

A black and white photograph of a landscape. In the foreground, there are tall, thin grasses or reeds growing in a field. In the background, there is a small, simple building or shed. The overall scene is somewhat desolate and rural.

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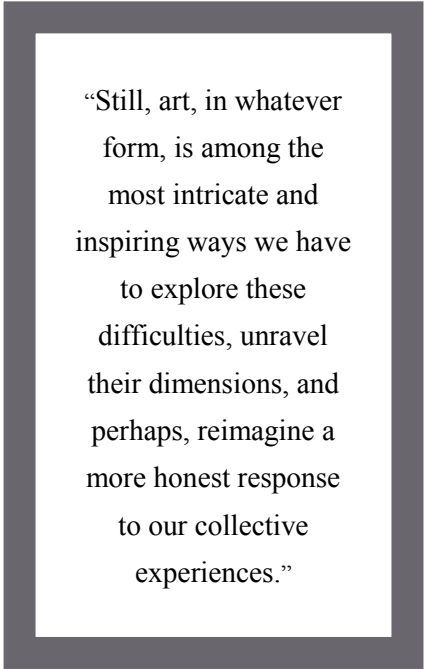
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Introduction

Art in Our Times

This was a difficult year, which, I suppose, is a feeling that could describe any year, depending on how often the glass spills and deeply the liquid stains. Such cynicism is not particularly helpful. Yet something about this year felt fraught, wrenched and unstable, a mood I can't shake no matter how much mint tea I drink or chocolate cake I eat.

For example, a person claimed in a public forum, showing no concern for historical accuracy, that “the Irish had it worse than the slaves”; another American died in a foreign war; the unions that saved generations of workers, including my grandfather, father, and mother from poverty and abject misery (read *Children of the Abyss* or *Germinal* for a taste of these times) were attacked; the rich avoided paying their fair share once again by claiming to be “job creators”; and Rupert Murdoch bribed another police officer, neither of whom shuddered at the misery he caused. And given all this, people still believe the obvious lies spouted by the vacuous personalities haunting cable news programs; and the empathy that might have helped one person imagine the suffering of another, and seek its remedy, disappeared into the fear-riddled fence running along Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, and the polished floors of the Wisconsin State Senate.



“Still, art, in whatever form, is among the most intricate and inspiring ways we have to explore these difficulties, unravel their dimensions, and perhaps, reimagine a more honest response to our collective experiences.”

Still, art, in whatever form, is among the most intricate and inspiring ways we have to explore these difficulties, unravel their dimensions, and perhaps, reimagine a more honest response to our collective experiences. But such efforts are not easy now that our freedom to speak truthfully is under attack. For this and myriad other reasons, the efforts col-

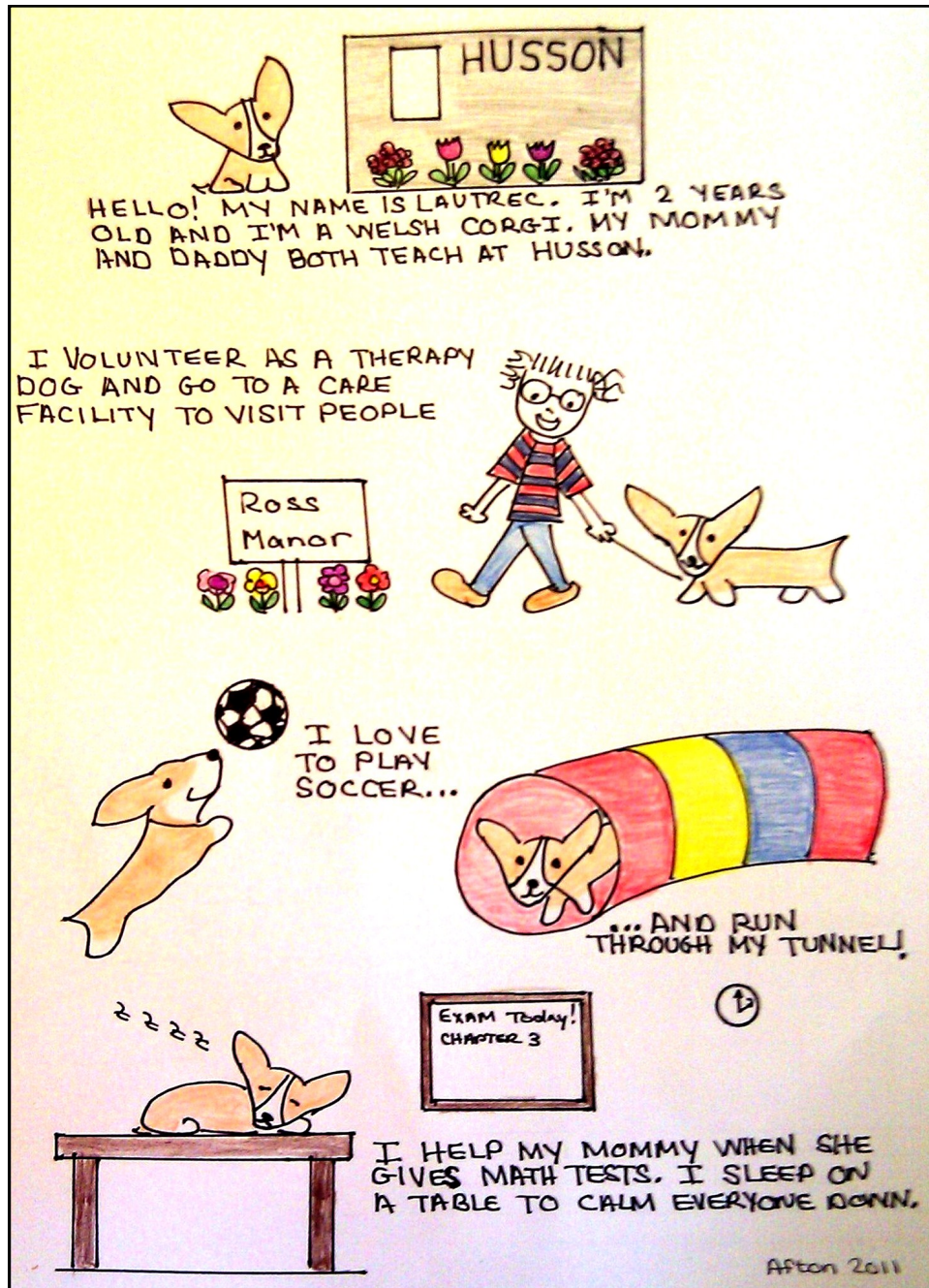
lected here matter. They breathe the stench of sincerity back into the faces of those spouting lie after lie, and I continue to hope that truth's garlicky taint will season those wretched meals that are so often placed before us.

These are indeed bad times, and the contributions collected here emerged, consciously or otherwise, from this heart-breaking context. Read these works and consider what they suggest about how we might aspire to something more uplifting. Consider Dave Haskin's drawing and imagine how winter has shaped our sense of community, how cold has infused the Mainer with cool strength and frigid insight. Follow the adventures of Lautrec and laugh, realizing how our pets distract us from the otherwise withering stress, fear, and failures of our world. Read the poems and short stories and ponder the photographs for the depths they mine and the wonder they inspire. Realize that even in bad times, when all graphs seem to trend downward, kindness and good will remain.

The Editor

Irene Haskins (Afton)

The Adventures of Lautrec



Posey & Spilt Oil

Jamie Gagnon

A Slave to the Rhyme

I've been a slave to the rhyme.
Chains of servitude wasted, *
Feigning happiness like a mime street performer.

I fight to be ridden,
Fight to break Mother Goose's Hip Hop,
I want my skill hidden, subliminal.

This isn't fifth grade,
Where my poems I couldn't spit,
And my lines spoken like Sling Blade Billy Bob.

Even now I struggle to slow,
Revisions allow a second chance,
That otherwise here would show pop.

Well now it's time to break these shackles,
I B-line for the door,
Like a madman letting out a cackle chortle.

I reach my exit free from the evil,
Looking back inward I see the pure,
So from line one to now, I obey this one last time.

*Chains is a unit of measurement equal to 66 feet.

□

My Favorite Shirt

My favorite shirt is ripping.
Years of fade couldn't touch it,
Miles of use
immaterial.

But the
Preser-
Still I fight

shirt continues
vation past its
against its final

to shred.
prime,
trash can.

Forces pull
My lower
And the

back in common strings hood

tug of war,
away,
aches more.

Why must my favorite shirt pay?

I consider
Does this

termination,
suit?

type of shirt
Forces work for a reason,
Maybe I need a new one?

“The shirt remains,” declared by I.

Forces do your worst,

With scissors this shirt is so much more.

☐

Susmita Chatterjee

The Thematic Value of Tagore's Dance Dramas

Poet Rabindranath Tagore has written three thousand lyrics in Bengali and turned them into music, a number of extraordinary dramas and dance dramas, novels, essays and short stories that are world renowned. His contribution in the field of literature has amazed all and it shall forever remain so for generations to come. No wonder that he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1913 for his immortal book of poems, "Geetanjali" or "The Song Offerings".

In the present article, three of his dance dramas and their thematic value is discussed. His most popular dance drama "Chandalika" (the daughter of a chandal or untouchable) sends a message of social reform for India.

The drama opens with a bevy of young damsels playing games in an open space on the stage. At one corner a dark girl stands and looks at the playing damsels. Nobody plays with her for she is an untouchable's daughter.

The seller of colorful glass bangles comes along and sings a song to draw the attention of the young damsels. His song tells of the beautiful bangles he has brought and anyone who would listen to him and buy his bangles shall be successful in love. For these bangles like handcuffs will tie the heart of the lover to hers. All the girls rush to buy the bangles, but when Prakriti, the untouchable girl approaches, the other girls tell the bangle seller "not to touch her for does he not know that she is the daughter of an untouchable?"

Then comes the vender of yogurt to sell and the dark girl approaches him to buy some; the young damsels warn the vender that "his yogurt will be polluted if he sells to her for she is an untouchable's daughter. If he touches her, his yogurt will be polluted. Does he not know that?" With a weeping heart Prakriti moves to the sell that was meant for the untouchables of the village. She sits there lonely and isolated.

The Buddhist monk Ananda is passing that way in scorching heat, preaching the message of the Buddha. He is extremely thirsty and begs for some water from Prakriti who shudders to think that she would be serving the monk with water. In an agonizing tone, she says that she is not blessed enough to serve him with water for she is the daughter of

an untouchable. For Ananda, a Buddhist monk, there is nobody untouchable. He tells her, "I am the same human being as you are, oh damsel, and that water is holy which quenches the thirst of the thirsty, so please serve me with water."

Prakriti now pours water in his palms and he drinks it to his satisfaction and leaves. At this high point of the drama, Prakriti is transformed and she realizes that she is like a rare flower that God made and there is no pollution in herself and she is blessed on earth. She becomes a follower of the Buddha and follows Anada, the Buddhist monk.

As a poet, Tagore knew the anguished soul of the untouchable girl and also the magnanimity of the Buddhist monk who is full of compassion and is above social stratification of the caste system. This is a theme that India needed; the benign message of compassion and equality of all humans that the Buddha preached two thousand five hundred years before Christ.

The next drama of Tagore that fascinated all thinking minds is "Chitrangada". It is a dance drama based on the story of a princess of Manipur, India. Chitrangada, the princess, is the protector of the people of her kingdom. She is dressed as man's attire and goes to the forest to hunt with her female companions who are also dressed as males with bows and arrows. The sky was dark with clouds and thunder cloud-bursts were expected on the shady forest.

They try to find their prey to hunt in the forest. Right at that time, the hero of the Mahabharat, the great Arjun, was asleep under the shady tree and bushed of the dark forest. It was a period of time in his life when he was to live in incognito as an exile due to the terms of a chess game that his elder brother had entered with his cousin at Hastinapur, now a dilapidated kingdom. They lost the chess game and needed to fulfill the term of being exiled and live incognito, unknown to the world. Tagore brings into his dance drama this story of the Mahabharat and dove-tail the legend of the epic.

So we find Arjun among the bushes and Chitrangada in her hunting mood tramples on Arjun, unaware. A most sacrilegious thing for her to do! Arjun wakes up in anger and asks "who could do this preposterously arrogant deed of trampling on the great Arjun, in disrespect?" He as and looks around only to find some boys. Little did he know that they were girls dressed in boy's clothes! So he feels amused and laughs at their indiscretion. "Oh how funny, oh so funny. Go back to your mothers boys and don't be afraid of Arjun," and walks away from the scene.

For Chitrangada it was a shock. She explained, “Oh you are Arjun, please come back, do not insult me. For I am a woman, not a boy.” But Arjun didn’t come back and she was in a mood of anguish for she knew about prince Arjun and perhaps had thoughts of adoration for the great prince and hero of the Mahabharat. In deep anguish she prays to Madain, the god of love or Cupid, the Greek god of love. She entreats her to give her unparalleled beauty just for a year, to vanquish the proud Arjun. Cupid or Madan readily agrees and showers her with extremely beautiful looks as a boon to a princess who was so indifferent to love.

Chitrangada, now a beautiful woman, finds herself in a mood of love and her heart is full of unheard music that resonates in her beautiful body. Her mind is in a state of ecstasy and she feels the longings of love. Arjun finds her in the forest and now falls in love at first sight. They have a span of ecstatic love and passion. Soon, however, “love’s sad satiety” grips Arjun. It is not enough for a brave and valiant man like him to be ruled by love.

At this point some villagers pass the forest. They are tormented and disarrayed due to some devastating catastrophe that has struck them. They are, therefore, searching for the princess Chitrangada, who always saves them from trouble. But she is not to be found, so they shout her name and beg to her to save them from their plight. Arjun listens to their cry and utters that it could be great to meet princess Chitrangada, who can surely satisfy a brave man like him. As soon as Chitrangada hears this she rushes to Madan (or Cupid) and tells him to help her vanquish her beauty and get back her original looks. She comes back as princess Chitrangada and meets Arjun, declaring that she is the princess Chitrangada, whom he is seeking. Arjun, who is deeply satisfied to find the great prince of Manipur, brave and glorious. Legend says that Arjun married Chitrangada and gave her a son. It is a belief in that area that the progeny of the great Arjun, the epic hero, rule the kingdom of Manipur even to this day. Tagor, in his sensitive way, brings out the truth that the beauty of a woman, however beguiling, is not that important. What matters is the greatness of her character and her benevolence.

The last, but not the least, “Shyama”, is a dance drama of a unique nature. It is psychological and full of dramatic array of events. Love is a passion that brings human beings to heights of violence and can drown a person in the abyss of treachery, resulting in ignoble action. We find Tagore at his best in assessing human nature and he renders it in beautiful poetry and music. It actually reminds me of Italian Opera in Indian setting.

Shyama is the courtesan in a king's court and has immense power over all the people who matter. She watches from her palace window as a handsome, tall young man rounded up by the Kotwal (chief of police) is being taken to jail. She falls in love with the person inevitably at first sight. She asks her maid to go running to the Kotwal and ask him to meet her. The Kotwal comes and stands in service to the courtesan. She requests that he leave the prisoner, Vajrasen, with her for a couple of days. The Kotwal obeys and leaves Vajrasen at Shyama's disposal. It was love at first sight for both. Shyama is in the top of her mood in love and Vajrasen is much impressed by this unsolicited freedom from prison that Shyama brought to him. Strictly speaking, Vajrasen was not of any fault. The Kotwal rounded him up because he had to find a thief for the theft in the royal palace.

Meanwhile, the dramatic events take the audience to another character, Uttiya, who loves Shyama and is enamored by her although Shyama does not respond to him. However, at this moment, Shyama is in need of Uttiya. She asks him to go to the Kotwal and show her ring, telling him that it is he, Uttiya, who is the thief and not Vajrasen. The Kotwal grips him by the arm and throws him into the dungeon, releasing Vajrasen from jail. He needed a thief and he got one.

The Kotwal brings Vajrasen to Shyama on her instruction and they leave in a boat that was ready for an unknown destination. Uttiya dies on the scaffold that was meant for Vajrasen. He was happy to sacrifice his life for Shyama's happiness.

Shyama takes deep pleasure in the company of Vajrasen and plunges in amorous love. Vajrasen is in love too and he asks Shyama the million dollar question, how was she able to release him from prison and free him from the wrath of the law and king. Shyama replies, "We shall not talk about it now." Vajrasen's questioning does not end. He makes another attempt to know how he had won his freedom. Shyama does not reply. They pass through the land and watch a variety of scenes, a few women who were returning from the market place and going back home. Vajrasen brings up the question again, "How did you save me from death?" Shyama now comes out with the truth and tells that Uttiya was ready to do anything to please her. He was in jail for Vajrasen and died for him at the request of Shyama.

Vajrasen felt as if he were struck with thunder and he instantly stands up and calls Shyama a sinner and tells her to leave his life. He was terribly agonized to know that he owed his life to Shyama who could act so heinously in the nature of love. Shyama leaves the boat and van-

ishes into the forest.

Vajrasen is pained in anguish for the misdeed of Shyama. He is in a fury of love and hate, a unique situation to be depicted in a dance drama. And he prays to God , the almighty, to pardon Shyama for God forgives all sinners and may He forgive and pardon Shyama. Thus this pathetic and tragic drama ends with Vajrasen searching for Shyama, even though he hates her.

The sensitive poet, Tagore, portrays the unique situation in the love relationship of men and women and brings forth the heartfelt need of forgiveness for human sin and failings.

□

Nature & Desiccated Corn Fields

Britteny L. Burby

Where The Butterflies Hide In The Rain

When the rain dropped down your honest face and slowly fell off your lips, it was then that I realized how much I loved you.

When your eyes saw past my defenses, my heart beat so sudden it thrummed out the sound of the rain's soft fall upon the ground.

No more protest within my soul, seeing into your eyes more feeling hits me than words could express.

From the first kiss, your lips whispered secrets within your soul, innocence glistened back.

The warmth of your body wrapped tenderly around me, a promise to keep me safe.

Wishing the touch of your skin would linger on forever.

Fluttering, wings beating hard against my rib cage, that's where the butterflies hide in the rain.

As the rain fell the world seemed so far away, a distant memory in a cloudy haze.

Steam from the rain, clouds around us, as I hold onto this moment forever, with you wishing it would never end.

□

Alabama Summer, 1936

I woke up to yet another day in society's depression. Laid before me an open field made with no such promise of a better today. My life as broken as the picket fence destroyed before me. A light breeze dances across my skin like a tickle of hope, as I see all the work I have to execute before me. The hot Alabama sun scorches my skin, a reminder of this time that only seems to get tougher with each passing day. Soot and dirt streak my face as hard labor leaves its mark. Goose flesh comes for I am the roots of a tree strong and wise, as death creeps closer. I look up at the world's beauty, wondering if it's still possible to admire. Searching the clouds outlined with silver for a way out of this demise, a new day yet to come, though I'm not sure I want it to. Wild life moves on around me oblivious to society's stupidity. I ask the birds, "what is it like to be free?"

□



Nature's Remains and Cobscook Beauties by Beth Clark



The Story & Moldy Crumbs Under Couch Cushions

Stefanie Foutch

Don't Fear The Reaper

"This is so ridiculous!" exclaimed Leona. She had been upset about Prom ever since it was brought up in school.

"Don't be such a drag. You'll have fun, I know it." replied Layla.

"I still think the theme is totally stupid. Why would they use Halloween as a theme anyways? I want a real prom, not a kiddie theme."

Leona had a reason to be upset, but it was not going to ruin Prom for Layla. The school had voted on a Halloween theme for this year. It was all because of the new media craze; the vampires, werewolves and pirates. It was all over TV, many authors wrote a book about it, and of course, every teenager fell in love with it. Layla was not extremely thrilled over the theme either, but she had been waiting for Prom since she was in the first grade. She would not let some silly little thing like this stop her from going. And it would certainly not stop her from dragging her best friend along with her.

Layla tried encouraging Leona. "C'mon Leo, just pick a costume, we're gonna be late. Prom is tonight you know?" Layla tried encouraging Leona.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I guess I'll just go with the princess costume. At least it is somewhat close to a Prom dress." Leona shuddered.

"It is cute. I'm gonna be a pirate. I'll fit right in. What do you think of it?" Layla asked holding up a girl pirate costume.

Luckily, there was a Halloween shop that was open all year long. It was a good thing since Prom is in May, and not in October.

"It's fine." Leona was still being a grouch.

The girls paid for their outfits and then headed to the car. They were going to McDonalds for something to eat. They had decided to get ready together for Prom at Layla's house later that night. They already did everything together. They were inseparable. They were best friends, and they had been since they were in Kindergarten.

Eric would come by after the girls were dolled up to pick them up, in a limo. Eric was a tall and handsome young man. He was brave,

and every girl loved him. Of course, he was also on the football team. He was everything every girl in school drooled over, but his heart was already stolen by Leona. They were the perfect couple. Leona was a blond, blue eyed, average height pretty little thing. Leona was smart as well. All the boys gawked at her, just like the girls loved Eric. However, Leona never seemed to notice. She was just too in love with Eric, who she had been dating ever since their freshman year in high school. They talked about getting married someday, but right now they were satisfied with the way they were.

Layla on the other hand did not have a boyfriend, or for that matter a date for Prom. It bothered Layla slightly. She was just as beautiful as Leona, except she was socially awkward. Some people even confused the two for sisters, but there was a major difference between the girls. Leona was popular, and Layla was simply not. Layla liked to lay low, she kept to herself. She always had her nose in a book, and if a cute boy even asked her how she was doing, she would clam up and break out in a sweat.

She had been waiting for a long time for a boy to ask her out. She dreamed of it often, but she knew it would not happen by tonight. She would just have to be the third wheel at Prom and hope that someone would ask her to dance. If that plan did not work out, she already had another one, hang out at the punch bowl and pretend to fit in.

There was a knock on the door, and the girls knew it was Eric. Layla open her front door and saw Eric dressed in a clown costume, wearing a bright red wig, and holding a pink corsage in his right hand that was waiting to be put on Leona's wrist.

"Arr matte!" joked Eric as he squinted one eye at Layla.

"Hey there." replied Layla with a smirk.

"Where's my princess?" he asked.

"I'm right here." said Leona with a frown as she walked down the stairs holding up the puffy pink dress.

"Well, well, well, what have we here? You look gorgeous."

"Thanks babe." said Leona trying to keep the frown on her face, but she was flattered and the mooney frown turned. Eric always said the right thing.

"Are we all set to go?" Asked Eric, still staring at his future wife. Layla looked around the house, then at Leona. "Yeah, I think we are."

"Okay then." replied Eric.

The three of them stepped outside to find a black limousine wait-

ing for them to climb in. Eric was that kind of guy that would do anything for his woman, and Leona knew it. She had asked him to bring a limo. To Layla, the idea of ridding in a limo while wearing Halloween costumes was somewhat silly, but she could not resist. She wanted a limo too. Plus, she already had to talk Leona into going to Prom, she might as well let her have a limo ride.

The ride was not very long. The high school was only about three miles away from Layla's house. That was all right though, Layla was anxious to get there. Even if no one would dance with her there. The three of them arrived and they all headed inside.

The group walked into the main entrance of the building, to find the principal selling tickets. Most of the students attending Prom had all ready bought their tickets, but there were always the procrastinators. All three of them gave their tickets to Mr. Clifford, the principal. In return he stamped their hands with red ink. They all thanked him and headed over to the gymnasium.

Walking into the gymnasium was quite intense. The Prom Crew did an excellent job decorating the place. There were scary things everywhere, and of course the place was dark. There was a DJ, and he had his strobe lights and a disco ball set up. There were masks, statues, and cobwebs all over the place. It seriously looked like walking into a haunted house, just with fast music playing. The gymnasium was all ready packed with people, and Prom had only started an hour ago. Everyone was dressed up in costumes for the occasion. There were people dressed as vampires, werewolves, pirates, princesses, goblins and wizards. There was even a guy dresses as a pumpkin, this made Layla chuckle to herself. One girl even had the guts to dress in a skimpy suit and a silver wig, which made her look like Lady Ga Ga. Layla wondered how long it would take the chaperons to see the girl in such a costume and escort her out.

By time Layla had finished looking around, she realized that Eric and Leona had already taken off. *Oh, great. Thanks guys.* Layla thought to herself. In a way she was not surprised that the couple had left her standing alone. It was still disappointing though. She had been hoping that Eric and Leona would hang out with her, but she was not gonna go track them down either. She decided to take a seat by the punch bowl, and work on plan B.

She was still looking around at all of the decorations when she bumped into something or someone. She had been too distracted by the things around her to pay any attention to where she was headed. When

she looked up to see what she had ran into, she saw the back of someone tall. The figure turned around too look at her. Layla was not sure if this person was a boy or a girl. The figured seemed too tall to be a girl, however, the person was wearing a black cloak with a hood over their face. The irony of the whole costume was that with the black hooded robe, there was also a scythe. She noticed the person was wearing gloves that made the hands look realistically like a skeleton's.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there."

"That is quite all right." replied the disguised person.

Layla could now tell that the hooded figure was a man. He had a deep, yet charming voice. He even spoke with eloquence. Layla thought that she had recognized an English accent in his tone of voice, but thought nothing of it. She found herself just standing in front of him, staring. When she realized what she was doing she blushed, and tried to walk past him.

The man grabbed her hand. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Was this really happening? I bump into one random guy, and then he asks me where I'm going? Layla thought this couldn't be true. She knew he would certainly ask her to dance. Which in turn made her nervous. *Was this all it took to get a guy to dance?* She thought to herself.

"Um, I was going... to get a drink. That's all." replied Layla.

"Why don't you dance with me a round first?" asked the hooded man.

Layla could feel herself starting to blush, but before she could say anything to him he grabbed her hand again. He started to pull Layla toward him. He grabbed her right hand with his, and wrapped the other one around her waist. A slow song started to play just in time. Almost as if the man had put the song on himself. Layla could feel that old familiar sweat starting to break out. She was still trying to find his eyes, but the hood was too dark and so was the room.

"So what is your name darling?" the hooded one asked her.

"My name is Layla." she answered him. "And yours?"

"What a beautiful name. Layla." he said it as if he were trying to memorize it.

"Thank you. So, your name?"

"You can call me Grim." he chuckled.

Layla knew that Grim could not be the man's real name. She knew it was a joke, because he looked so much like the Grim Reaper. She decided that she would just call him Grim anyways, getting a real

name out of him was going to be a challenge. Layla figured if he hung around her long enough, he would eventually give her his real name.

The first slow song ended, and ironically “Don't Fear The Reaper” by Blue Öyster Cult started to play. Layla recognized the song, it was one of her favorites. She almost started to laugh. *Here I am dancing with a man dressed as the Grim Reaper, and the song fits perfectly.* She heard herself think. She did not fear him, he seemed harmless, kind.

The song ended. Then another, and soon another. The two of them danced and danced. No matter what the beat was to a song, the two continued to rock back and forth slowly. They never said a word to each other, and Layla was okay with that. She was just happy to have a guy dance with her for the night, even if she had no idea what he really looked like or what his real name was. If she was lucky maybe Grim would ask her out on a date.

Layla had not noticed the time. She also had not noticed that people were starting to leave. Soon the gymnasium became empty.

“I should go. Thank you for a wonderful time.” Layla said pulling back.

“Oh, no. There are still people dancing. You must stay. Grant me one more dance with you darling.” replied Grim.

“I shouldn't. I came here with my friends, if they leave without me I'll have no way of getting home.”

“I have a vehicle. I will give you a ride. Hmm?”

Layla knew she shouldn't stay. She did not know who Grim was, she did know that riding home with a stranger was a bad idea. However, she was enjoying his company, even if he did not say much. She really did want to stay with him. She actually never wanted to leave. There was something about Grim. A charm, his personality was so inviting and caring. She decided that one more dance couldn't hurt.

An half an hour later the DJ announced; “That's all folks.”

Layla turned around to see that her and Grim were the only other people left

standing in the gymnasium, except for the chaperons and the DJ.

“Oh great! Now they've done it!” cried Layla. She should have known better.

“What is it?” asked Grim.

“My friends, they ditched me.”

“What kind of friends are they then?”

Layla didn't know what to say. She knew she needed Leona and Eric to give her a ride home. They were her only friends, and her parents were out of town for two weeks. *You stupid, stupid girl! One boy asks you to dance and you go crazy. What were you thinking?* She also had no money for a cab ride home, it looked like she would be walking.

"I really should go now." said Layla trying to pull away from Grim again.

"At least let me escort you out." answered Grim.

Layla saw no harm in it. She headed for the doors, and Grim followed. When she got outside, it was freezing cold. Layla started to shiver. She knew it would be brutal walk home, no jacket and in high heels.

"Are you not cold darling?" asked Grim.

Layla found it odd that Grim always called her darling. In a way, she also found it cute. But, whatever he called her, it was not her main problem right now. She needed to get home.

"You are cold. You are shivering. Let me take you to your home." said Grim.

You know better than to ride with strangers, especially if you don't even know what they look like. She shook the thought off, and nodded at Grim.

"Splendid darling. Right this way." he said, his tone seeming to sound happy.

Layla followed Grim through the parking lot. It was late, cold, dark, and it was a huge parking lot. She never noticed how big it actually was before. She continued to walk along side Grim until they came up to a hearse.

I told you this was a bad idea. The guy drives a hearse, for crying out loud! Layla heard that familiar inside voice. Once again, she did not listen to it.

"You drive a hearse?" asked Layla.

"Yes. Well, just for tonight. I thought it would be a nice touch to my costume." answered Grim.

"Do you own it?"

"No, I... borrowed it." Grim answered Layla's question.

"Doesn't it give you the creeps? There have been tons of dead people in there before." she stated.

"There have in the past. However, I promise you darling that there are no corpses inside the vehicle at this current moment." he reassured her.

Layla chuckled. She knew this was what she had to ride in to get

home. Grim was nice enough to give her a ride, what he drove should not matter. Besides, it was not his regular car. He said he only borrowed it for tonight.

Layla stepped into the hearse and Grim slid into the driver's side. There was no music playing when he started the car. She found the silence eerie, but she was also no conversationalist when it came to talking to guys. She would just have to wait until Grim said something.

"When did you think your time would come?" asked Grim as they started to drive down the road.

Layla tilted her head. "Excuse me?"

"I mean exactly what I said. When did you think your time would come?" he answered his tone getting lower. She noticed that the car was starting to move faster. Or was she just imagining it?

"I'm not sure how to answer that. My time for what?"

"Oh do not play stupid with me. You know what I mean." answered Grim.

Layla could feel her heart racing. She looked out the window again, and this time she knew that the car was in fact moving faster. Much faster than she would be comfortable with.

"Hey, you should slow down." Layla told Grim, her voice starting to shake.

"Are you criticizing my driving? I am perfectly capable of driving!" he started to yell. His voice was so much deeper than it ever had been the entire night.

"If you wish not to answer my previous question that is fine. I just like to get to know the ones I have to take." Grim continued on.

"Take? Take where?" Layla was beginning to become extremely nervous. She could feel the tears starting to swell up in her eyes. *Something is totally wrong here. What is he doing? What is he talking about?* The voice in Layla's head started talking again.

"Maybe you should just let me out. I can walk from here. Please?" Layla insisted.

"Oh no. No, I cannot do that. See, you are on my list." Grim replied.

"What list?"

"You still have not figured it out. Have you? You stupid teenage girls, completely obsessed with finding a heart-stopping romance. This is getting easier every day. It is your time to go to the other side, and it is my duty to bring you there." Grim ranted as he sped up. The hearse was beginning to move so fast it started to shake.

Layla could feel the words climbing up her throat, but it was too late. Grim took a hard right turn, off of the road. Layla saw that what he had done was irreversible. She tried to look at him as the hearse went flying off of the edge. However, Grim was gone. She could not figure out how Grim could leave the hearse while it was tumbling down the hill. *Did he fly out the window?* Layla asked herself. However, there was no broken or open windows that he could have been thrown out of.

All of it did not matter. The next event was too dramatic. Layla and the hearse went rolling down the hill. Layla could feel the wind being knocked out of her with every contact with the ground. She could not regain her breath. She could feel her organs becoming bruised. She hit her head off of the window and the dashboard several times. Layla could not see anything around her, it was all a blur. It was all happening too fast, yet it was happening in slow motion. She felt every wound, hit and impact as the hearse continued to tumble. It seemed like forever, but the hearse finally made a landing.

The hearse was upside down, next to the hill that it had flown off of. Layla was hanging in the hearse, her seatbelt restraining her. Layla tried to look around but everything was starting to fade. She could hear someone approaching the smashed hearse; it was Grim.

"I am terribly sorry about this mess. I know you are having regrets and wondering why this had to happen to you on Prom night. My dearest apologies, but you are on my list. It is a shame that I had to ruin my vehicle for this." Grim explained.

Layla could hear Grim talking, but she could not see him. It was still dark and she was too badly hurt. She could feel her breathing slowing, she could hear her heart giving up. She was very dizzy, and hanging upside down in the hearse was making her nauseous. She closed her eyes as she listened to Grim one more time.

"Do not fear the reaper." Grim laughed.

□

J. Michael Adams

My Lucky Day

It was mid February in a small coastal town in Maine. The snow had been falling for most of the day and most residents went home early to wait out the storm. I, however, did just the opposite; I had been out driving around in the storm all day. I love a good snowstorm, and I especially love driving in it! When it snowed I had the chance to work on my drifting skills, which I was unable to do in the summer because I owned a little four-cylinder pickup. A snowstorm in a small town meant very little traffic, and with only one cop on the island, it also meant that the chances of getting caught acting up were slim. The cop headed east, and I went west.

It was about eight-o'clock at night, and my friend and I were riding around listening to music as loud as it would go, as we always did. The streets were empty and we had the town to ourselves. I drove down the breakwater and made a sliding u-turn and returned back up to the main road. I drove down through town and took a right up Key Street and the back end of my truck broke loose and we began to slide. Taking advantage of the situation I recovered and overcorrected on purpose to keep the slide going back and forth. I fishtailed up the street for a couple hundred yards when all of a sudden I lost control.

Unable to stop, I slid right into a white picket fence with a lattice arbor and finally stopped, my front bumper resting on a telephone pole. My friend and I looked at each other in horror, we new we where in trouble!

The thought of running had crossed our minds, but the vehicle had come to a rest about fifteen feet from the front door of the house—not to mention we could see the television inside the front window and the black silhouettes of the homeowners. Certainly they had to have heard the crash. Not to mention the truck was still running and had a loud exhaust. A minute or so passed and much to our surprise no one came outside. Knowing there was no way we were going to get away with this, we got out of the truck and walked up and knocked on the door. A few seconds passed and we knocked again this time a little louder; we leaned over and looked through the window. The TV was still on and the homeowners hadn't moved a bit. My buddy and I were beginning to have the same thoughts.

We began looking behind us, up one end of the road and down the other. There wasn't a soul in sight.

We ran back to the truck and looked over the damage, the truck had some white paint on the front bumper from the fence but other than that the vehicle was fine. However, the truck was stuck in a mixture of snow and broken fence. Frantically, my friend ran to the front of the truck and began to push, as I jumped in the cab. We began to rock the truck out of the snow. The engine was roaring both of us looking over our shoulders, thinking someone must hear this.

After about ten minutes of wrestling with the truck, we managed to get it back on the street. Looking around one last time, I sped away from the scene miraculously unnoticed. I drove down a dead end road to reassess the situation. We spent the next half hour scraping white paint off the front of the bumper to hide any evidence.

The next day I drove by where the accident happened and there was the local cop with his lights on and yellow tape around the broken fence. I slowed slightly to see what they were doing, gave them a wave, and kept on going. To this day I still have no idea how we got out of there without a single person taking notice. I guess it was just my lucky day!

□

Ryan Smart

an icy heart could mean the world

Standing in the icy heart
Of an inexhaustible field
I, however, did so yield
To being tempted to impart

For the fog is thick and muddled
As is the very distant wood
Together collectively hundreds stood
Neighboring and thrice befuddled

I suppose I could have spoke;
Enlightened the other's minds
Nay, though removing their blinds
As well as their altruistic cloaks

Forever like all, their limbs intertwine
Like the very roots upon their base
And the coarseness upon their face
Though they shall never remove mine

□

Divan Delgado

Dear Aquarius [Letter One]

Dear Aquarius,
Furnish me with the necessity of life
Enable the water to flow like streams
Enable me to swim through the sea of dreams
I wish to fathom the depths of the ocean
I wish to surf the waves
And drift through currents
Let me feel the rush of the surging rivers
With you as my guardian
I shall not dread the water
I shall live it
I shall be the caretaker of the Pisces
I shall preserve the life of Earth
And when I decease, I shall emerge in the waters
Dear Aquarius,
I see your great work with my own eyes
Permit me to be your pupil

□

Dear Aquarius [Letter Three]

Dear Aquarius,
Yet again I set sail in your ubiquity
As a drift through a sea of tranquility
Beyond my greatest viability you have me...
mesmerized
Until the point of a thousand eyes
From the waterfront to frontier
Across the horizon against the Troposphere
I find myself lost in a state of mind
Transfixed by captivating ripples
No timetable for my return
For I roam these waters like I am already home

Like no other world exists
Surrounded by a dynamic bliss
I look up at the stars
Back down at the fish
No astrological sign
Is better than this

□

Dear Aquarius [Letter 4]

Dear Aquarius,
Spring has sprung and so have I
I breathe fresh air through my lungs as I feel fresh rain against my palm
Drops to the ground run through roots and before my eyes flowers form
A single bud stands in garden waiting for the others
I wait for the others to enjoy this moment
A moment you have sparked
And when the sun sparks we catch rainbows
The colors of spring are here
I can already see the green on trees
The leaves covered with droplets
And music is made when they hit each puddle
Interesting how they create little streams down streets
Only for the boys and girls to splatter and splash with their little feet
I could smile at the sight

□

Brittany Pettegrow

Forgotten Memories

There is a legend now forgotten, a tale from the very beginning of the world. Passed down through the generations for a time, this legend has now faded from memory just as have the primordial gods and goddesses. Few now have even the knowledge that such a time existed, fewer still know anything more of it than a scattering of trivial facts. A memory can be a slippery thing, and there is no reason to remember a legend that caused neither widespread wars nor renowned successes. If people knew the tale, perhaps they would be interested to know that the time is not so far behind as it may seem. What is forgotten is never necessarily gone, and humanity would do well to remember that.

When a memory slips from the last person to hold it, where does it go? Does such knowledge simply vanish, never to emerge again? It would seem a waste for that to happen, Of course, such a thing would not be allowed to happen., so began the birthing of a particular legend, now only known to one woman. Many titles have been given to her over the ages: Memory Keeper, The Oracle, Chosen One. She accepts yet rejects them all, maintaining no name whatsoever. She is nothing and everything all at once, every forgotten memory is hers.

She dwelled for a time alone, needing neither social interaction nor outside interferences as she did her duties. Now has come a time, however, when even legends must make their presence known. Her aura was impossible to detect, her steps leaving neither trace nor vibrations. Undetectable except by sight, she was able to avoid most of the people around if she so desired. If one managed to get a glimpse of her as she traveled, they would most likely assume her to be a homeless peasant. Having no reason to care for material possessions, she clad herself only in a robe, the color precisely the same as a storm cloud before the rain. A soft and fluttering fabric, the edges were slightly frayed and small threads hung in front of her face. The robe trailed all the way to the ground and had long, wide sleeves. Wrapped tightly around

her body, all that could be seen were her small, delicate hands and what she chose to reveal of her face.

Her robe was adjusted so that her eyes were concealed, as well as her forehead and the top of her nose. Not a single strand of hair escaped, so the color and length were a complete mystery. Her lips were full, an odd purple color, their mere volume pointing towards youth. Her nose was delicate, unremarkable. Just below the edge of the robe, if one looked closely, they may see an odd mark that started on the apples of her cheeks and spread upward. A marble-esque effect, completely smooth to the touch and a touch more red than her usual skin tone, it could easily be missed if one were not directly conversing with her. The only other detail able to be spotted was a very faint blue glow under the neck of her robe, nearly undetectable thanks to the thickness of the fabric.

She entered the forest at her usual pace, neither hurried nor slow. Eyes unseen scanned the area, no movement of her head giving away that she was even aware of her surroundings. She walked a perfectly straight line, deviating only for trees, which she seemed to give an oddly wide berth. Appearing to ignore all beings present, she merely kept walking, almost as though searching for something. She was by no means a threatening presence, her build slender and her height only just topping five and a half feet. Her lips gave away no expression—a frown wasn't necessary, and her smiles were rare. As she walked, she kept her hands clasped in front of her stomach and her posture perfectly straight. Addressing none yet seeing all, she kept her silence and didn't pause as she moved through the realm.

Soon she came upon a young boy, clearly only a child, probably no older than five years old. He was sitting on a fallen tree and had both of his hands over his face, sobbing uncontrollably. Normally she would pass by without a comment, but by a strange twist of fate, he happened to look up just as she was passing. He looked up at her with huge green eyes, his face covered in tears. She paused since he was obviously looking directly at her, meeting his gaze with her unseen eyes. Of course he would have no idea if she was even looking at him, but he didn't seem to mind that as he slid down from the log and walked over to her.

She watched him approaching, calmly interested but not really willing to speak to him since children were some of the worst people for her to come into contact with.

The boy continued approaching her and she stayed silent, intrigued to see what he would do. He stopped directly in front of her and tugged on her robe, murmuring something quietly. It was easy to assume that he only wanted to talk to her, so she crouched down carefully in front of him, her eyes still concealed but a gentle smile on her lips. “What is it, child?” she asked, her voice a little deeper than some women but still very pleasant to hear. It held the ring of an ancient authority, a tone most people wouldn’t recognize upon hearing. Clearly the boy thought nothing of it, but he was staring at her oddly. The crack-like marks on her face fascinated him, and before she could react, he had reached out to touch her skin.

The very instant that his chubby fingers came into contact with her, he collapsed. All it took was the slightest touch. He wasn’t dead, of course, it wasn’t as if she cursed everything. What had happened, faster than the child could blink, was much worse. Every memory that he possessed that was his and his alone, was now hers. All memories shared by people still alive remained—watching an event together, for example. Yet everything that he experienced by himself was stripped from his mind and forced to hers. She caught glimpses of the rest of his memories, but they were not hers yet and they faded in a few seconds from her mind. It was always hardest on the children because little ones tended to go off on their own more. They had more memories of seeing things differently or going out on their own than adults. With older people it was much more balanced and she only had to take about half of their memories, or even less. There was no helping it now, however. Once done there was no reversing it, no matter how she wished it so.

She sighed softly and reached out for his limp body, scooping him up in her arms before straightening. There was no point avoiding touching him now since the damage was done, but she still made sure her robe was between her skin and his. She walked at her normal measured pace towards the village that she

knew to be close by, unaware how ominous she appeared with a small limp body in her arms. Eventually she made it through the village gate, which was wide open despite the late hour. It was obvious that they had been searching for the boy, and many people who had been running around frantically froze in place when she entered. She gave him up easily when a panicked woman ran up, this time taking enough precautions to ensure she didn't give the same fate to the poor woman.

"What did you do to him?" the woman demanded, clearly upset that her boy wasn't responding.

"I sated his curiosity. Perhaps it would be wise when he wakes to teach him not to investigate things that he does not understand. Feed him, keep him warm, he will be fine," she responded quietly, her rich voice echoing easily throughout the mostly silent square. Nobody answered her, they all simply stared. Without waiting more than a moment, she turned away and made her way back into the trees. The collection of memories would never end.

□

Alicia Strusa

For Love and Money

“Love Day.” “Friendship Appreciation Day.” “The Worst Day Ever.” Call it whatever, but it’s all about February 14th and it’s right around the corner.

Yes, Valentine’s Day.

You either just smiled and got a warm, fuzzy feeling inside, or you just shuddered and decided to scrap this article. But Whether or not we despise the holiday, (or even refuse to recognize it as such) there’s no denying that we will end up spending a good chunk of money on the people we love that day. Sure, we’ll get love in the form of materialistic things in return, but there’s a bigger problem developing and it’s begging for our attention.

Valentine’s Day is going to put a big dent in the wallets of most Americans this year.

Or is that so?

In the latest of these hard times, recent retail polls are showing that Americans are going to spend less this year. The media is constantly spitting out the bad economic news, revealing the soul-crushing nature of this recession, and, yet, Americans are expected to shell out about \$14.7 billion on romantic gifts. Romance is to be treasured, but must we spend nearly \$15 billion on candy, flowers, and other silly gifts? A bit ridiculous isn’t it?

The truth is that there are better ways to show someone you love them and smarter ways to spend your money.

Men, you should already know that women go gaga for those red and pink decorated aisles in the stores. Sure, they want to feel loved and adored and receive things that have frilly red hearts on them, maybe even just an excuse to eat chocolate. Instead of all that nonsense, if you were married, a nice gesture would be something like making an extra payment to your beloved’s credit card account. It’s not what most people think of right off the bat, but it’s a great idea. Another idea is to pay bills early. Surprise your one and only by paying a couple of the March bills in advance (think small like car insurance, electricity or water). Point out that this will build some financial breathing room to move forward. Then hug each other.

Victoria is not the only one with a secret. We don't realize that we are giving in to the vicious cycle of deep and dangerous debt. According to the National Retail Federation consumers will spend about \$123 on flowers, jewelry, cards, eating out and a whopping \$1 billion on candy alone!

Americans cannot afford to live this way. Valentine's Day, like many other occasions, has grown from being a celebration that once aspired to some meaning, to being a trashy, materialistic extravaganza. Think about how much pressure there is to participate. Almost every young schoolchild is expected to make or send cards to their classmates or bring treats to class. Some single women feel so left out on Valentine's Day that they've been known to send flowers to themselves, so they won't look like losers. Don't assume couples are happier; for many, Valentine's Day is a yearly excuse to have a nasty fight, with partners feeling unloved. (Because they didn't get a stuffed bear or some candy? Come on.)

We know nothing about the history of this dumb day and yet we're eager to go around spending our hard-earned money to say, "I love you."

Romance is a wonderful thing and during the dull days of mid-winter, who doesn't need a pick-me-up? But as a country deep in debt, we don't need to spend billions of dollars on souvenirs of affection. Instead, this year come up with something creative and original by showing love with actions or with wise money-saving ideas that Pookie will adore.

□

Aaron Waite

Red Private Eye

The wind whistled through the streets of Noir like a savage lioness defending her cubs, as I trudged her cobblestone toward my destination. I'm not sure why, but I always referred to this metropolis as a she. It may be that her black and white colors never mixed with my red sensibilities, just like those other washed out dames who always found some excuse to leave me before too long. That being the case, this city had been my girl for far too long, like a gold digging leech scraping the bottom of my mental pockets for the last coins of my sanity.

My foot splashed into a puddle, a rude awakening. Casting my eyes downward, I saw my distorted image, a red monster against a colorless sky. This had been the way it had always been, sure as the sun burned the horizon on either end of the day. Private eyes usually got a good amount of flak in this town, but I was an exception to even that rule. I was red, and the beautiful people of this city were black and white.

I pulled my trench coat closer around my shoulders. It felt like an incredibly weak defense against the strength of the winter tide, but it comforted me to know that I had some sort of support in this twilight town. My hands already deep in my pockets, I fumbled for my office keys.

Flipping through the myriad collection, I paused to take in the letters emblazoned on the glass of my door. "MacManus Red, Private Eye" the bold print seemed to scream. Screaming seemed appropriate for these dark days, and the attention these letters brought were my only source of meager income. I shook my head slowly as I scratched at my five o'clock shadow. There was a time in my life when I loved the thrill of this job, the discovery of the truth, the dispensation of justice. Now? I was just a washed-up, lonely red soul.

The scene that greeted me hit me like a steroid-fed major-leaguer cramming a bat into my maw. Sitting at my desk, healed feet propped up, was one of the most beautiful lasses these red eyes have had the privilege

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to see. How she got in, I wasn't quite sure, but the shards of glass left on her dress gave away the price she'd paid for a dramatic entrance. Her eyes locked with mine, the red and colorless worlds colliding in an optical dance. We spoke no words at first; our priorities were to size each other up. I can tell you truthfully, I had no problem casting my eyes over such a dame. Her hair was shoulder-length, partially obscuring her vivid, intelligent eyes. Her dress, full-length, made of the finest black silk, was covered by a fine fur jacket. She noticed my analysis of her ever-so-fine features and raised an eyebrow.

“Red, I'm going to hire you to be attentive. However, that attentiveness stops with me.”

Aw, sparks. A pushy dame. Just what I didn't need. I sighed as I tipped my cap to her, sat down in a chair across from my desk. Cocking my head to the side in a tired, inquisitive manner, I pursed my lips and prepared to hear out this gal's story. So much for a quiet day at the office.

[To be continued]

□

Michael Moran

Hate-to-be-out-of-bed Day

It was just your average boring, gray, hate-to-be-out-of-bed day. Nothing in the world seemed exciting anymore. Normal events during the days became routines, routines that even if once enjoyed we had started to loathe. My routine for the day was a long walk to the grocery store so I could buy dinner. Opening the front door of my house, I entered the wet, cold, black and white world that we live in. It took me exactly 32 minutes to get to the store, seven minutes to grab what I needed, and five minutes to check out. I had timed this before.

Finding my normal route blocked by an accident, I took a longer one through town. The damp streets, filled with slimy stores and greedy people, did nothing to excite anyone. Then, like the sun suddenly appearing in the sky; I felt a warm, welcoming feeling coming from the next store. I needed to know what it was. I ran to the store and saw the bright, red rose.

The sheer existence of this rose added excitement to my day. I needed it. Its piercing thorns on the stem and its smooth leaves tried to make themselves known, but the fiery red coming from the flower itself kept all the attention. The petals were soft and polished, the red comforted me into believing that this could change things. No more wet, black and white world. As I brought the flower to the register; I could feel my blood boiling with excitement. I left the store and hurried home as fast as a rabbit could dash, forgetting my groceries at the flower store. But it didn't matter. Instead of food that night, I would place this brilliant organic ruby in the center of my table.

With the rose on my table my house didn't need lights. It acted as a fireplace, igniting the rooms but not burning when touched. Instead it felt cool, a very relaxed feeling came from the fuzzy petals and bright color.

I couldn't sleep that night. I never left the table; I just stared at the small, amazing world in front of me. With this rose I felt like never before; however, after a few days it started to die. I ran to the store; again like a rabbit but this time a rabbit dashing away from the hounds, dashing for its life. The shop owner was locking the door for the last time when I arrived. He said that I had been his only customer in weeks, and he couldn't keep the store open. I snapped at him; I needed to know where I

could get another rose as warm and bright as the one before. He told me of a meadow where not only were there so many roses it looked like the meadow was on fire but also that there were many other flowers and colors too. I found this meadow and never left it. The flowers were more than colors. They were emotions. Each one had a different feeling that I couldn't and never wanted to escape.

□



Morning Greeting by Beth Clark

Caitlin Ramsay

The Sanguine Charity Ball

“Dr. Anders, I know this is a bad time,” says the cop who acts like he is God’s gift to man, “but we need to know what happened.”

“Of course, officer, I understand,” said Dr. Anders.

“It usually helps to start at the beginning,” said his female counterpart with kind eyes.

“I remember the limo driving the last few blocks to the hotel. My nerves were in overdrive, so I checked one last time on my reflection...

Everyone was in awe when Dr. Anders entered. Her usually matty, tawny hair was pulled back into an elegant chignon. The stunning red gown made her eyes look halcyon and lively.

The lobby was overwhelming. Everywhere one could look there were vases of flowers. The chandelier was hanging as if to say it could defy physics due to its sheer beauty. The caterers were running around; no doubt there was already an issue at that point with the food not being just so. The hotel staff was trying unsuccessfully to herd the guests into the ballroom.

Under the chandelier, leaning ostentatiously against the fountain was a strange violet-eyed Adonis eyeing Dr. Anders. He had this majestic grace about him as he stood there smiling at her. The beginnings of a flush crept its way into her complexion. The other women in the room could not help but glance his way every few minutes.

“A rose for a Rose,” he said revealing a perfect orange rose.

“Tom, you did not have to do anything. The fact that you are here is all I needed,” said Dr. Anders.

“Rose, this is your night. They all came out to see you, the new scientific laureate. You should be enjoying this,” said Tom.

“It is a charity ball, Tom, for our new research,” said Dr. Anders.

“Yes, but how do you think the Board of Directors got all these people here?” asked Tom.

“This is all very interesting, Dr. Anders, but it’s not very pertinent to the case,” interrupted the annoying cop.

“You told me to start at the beginning,” said Dr. Anders.

“Yeah, and now I am asking you to cut to the meat of it before the nursing staff kicks us out,” demanded the rude cop.

The caterers were out with hors d’oeuvres. Mostly everyone was there at that point. Janis wanted Dr. Anders to give a speech soon and her stomach was starting to do flips. Tom suggested they should go for a walk and she was all too eager to get out of that aurous ballroom.

She was not paying attention where he was leading her. Dr. Anders was caught up in the glow of this stately man on her arm and his wafting cologne. He stopped suddenly and kissed her, and she was seized by the flaming ecstasy of it. Tom took advantage of Dr. Anders euphoria and shoved her in a closet. There was the subtle click as he locked her in, and then squeaks as the cart was pushed in front of the door.

“I knew then that he had used me,” said Dr. Anders

“The rest will haunt me. The long silence when nothing was audible but my screams for help. Then the warning shots going off like fireworks....

The screams that followed were almost unreal. The thunder as hundreds of people ran for exits away from the calculated shots of a hunter stalking its prey.

Dr. Anders had managed to jimmy the lock open, but the door would not budge. She ran against the door opening it decimally. Excitedly, she turned to do it again catching her dress on the shelving unit. Dr. Anders shuddered as she heard the expensive gown tear. She tripped over the lavish scraps landing on a sharp protruding bit of darkness. There was the subtle tearing of skin and then the gentle oozing of hemoglobin. Dr. Anders hobbled at the door once more freeing herself.

The adrenaline was coursing through her veins bringing everything into focus. The throbbing red lights were giving a vermillion glow to the walls, which only added to her disorientation. Dr. Anders could just make out the light pounding of footsteps behind

her above the constant drumbeat in her ears. The gash on her leg was only a small annoyance now, despite the crimson trail she was leaving behind.

She followed the once pretty flower petals leading back to the entrance. All around her were cherry blossoms, roses, fuchsias and poppies surrounded by broken glass shards creating a Mexican Mosaic; further proof of the horrors of the night. Out of the corner of Dr. Ander's eye she caught her reflection. The once flowing burgundy ball gown was now a feverish wreck accented by russet colored stains adorning her arms and legs.

She heard the faint crunch of crushed glass and took off again like a cat that's seen a dog. The drumbeat was a quick staccato now blocking out all other noise. Dr. Anders pushed her legs to the furthest reaches of their endurance creating a blistering stream of cardinal liquid for him to follow. Dr. Ander's arms were pumping in time with her legs. Her entire body was building to its crescendo. The entire effect was a counter beat to the vibrant ruby light still cheering her onward.

She turned the corner then and saw them; the beautiful glass doors that were her portal to freedom. Behind them were the brilliant, blue, pulsating lights of the police cruisers. The S.W.A.T. team was there like a personal knight protectorate. Dr. Anders's last ounce of endorphins kicked in, throwing her body completely into survival mode. She was only a few yards away. She was going to make it! Dr. Anders could feel the beginnings of relief and then she heard it, the gentle pop.

She was falling, tripping, rolling, and leaving a garnet wake. Dr. Anders could just begin to taste the copper creeping down her face and into her mouth. The hole in her chest was adding a new richness to her dress. Dr. Anders felt the sticky, hot moisture seep through her fingers. There was a fiery light to the air as he stood over her leering. Then she heard it; those last few sounds as the wine light was turning to black. The gentle clinking as the glass pulverized and then the soft thud as a body hit the ground. Then everything was black and painless.

"He wasn't using you," said the nice cop.

"What?" asked Dr. Anders.

“This whole thing was always about you,” said the arrogant man. “Do you remember working for a Dr. Stevenson when you were a grad student?”

“Sure. The top students all worked on his miracle drug that was supposed to help those with Bi-polar disorder. Of course, we all found later that Dr. Stevenson was a fraud, and his drug actually increased violence in its patients,” said Dr. Anders.

“Exactly, the man you know as Thomas Moore is, in fact, Benjamin Hinckley. He was one of the first test subjects. In 2002, right before the testing ended, he got into a heated argument with his wife and shot her. He was sent to a psychiatric facility for treatment and was only released last year. My guess is Mr. Hinckley wanted to go after Dr. Stevenson, but as we all know, he is somewhere in the Cayman Islands enjoying the last of his swindled billions. You were easier to find due to your new-found science superstardom thanks to your new HIV drug,” said the pompous man.

“So, all those people died because of me?” asked Dr. Anders.

“Smooth,” muttered the female cop glaring at her partner. “No, those people died because Mr. Hinckley is not well. He wanted to make a big scene or else he would have tried to kill you earlier. I know it may not make you feel any better, but this was not your fault.”

A nurse walked in then dressed in bright salmon, heart bespeckled scrubs. “You are distressing my patient,” she said in an ice-cold voice. “You will leave now or I will call the doctor.”

The two cops shuffled out like disobedient children. The nurse slammed the door closed behind them making the glass pane teeter. She went over and tucked Dr. Anders snugly back into bed.

“Don’t you worry about a thing. Love Sally’s here and she’s gonna keep ya safe,” said the Nurse, and with that she put a shot of something into Rose’s IV, letting her go back to sleep. The gentle electronic metronome slowed into a final annoying note.

□

Terri Baker

‘Round Mad Again

As I say good-by to you,
Late to catch the train
Or bus or subway,
You stumble back to sleep.

I’ve come ‘round mad again,
Of a Sunday afternoon
Where thoughts and worlds
Abut and overlay.

My feet are on the brickwork
Of Bangor
Warmed by spring sun
Until the notion of “real” isn’t.

I’ve come ‘round mad again
While dark streets
Of a New Years
New York City

Slip by slick and misted.
I follow schematics of yarn
Twisted cabled and shaped
Forming scarves or hats

Or unfinished socks.
And here I’ve come ‘round
Mad again,
Desperate to be seen
Touched or maybe

Just ignored as I say good-by
Again, late to the train or bus
Or subway as
You stumble back to sleep.

□

Matchstick Men

Matchstick men
March in lines,
Regimental

To and fro.
Stick legs
Scissor

And stick arms
Swing.
Bulbous heads

Swivel. Heads
Filed with logic
Made mostly

Of holes,
Strike against
Anything that stands

Against them.
Flames,
Bursting from

Cores,
Burn
Everything.

□

Amanda Kitchen

Female

I dove in.

And, unfortunately, I did so without hesitation.

I shudder when it becomes clear—it builds to that electric moment in my thoughts that shocks down my limbs, back up via my throat and in less time than I'm aware the moment has come, that dreaded, self-consuming moment—and it beats my eyes to a wince. *Damn.*

I did not stop to wonder if I had anything left in me worth protecting. If things didn't pan out, I mean. I assumed, whole-heartedly, without a hint of blatantly obvious doubt (it was there all along), it would ripen and never pass, just ripen and grow fat on the vine and I'd forever be feasting on it. It's still full-color printed behind my eyes, also sitting in my lungs, which is hard to understand—we're there, backs to footboard, drinking from top-filled solo cups, side-giggling and whispering and carelessly clock-watching to usher out the moon. (I am not sure that I really thought in terms of forever, but I am certain it stretched on beyond what I was then too naïve to explore.)

But.

One by one they came. The stunted nights. My limbs would stretch and pull your vacant form close to me before I drifted. You weren't there anymore, of course. Your heat had long billowed from the sheets half slunk to the hardwood, a cold reminder of how you spun your legs, feet to floor, always squarely, always slowly, patterned—groan, knuckled eye rub, sigh, fumble for clothes—and you weren't there, not in any sense, not anymore, except in that way.

And now, I say to myself, this is what happens when I let my mind open, and let this all truly, truly close my eyes—more electric moments strung, one by one, pulsing like centuried French Quarter street-lamps flickering against a nearly visible and stagnant July air.

And so, yes, clearly, it has to be something I did.

□

T. Voorhees

The Woman with the Blue Hippo

My mother doesn't remember the time she first heard language above a whisper. All the adults around her whispered—constantly, urgently—about everything, seemingly. My mother doesn't remember the first time she saw people smiling, and although she knew smiles, even her own mother's, she doesn't remember where they came from. My mother doesn't remember strolling—only being hustled, by whispers, from place to place evading some invisible pursuer. My mother, in fact, doesn't remember being a child at all, only that, according to her mother, she came from a place where there were no children.

My mother remembers words, lists of words— names. Names and fingers, hundreds of fingers, which seemed to outline each letter of each name with absolute hope and hesitation. Hands which seemed to cradle the names as if they were flesh and blood—and kind sounding ladies in capes and caps who never seemed to know anything about anything.

For a while my mother thought she lived on that bench near the train station. The place where her mother told her to wait while she perused the lists posted on the wall. For what seemed to be an eternity this seemed to be her universe. A few squares of concrete, a small patch of green, and the bench. My mother could sit there for long periods of time without moving, the huge crowds of people searching the names on the list forming a related, yet entirely different existence to which she did not belong. My mother did not understand this group, their function, their reason for being. Day in and day out she watched them look for people she didn't know and beg the cap and cape brigade for information that wasn't forthcoming. This was a never ending cycle of inquiry which was only rarely interrupted with an answer.

This is how life was for my mother then. Her mother would give her breakfast, after which the two would go to the train station. It was such that my mother forgot why they went to the train station, what the lists meant, and why the caps and capes didn't seem to serve a real purpose. She even grew to become unable to tell that the mass was indeed comprised of individuals—except for the woman with the blue hippo. My

From Stories for Knitting on a Rainy Day

mother couldn't tell you whether she remembers this woman so much because she looked like a film star from a slightly earlier time, complete with alabaster skin and an immaculate wardrobe, or the fact she carried with her a well-used, stuffed blue hippo. The hippo was made of royal blue corduroy and was missing one of its black button eyes. Definitely homemade and certainly treasured, the hippo stood out in marked contrast from the woman's classic sophisticated attire. The woman held the hippo as if it was a purse, constantly rubbing one of its ears between the thumb and forefinger.

My mother remembers being able to think of nothing else at this time except the woman. Who was she? What was she searching for? What was the story behind the stuffed hippo? Daily the woman sat on the bench next to my mother, but she never spoke—only slightly nodding her head in a form of recognition on arrival. More interestingly she never approached to mass of people near the lists so that she, too, could look there, and she never had any contact with any of the caps and capes. A more inquisitive child would have most certainly questioned the woman, or would have at least initiated some sort of contact, but in the world of my mother's, where language was whispers and words were simply lists, this didn't seem to be an option. In my mother's world the best thing that she could have done is what she did—she sat there. After all, the woman wasn't discomforting and her expression wasn't altogether unpleasant—not exactly happy, but certainly not distraught.

The woman showed up for days carrying her blue hippo and my mother began to feel a certain sense of comfort at the regularity of it all. She also began to fancy different scenarios which brought the woman to the train station and into the possession of the blue hippo. Scenarios developed to bring solace to a lonely girl and largely forgotten to the past.

After a while the crowd by the list at the train station began to decrease. She still went daily with her mother, and the woman with the blue hippo still showed up, and the caps and capes still knew nothing, and the trains arrived and departed, and the world seemed to continue to list on its side. That is until one day, when the woman with the blue hippo's expression changed. When her neutral to contented expression melted into sorrow. My mother remembers a tear, a sole tear on the woman's face which seemed to capture time and make it slow down. A sole tear which seem to capture the world's sorrow on its slow descent down the woman's cheek. A tear, which like my mother, was alone and would seemingly remain so.

Gracefully, the woman brushed the tear away. Without a word she gently lifted my mother's hand off her lap, placed the hippo in it, and lovingly placed her hand on top of the hippo. Almost instinctively, my mother found the ear, where she too began to rub the ear softly between thumb and forefinger. The woman leaned over and cupped my mother's face between gloved hands. She looked at my mother briefly, kissed her on the forehead, and finally, rose and left.

My mother never saw the woman again and eventually she and her mother stopped their daily vigil at the train station. The blue hippo, however, remained a valued possession. To her it represents all the love and losses in all the history of humanity, and, most importantly, continuity.

□

Matt Pifer

Michigan Guide Book

I make my way through the forests around Clare
travel along the old mounds where the tracks
rose over a once treeless place:
dunes forming in timothy grass,

blowing sand still is a comfort
as it was then.

I go into the rural shack towns
where kids still eat paint off dirt floors, and men drink liquors
like Mad Dog and Boone's Farm and crouch
along the Muskegon River as it passes through ancient soil.

Some know they're mostly Indian
most don't care, seem, in that place,
far from the rich reservations
south and north. This is a place
according to guidebooks
where people don't read: illiterate in-country.
Stay, they say, on the shores of the big lakes
where you won't get "abused" by those
devoted to senseless work and misery.

Green ranch houses stake out the narrow roads
flying suspect flags, their yards littered with dogs and diapers.

□

Seasonal Roads

Before these long distances
I skirted the back roads of Clare County
patching pot holes and scraping up dead animals

ruts, rock ripples, stains of oil, chunks of asphalt
haloed in mineral spirits. Puddles birthing mosqui-
toes, helpless later in my arm hair. The smell of a
bloated doe, a stain of bile and blood trailing into
the ditch.

Look for the last aimless drunk, avoiding the town
in ditches and out on the seasonal roads
released to the letters he stuffed inside torn pockets
Holding the keys and change that mark where he's going.
He was caught drawing maps and making plans
on the oiled gravel. His index finger was expressive.
He leaned into the shade of the stunted pines,
as sand sang up the painted warbler's exposed foot.

To be the last of a kind. "I returned here to be near
my family," he said, "and I will die here like a
good man in this very suit." He held the suit coat
open, revealing the white shirt that promised years
of warmth and safety.

The child's mouth collects peat dust and pine sap
Lips speaking—as red as plumb—watch what they say;
Life is seed; she being expected to feed and hold herself tall.
Tired of learning, of reading across red-rimmed eyes.

The heritage might've saved him if anyone
had recalled it; if the places—the bars and beaches
—spelled it out like singing
"l, m, n, o, p"; if memories weren't
confused with bad dreams: holding small
hands quiet over an open coffin while the
minister speaks of unfamiliar names:
"he was the son of Helen and Bob, who he had

never met and who he hated and dreamed,
maybe until last week, of killing. Give his cold
hand a pat as you pass, he finally looks tired,
and has forgotten this lost place
and the taste of cold and cured meats.”

The shoelaces drag across lawns and collect dew.
The green plots placed like no-man’s land,
checkered with gravel and leading
to little lakes where the retired go—
pistons & starters timing their decline
beneath a bird feeder mounted by a blue jay
sunning itself open, the dark crest knocking the wind.
Placed, then half turned, onto concrete porches—
painted gray and level with wrinkled touch—
the gin & tonic sweating a circle that old habits fancy across.

“I married him ‘cause he was a man wit’
strong wrists. Like a good man, he got up
at five and milked the cows and e’t
his oatmeal wit’ his mout’ closed. Ain’t
that enough?” In the timothy grass, bent
and dying under the jack pines, the
babies play with tent worms, screaming
with bravery, touching the fuzzy mass.

The child can’t imagine where she’s been
from welfare home to county school # 3
sounding out the pairs “ou, ie, au”
that end among stairs where the wood is dropped
and lead paint lightens the carpet
and feeds the poor
little bit by little bit.

“And did Jack see Jane run?”
“Nah, I think Jane hated Jake.”
Read the stenciled roads names: Huron
Chippewa, Ottawa, Cherokee, Apache—
places where you find kids hiding with

pointed ears and teary eyes.
“I told my grandma, an’ she says that Jane
was a white witch. Isn’t Jane—her there—
a good person?” The tar-and-chipped asphalt
smells on the back of the tongue,
and can’t be swallowed.

Scaled down voices ask forcefully for disclosure—
a sifting of stories, a morality that feels hollow.
In the bushes rests a dead head the color of teeth,
both matching the angles of drifted sand
between each step leading off the playground.
Dig-in now; the steel slide at the park reflects heat,
and book pages dingy as toilet paper
recall the horrors of Jackson, the humor of Sherman,
the humanity of Kennedy. These are slowly buried

“ringing around the roses
pocketing dried and fragrant posies
ashes for ashes, we all slide down.”

□

Roadside Crosses

Grief is tacked into cheap wood
partially rotted paneling—faux oak—
crossing the paint-flaking two-by-four
both pieces pulled from beneath the car

oil stains seeping into her cut chin
and cracked lip, cupping the first syllable
of her last name coughed from broken lungs
frosting the refractions, the fragments
dissembling the moment
into a heavy thud
 along the back road, darkening at the edges
 beneath a sky bending away in benediction.