to come to a dead stop. Get it? Dead. Stop. Then he's going to snap. I don't know where he's going to snap, but he'll snap," Alberto said, smiling.

"And those baby blue eyes of his, they're going to bulge right the fuck out

of his head. You'll really know when he's gone when you see the little touch of spit drop out of the corner of his mouth. That's when it's over. We even built a special gallows in honor of the Messiah for this one. You ain't gonna make it," Alberto said, lightly tapping John Matthew's head. "Can't you carry on a conversation? This prick say anything to you while I was gone?" Alberto said, turning to Joseph.

"No, not a word."

"Thought so. All right, happy hour has arrived. Let's give the people what they want."

"I'll follow," Joseph said while grabbing John Matthew by the chain between his wrists. Only the echoes of the Polizia-issued boots were heard through the Vatican on the way to the publicly displayed gallows. John Matthew did not look up, Joseph Pezzulo did not look back. As the two drew nearer to the entrance, the chant heard by John Matthew for the first time and already familiar to Joseph became clear. APPENDERE IL PAPA! APPENDERE IL PAPA! the voices grew louder with each step. When both men were publicly exposed and the chant turned incoherent, Joseph evened his pace with John Matthew, leaned his head towards his ear and said, "No, no I don't believe. I don't believe in your rules."

"Do you believe in God?"

"I never believed in your rules. I never will obey your rules."

"Do you believe in God?"

"I haven't been to church in months, I haven't confessed in years. I don't have time to bother with this nonsense."

"Do you believe in God?"

"It's too late, you're going to die."

"Do you believe in God?"

"I believe in the law. The law has sentenced you. It has sentenced your beliefs which will die with you. Please stop asking me the same question. It's difficult enough killing someone you once prayed to for forgiveness."

"Do you. . . ."

"I don't hate you like the rest of the people here. I don't agree with you, but I don't hate you. I'm just doing my job. I can't go to hell for doing my job, but there's no hell anyway. There can't be a hell because there's no God. If there is no God, there's no heaven. No heaven, no hell, no Devil, no God, no nothing. Just this life. That's it. No God. We proved it. Nothing. This is it. There's your answer. I don't believe because God has been. . . he's not God, he's. . . I don't have your faith so there is no God. He can't be proven. So don't ask me anymore. That's my answer."

"This is it," Alberto said, turning back to Joseph, at the end of the journey. "Walk him up the stairs, string him up and let him down. The PROVEN law of physics will do the rest."

John Matthew led himself up to the noose. Joseph followed. He slipped the noose around his head, making sure that it was in order, doing just as he was told. John Matthew stared straight

ahead into the thousands of faces screaming. APPENDERE IL PAPA. APPENDERE IL PAPA. He showed no emotion. He had no emotion to show. He had only faith. Through all the disbelief, his faith held firm. Joseph knew this. The noose was fixed and he made his way to the lever. With a raise of his hand, he silenced the crowd.

"Cameras are rolling, make sure this one counts!" Alberto yelled from below.

"Noi aff etto, Padre" was heard in scattered spots among the mass. The expressions of love and devotion were soon silenced by the almost unanimous chant--APPENDERE IL PAPA. All was silenced by the second raising of Joseph's hand.

"Any last words?" Joseph said, turning from the crowd to John Matthew.

"Your father was correct." John Matthew said, still staring straight ahead.

The lever jerked. The bottom dropped. He fell a few feet. Snapped. Swayed. Just a little. No bulging eyes. No spit. He was dead.

"Mr. Pessulo, what was going through your mind as you were leading John Matthew the Eighth to the hangman's noose?"

"Nothing. I was just doing my job. I've killed for punishment before, I'll kill for punishment again. This was just a little more glorified."

"Were you scared that this event would bring about further repercussions

within the former Diocese members?"

"I was scared to be on camera. I've never killed with a worldwide audience before. That was the scary part."

"What were you saying to John Matthew as you led him to death?"

"I was explaining that he still had a chance to save his life by denouncing

God and the Roman Catholic religion."

"He refused?"

"Yes he did."

"Did Pope John Matthew the Eighth, the last Pope the world will ever know, have any final words?"

"No, not a word."

Richard Anthony Bova

SOME POEMS

are strangers
I pass on the street,
just a word,
an idea,
coming,
meeting,
passing
me.
A poem
crossing the street,
turning the corner,
disappearing,
before my pen
has a chance
to meet it.

Pat Hanley

Lovebeat

swirl, moving
white-hot pain
push, coming
back again

hours pause
like dying days
time stands hushed
in sweat-drenched haze
gasp, grasp
split asunder
sudden silence
loud as thunder

rest alone
heart-beat stilled
seconds spasm
presence willed

a seeking cry
crescendo undone
life in rhythm
my newborn son

Marshall Tanner

The Page of Evolution

I am standing behind the deli and
staring, well not just staring but sort of
burrowing into this shallow hole in a
yellow slab of Jarlsberg cheese, rocking
onto the sides of my burning feet. The
phone rings. Amar Deep picks it up and
soon my thoughts are floating, tilting on
the melodic, earthy tones of the
Hindi-English tongue.

Something metal falls. I spin around
and ask the plastic-looking face behind
the pair of fumbling hands if it needs
some help. No? "Of course not," I say to
myself. "Just come by to fuck with the
coffee makers." Perhaps I am a bit harsh.
I know. But I get tired of the "hover and
handle" people, grabbing and yanking at
display models as if they were babies in
the wombs of unwilling surrogates.

"Do you have a minimum for credit
cards?" the face asks.

"Five dollars." He curls his lip and
glared at me as if I've just robbed him of
his birthright, turns and storms out the
door. I give him a flourish of trumpets
and return to my work. Amazing how
students going to fifteen thousand dollar
schools never have a penny on them. Just
plastic.

I ring up a Soho Natural Orange Soda
for old Vern. He's kind of crazy. He once
asked me why the natural soda did not
come bubbling out of a stream so he could
just dip his hat in and drink away. Once
David tried to kick Vern out of the store.

David was this athletic-looking waspy
type, whose arm hair curled up over the
Rolex watch he had gotten by deciding
who could and could not park in the lot
at his father's gentlemen's club. So he
tried to kick old Vern out, and I
remember Vern yelling Nazi, Fascist
something or other. I think he wanted to
say something frightening and militant.
I turned away that time, remembering a
poem I had found under Vern's usual
table. It was about Zion National Park,
where he found a powdered,
rust-covered rock that he didn't have to
ask to take home, and he put it in a
custom leather pouch. His hands would
get all rusty when he held it, but he said
that's what happened to things. It
happened to his bike that was once new
and paid for.

Again, I stare at the hole in the
yellow cheese, perhaps wanting to
tunnel through to the other side. The
feet still burn, burning so much I
imagine having shoes off, toes gripping
tiles, feeling wet clumps of watercress
and sprouts.

"Key, Fratman," squeaks a small voice
to my left. Smiling and unembarrassed
by Eva's little nickname for me, I spin
around.

"Key Eva, what gives?"

"Great news."

"Teah."

"He asked me out. Large French Roast
asked me out for a drink." We had a

strange habit of referring to customers by what they usually ordered. There was Large French Roast, his friend Large Colombian and my favorite little girl, Small Mint Tea.

"Great," I lied. I look out for Eva. "Discriminate!" I want to tell her. I guess I want her for myself.

But we're close friends. It's unapproachable. She's nineteen years old and very down-to-earth, small-mouthed, porcelain white skin, thick natural blond hair. She attends self-actualization seminars, drinks Guinness Stout, bites my arm and sometimes belches in my ear. She's sulking now and pressing a mushy wedge of Brie back into shape.

"Aren't you happy for me?"

"Yeah, yes of course. He's very, ah, hairy."

"He's perfect."

"Tufts of hair climbing through those holes in his mesh jogging wear."

"Shut up."

"Come on. This guy could be the poster boy for Carpet Giant." She slaps me. I grab her wrists, tuck her head under my arm and kiss her on the forehead. The odor of rotting Brie assaults my nostrils. Eva has this habit of forgetting to peel back the tin foil to check the cheese.

"Hey Eva, um . . . This guy, what does he do? I mean besides drink French coffee and cultivate that, that throw-rug on his chest."

"He sells imported cheese. He's

taking over his father's business, and he wants me to work for him, says our business is poorly run. We let bums hang out here, stinking up the place. And he hates those plastic ferns."

"Funny, I figured he'd like those."

"He used to be an artist."

"Con?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Be careful, Eva." I fancied myself a father figure, but I don't know why. Eva was more independent than I was. We both went to the state college, but she had to drop out for financial reasons. Now she was working long hours, fixing up her apartment and thinking of buying a new car, though there was nothing wrong with the one she had. The boy stocking Soho Natural drops a bottle of Sweet Lemon-Lime on the floor, prompting a dozen heads to turn, necks craning, faces screaming: "My God. Get a mop immediately!" I frown. There's no hurry. No one walks around here barefoot. No one even tries.

When she walks in, I am busy myself with the pate case and laughing my normal laugh which is not so loud as it is dopey. A couple of truck drivers came in one day and one of them said to the other, "Hey! They got a piece of your old lady in that case, Vic."

"What are you talking about?" said the other.

"Wild Boar Pate! See!"

It reminded me of these wild guys my brother used to work construction with. They were funny. But my laugh stifles

itself as her leopard-skin sun dress and flowing yellow hair fill up the door way. Vague thoughts disperse. I barely hear Amar Deep saying, "Something Cardoonga pe nanga," which means that he is threatening to hang me by my feet from some tower in New Delhi with no clothes on. Wouldn't that give me an erection! No, not hanging that way. He kills me, but not today. Not this particular moment which spreads itself like a lush grove of apple trees before my starving eyes.

She's not perfect. No. Got a bit of a hawk-nose and a couple of saddle bags downstairs, but her tanned, waxy-smooth arms and legs, surging breasts, boundless eyes and thick round lips rivet my senses to her. Her lips are large like a native African woman's, and there is a tiny scar over the top one which keeps getting whipped by her tousled hair as she swings her head back and forth over the sandwich menu. I cannot look at her without feeling a little dirty and scared. I am fourteen again, and in my swimming pool with my sister's rough and trashy friend, who keeps laughing and pressing her bum against my fierce, functional penis. I guess everyone went through that nervous age. But this thought vanishes too as I float over to the counter.

She orders a sandwich, and I almost ring it up immediately, her words driving my fingers to the keys. Her strange, strident voice belies her image, and throws me for a bit, and then, I am

lost in the artistry of sandwich making. Cucumbers become lichen, wreathed with moss, covering rocks in the rain forest. I hollow out her bread like an earthen bowl to keep the chunks of chicken from spilling out the sides. Slicing, scooping and spreading my masterpiece chases the pain from my feet. My toes swim about in their sneakers, daring the double stitching to hold its own. It gives way. My feet tear through the sides of my black Reeboks, sending all of their searing heat through my tired limbs, up my aching spine, surging and pounding at arms and chest like a steaming geyser. Not "Old Faithful" but one of the more dormant guys. So I am alive. I leap to the counter and tear off my sweatshirt and Levis, everything, save my apron, which I fashion into a loin cloth. I hop up onto the prep table and give myself a going over. I've got a medium build, a bit of a beer gut and a decent amount of chest hair. Once this old queen told me I had text book chest hair. We were in the dressing room at the time, and I really didn't think much of it. Now it seemed strange and important because I imagined myself on the page of a textbook, standing in a line of evolution, not feeling at all unique. The guys behind me are hairier and hairier, and some are businessmen and artists and bums in their own way. But it's secret, undetectable. Again my thoughts funnel out of my mind. In an instant, I swing across to her on vines of dried, red

peppers, sandwich in hand. We are both on the counter now, arching and twisting our hungry bodies, tearing at hunks of sandwich in a passionate feast. Hot herbal mayonnaise streams down leaves of lettuce, hugging sweaty, sloping breasts, and she laughs as I devour a chunk of meat stuck in her navel. Her lips slide kisses up and down my torso. David comes out of the kitchen to assess our performance and suggests that I try spreading a little country pâté and some melted brie in the small of her back. But I send him flying into a rolling rack of stale puff-pastry. I return to my feast, as beautiful as it is relentless. She gives me instructions. I follow them but wonder again at her strange voice. A hint of forced nasality and extended vowel tones leads me to think she's rich, a lawyer's daughter. But she's got trashy hair and that dress, and her manner. Is she a rebel? Is she daddy's girl all the way? And if she is daddy's girl, what will daddy think of me? What will he think of my rusted old Dodge Dart? Will he patronize me in the wine cellar? Will he scoff at my sketchy knowledge of goose-liver pâté? No. He has no control over her. She's a free spirit. I can tell by her aggressive eyes. A shelf of Linder's Sportman Chocolate topples. Her body stiffens a little, and coffee equipment flies everywhere. The afternoon crowd disperses, and we make wild love for what seems like hours. Thick stalks of watercress shoot up to the ceiling as a silent stream of

Lemon-Lime Soho washes over our trembling bodies. In the instant of utmost peace, I shudder as the stalks of watercress turn into a spiraling tunnel of plastic ferns which wraps itself around us and autoclaves us.

"Again, I think you sleeping on the job, man." Amar Deep yells from behind me. I take a deep breath and grab hold of the counter. A few stalks of watercress snap beneath my black Reeboks, and I tug at my sweat-shirt in embarrassment. The scent of rotting cheese assaults my nostrils. The woman is nibbling at a wedge of Brie, peeling up the white mold to get at the yellow goat cheese. "Uh... that might be rotten. I could get you fresh...."

"Tastes fine," she says. "Look, I'm in somewhat of a hurry, and my car's running, so...." Right, okay. That'll be \$4.77 with the cheese." Her lip curls in mild disbelief.

"This day is just conspiring to.... You've got a five dollar minimum on credit cards?"

"Yes."

"Well, ring me up a coke then. I can't believe...."

She mumbles something uncomplimentary under her breath on the way to the soda case. Her card, or rather, her father's card, stares me in the face. Dr. Gavin C. Newburg is staring at me, dangling something in front of my eyes. I strain to see it, but it's just a gleaming of silver. Now it's his daughter. Yes, he's dangling her in

front of my eyes, and she's holding something silver. A watch. Yes, it's a Rolex watch, and something else. It's plastic. It's a card with my name on it. I think. It's hard to tell because the girl, the watch and the card are all whirling around my head. I'm getting dizzy. What's wrong with me? Am I so easily lured by the trappings of luxurious living? I gaze over at the soda case. My leopard-skinned girl turns and gives me a shy, silly grin. Everything's okay. It's different. She's different. Despite the credit cards, the watches and the B.M.W.'s, we would still manage to be real. We could ride in my old Dodge Dart if we wanted to. We could have an Indian meal with Amar Deep and his family. We could even sit down at Vern's table and check out his poetry or ask him how his bike is doing.

"I've watched you work before, you know," says my leopard-skinned girl. "You have?" I say, scratching some dry skin from the corners of my mouth.

"And you punctuate each step with a certain tight-lipped self-confidence, very reassuring."

"Well, I've worked here since May. Gets engraved, uh... reassuring? Really?"

"Oh, yes."

"I always thought I was a little smug."

"Don't be silly."

"Your car?"

"Yes."

"Running? Street? Uh, somewhat of a hurry?"

"Then perhaps you should ring up my order. You can listen with one ear, can't you? Good. My mother has made it my responsibility to find a young man."

"Young man?"

"Yes."

"Your mother has made it your responsibility?"

"Yes." "Nothing personal, but 'responsibility' might not be the word you're looking for. Sounds like you're talking about trimming the hedges or keeping the living room neat. Tell your mom that sex and fun comes under miscellaneous-slash-other."

"You misunderstand, you see...."

"I do?"

"Mother is looking for someone to go to the market, take care of the dogs, that sort of thing. Sort of a houseboy." I stare at her, not just at her, but through her, burrowing through holes much larger than those in the Jarlsberg cheese. It is no puzzle anymore. Jesus. Houseboy. Of all the degrading shit! No. Wait. Let's think about the prospects for a minute. Working in a luxurious East Side home can't be that bad. And suppose Dr. Newburg likes me? Suppose he's just summering in Providence and has a mansion in New York, Park Avenue. Before you know it, I've got exclusive use of the family car. I drive him to the golf course, his wife to luncheons, his daughter to the beach club. So what if she doesn't love me? I hang around the house, pick up tips here and there, and soon, I cut my tie with

the Newburgs and become a wine steward at a fine gourmet restaurant. My integrity intact, I go to school part-time.

Very casual. Very comfortable. I'm getting dizzy again. I see a gleam of silver--something dangling before my eyes. It's not a watch though. It looks like the handle of a doctor's mallet. Yes. Dr. Newburg is holding his mallet. He's trying to grab hold of me and tap on my knees and ribs with his little hammer and soft, white knuckles. He's trying to find the weak spots. He knows where they are. At least he knows where the weakest spot is. That's the heart. Its pumping is involuntary, uncontrollable, and so we try our best to forget we even have one. We sleep, have sex, and struggle to get ahead by just fucking forgetting that we have a heart. And now we have the artificial heart, courtesy of Dr. Gavin and the plastic-faced people. "Who can afford these plastic hearts?" Me? Old Vern? Eva? No. But they'll be lining up for them. Yes. I can see them standing in line at evolution, heart in hand. They keep passing them back, and then they curl their lips in disgust as the spe man cracks them open to make a trinket or a bowl or something.

Damn it, I'm sick of these people and this place with its thirty flavors of coffee. It's like fuckin' Baskin Robbins with an attitude. Thirty regions of this great earth getting crushed, ground and filtered into little cups, and I wish just once, that Dr. Gavin would drink a cup and taste hot, fresh coffee. I see him

swirl the coffee in his mouth, and I can sense his taste buds clicking up and down their memory, somewhere between six dollars and twenty-two dollars a pound. Do not dally, Doctor. The world is waiting for you to perfect the heart. Fill the mold. Cast the elusive dream. So hop into your latest greatest something or other and soar off the page of evolution through the yellow fern garden into blackness. I'm silent now. I hand her the Visa slip, and let her tear off the customer copy. I rest on my heels, and then rock onto the sides of my burning feet.

"Well, what do you think?" she says.

"What do I think?"

"Yes."

"About what? You? Your mother? Truffle mousse?"

"No. About working for my mother." Again I stare through her, and then the corners of my eyes crinkle up as a smile works its way through my lips. My feet are cool now. I turn and deliver my decree.

"I will not work for your mother."

"Oh, I see."

"And, by the way. I think we have a piece of your mother."

"Excuse me?"

"Right there in the case. Wild Boar Pate. See?" She grabs her things and rushes out the door. She probably doesn't understand. In fact, I'm sure she doesn't.

Across the room old Vern takes off his hat and empties a Soho into it. He

takes a long gulp and just winks at me.

Chris Fratiello

Calluna vulgaris

Why do you drift,
foxhollow wanderer,
with your bag of purple smoke
tumbling over the lowlands,
as bees tumble in sweet slumber
from between the lips of flowers?
Where do you go when shamrocks
fold their luck for the long night
and joy soaked wasps lie,
half mummified in autumn's sugar fruit
and the sky goes green
and the bogs go silent?
What do you do,
foxhollow wanderer,
when even the poets
go mute for the winter?

Robin Petro

House Building

Their procession is even
No breaks are taken here
Each ant working with great concentration
To balance their load

You can almost hear the beating
Of great Indian drums
As they carry grains to and fro
What labor for such meek creatures

Slowly, painstakingly made
It flourishes-is noble
It is simple-symmetrical
A great monument of earth

Great patience, great hope
Pride is prevalent here
They put the last crumb in place
And enter their gentle haven

Tracy Jordan

Blue-Grey Baby

Statues in the park embrace
Hungry, homeless wail
Hero's glory fire
Won for freedom
No warmth brings
Old men who see him
through iced mire.

The steed rears from
a plastic blanket
No stable for the indigent
to lay their burden down.

Words now propel
who is worthy.
Cannon hills on
Capitol hills
bombs or bottles
blood or milk
one warm, one cold
some new, some old,
enemies.

Ancient fears
remain before us.
Prometheus and old men bound,
then by hubris,
now by hunger.

If there's another time
they'll wonder
what the fattened hero saw
beneath him.

Some shelter though
he offers them,
one side to windward
one to lee
discarded dolls
of living play
young and old
insane, insane.

The general wears
a coat of snow
while naked lies
the child below.

Frozen, Dead.

Elizabeth A. Howarth

This must be the place

Which alarm?
Don't brush against the lights.
They fire-torch your eyes.
Sometimes we have to go home
sockets smoking still
that smell of burning wires.
All day long it's dawn, pink
like flesh. But I can see
bones like soft gold buried everywhere
they would melt in your hand.
And the shadows flung and burned
on the walls, baked like old blood.
Every day, we're at the zoo
every day, every day,
and the children rasp in their sleep
like old men.
I'd give anything
if I could stand up and walk away.

Melinda Pace

Angela at the Market

"Mommy! I want that!" squeals the
little girl, pointing at a bright red
bottle.

"You don't like ketchup," Angela
reminds the three-year-old.

Lisa twists in the shopping cart seat
and points at big green jars.

"You don't like pickles either," her
mother sighs. The two roll toward the
olives. Angela stops and stares at the
almond-stuffed ones. Lisa la-la-la-lah's
along with the jingle lilting over the
intercom.

"What's those?"

Angela wishes today, of all days, not
to have to explicate the grocery
shopping. "They're olives, sweetheart."

Angela hasn't treated herself to
anything as exotic as these in years.
The first time she ever had green olives
stuffed with almonds, was ten years ago,
the year she and Julie travelled in
Europe after college graduation. Angela
smiles. They met the most gorgeous
Italian men who took them to that party
in Paris at Count what's-his-name's...
the olives were served with other
cocktail tidbits and the aperitifs.
Today, Angela decides, I deserve these.
She puts a jar in the basket.

Lisa tries to reach the olives, her
chubby little body twisting in her
polyester stuffed nylon jacket, like an
owl turning its head all the way around.
"What's ovs?"

"Ah-livs," Angela pronounces.
"They're sort of like pickles. Now,
enough questions."

Angela scans her list. She doesn't
know why she bothers to write
everything down. Even though she and
James have only been married three
years, it feels like forty. She shivers
and pulls her old corduroy coat together
at the front.

A frail old woman stoops. Her nose is
nearly pressed against a jar, her cart
forgotten in the aisle. Angela starts
around it and a crush of others, nearly
colliding with a fat man whose cart is
filled with cookies, hot dogs and buns,
soft drinks and potato chips. She jerks
her carriage to the right. The man's arm
brushes hers as they squeeze past each
other. Angela shudders. His worn and
discolored suede coat has probably
never been cleaned and the man smells
of cigars and beer.

Shopping here reminds Angela of
riding the Metro in Paris on rainy
winter afternoons at rush hour. People
in wet wool or cheap leather jackets.
Pressed together like slices of bacon in
a package. Springing for the first
available seat as the doors jerk open at
the stop, just as here they lunge for a
place in the check-out lines.

Angela's stomach growls. At the open
freezers, she buttons the middle button
on her coat and selects what she needs.
"You cold, honey?"

"No." Then, "I want that!" the little girl points as Angela turns into aisle number eleven.

"Paper towels. . . ." Angela pulls the two-for-a-dollar brand from the shelf and tosses it into the basket. A carriage bangs into her backside.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" a young woman apologizes.

"It's O. K." For once, Angela is glad she has "lots of padding back there." If this had happened five years ago, her tailbone would hurt like hell. She watches the high-heeled woman continue down the aisle, noting the soft, ten cashmere coat cinched at the tiny waist. Angela wore a coat just like it when she used to work, before she got pregnant, before James convinced her to marry...now the coat, in dry cleaner's plastic, hangs in her cedar wardrobe. Angela had calculated that on her present diet, she'd lose enough weight to wear the coat by New Year's. But, since learning the test results this morning, . . . James doesn't know yet.

"Mommy, I hungry!"

James is the one convinced that parenthood is wonderful. "Lisa, I'm going as fast as I can. Here, have one of these." She opens a bag of cookies and hands one to the little girl.

"What's that?" the child asks, inspecting a chocolate chip.

"Lisa, you know what that is. You eat them all the time."

The child stares at the cookie, as though it has taken on a perplexing new

form in the grocery store.

"Here, squeeze the Charmin, then." Angela tries to smile and drops the package onto Lisa's lap. The cookie falls to the floor.

They almost pass the rows of neatly stacked disposable diapers. Angela stops. Cute little babies with tearless blue eyes and wispy curls grin from the packages. The personifications of motherhood smile lovingly with fresh paper diapers for their fresh, sweet babies. None of these women look as though they have ever suffered through twelve hours of labor. Angela's stomach growls and she rubs her hand across her cesarean section scar. Maybe James won't ever have to know. . . .

"Mommy, I hungry. I want home," Lisa whines, the phrase ending with the beginning of a sneeze.

"Honey, Mommy will be through in just a few minutes. Now 'bout another cookie?" Angela thrusts another one into her daughter's tiny hand.

Satisfied this time, the little girl eats quietly.

Angela rolls up to the meat counter where people, pressed together like bacon on a slab, lean toward the glass. She tears number 65 off the tape.

"Number fifty-one. Fifty-one!" yells a butcher. Angela watches though the glass as a butcher works on meat. She remembers the operating room. James had to leave. They only trained for natural childbirth. She remembers opening her eyes, James at the bed,

holding her hand so tight that she had to ask him to let go. . . . She was glad to just be alive. No more children, she told him. . . .

"Mommy, I hungry."

"Honey, you just had a cookie."

"I want that!" The little girl points at a child eating a banana.

Another butcher yells, "Number fifty-two!"

The woman in the ten cashmere coat steps up to the counter and hands the man her ticket.

"O. K. Let's go get some bananas while we wait." Angela inches out of line and heads for the produce department. Lisa sings, kicking her feet out and back along with the song she makes up as she goes.

A child is whining. "Why?" His mother snaps, "Because!" Angela passes them, giving the mother a knowing glance. Lisa stares at the little boy, then points.

"Lisa, don't point at people, honey."

The little boy stops whining, transfixed by Lisa. The two crane their necks and watch each other until the boy's cart disappears around aisle number fifteen.

"Boy gone," Lisa says.

"What? Oh, the little boy. Yes, he's gone."

Angela finds the bananas, selects a ripe bunch and breaks one free. She hands it to Lisa, who stares at it. "Let me move out of these people's way, then I'll peel it for you."

Angela stops the cart next to the "Fresh Produce" sign.

It is embellished with a cornucopia, overflowing with big, round red and green apples, oranges and grapefruit. Plump pineapples, and pears, grapes and bananas spill forth, curling around the perimeter of the sign.

"What's that?" Lisa has forgotten the bananas her mother holds toward her.

"What?"

Lisa points at the cornucopia.

"It's called a 'horn-of-plenty.'"

Lisa turns back toward her mother who is staring intently at the sign. Lisa takes the banana, saying "Ba-na. Ba-na."

Her gaze broken, Angela pushes the cart back toward the meat department, correcting Lisa. "Ba-na-na."

A butcher yells, "Number sixty-four!"

Angela hurries ahead, fumbling for the ticket in her pocket. She stares at the 6 and the 5. 65. Sixty-five. . . .

Lisa has finished what she wants of the banana, thrusting it toward her mother. Angela quickly wraps its remains in a Kleenex, and stuffs it in her purse.

"Sixty-five. Sixty-five!"

She wonders what her body will look like, feel like at sixty-five. Will her daughter love her, bring her cookies and rolls of Charmin? Will she have confessed to James what she did, what she's thinking about doing?

"Sixty-five. Last call!" The butcher snaps.

Angela's cheeks feel hot and she is
sure they are as red as apples. She

Priscilla L. Young

Bus Ride

A dark gray line
carves the wide, flat land
two halves of a plain
under a seamless amber sky

Soft wind tousles
the thin white weeds
as a single crow
cackles at evening

Day's last light
dwindles to a candle-glow
and night's eyes open
blinking distantly

Behind tinted windows
tired faces contemplate
empty eyes reflected
in the sable darkness
beyond the glass

Nancy J. Hoffman

steps forward and gives up her ticket to
the man in white.

Valentines'

Well, I readily admit that I'm no poet.

I know it, and have proven it.

before. But on Valentines', it is Valentines.
I'll take it on my stoop'd verse to write a line
in love, of love, to you you see I must.

OH! Cruellest fate on this the sweetest day of days!
For poets everywhere, to place their verse, stilted
verse, 'gainst others to compare,
Like Shakespeare's!

Throughout the ages, yea the years,
Poets spill their salted tears across their lines
of love, on Valentines, their rhymes of love,
like Donne's, written, written
well, really well, indeed.

So well that I cannot compete
with those dead men, moldering now, who've written
words so poignant and sincere you'll likely
read their works and fall in love with them
instead of me.

Originality is praised, but think how hard it's come to be
to foster uniqueness and rhyme still.
Love poems must rhyme or die.
Rhyme is dead.

It's moldering there by Shakespeare's feet,
right and left, both complementary,
I'm sure.

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's Day?
It's been done before, but if I could I would.
I think you will last forever.

He didn't think of that in his theatre,
working on his love poems all year,
working without respite, from spite,
making the rest of us seem trite,
five hundred years later,
Dead, not decomposing.

but seeming to last forever,
like other things that I could name:
A poem, a kiss,
A poet's world upon your lips.
Something even Shakespeare missed.

Gary D MacDonald

MY GRANDMOTHER'S GRAVE

Standing alone,
I can smell the clean scent
of her soft skin
washed in Noxema
She stands by the oak tree
dressed in a silk dress
printed in swirls
of blue and violet carnations.
Her silver hair
neatly braided,
pinned in a French bun.
She is
as I remember her;
waving, calling me,
saying: "Keep me
in your heart's pocket."
I say "I always do."
Looking up,

she isn't
there.

Pat Hanley

Porous Grey Ice and Snow

The day is typical for April in New England. The winter's snow has melted now, or is melting where it is piled beside the road, where it is no longer snow but porous grey ice instead. Crystalline perhaps if clean, but marred by soot and dirt. Early birds twitter about the trees, still searching for a worm in the decidedly unspringy and downright sticky mud of the month. The Chevette, as it turns onto the bumpy, dead-end road, is salt-spattered, like a lobster boat. Rust has bitten into it over the winter months, and it rattles and clunks its way to an inconspicuous spot in front of either of two houses. Moments pass, but for the shuddering halt of the small car's engine, quietly, until finally, its driver side door opens, and a man gets out.

His name is Brenton Quigley, and there is little that can be said to be distinctive in his appearance. He wears a denim jacket, the collar of which he has just pulled forward, and beneath that, a blue-striped shirt of some kind. His pants are denim too, and his shoes, well, they're just sneakers, ordinary in every way. His features, are rounded, although the angles of his cheeks stand out. And above that, his eyes... his eyes are, well they're blue, and intent. And there is something of compassion revealed within them, not in his eyes so much as in the skin, and in the muscles,

and the folds about, around and below his eyes that reveal worry, which reveal care, and a capacity for hope. For one cannot care unless he hopes, hopes to receive something from, or to give something to, those around him. Brenton Quigley's eyes, as we speak, are intent upon one of the two houses before him. He is looking for something. But they are intent upon some other thing now as well. They are intent upon some something far away and in the back of his head. Intent upon something he cannot see. For there is, after all, something distinctive about Brenton Quigley. He has a dream.

Men need a dream. We need some quiet hope, some hope of redemption, some goal in life, a love or a god, some promise for the future, an illusion we can take hold of, a dream. Our big brains work against us that way. They tell us that all we've got can't just be for survival!

I wish that I had lived, the way that Romeo and Juliet did. They had a dream. Their love, as the love of any thirteen-year-old must be, was a dream. But they ended, still caught up in that whirl of passion, in that crazy delirium that a first "love" is. Would that I had soared to that apex as did they, and there, like a spectacular rocket on the Fourth of July, to have exploded, to have self-destructed, and to have added a little beauty to the world. Instead, I

never did explode. I sputtered to the ground, and I skittered across it like a frustrated, fallen firecracker with no direction will, before it burns out, before it grows cold. Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all? Better to have loved and died.

But the Tale of Brenton Quigley. . . The Dreamer. Let me begin it again. This time, in the grand style. This time, the style that strikes me as only appropriate. . . Once, once upon a time, and long, long ago, there lived a gentle lad. A boy of twenty or of twenty-five. He was not much younger, certainly not much older, he had a dream, and, you may already have guessed, his name was Brenton Quigley.

Brenton Quigley drove a dilapidated but friendly grey Chevette. He had very little money, and he attended a very public school. He studied the social sciences, and he was adept at them.

Such are the facts, the facts we might have garnered from the school computer. What is more is what few people could tell you. That were this a true, "Once upon a time. . ." tale, Brenton Quigley would surely be more than simply "Brenton Quigley." Without a doubt, he would have been Sir Brenton Quigley, or Duke Brenton Quigley, or some other of the grand appellations appropriate to those heroes who, in the fairy tales, champion the causes of the weak and the meek. Did he not drive his lovely Chevette, he would have mounted a great,

white stallion. And were he not trailed by carbon monoxide fumes, flights of angels would have sung him to his destination. He stands now beside his faithful Chevette, watching one of those two houses between which he has parked. He fingers his jacket collar, looks about, and the fresh April air ruffles the hair round his fingers. Finally, his indecision pays off, when the porch door opens, and she appears waving and smiling, and walking toward him. He smiles back at her in relief, and in joy, and in having her all to himself.

She is Linda, and were this a true "Once upon a time. . ." tale, she would be a lady fair, and the youngest, fairest, favorite daughter of some great elfin king and some great elfin queen who would surely never approve the love these two bear each other. Who would surely not allow her out of doors without some guard. Who would surely never let these two see each other unless poor Sir Brenton could somehow perform some dread service for them, and not die in the doing. For she is sweetness and fairness and beauty and light. Were this a fairy tale, Lady Linda would be in a tower growing her hair, and hanging sweetly out the one barred window. Oh, were this a fairy tale, Lady Linda would surely not be carrying Sir Brenton's baby, and these two could never be hugging on the lawn.

"Lady Linda. . ." In her hair, in her ear, his voice is moist, and in the air it speaks in crystals haloing her head.

"What's the matter, love?" He breathes and looks her in the eye.

He had an idea, of course, of what was the matter. He knew well enough that she was not sure she should have the baby. But they had talked, and he had thought he had convinced her that to lose this, the first physical product of their love, to give it away because they were afraid they couldn't handle it, would leave them each with a regret, a sense of loss, a void in their life where a question would loom. And yes, having the child would demand sacrifices of both of them. They would have to alter their dreams for the future, get married right away, before either of them really felt sure of it. And he would get a full-time job, and go to school at night. But God, they had been going out almost two years, and if that wasn't a long time as relationships went, still, it was longer than some. He knew he loved her, she knew she loved him, at least she said she did. And, eventually they would get married anyway. Even if it meant sacrificing some hopes, still that would be better than sacrificing their child.

And there was a sweet dream he had told her of: A simple dream, a new dream. A dream to replace the dream of a great, big wedding, a dance with dad, a tiered cake, and a dream to replace the dream of the cozy little house with the furniture that fit just so. They would have a simple wedding, for they could afford no more, which, in its very meagerness would be more romantic than

all the adornments of the Catholic Church. And they would rent an apartment, or buy a small, unfinished house, that together they could repaint, and rewire, and rebuild to a satisfaction that they could never buy in a new house. They could work together, and make their home another baby, another physical manifestation of their love. And he dreamed of her, five months from now, big with their child, in overalls, a kerchief in her hair, a splash of white paint upon her forehead and brushed upon her cheek, dusty, but bright-faced with exertion and beside him building a home somewhere. Imagining a small room for the child somewhere, and the two of them making love in the afternoon, on unfurnished floors with wet paint drying unheeded around them. This was the dream he had painted for the two of them, and the dream for which she had said she would carry the child to term.

"Oh Brenton." And her eyes were gone from his, closing against his shoulder, staring to the sky beyond him and returning brighter than before, blinking a tear. "I can't have it!" She choked the words and hugged him, tight, afraid. He held her, silently, but finally had to ask, "Why?" although he felt like a clumsy fool butting into affairs of her body, female affairs in which he had no right besides the knowledge that he was responsible for what she carried. It was humiliating. That she should cry, that he could have done this to her, made him feel like an insensitive ass, and that he

should not understand what made her cry only made him feel more foolish, more cruel, more blundering.

"It's just not right." She wiped a tear from her eye, and stared down at her feet.

"But God..." If she didn't want the child that was up to her but, "You love me don't you?"

"Yes, Yes..."

"Then why won't you marry me?"

She spoke the words like she was speaking to an idiot. "Don't you see? I can't marry you now. Not for this. Not like this. Look, I've known it for a week and couldn't say. I'm not gonna have it. I can't"

"Okay, okay. I know, I know." He knew it was a mistake. He held her and she did not cry, she just stood rigid within his arms.

He knew she was wrong. God, this is a child! He had a future, he might someday play ball, or look cute in his shorts, or get ice cream all over his face. There was so much she was forfeiting not just him and her but this kid. He knew she was wrong. "Linda..."

"Brenton, I've got an appointment today. I just want you to be there."

And that was that. He couldn't force her to marry him, and he surely couldn't force her to carry the child against her will. He would not have had her act against her will. He couldn't saddle her with his child to carry for nine months, to care for years. His heart sank within him. All his dreams of a simple,

romantic life that had made his previous dreams pale in comparison, that had shown him how lonely those dreams had been, sank, sagged, deflated and fell inside him. But he clung to what he knew and more than hid his pain. "If that's the way you feel kid, then that's fine." And he lifted her chin with his finger. "I'll be with you all the way."

He held the door open for her, closed it behind her and settled in behind the wheel, bleeding inside, ignoring the pain like Sir Brenton would have, and started his Chevette. He drove her where she had to go, and he held her hand while she was there. And he was very sweet and very sad, and all the while he acted as if he agreed with what she had done. In short, he sacrificed himself for her most excellently, and most lamentably, as Romeo did, and Juliet did as well.

Were this a fairy tale, I would say they lived happily ever after, and perhaps I will anyway. Were this a fairy tale, in which people like Brenton Quigley got what they deserved, I would say that he had won the princess with his feats of derring-do. By saving her and by sacrificing himself for her, I would say that he won fame throughout the realm. But his act was held, of course, in the strictest confidence. And no one ever knew what danger the princess had been in. And no one ever saw Sir Brenton's scars, though the pain of them could sometimes be seen about his eyes, in the folds of skin that hung

his salt-spattered Chevette about. And the best ending, for so sad a tale it seems, is simply that it end, here, before we discover what happens next.

Gary D MacDonald

and can still close our eyes, wait, and wish to hear, "...they lived happily ever after to the end of their days."

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