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Contributors:
Pamela Akin – Kenny in Detroit
County Court Day
Summer Grass
Chris Allen – China Love
Pap
Elaine Ayers – Lady of the Bell Jar
Labor Relations
Caveat Emptor
Acolyte
Fat Girl’s Fantasy
Harlequin
Lonnie Bailey – Mountain Witch
Paul Bush – Hi Noon
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No One Blames the Ice Cream Man
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Kenny in Detroit

I found a yellowed post card to my mother. It was from an old boyfriend who worked in a factory during the war.

See this scene on the card, he wrote, how romantic it is. I wish we were there together on the beach, loving under the moon.

At that time my father would have been far across the ocean, fighting, unaware that mother was being wooed through the mail by Kenny in Detroit.
Pamela Akin

COUNTRY COURT DAY

It's county court day on the Scottsville square.  
The buying and selling and trading are fair  
For Sheriff Bluestone mills among the crowd.  
At the first sign of trouble or words spoken too loud  
Sheriff Bluestone steps in and likely as not  
He'll haul off the troublemaker on the spot.

On county court day the knife traders come in.  
Their wares displayed on the tailgate of a truck.  
Their best in a velvet lined box.  
You can hag down a knife trader fifty cents to a dollar  
But more than that they start to holler  
And in steps Sheriff Bluestone who bellows,  
"Be fair, fellers, be fair to your feller man."

When county court day comes around the liquor flows.  
Just look around, you'll see a certain truck parked so  
There'll be a hidden place for the men to go  
So's not to offend the womenfolk.  
Sheriff Bluestone knows, of course, the booze is there  
But if the men keep peace he doesn't care.

On county court day the spit-whittlers are out.  
Their cedar wood shaving piles grow.  
The spit-whittlers are old and they look around  
At the young men buying and trading on county court day.  
The young men who will be spit-whittlers someday.

County court day is over on the Scottsville square.  
The liquor behind the truck has run out  
And the men know where to find more, at the Red Grill on 31 South.  
Sheriff Bluestone thinks, and smiles to himself,  
The day has been a peaceful one, no fights, no killings,  
And the trading was pretty fair  
At county court day on the Scottsville square.

Pamela Akin

SUMMER GRASS

I lie on my back in the summer grass  
to watch the clouds gather,  
to hear a distant train,  
to smell the sweet honeysuckle.  
I remember another summer day when it was my inclination  
to lie in the spongy grass,  
to close my eyes against the heat of the sun,  
to hear the buzz of insects near my ear.  
It has been too long since I lay in the cool grass,  
I am twenty years older,  
I am wrinkled and gray,  
I am going to lie in the grass on my back - again,  
Perhaps tomorrow.
THE EYESORE: GOOD EATS

The Grandfather had lived alone in his ill-kept log cabin for a long time. It had been long enough for his children and his children’s children to grow tired of joking about him and his ramshackle eyesore and he was glad to have a break.

For a while only the children’s children were making cracks about the place, but then they started getting ready to marry, get pregnant and have another generation of jokers. That thought made the Grandfather realize that the snide, snot-nosed comments could go on into infinity itself and he suddenly got very tired of the whole arrangement. Being one-hundred-and-six years old, he had the right to be. He decided to do something to stop the jokes before there were any children’s children’s children’s brats hanging around telling the old ones all over again.

“T’m damn well going to … to …” he paused and concentrated, “do something about it. Yeah, damn well do something.”

He had slowed down some, but he was far from a complete stop. For a couple of weeks he sat on his comfortably loose-boarded porch, wearing a sweater against the May chill, and planned. Planned, plotted, thought and cursed. All he came up with was the assumption that the only reason the children’s children and so on stuck around at all, joking or not, was to be there Johnny on the spot to inherit when he finally went so far as to die.

The only countermeasures he could come up with for this were either not to die until they were tired of waiting, which would be a long time to wait with the jokes still going; or to write up a will cutting them out of everything he owned, which might turn simple contempt into frustrated hatred.

He was still thinking, if not plotting, planning or swearing, one day when a quiet little oval-shaped woman with short, curly, silver hair stepped onto the porch.

For a moment, the Grandfather didn’t look up to acknowledge her presence. When he did, he said, “You’re May, aren’t you? One of mine. You want something?”

“Yes, Grandfather,” May said. “I couldn’t t-“

“What are you calling me that for? I’m your father.”

She blinked. “I don’t know. I suppose because all the others call you Grandfather.”

“That’s because you’re the last one of my kids that’s not dead and

or senile.”

“Oh. Yes,” she said, biting her lip. “Well, ‘Father’ then. I couldn’t sit… .”

“No,” he said and shook his head with a shrug. “You go ahead and call me, call me ‘Grandfather.’ You’re the only one that puts any respect in it.”

May smiled and reached for his hand. Their veins and age spots were very similar. “Grandfather, I couldn’t sit by and watch them do what they want to do.”

“Them,’ huh? ’The others,’ huh? You aren’t one of, uh, ‘them’?”

“Good Lord, no!”

“You’re not too happy with them either, huh?” she said. He smiled, showing mostly original, home grown teeth.

“They’re your grandchildren, give or take a great-. Some of them are my grandchildren. But some of them are my children, my nieces and nephews. If anything, I should be even more ashamed of them than you are.”

“Shamed, huh? I’ve been displeased at disrespect and, uh, unsettled by greed. What have they done shameful?”

“They want to declare you mentally unsound and take everything.”

“They’d do that?” said the Grandfather. “For this? They hate this place.”

“There’s Momma’s silver. And most of your furniture is antique. And there’s the land.”

“The silver, hal Your Momma hated it. Ugly. Bunch of people at our wedding chipped in to buy it. And we got those ‘antiques’ when they were just furniture.”

“It’s all valuable now,” May said.

“Hmph! The land, and some stocks, and your Momma’s jewelry, and my watch. They’d do it for that. Yeah, they would.” He had brought out his watch and now, suddenly seeing how late it was, he hopped up from his chair. As he helped his seventy-five-year-old daughter into the house, he said, “Your birthday’s this month, isn’t it? About a week from today. That’s why we named you May. Well May, you and me, you and I are going to give ourselves a right nice little present.”

By morning, not only did May fully understand the present plan, she had contributed to its scope and impact. They drove into town (the others hadn’t taken away May’s car or license, or at least hadn’t tried hard enough) where they gathered the assistance
they'd need for their present. They contacted banks, lawyers, real
estate offices and, for later use, architects and a construction firm.
The Grandfather sold everything he owned, every little scrap of
anything valuable, except the broken down house and a couple of
acres around it. He called favors and political pull (both of which he
had almost a century of) to get a good hardy loan. He used the same
influence to make sure his isolated property was zoned for what he
had in mind. He even started the procedure to have his name
legally changed to "Grandfather" ("I like the way you say it," he
told May).

Things got done that day, and it wasn't too many more days before
May and Grandfather were watching architects milling around the
old log cabin calling instructions to builders, who were also milling
about. There was just one change made to the outside of the cabin,
but the inside was rebuilt; basements were dug; sub-basements
and sub-sub-basements dug. As things shaped up, cooks and
maids and waiters and all kinds of people came in. The only thing
that could be seen from the outside, though, was a hand painted
sign on the house, 'The Eyesore: good eats.'

* * *

The conference room was dark with only small reading lamps at
each seat. Unpuffed cigars smouldered in ashtrays, smoking up the
room. An elaborate map of Europe hung ignored on one wall.
Men and women sat quietly at their places, trying to recognize
one another through the gloom, until one man walked in, locked
the door behind him and took his place.

This man, Stan Hart, the Grandfather's great-grandson, produced
a copy of the Boston Globe and said, "Now is the time."

Hart was the leader of the assorted descendants.

"I don't see why we haven't taken it already," said a young voice
from the bottom of the dimly lit table.

"Now is the time," said Hart. "I believe now he really is senile. We
found this same advertisement in the L.A. Times and even the Paris
Monde." He folded the paper to show a full page ad with "The
Eyesore" in block letters and "good eats." in small print.

"But now he has Aunt May to help him," said the impatient voice.

"What if she gets in the way?"

"My mother?" a surprised voice said.

Stan Hart shrugged. "If she's with him," he said, "we can have
her put away just as easily."

With less surprise, the second voice said, "We must if we must."

"Then I'll go there tomorrow with the lawyer and doctor," Hart
said. "We'll take it from him before he squanders it all on this," he
slapped the paper, "nonsense."

* * *

"You must admit, Mr. Hart, your grandfather has done wonders
here," said the lawyer. "At least inside."

The doctor, splashing his fingers in the water of a marble
fountain, looked up and nodded.

"When I want someone to give me advice, counselor, I'll hire
someone to give it to me," Hart said. "You saw the outside - what
this really is. A falling down log cabin cannot be made into a
resort!" He gestured blindly. A sign standing by the door pro-
claimed, "Special Rates for the Idle Rich." A smaller one by the
elevator advised, "champagne, stationery and matches are com-
plimentary with every room - please leave our towels."

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Grandfather, coming out of an
office with May. "What can I do for the two of you?"

The doctor and lawyer bit off smiles at this but Hart had no interest
in civilities, just incivilities. "Grandfather," he said in his way,
"we're very worried about your health. So we've found a nice place
you can stay."

"No nicer than this."

"You can see he can't take care of himself," Hart said to the doctor.

"If Grandfather," May said in her way, "cannot take care of
himself, no one can. Outside of me."

"I knew she would be losing touch," Hart said. "She's his
daughter, not grand-daughter."

"She's got a little respect for a man's name, boy; remember
that," said Grandfather.

"Neither has any grasp of reality, wouldn't you agree, counselor?
There's not a single guest in this whole fiasco."

"What's your ass-" began Grandfather.

"...assumption based upon?" said May.

"No cars, dear Aunt. No cars, no buses, no bicycles."

"Not even ours," put in the doctor from a window.

"Not even... Where's my car?"

"The parking, uh, valet took it. Probably sub-sub-garage B."

"That doesn't mean anything," Hart began to tell the lawyer.

"Good moring, Mrs. ben Aziz," Grandfather said to a dark-eyed
woman stepping off the elevator. "How is your room?"

"It is very well, thanks. How are you?"

"Just fine."

"Very nice. Would it be troublesome for the sheik and I to dine in
the Crystal Room tonight?"
"Not at all," said May. "I believe there's a vacancy."
"Very nice, thanks. The sheik did enjoy the band last night. Good morning."
"Good day, Mrs. ben Azi. See you at the backgammon tourney?"
"Certainly," she said as the elevator came for her. "I admire Miss Fonda's strategies very much, thanks."
The doctor and lawyer looked at each other and snickered, then at Hart and laughed. He turned on his heel, the muscles of his face
cold, and walked away.
The lawyer caught up to him. "I know what you're thinking, client," he said. "And take my advice, forget it. You'll be in a home
before he'd go to one. The more you want this place, the more success he's going to have to back himself up."
The doctor shook hands and winked at Grandfather and May. Before he, the lawyer and Stan Hart left, Grandfather said, "Come
back anytime, gentlemen. There'll always be two vacancies. As for you, boy, you got your own vacancy."
Stan Hart never returned.
The Grandfather managed The Eyesore a few more years. He slowed down just a little more and stopped only the once.
May didn't particularly want to run the place by herself so she held a private stock sale and sold out to the friendliest millionaire.
He ran the place as his sole occupation and hobby, and May stayed on for a long while, running the casino part of the year and touring
sites in the Yukon during her summer vacations.
None of the other relatives ever ate a meal or stayed a night in The Eyesore, much less owned any part of it.
The eats were always good.

Elaine Ayers

LADY OF THE BELL JAR

How did she write that poem,
so close to the sting of death
that she could hear the hum
of killer bees?
How did she go on,
peeling potatoes for stews
while boiling
in a thick, brown stock
on the stove,
caught in the sticky pages
of some man's cookbook?

How did the children not know
the tenderness had gone
from their mother's touch,
fingers cold as the blade
of a carving knife,
kept ever-sharp
and accessible?

In the cells of that hive of a house
she sat
counting the sweetness
trickling through her mouth.
How did she sleep
dreamless
in the thick narcotic fog
of a doctor's indecipherable hand,
with no lover at her side
and winter on her doorstep?
Elaine Ayers

LABOR RELATIONS

Night
is a factory foreman
supervising the love I make,
checking that I take
nothing home with me.

Elaine Ayers

CAVEAT EMPTOR

How we laughed
at the boy with green eyes
and fangs instead of teeth
who gave us a half-eaten apple
for a quick peek at our panties
and went away
whistling
thinking
he'd gotten what he'd paid for.

Elaine Ayers

ACOLYTE

I serve your memory,
keeping to the temple
as the virgin keeps to the hearth,
stirring ash,
so the warmth does not wane
though the fire smolder
and the flame die.

On this altar,
I offer sacrifice,
blade red,
entrails falling to the floor
so that you might see,
though dying,
I believe.
Elaine Ayers

FAT GIRL'S FANTASY

At the bottom
of the next pint of ice cream,
beneath the next layer
of chocolates in the box,
is a prince with Oreo eyes,
waiting for me.

No honey compares
with the sweetness of his mouth,
no hot fudge
to the warmth of his embrace,
no cream
to the richness of his voice,
whispering the fairy-tale ending:
"I like my women
with some meat on their bones."

Elaine Ayers

HARLEQUIN

Words—
even someone else's—
can't reach you.
Poems and love songs
can't touch you;
you are shielded,
by wit enshrined.
And, I, your humble priestess
am but jester to the faithful.

Paul Bush

HI NOON

Printed in childlike writing on a piece of paper that was yellow and frayed around the edges were the words "I Love You Mommy." Jesse was a lot like that paper which was nailed on the crossbar above the door. On Sunday at ten, the bells talking at St. Joe's would wake him up with "Jes-see-go-see-God." The peeling wallpaper looked like the petals of yellow flowers, so Jesse's eyes always opened on a paradise. Twisting in his bed, he would frantically search for his Timex and sign with relief to find it placed carefully on the unvarnished nightstand. In his wrinkled hands, he slowly wound the stem and contentedly smiled when the second hand made its way to twelve.

After stomping into his brown unpolished cowboy boots, he would finish getting ready for church. Every morning, the tattered grey sweatshirt would wrestle with him. He always won after a while—a longer while on Sundays. Getting his mother's worn out brush, Jesse squared himself up with the mirror and attempted to part his pepper-grey hair on the left. The stubborn old man looking back at him always confused him; so turning to the window he swiped at the shock a couple of times. Facing himself again, he smiled his satisfied smile and said, "You look fine, Jesse, you look just fine."

His head bobbing with excitement, Jesse ran his cracked yellow fingernails through the pepper before putting on his John Deere cap. "Church," he murmured happily down the not unused bare steps. Shirley, hearing the constant clomping, met him at the bottom. In answer to his question, her soft brown eyes smiled as she warmly said, "You look fine, Jesse, you look just fine." Giving him a warm biscuit, she told him to go outside and wait on the porch until she was ready. The bells announcing the ten o'clock mass had told Shirley she had an hour to get herself all fancied up. At forty-five, and not an old forty-five she would have added, Shirley was ready to get married. Church meant lots of men, so Shirley loved Sundays just as much as Jesse. For some reason, she felt like this morning was going to be special, so she spent an extra five minutes carefully layering on the blood colored rouge to her pale cheeks. Then winding her hair into snakelike stands she placed them in a nest on her head and stood back to admire herself. She thought her plump figure looked pretty good stuffed into the

Jesse sat picking crumbs off his jeans in the bright light. He loved the yellow sun. It always smiled warmly on him, just like his mother used to; today, it almost melted him into a new shape with its intensity. Two white posts in black spikes passed in front of him and then he heard Shirley telling him to hurry up or they would be late. Knowing that late meant clock, Jesse looked at his tanned wrist in time to see the second hand sweep past twelve, and smiled.

Shirley wished winter would hurry up; she was tired of Jesse trying to stomp on every brown leaf that tried to blow by. “Stop it, Jesse; that dog’ll bite you.” But they never did. They passed the halfway point, a little girl smiling while eating her Sunbeam bread. Jesse liked her.

Ahead, white-haired Mrs. Casper leaned into the breeze like an old ship captain fighting a gale. When they caught up with her she turned and pulled a smile from the wrinkles in her face. With a twinkle in her pale eyes, she said, “My grandson’s stayin’ with me and Sister for the weekend.” Shirley smiled politely and listened to Jimmy Jr., deceptions. Of course, he was handsome. Yes, she was sure he looked just like Jim, his father. Yes, it was sweet that Sister had taken him to Sunday school this morning. Of course, they’d be glad to meet Jim’s young boy.

Mrs. Casper’s cloudy voice brought welcome news to Jesse. There were few things he liked better than meeting people, and he shivered with pleasure at the thought of shaking hands with someone new. Then he pounced on another rustler trying to crawl by on the ground.

The people getting out of the ten o’clock mass were mulling around outside the ornate wooden doors. Waves of gossip and trickles of Father Holly’s sermon flowed around the mill. On the solid steps leading into the Lord’s house, the white robed priest was shaking hands with leaving visitors. He spotted Jesse, smiled, then turned to smile again at Mrs. Simpson, who was saying how nice the September weather was and how nice his sermon was.

Clomping up the steps, Jesse jabbed his hand into Father Holly’s and pumped the white cloth up and down. Enthusiastically, he said, “I’ve come to see God, Father.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Jesse. Go right on in, And don’t forget to take your hat off. You forgot last Sunday.”

“Yes, sir. I will. I won’t forget again. I promise.”

That’s good.” As he watched the man stride past, the priest breathed, “God bless you, Jesse.”

The cool, dark air of the church ushered Jesse down the aisle. By the light of Jesus’s thorn wrapped heart, Jesse dug into his pocket to unearth the nickel he’d saved all week for this occasion. He put it in the box. Then he added another flickering light to those candles lighting up the feet of the baby Jesus’s mother.

Throughout the service, Jesse silently followed the motions of the red haired lady in the blue dress in front of him. He crossed himself just like his mother had taught him when he was a boy. Every once in a while, a tuneless hum could be heard while the parish was singing hymns. Most of the time, Jesse sat there playing with the rosary that Shirley had given him to keep him occupied. At times he would squirm waiting for his favorite parts of the church service.

This morning, his routine was unbalanced a little by the boy who was fidgeting between Mrs. Casper and Sister. Vaguely, he understood that this must be Jim’s son, Jimmy Jr. Misty veils parted to reveal a kind of black and white motion picture of him and Jim rounding up orange and yellow butterflies. Jesse liked to look at them up close and watch the sticks wiggling on their heads. Jim always wanted to tug their wings off and watch them flop around. Horrified, one day Jesse saw him take the most beautiful butterfly he’d ever seen and pin it to the ground with toothpicks. Then he put a glass over it. Sadly, Jesse smelled the acid smell of the fragile creature’s racked body.

“Why do you always hurt them?”

“Quit whining will you? Why do you always try to spoil my fun? Look at the sucker burn. Ain’t this fun?”

“No, Quit.”

“What do you know? My dad says you’re just an idiot. That’s just what you are, a idiot.”

Jesse’s disturbed thoughts were interrupted by the blue dress turning around in front of him to place a limp hand hesitatingly into his. After happily jerking at her arm, he turned to Shirley and pulled at her for a while; then, he tugged a couple of times on the hand of the tall man with the spotted tie before it was firmly pulled away from him. He knew that his really favorite part was coming up soon, because everyone was through smiling and being friendly. Curiously, he gazed around to stare at the high arched ceiling with blue fluffy clouds. An angel’s face smiled the same cherubic smile it did every Sunday, although today it seemed more inviting than ever. A sense of calm floated over him as pretty organ music smiled on him like the father of Jesus.

In wonder, Jesse looked up at the man nailed on the cross. His father used to be a carpenter. With a light heart, he would tug at
the heavy roughcut timber to help his father build chairs. At the lathe, his father would laugh and say, "Son, people are a lot like wood. You take Jim, for instance; he’s twisty gnarled oak. His momma’s like a weeping willow. Your momma, well, she’s like fragrant cedar." These bounced off Jesse like wood chips thrown at the shoulders by the lathe, but he nodded, agreeing with everything his dad said. The drone of the turning machine blended with the priest’s "...venite adoremus..."

The plush, velvet carpet muffled the tapping of Jesse’s boots, as he eagerly shuffled behind Shirley to eat Jesus so he could be good and go to heaven. His mother was already there with Jesus waiting for him to come too. All he had to do was be a good person and not ever be mean to anybody or anything. He didn’t know if Shirley would make it or not. Every once in a while, she would put white sticks in her mouth and set them on fire. His mother said only bad girls did that; but, she allowed it because Shirley was her husband’s niece. In the meantime, the niece became a babysitter for Jesse. Her position was made permanent when her aunt and uncle died in what the neighbors called a tragedy, but the town considered just another car accident.

As Shirley waddled by Mrs. Casper, who was grasping the dark wood to steady herself as she kneeled to pray, she reached out to pat Jimmy Jr., on top of his curly red hair. Dodging, the boy ducked under the gesture and slid around his grandmother so he could get close enough to kick the cow in the green dress. Since she was out of range, the shiny black leather shoe lashed at the old timer behind her.

Jesse was going to see Jesus. He wanted to tell Jesus to take good care of his mother, just like his father used to tell him to do when an order of chairs had to be delivered to a far away place. Jesse used to take his mother to the amusement park and let her watch him ride the rides. His favorite was the merry-go-round. Always he was torn between terror and glee to be a real cowboy on the back of the quiet animal. Part of the gaiety came from seeing the smile on the angelic face. He could never understand, though, how Mom’s face appeared when he tried to head the bad guys off at the pass. Jesse liked watching the second hand of his Timex go around; he always saw Mommy’s face at twelve o’clock and smiled wide.

As he fell, his head sharply struck across the corner of the pew. His blood and the wine spilled by Father Holly blended easily into the purple carpet. As he placed the body of Christ into the dead man’s mouth and said the last rites, the priest noted Jesse’s peaceful smile and thought it strange that all the hands of the yellow Timex had stopped on twelve.
DEATH AND A CIGARETTE BUTT

My life
will be put out
with
a cigarette butt
both silently
extinguished,
alongside
many others
who burned
pieces
of themselves
nearer ground
with every breath
of someone’s use
smoldering
toward
dissolve.

---

Peter Kolbenshlag

OLD GLORY
(IN A NEW LIGHT)

Are you worth the awesome cost?
Are you better than the rest?
Do you realize What you are?
Are you a symbol of ourselves, or are you a symbol of our gods?

If you personify a dream,
What then personifies reality-
A tombstone?

We pump you full of life,
You are Freedom and Justice as we carry you and kill
To plant you in the bodies of the Devil’s allies.
Do you wave proudly as we watch, or do we watch proudly as you wave?
As you ripple in the breeze, is it freely?
Have we not paid?
James Laramore

CLIPPINGS

Eager minds rush by, bright visions wearing
Lively colors, with little path laid and
Years of virgin field before them, radiant
Eyes Reaching forward, smooth, ivory hands
Clutching self-fulfillment.

But the tireless, gray beast rolls slowly on,
Shaving ever-close the edges of life.
I no longer drive, resigned to ride,
While my path remains to remind me
Of fields yet to tend.

I cling to my ride, fearing
A fall, as I wonder about
Soils unplanted and
Lawns passed by.

And I ponder the
Importance of
One less
Blade.

Karen McDonald

REFLECTIONS

She always liked
the red leaves,
pointing them
out to me
each time
we passed a tree
where they
dominated the others.

She always
answered
my questions
with questions
and I would
answer
and
answer
and
then say,
"Hey wait a minute."

And she would
smile
innocently.

I learned
to read her eyes
but that always
scared her.

Sometimes
I think
she was afraid
to look at me.
She always liked
rocking chairs
and
fairy tales
and
horses
and
cows.

She knew
the smell
of tobacco
drying
in a barn.

I asked her once
if it was anything
like the smell
of the cigarette factories
and distilleries
in Louisville

and she laughed
and laughed.

She always
said, "Don't touch me."
when she meant
touch me
and
"No"
when she meant
yes.

And then—
I learned
to read her eyes.

Karen McDonald

AN ARIZONA SUNSET

Purple
slides into red
like a ball player
sliding into home plate.

And yellow dust
rises around him
behind a rock ocean
of blue and gray.

The desert Mesquite tree
spreads
like an oriental fan
against the sky.

And the giant orange ball
slides
through outstretched cotton
before drowning
in the mountains.
DREAMS

You always dreamed
of being a ballerina
dancing on your toes
in a tutu

your golden hair pinned
tight and high.
How graceful and pretty
you were in your mind.

You practiced
as a child
and when you fell
you weren’t afraid to cry
nor were you afraid
to once again try.

You always dreamed
of playing the piano
when there was none to play.
You always knew you would though
-one day.

You always dreamed
of singing
in a spotlight
on a stage.

Into wooden microphones
you sang and sang.

But those were dreams of a child.
You’re no longer a child
and you’re no ballerina.
You can’t play or sing a tune.

But still you dance
and play
and sing.

And still you dream.
And she had dreams too
but no one knows what they were.
No one knows if they’ve come true.

Perhaps she also danced
but behind locked doors
and if she fell
she wouldn’t have cried
nor would she have danced anymore.

She simply would have lied
and said that she didn’t care to.

Perhaps she longed to play
but everyone watched
and she wasn’t sure
of certain applause
and afraid of laughter.

And she probably sang
along in church
or with the radio
but never alone
unless she was alone.

And now,
alone
in a darkened room
filled with dusty books
of stories read
but never lived,
she cries

for pages lost in the calendars
that have hung on the walls

for calendars
gone
from the walls

for walls
that have stayed.

And still she dreams.
POLITE LIES

She wore
a blue dress
-her favorite color
though she hated all dresses
and it matched
the satin lining
of the thousand dollar
water-proof box.

The lace
covering
her drawn neck
matched
the lace
around the small pillow.

All
so
perfect.

Every fake hair
in place.

She looked
so prim
and proper
so unlike
what she was.

Three levels
of flowers
formed a half circle
around her body.

All beautiful
all expensive
and arranged perfectly,

when she would’ve preferred
a bundle
of dandelions
like we used to bring her
from our back yard.

She’d put them
in an empty coke bottle
and set them on the table
until the ants
began dropping off
and running madly
for the little gray
sugar bowl.

Then she’d throw them out
but assure us
that they were lovely
and that she loved them
and that she loved us.

So we’d promise
to brush off all the ants
next time.

They all gawked
at her
and then said
how “lovely” she looked,
“how natural”
and then
they got back into their
four-door American-made cars
and said,
“My-
Dear,
didn’t she look bad?
She’d certainly gone down
since we saw her last.”
They hadn’t seen her
in years
but they were there
to attend
and to sign the register.

Mutterings of
"My wasn’t she strong?"
and "What a good Christian
woman she was," and
"Oh, how I loved her."
filled
the dimly-lit
heavily-carpeted room.

And I wanted to scream.

I wanted her to sit up
one last time
and call them all hypocrites.

But I knew
she’d never sit up again
or call them hypocrites
or call me in for supper

or sing along
with our Elvis
and Ronnie Milsap records

and show us how to
do the twist
or the jitterbug
or the shimmy.

I knew
she’d never sit
at that one end
of that old plaid couch
with her cold feet
 tucked under her
and pretend to give Me
dirty looks
when I tried to tuck
My cold feet under her too
from the other end of the couch.

I knew she’d never read
those trashy books
while wearing those
black-rimmed
reading glasses

or tell those jokes
that used to embarrass me
-that wouldn’t embarrass me now.

After two days
of polite lies

the preacher
told some more
that made people cry

that moments before
had been fine
-smoking cigarettes
and drinking coffee
in the lounge below.

And then four people sang
"How Great Thou Art"
her favorite hymn.

and people
really cried then.

She
would’ve said,
"I like the way
Elvis sang it better."
Chris Allen

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL . . .

All I can see is the Outback, a grim expanse of unbroken brownness, or yellowness, or whatever. Flat, mostly. Brownish yellowish flatness. I like that. It's boring.

I've had enough excitement. "The News On The March" syndrome. I don't want to sit anymore at my desk, chewing yellow pencils and slowly contracting lead poisoning, while the teletypes clatter away all the world's excitement—and me sitting there comatose trying to condense it into 25-words-or-less captions for news photos. Having to know intimately every terrorist slaughter, every napalm-singed child, every persecuted race, every downtrodden laborer, every corrupt politician, every rapist, and murderer, and bloody wrong-thinking bastard who ever lived—and condense that for John and Dorothy and little Billy to read at dinner. To hell with all that.

None of it matters out here. Out here, you have few things on your mind. Water, mostly. Food, occasionally. I'd say sex, too, but I'm no longer certain that qualifies as an essential ingredient for survival. Depends, I suppose, on the degree of your self-control.

I wonder how the Sydney newsroom covered the Big Event? I'm glad I got out by then. I doubt I could've stayed through that—assuming I survived. Its one thing to summarize a rape in 25 words or less. Its another matter to capitalize the End of All That Is.

Maybe not: how about "Your Tax Dollars At Work" beneath a simple black-and-white Polaroid of a mushroom cloud over Perth?

David Parrish

CHINA LOVE

We lie together
Me in my world,
Her in hers.
Incense, plum wine.

Stateside life?
Yes, I have a wife
And a child.
She smiles.

She shares her art
But I must pay
To touch her heart
Of JADE.
You could always find him at the store
Sitting in his favorite chair behind
the black coal stove.
Trading knives and spitting tobacco juice in
the ash-box.
He mostly listened, didn’t talk that much,
But you could ask him something that happened
sixty years ago,
He would know.

That Chair is empty now... We don’t go into
the store much.
We get out the photo albums and ask my son
“Our’s that old man with the cap?”
“That’s Pap!” he says.
The memory still remains.

Robert St. John

WORM MAN

Squat, like slung millipedes, the trailer park grew outwards,
absorbing new tenants under the flat Missouri sky. Fat kids sailed
screaming in big wheels down the streets and dead men awoke by
this to go to work, rubbing the pounding red from their eye sockets.
Palmer rolled in bed and shoved at Boopsy with his knee. “Get up,“
and she didn’t even grunt.

After Palmer had waddled out in boots, he rubbed his head,
feeling the bumps there, and stood beneath the coming storm
clouds that strode in solemn and black and white, just like a clump
of nuns or cows. Palmer burped the beer fumes that crawled out
rancid. Charley and Sam and John would be burping beer fumes
too. “Ready,” Boopsy called through the curtains, and Palmer
turned his back on the clouds.

Breakfasts were alike, always. Kevin and Christopher and Jason
and Palmer and Boopsy clicking forks and swallowing. No one
spoke. The yokes broke quietly. Jam was spread carefully and did
not interfere with Dad’s meal. Dad hated jam and did not want to
know about it.

The boys, a group, all left (after they were excused) and ran off
bland and under control. Palmer should be proud. He sucked on a
cigarette instead. He smoked at breakfast always.

Sometimes in the dark there would be a tiny glow in bed. And
always, he smoked to help to move his bowels. Used to, he smoked
while taking a shower, until once a sparkle had disappeared into
one of the dark folds of his curved macaroni-like private and made
him dance a jig. But he smoked as he drove to work.

Boopsy didn’t tell him goodbye. She was reading the t. v. guide.
At work, Charley and Sam and John were drinking coffee,
sputting thoughts. They had huge thoughts, like elephants and
nine grades of school between the four of them. The philosophy
club. There were two huge, worn-out subjects. There was one—
Here’s one of my troubles lately, and two—I can do anything I want.
Today was number two. Charley was saying.

“Hell, my wife got no claim on me. I kin do anything I want. She
got no say whatsoever.”

The others nodded.

“I don’t let her tell me what’s what. I go to the damn cockfights if I
want to go to the damn cockfights. I don’t, then I don’t”
“An’ she don’t say nothin’ about it,” threw in John.
“Damn right.”
“The hell she don’t!” John clucked and Sam roared and spit a hoof of brown.
“My wife tells me what to do all the time,” said Sam around the tobacco.
“So does mine,” smiled John.
“But it don’t do a damn bit a good,” Sam added and Palmer smirked, nodding at the chipmunk under Sam’s cheek. He could just see its back when Sam roared and held his mouth wide like he did.
“I’m fishing tomorrow,” said Palmer.
“Where at?” asked Sam.
“Browne’s.”
“I can’t go.”
“Can’t neither.”
And John, he shook his head.
“I’m going to stay home tomorrow.”
“I need to work on my garden.”
And John, he just said “Yeah.”

But hell, Palmer didn’t care what Boopsy said. He laughed at the idea. Boopsy! She was just a thing. Like a doorknob. A man don’t tell a doorknob he’s going fishing. What difference does it make? Palmer asked. It doesn’t make none, he answered back.

So, underneath the nun-like clouds again, by himself, he paddled out and set up the next day in the rented, rotting rowboat, creaking as it went in the wind. The trailer park and those people could not get to him. He knew they were curious. Where’d he go? They would be wondering right now. They couldn’t get him though. They would just have to get along.

On his way out, he had pulled the truck with the bald tires into the gravelly drive under the Shell sign. He got out and stretched beneath where it said LIVE BAIT on the wall.

“G’me some crawlers,” Palmer said, curling his lips around the smoke and he paid for the round box, taking it up with his four fingered hand. Out in the boat, he pulled the oars in and set them dripping in the belly of the boat. Lifting the hook to bait it, his tiny brain began to rub against the sides of his skull like a catfish in a cooler too small for it. He had a thought of his wife. In his thought, Boopsy was ironing one of his work shirts. He studied the worm box and Boopsy left the iron flush against the shirt and a wedge shaped brown burn mark smoldered on the shirt that he imagined. The worm box had done it.

Looking at the round worm box, Palmer remembered about coming home and finding Boopsy asleep in front of the t. v. and the kids sent off to neighbors. He stared at the words printed black and red across the top of the box that meant worms to him only because he knew that was what it had to say. Palmer couldn’t read a lick. Boopsy could though.

He had found the bed unmade. While she snored streams into the ceiling from the sofa, he had been looking for his slippers and had found something else. A sales brochure for some sort of encyclopedia. Halfway up under the bed like someone had dropped it and it had sailed there and they just said to hell with it. Like they was in a hurry about something. He opened the box of worms.

The worms writhed and glistened in the sun that glopped in on top of them. They backed away from it. He dug his fingers into the dirt. The worms were hard to get a hold of. He tried to heave the ugly, warty thought over the side of the boat. It would not go. Why would someone have been in a hurry? The thought had taken on a voice now. The worms stared up at him, waiting. Because he would be taking off his clothes! The worms giggled in the dirt. Agitated, he fished one out.

Pushing his forefinger and middlefinger deep into the dirt, he managed to pin a worm, squishing it on the bottom of the box. He lifted it out and it tugged at him insistently. Palmer brought the hook to its side. Just as he made to poke the thin jabber into the wriggling worm, he asked the worm a question. “You gonna catch me a big ol’ catfish?”

Palmer, being a stupid and uneducated country boy, asked the question out of habit. It had not been in his plan that day to be talking to a worm. But, he had not expected that the wriggling worm would reply. But it did.

“Why should I?” was the worm’s more than logical answer.
“What will I get out of it?”
Palmer dropped the worm.
“Hey! Pick me up!”
Palmer drew back, as if from something he had stepped in, something that he might scrape from his shoe.
“Palmer.” The worm called him by name.
“How do you know my name?”
Being a stupid man, Palmer didn’t think to ask how the worm had learned to talk.

The worm didn’t answer his question, but instead, it asked him one. “What are you going to do about your wife and that salesman?”

Palmer sat there drifting in the boat.
“Come on, Palmer. What are you going to do, hmmm?”
The worm asked the question five more times and then it dried up in the sun.
Palmer just drifted and the sun sat red just above his shirt. When he convinced himself to forget it, he picked up another worm from the box, catching it between his fingers.
"Bet they're together now, going at it. Waddaya say, eh, Palmer?"
Palmer twitched automatically and the worm plopped into the water. It sunk out of sight.
"What the hell!!" Palmer said, speaking to someone in charge. He looked up for some reason, but wasn't sure why.
Palmer scooped down and took up a handful of dirty worms, like intestines in his hand. He could hear them murmuring.
"Hey!" one of the worms shouted, seemingly pointing at him.
Then all of the worms took up the cry. "Hey, Palmer! Hey, Palmer!"
And one of them said, "What about that time she slept with your brother?"
The worms peppered the water. Palmer had hurled them with all of his might, grunting as he did. Now, the red faced man was puffing hard. Shaking, he rowed back to where he had left the truck. He felt the heat on his neck for the first time, now realizing just how hot it was.
When he pulled up to the dock, the jowly man who had rented him the boat was there. The man frowned, making his doughy jaws sag.
"Didn't stay out long," the man said.
On the way home, in the seat next to him, the worms would not shut up.
"You gonna shoot that whore? You gonna shoot her?"
"Don't forget to slap her around a bit first, Palmerboy."
"Maybe you'll catch her in the act."
And the truck surged, accelerating. By the time the worms began to laugh at him, the truck was squealing on the curves, flirting with signposts and just barely touching the asphalt.
"She hates you because you can't read, I bet."
"She wanted to live in town."
"With your brother."
"She always liked him better."
"Kevin doesn't look much like you, does he?"
As he jolted to a cloudy stop, dust riding in around him and clogging the air, he stomped out of the truck and the worms chuckled behind him.
"That a boy, Palmer!"

"Go get her, big guy!"
The trailer door banged thinly shut and from all across the trailer park, Palmer had turned a couple of dozen heads, and four dozen eyes stared down the road and from out of windows, wondering and watching. Squabble time. Who will call the cops? They all waited. They waited like worms wait. The bigwheels had stopped. A man washing his car let his hose droop in his hand, like a long green obscenity, gone wild in the sun. After a long while, Palmer came out of the trailer and got in the truck.
"Well?" One of the worms asked.
Palmer stared at the windshield. "She's not there."
Soon, from his right, he heard Boopsy's voice. "Palmer?"
He looked over. "Where the Hell have you been?" he demanded loud enough for the worms to hear.
"Over to Betty's," she replied.
His face turned vivid with frustration. He forgot how to breathe for a second. "Like hell," was all he had the intelligence to say.
An argument followed and Palmer came away looking stupid and Boopsy huffed off, aiming the door into its frame behind her jarring behind as it went into the dark of the trailer. Palmer sat in the truck until dark and the kids had long since come home and asked where Dad was and had even been put to bed. The crickets had even become routine and the cab of the truck had become mysterious and gloomy.
From out of the dark, a squeaky worm voice came to his ear.
"Hey, Palmer. Go on in and ask her about your brother. Ask her what it's like." Palmer slept on the sofa, watching t. v. until it turned into snow. When he came to, the house was empty. Boopsy's clothes were gone. The bed was made.
Palmer stepped bootless into the truck and drove out onto the long ash black road. Traveling slow and deliberate, about halfway to Alabama, Palmer turned his hand to the wind. The cup of worms spilled out.
"AAAAAAAAAIIEEEEEEE!!" said the worms in unison, hurtling off the road.
Robert St. John

**NO ONE BLAMES THE ICE CREAM MAN**

Of course, no one ever blamed the ice cream man.

He did have that music playing.

The kid should not have been running, period.

and we were all yelling,
all of us, not just him.

I mean, he was breaking
the Rules, for Chrissake.

He just . . .
tripped.

it sounded like a turtle shell
pop
just like that.

and the circus ditty played
on and on

We ran inside and wondered where
now to spend our change.

---

Robert St. John

**IT'S TOO BAD ABOUT POOR MRS. KRIPP**

Poor Mrs. Kripp was trapped in her car, mere feet from the front of the mall. Help, help, help, she cried, but the sound never came out at all. Then, as she tried to bang on the glass, her wrists were all that appeared.

Her hands remained in her pockets, turning to liquidy goo. Her backbone turned into salt, her bowels filled up with glue.

Jesus, she gurgled, as her tongue fell out and her eyeballs, well, they fell out too. And just before she wet herself, she heard the policeman snicker, Ma'am, this here is a magic handicap zone, and you ain't got a sticker.

---
Robert St. John

WHEN THEIR CARS ARE RUNNING

When their cars are running,
they run hunchbacked,
one-eyed and roaring,
bleeding hot black and
rolling
the bodies of poor
runt dogs like dough down the streets
while wide-eyed kids look out from
windows
screaming beneath
the tires.

Their children are lanky
and mean, smoking against trees at school.

Their fathers are fat like bulls.

With blood in their faces
and years of
Fury
when they get drunk,
exploding with words
so strong
that they can drive
nails through boards
and make
children two houses down cry in bed.

Robert St. John

REPTILES

Little Tobias, he had saved and had come up with the money and now was inside. He couldn’t eat cotton candy like them rich white folks, but he could run, and he could look at the elephants and the seals and the bears nonstop with a loose lower lip, bugged and unstoppable.

But Tobias stopped when he came to one place. Ooooh, we know that place. It was the Reptile House. Tobias knew what a reptile was. He could see, fixed in tile, on the outside of the building, pictures of snakes and turtles and men like Egyptians or Africans doing things with them. Tobias would never go in a place like that. It was like the Spooky House at Halloween.

Tobias had gone in the Spooky House on Halloween with a bunch of his age and older. They had all been wide-eyed and squealing (like little brown mice). Tobias stood, remembering the Spooky House when three white boys with cameras came out of the building and looked snotty, looking at the world like they owned it.

Tobias went in, shoving the turnstile like an insult, out of his way.

Inside the Spooky House (Reptile House) it was dark and there were lots of folks staring into cages of glass fixed in the walls. Tobias felt like a sneak for being in the cool, dark place, but no one was really looking at him. He got into the moving line.

There were sticks and grasses and some water in the first few cages. Somebody had tried to make them look real by fixing them up like that. Tobias didn’t see no snakes nor turtles nor frogs, though he didn’t look too hard after all. Down a ways, some white folks was grouped around. Tobias rushed down.

He shoved his face in and tried to poke his eyes through the legs and arms and finally did. He saw a big pool of water, and tree limb (this was a big cage). He saw Tobias staring back at him in the glass, a bunch of rocks, and Tobias in the glass looking all around the cage. The folks started pointing. They saw something that he didn’t see.

Then he did. It was the ugliest turtle ever and it could have been a rock. Tobias would never have seen it.

Tobias saw lots of turtles, then he got to frogs, but they were hard to find and he wanted to see some snakes.

“Oooooh, I’m scared of them snakes,” Tobias wanted to tell somebody, proudly. He turned to a white boy next to him.
“I’m scared of snakes,” Tobias said, holding himself and ballooning his eyes.

“Me too,” said Jason.

“Jason, come here!” squealed the redhead boy’s sister, excited. Jason ran off.

Tobias saw alligators just snoozing all over each other like they had been tossed there. They might have been crocodiles. Tobias had not come there to read, so he never knew.

Then! He came to the Snakes!

The first ones were rattlesnakes and he tried to make them rattle by tapping on the glass and saying, “snake, snake!” But the snakes were not interested and it didn’t work. They didn’t care. He imagined they were striking sometimes when they looked at him with those mouse pellet eyes and flicked out their dark forked tongues. Tobias jerked back his hand when they did that. It soon became a game.

Jason, having grown tired of this, said, “You’re not supposed to do that.”

Tobias looked at him. Jason’s mother shushed him, ignoring Tobias.

So—Tobias stopped teasing the snakes. He didn’t know. He didn’t want to get kicked out.

“Heck, I could stay here all day,” he wanted to tell somebody but not Jason. So Tobias went on, but slower, letting Jason and Mom and Dad and Sister get farther away.

Tobias knew the cobras because they were in baskets and such. You could tell a lot about the snakes by looking. You didn’t have to read if you were smart. You just had to be smart. Tobias knew the cobras and the rattlesnakes, and then, the Boa Constrictor!

Tobias had heard about them. They could swallow a man whole without chewing him up. The man would live inside the snake for weeks before the snake decided to eat him.

“If a snake ever ate me, I’d tear out, right through his skin,” Tobias wanted to tell.

These were little boa constrictors. Some of them could get two hundred feet long, Tobias knew. These here couldn’t swallow no whole man.

Then, there was a group of folks listening to a tall, white fellow talking. He was wearing one of those white lab coats and he was talking about snakes. Tobias went up to the crowd and pushed his way up to the man. The man was talking about South America or something. Tobias stopped him, blurt,ing, “What do these snakes eat?”

The tall white man told him that different snakes eat different things, but most of them eat baby chickens or mice and the big ones like the boa constrictor, the biggest of them, they eat little rabbits.

“Live ones?”

The man looked at Tobias and nodded. “That’s right. That’s the way they eat, son.”

Tobias hated to be called “son.” Usually, he would say, “I ain’t your son,” but he didn’t.

“Feed that big one a rabbit!” Tobias demanded, excited.

The man smiled. “It’s not time to feed him yet. He only eats twice a month. We have special days for feeding, and on those days, the reptile house is closed.”

And the man went on to someone else, even though there was lots more that Tobias had wanted to ask.

Eventually, it was getting dark outside, and Tobias left the reptiles and went home. He didn’t have to, but his Mother would wear him out if he didn’t.

One feeding day, Tobias went back to the zoo. He stole the money from his Mom. He would get wore out for sure, but that didn’t matter now. He wanted to see That Snake Eat.

Sure enough, the elephants were there, the bears were there, so were the lions, the seals, the tigers, the goats and ducks even. But the reptile house was “Sorry, closed for Feeding,” just like the man had said.

It wasn’t that hard for Tobias. He was used to sneaking. He had snuck into harder places. But this time, he waited until the zoo was ready to close, hiding in an exitway, in a cool, dark beneath some stairs. It was right outside and past his suppertime, but that didn’t matter now either.

Inside, every once in a while, all the time he was there, he could hear someone moving around, walking around in the empty building. Then, after a long, chilly time, the footsteps left and went home. Tobias waited a few minutes to make absolutely sure, and then, he stuck out his head.

There was no one about. Quietly, he came out the door, shutting it carefully behind him. He crept across the shiny tile. The lights were all still on inside the cages. How could the snakes sleep? thought Tobias. The Big Snake was on the other side of the building, so Tobias walked past all of the others first.

Inside the cages, he saw the snakes sliding slowly, looking at the fluffy yellow chickens or the pinkeyed mice. He began to want to hurry, but he knew better. He still ought to be quiet. Just in case.

It was a good thing too. For just as he came around the last corner, there was a man, the white man from the time before, walking right at Tobias, but looking at the floor, lucky for Tobias.
Tobias drew back and went down on his knees, scrunching into a ball, and he held his breath. The man, now dressed in blue jeans without his lab coat, walked right on past, thinking, just like that, easy as pie. Tobias forgot all about the snake.

He got to his feet and made up his mind just to get out of there. He snuck a look to the man now far down the hall and then made to leave. Tobias then turned the last corner and walked the last hall.

He passed the Snake.

The Big Snake.

The Boa Constrictor. It was big. Big. It could have been two hundred feet after all. If you asked Tobias later, he would’ve probably said it was.

There, on the far side of the long cage, was a rabbit twitching its whiskery nose. There were no baskets in this cage, no grass, no decor at all. There was one large bright lightbulb and a water dish. That was all. And the rabbit and the Snake and their eyes.

There were the rabbit’s eyes, glazed and blinking, staring at the snake. There were the snake’s eyes, intently sure, staring back.

There were the two Tobises, the one looking in and the one looking back reflecting egg-eyed gape-mouthed in the gleaming, wind-eyed glass. There were the four of them, all staring, watching, with nowhere else to go, with no way out. There was nothing else that could be done. Nothing.

It did not happen as Tobias had known it would. The snake did not sneak up and curl real sinister and slow around the rabbit. The rabbit was there, you could see its tin drum heart heaving out the furry sides, and you knew that if that rabbit could run that it would not run, it could not run, could never run in a million years. It could not move at all. It simply watched.

The snake was moving and bunching its muscles, but it was moving so slow and easy like syrup and it looked to Tobias like he’d never do a thing and maybe he wasn’t hungry after all.

Then Tobias could not believe it. The snake struck. Like lightning, and he was wrapped around the rabbit like he had been thrown on him by a cannon; he was not on him and then, in the beat of a kitten’s heart, he was there coiled around the rabbit, smothering him with all that weight, his teeth sunk deep beneath the fur. The rabbit twitched and kicked out, once quick, twice slow, a third time barely at all, and then it was over.

The snake unhinged its jaws and swallowed first, the head and just kept on swallowing until the rabbit was just a lump, going down inside the snake.

From behind Tobias, the tall white man, shaking his head, walked across the floor, not bothering to be quiet, and approached.

Tobias didn’t move, and did not hear the man approaching. His heart was reaching and stretching, stomping on his ribs.

Something cold and mouthlike fell on the black boy’s neck and inside, the boy turned into a knot, small and tight, like a wet tennis shoe knot, pulled as tight as it can be. But it was just a hand. Big eyed, Tobias walked out with the tall white man and his knees and legs were like jelly, wobbling and his fingers tingled and his arms shook like they were being tickled and pickled by a breeze. They went into the bright light office and Tobias sat on a cold, vinyl chair that squeaked.

When Tobias’ Mother arrived to take him home, the tall white man said to her, “I’m afraid he saw too much.”

Tobias’ Mother looked at her son with jowly eyes and nodding, she said, “Ain’t that the way? Ain’t that always the way.”

She took Tobias out through the turnstiles, out through the night, out through the gates, and she put him quietly to bed.

And Tobias never went back to the zoo.
MORNING GEESE

The call
drifts across
still sky-water,
White, winged stones
released by earth
rise
and limp
on amber crutches
to water’s edge—
in answer.

NEW MORNING — MOURNING NEWS

5:00 a.m.
Darkness fades,
becoming coffee
in a half-filled cup
which speaks to me
of car-bombs in Lebanon,
death in motion from the Jersey
making stops on the hillsides,
streets, and buildings
of Beirut.
I swallow...

C. W. Mayes

C.W. Mayes

Lonnie Bailey

MOUNTAIN WITCH

The Mountain Witch lived two hills over
in a holler called Black Tree Ridge
We stayed away cause we were afraid
of that woman and the things she did.

She knew strong black magic—had herb root cures
that she brewed in an old stone pot
And some folks said she could raise the dead
Even papa said, “Like as not.”

Because one night something happened
that I’ve never heard explained
It was a cold October evenin’
it had just begun to rain.

I was standin’ on the front porch
as the light began to fade
When I saw a figure runnin’
up the hill, along our way.

I couldn’t make out who it was at first
but soon I saw and knew
It was Benjamin O’Conner
with his little daughter, Lou.

Now Lou had been real sickly
since the fevers in the spring
So I was surprised to see that Ben
had her out late in the rain.

But as he got up closer
near the porch, then I could see
her lifeless body in his arms
Ben’s face of agony.

I called inside for Mama
to come and lend a hand
She quickly took the girl inside
and tucked her in the bed.
Then Papa said to Momma something
I'd never heard him say
I'll go and get that Mountain Witch
and fetch her right away.

Papa ran to get the mule
and took off in a tear
While Ben just sat and warmed himself
and looked off in a stare.

It seemed like hours that Papa was gone
or maybe just to me
But I was so excited
at the magic I might see.

I was waiting on the front porch steps
when Mama came outside
She said, "Now son, don't let on a thing
but I think the girl has died."

When about that time Papa rode in
we were glad that he was back
And in his hand he held real high
a small white linen sack.

Inside the bag something moved
and I heard a mournful sound
And Papa held the sack outstretched
so it couldn't touch the ground.

The Witch told me to take this bag
and "put it near her head."
"Too late, my Mama cried real soft.
I fear that she is dead."

"I'll do what I was told to do,"
he said, then went on in
And placed the bag up near her head
and turned to speak to Ben

But Ben had cried himself to sleep
while rocking in the chair
So me and Papa sat down to wait
and Mama knelt in prayer.

The next thing I remember
the morning light shone in
I'd fallen asleep like everyone else
the first to speak was Ben.

"Where is my little Darlin'!
Why ain't she in that bed?"
Mama also waking up
sat and shook her head.

"We didn't move her anywhere
since we laid her there last night."
But the bed was empty, the white sack gone
and the little girl not in sight.

We sat there stunned for a moment
then a joyous sound we heard
To us a sound much sweeter
than the sound of mountain birds.

We heard a little girl's laughter!
then the front door opened wide
There stood Lou with a smile on her face
Our old dog at her side.

"Me and the dogs been playin', Papa
I hope that you don't mind
Cause I been runnin' and I don't feel sick
And I'm feelin' purely fine."

Ben jumped straight up and let out a shout
as he took her in his arms
and he cried and he laughed and he kissed her face
His joy made us all feel warm.

When Ben and Lou had left for home
singing all the way
I asked my Papa to tell me
how this thing had taken place.

Mama spoke up and said to me,
"Was prayer that brought her through."
But Papa staring at the empty bed
said that just wasn't true.
“They’d prayed since spring and she just got worse
and that’s a natural fact,
So don’t be quick to judge the dead
and call it a Godly act.”

We never found the linen pack
that was laid up by her side
And we didn’t send for the Mountain Witch
the year that Papa died.

But sometimes when I’m huntin’
in the hills there back of home
I hear that sad and mournful cry
and it chills me to the bone.

Doug Logsdon

THROWING STONES

Waiting for the bus on the first day of school was hard for Joe Bob. He had a good reason to be nervous: his family had just moved to the farm and he didn’t know a single person in the whole county. His parents had been trying to get out of the city for years, and finally they’d gotten enough money to buy these ten acres. No one knew how Joe Bob had hated the city. He never told anybody because they couldn’t have changed it. But he was glad to leave.

Now, as he stood on the crunchy gravel between his front gate and the road, he was scared and wanted to go back. The driveway had a strip of faded weeds growing down the middle and left a trail of gravel out in the road. A freshly-lettered mailbox stood on a freshly-set fence post at the side: THE HODGES—EDWARD AND MARTHA, DAVID, AND JOE BOB. Joe Bob’s dad still had his job in an office in town. His mother had left her secretarial job to devote some time to the old farmhouse. His big brother was going into high school and rode a later bus. So Joe Bob stood alone in the humid early morning and waited for the bus to come, a small thin boy with a brown lunch sack.

No cars had come by in the ten minutes he had been standing there. He put his lunch down and began throwing stones across the road into the bushes to pass the time. He was aiming at a certain leaf that stuck out at the end of a long branch. Before he could hit it, he heard a noise and looked up to see a boy coming out the next gate down, across the road. The boy, the first neighbor Joe Bob had seen, walked to the edge of the road, put his hands in his pockets, and stood staring straight ahead. He was bigger than Joe Bob, a little chubby, with a haircut that looked like they’d put a bowl on top of his head and trimmed around it. He wore a blue-jean coat and a pair of two-for-five-dollar tennis shoes. Joe Bob got brave and stepped to the edge of the road.

“Hi...” he said and waved. He had to talk pretty loudly because the other driveway was about fifty yards away. The boy looked up.

“Hey— come here,” he said. Joe Bob hesitated, then turned, got his lunch sack, and walked across the road and down the shoulder to meet the unknown.

When he got there the boy stood just as before, but he turned his round face to Joe Bob. His eyes narrowed. Joe Bob stopped a respectful distance away.
Who’re you?” the boy demanded.
“Joe Bob. Hodges. Who are you?”
My name’s Mark Nuremberg,” the boy said. “Where y’all from?”
“Oh, we used to live downtown. Fourth Street.” Joe Bob stood silent for a moment, hardly breathing, feeling the scrutiny he was undergoing.
“Just move in?”
“Yesterday,”
“What grade you in?”
“Fourth.” He continued to hold his breath.
“Well... the bus’ll probably be late. Always is first day” Mark Nuremberg said. Then Joe Bob knew he wasn’t going to act mean.
Mark Nuremberg, Joe Bob learned, lived with his two old parents and his senile granny. He was in sixth grade. He told Joe Bob that most of the people along the road were old and retired.
“Any other kids around here?” Joe Bob asked. Mark shook his head.
“Just them ratty-ass punks up across the bridge.” He resumed his original position, staring straight ahead. Joe Bob didn’t know what to say so he just stood.
Finally he said, “What’s there to do around here?”
“Nothing.” Mark said. “Ever rock a train.”
“Nope.”
“’I expect you will.” Before Joe Bob could ask how you rock a train, the bus appeared and pulled up beside them. It was just a little Ford van painted yellow with a number on it. A little stop sign swung out from the side to help them cross the road even though no cars were coming.
The driver was a thin old man in green coveralls. Besides Mark and Joe Bob there were only three other passengers, two boys and a girl who sat in the back seat. Mark and Joe Bob sat in the front seat facing forward.
Mark said loudly, “Smell something?” He looked over at Joe Bob expectantly. Joe Bob raised his eyebrows.
“What?”
“I said, do you smell something?”
“Oh, uh... yeah.”
“That’s them Peels.”
“Shut up, Nuremberg,” said a voice from the back of the bus. Joe Bob heard someone get up and come forward. A skinny blond boy sat down beside him. His short haircut made his head look square, and his plaid slacks didn’t match his striped shirt.
“I’m John Peel,” he announced in a raspy voice. “That’s William and Charlene back there.” Joe Bob looked at him. John Peel’s eyes were set very far apart.
“I’m Joe Bob Hodges.” He went through the little interview again. John was in the fourth grade too, but he had a different teacher. William was in third grade, and Charlene was just starting first.
Mark interrupted the conversation. “Get out of here, Peel.”
John said, “Go to hell, Nuremberg,” but he went back to his seat.
The new school seemed very strange to Joe Bob. He was too tense to talk to anyone. He saw Mark at recess, and they sat in the shade with their backs against the bricks of the school watching and talking. After Mark had gotten through cussing his new teacher, Joe Bob asked him why he hated John Peel so much.
Mark brushed his bangs out of his eyes with a chubby hand.
“He’s always acting tough. I mean, hell, look at what he wears—look at how he acts. Look at the people he hangs around.” He paused. “I’m sick of him thinking he’s as good as me. But we’ll take care of him.” Joe Bob couldn’t get him to say what he meant by taking care of him.
In the afternoon the bus followed the same route it had that morning. The Peels were let off first in front of a little row of dirty whitewashed cinder-block houses. The houses were small, and the tiny yards were cluttered with rusted cars. Hardly any grass grew in them. John and William and Charlene went into one in the middle that had a big stump in the front yard.
The bus continued down the road. It crossed a bridge over a deep railroad cutting. Joe Bob noticed there were two sets of tracks. Mark asked him again if he’d ever rocked a train, when Joe Bob shook his head, Mark said, “Well, you gotta go straight home?” Joe Bob decided he didn’t.
When they got off the bus they walked up to the bridge and followed a path underneath it. The bridge was very old, made of huge tarred wooden beams. It was cool underneath. The cutting had steep stone sides. Joe Bob heard a train whistle far away.
“’Just in time for the thirty thirty,” Mark said. He started moving around, picking up rocks and making a little pile. He urged Joe Bob to do the same. After a minute Joe Bob did.
He always remembered how strange it had been. Mark got a big pile together. The sound of the train got closer and closer, and when the engine passed them an enormous roar echoed off the sides of the cutting and surrounded them. Boxcars streamed by, but Mark didn’t start throwing yet. He shouted, “Wait a minute.” Joe Bob could barely hear him. In a few minutes the boxcars ended and pigback cars started going by, each carrying a load of brand new station wagons. Now Mark began firing stones as fast as he
The next morning Mark told Joe Bob his plan.

"When they get off this afternoon, we'll be right behind them. That always makes John madder 'n hell. They usually run me off if they catch me on their side of the bridge." That morning no one said anything on the bus. Joe Bob heard the bus driver humming quietly to himself.

In the afternoon Mark gave Joe Bob a nudge just before they got to the Peels' stop. They let John, William, and Charlene step down, and just as the driver was about to close the door, Mark said "Hang on." He hopped out onto the ground followed by Joe Bob. The driver said "Ho-kay," closed the door and drove away.

John Peel immediately stepped up to Mark, who was a foot taller. "Get out of here, Nuremberg." Mark laughed a fake laugh.

"What you gonna do?" he asked. "Beat me up? Huh?"

John Peel withdrew to consult William. They whispered for a few seconds, then turned to go in the house. Mark said, "Look at the chucks run," but they never looked back. Mark and Joe Bob stood in the yard for a minute after they went in.

"What a bunch of babies," Mark said. "As soon as it's two against two they run. Hell. Let's go home." They trudged past the row of ragged houses and on down the side of the road and crossed the bridge on the narrow sidewalk, cussing the Peels as they walked. Just as they reached their side of the bridge, a rock skittered off the railing beside Mark.

They turned and saw John Peel at the other end, with William a little behind him. They both had rocks in their hands.

"I told you before not to come around here," John shouted. He threw another rock at them, but it went over the rail into the cutting. Mark quickly stooped, grabbed a stone from the roadside and hurled it the length of the bridge, so close to John that he had to dodge it. William ran forward a few feet and flung his rock all the way over Mark's head. Then the war was on, John and Mark and William all bending over and throwing and dodging as rocks filled the air. Joe Bob stood rooted in place. The scene seemed to move in slow motion. He could see sweat pouring down Mark's face, and the cloud of dust stirred up by his feet and the shower of rocks. He heard Mark yell, sounding miles away, "Come on. You're not doing any good standing there." A stone slid on the bridge close to Joe Bob's feet. Mechanically, slowly it seemed to him, he stooped and

picked up the stone. It was small, flat, but its edges were sharp. He felt his arm go back and then fire smoothly forward.

The rock went in a high arc; at first Joe Bob thought it would pass over John Peel. Then he saw it was going to hit. John was yelling. Joe Bob saw his jaw hanging open and the spinning stone strike just at the corner of his mouth. He fell to the ground, crying and bleeding into his hand. As Joe Bob turned to run, he caught a glimpse of the big foolish grin on Mark Nuremberg's face.

When he got home Joe Bob told his big brother what had happened. David didn't seem worried at all.

"Ah, heck, what's a couple of broken teeth? They'll grow back." Joe Bob felt a little better, but not much.

Half an hour later, John and William appeared on the front porch. John had a baseball bat.

David sent Joe Bob upstairs. "I'll handle it," he said. He answered the door. "Yes?"

"Joe Bob hit me in the face with a rock and I'm going to kill him!"

John bawled. He had been crying and he had a fat lip. David pretended not to understand.

"What?"

"Your brother hit me in the face with a rock and I'm going to kill him!"

"Huh? I can't understand you."

John repeated. "Your brother hit me in the face with a rock and I'm going to kill him."

David shook his head. "Look man, I don't know what you want, but you ought to learn to speak more clearly. You sound like somebody just hit you in the face with a rock." He slammed the door.

David had handled it, and he even had a funny story to tell later. Joe Bob always tried to chuckle when he told it, even though it made him feel sick. He knew how it felt to fall down bleeding. He had learned when he lived in the city. He never showed David the tiny white scar in the corner of his mouth. He didn't want to ruin the story.
FOR HIS OWN REASONS

His mom told him
The museum
Was an educational wonder
Where all young boys
Should visit
(at least once)
To get cultured.
He felt crowded.
He hated mom
And all her reasons.
Searching for his own,
He spots the smug
Jade goddess
Lounging on her
Feather pillows
Beneath her glass dome,
Untouched.
Jealous of her
Perfect lifestyle,
He reaches
(Just one touch)
But stops-
Not wanting to-
For his own reasons.

THE LITTLE WINDOW

Christmas of ’72 had always been my favorite. Romping in the snow on 140 East Park Street with William P. Flarity had been heaven to me. I was twelve then and my grandpa was sixty-two. That was the winter I had decided that Grandpa would never grow old. Usually Grandpa watched us when Grandma bundled my brother and me up to join our cousins outside in the snow. We’d wave at him through the little kitchen window where he always sat twiddling his thumbs. He refereed our snow battles with special signals he had taught us and judged our snow angels. Even though Grandpa never joined us outside, he still played with us. It was just that a little window separated us.

In ’72 when Grandma bundled us, Grandpa bundled up too. And when we went out to join the rest, Grandpa came too.

“Be careful, William P.,” Grandma yelled after him, “and don’t be too rough on the little ones!”

We were always the little ones to Grandma, and Grandpa as always William P., to everyone, not just Grandma. No one knew what the P. stood for, not even Grandma. I thought it meant Particular, since that was what Grandpa was. If one book was missing from his collection, Grandpa knew it. And if one piece of furniture was not exactly in the right spot, Grandpa straightened it.

He was a stout man, standing at least six feet four inches tall. He was almost as wide as he was tall, but his threatening size did not hint at his real self. Everyone knew my grandpa. He had lived at 140 East Park Street for most of his life, and was the minister of the town church. He was a good man, in every sense of the word. People had always said it, that my grandpa was just plain good. To me, a twelve year old, “good” was just average, and I couldn’t understand why everyone thought my grandpa was just average. Many years later I understood, though. They were right, my grandpa was indeed a good man. There was just no other way to describe him.

I discovered that I really didn’t know my grandpa at all on that icy December afternoon. I had always thought he was slow, and much too old to play with us in the snow. I knew he had wanted to, and that’s why he sat at the little window—to pay with us the best he knew how. I figured we’d have to be gentle with him and aim our snowballs a little more carefully on this day. My thoughts were broken when a snowball exploded on my cheek. When I swirled
around and demanded to know who had thrown it. Grandpa answered me by slinging another wet bomb towards the opposite cheek. I had looked at the little window and wondered where that grandpa had gone. That grandpa was old, but this one would never be.

Grandma shook my shoulder.
"Grandpa's leaving now, dear," she croaked.
I slipped out of my reverie and looked around me. This room: so drab, so sickening, so cold. I watched as they attached another tube to my grandpa. One more hardly made the difference.
This was the grandpa I had seen in that little window on 140 East Park Street twenty years ago. He had disappeared that wintery afternoon when I was twelve, but had finally come back.
"He's leaving now, dear," Grandma repeated again.
I reached to kiss him.
"Where are you going, Grandpa?" I blurted, becoming twelve again.
"Home," Grandma quickly answered for him.
As they wheeled him out of his room, somehow I knew she didn't mean 140 East Park Street, and I cried knowing that it would be more than the little window that would separate us now.

Michael Gray

RACHAEL'S IMAGE

Upward are bright glimpses of white:
Starry wardens guarding secrets and hopes eternal
'Having known no finger's soil — no lung's breath —
Full of sparkled allure, They beacon lights of
distant shores,
But do not warm or strengthen with green pulse.
Though some yearn for the fiery grandeur of their
flicker,
Most ignore the nightly splendor which costs nothing
And promises all.

Below with rancor are hazy, hot neons that flash
and beckon
Colorfully glorious, they tithe in empty webs.
Propped up from worn pavements and slanty, cracked
walks,
They parade falseness like golden calves.
Garbaged alleys, lined with scathed bricks and blood,
Rise without straightness and approach darkened
crumble.
Glass facades tease pockets and mirror faces.
Gutters drip vile brown rust and creak.

Waking carnage of heir soir, morning squints faithful
and unwilling:
Dawn bruises a faded roadway with slant lights.
Alongside, on gravel perch, a monarch rests taunted
by windy gusts.
Numbed rays, reviewing, strain focus on the clay
blowing...
Its chaff skids roughshod over small pricks that
snag and tear.
The creature rests,
Spewing a red sewage of ants.

On a table, under lamp glare, a dulled metal bear
is wound.
Wearing painted smile,
It plays a drummed satire of its winders who
listen and go on.
Releasing spring, the ever-slowing roll sounds T, T...t...
Empty, save the echo of rivets and gears, it grows
still.
Only to rust, it waits without impatience —
The raised drumstick foreshadowing promised sound.
Yet, its carcass offers not even the ant a home.

Like a savior, a crumpled woman sits sewing in an
ill-lit shack.
Sans profit or the hypocrisy of painted flesh or
city glow,
She toils — near a coal-scared fire.
Her crafts are gifts,
Selfless and enduring, they trophy human spirit
And illuminate her traveler’s path.

“‘What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats.””*

Avoiding a wound fate,
She has found a meaning that will not lie,
And a beam that will not fade.


Jeffrey Crump

REMINISCENCE

I stumbled upon a memory—
finding you among some dusty souvenirs
I had permanently packed and stored.

Curious, I carefully unwrapped the yellowed
tissue paper that protected you, wondering
if I would find you rusted or torn or cracked.

As you came into view
I studied you and found you resounding with
former intensity.

Much later, I tenderly rewrapped you,
and gently put you away.
Michael Harris

ASHES

The old man was coughing up blood again. It had been a bad night. Again. Just as all of the nights had been for the past month. “Boy?” his voice rasped out. “Boy? Still there?” The young man got up from the corner where he had been lying. “I’m here.” “Boy?” He lifted one gnarled claw and waved it vaguely in the air. The young man grasped the hand to reassure him. The only light in the room came from the door of the hut where a blanket flapped fitfully in the evening breeze. Even in the dim light he could see the old man’s dark eyes blazing with fever.

“Boy? Give me a cigarette.”

Silently, the young man pulled out the pack and struck a match. The glare of the match etched deep crevices in the old man’s face and revealed the gauntness of the young man’s face. He drew in on the cigarette and carefully placed it in the old man’s mouth. He inhaled deeply and was then racked with more coughing.

The young man took the cigarette to finish it. The old man’s coughing subsided and he slipped once more into a deep sleep or coma; the young man didn’t know which.

He crept to the door and lifted the blanket. The worst heat of the day was past. The sun was sinking behind the mountains and the breeze was stirring up dust devils. He threw down the cigarette butt and walked over to the stone wall and sat down. The stones were warm and smooth. He sat and stared toward the mountains in the deepening dusk until he noticed the woman toiling up the hillside with their food, as she always did in the evenings. Only tonight she wasn’t alone.

He couldn’t see her companion very well. It was a man, short like most of the locals, but wearing Western clothes—a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and baggy trousers.

The woman had been paid to prepare their food and bring it to them. They had come into the village weeks ago—the old man dying, the young man with the beginnings of a fever. She was some sort of outcast—he believed she had been raped by a soldier and had born an idiot child. He had seen the child, a boy with reddish hair and light brown eyes, seated near one of the huts. The child’s eyes had been huge and weary, not a child’s eyes, but eyes that knew the worst about life. Waiting for death.

The woman had been confused about the proffered money. She had tried uncertainly to draw him into the hut, but he had brushed her away, irritated. Then she had offered him the boy.

Finally, he had made her understand the services that they required. He was afraid that he had paid her too much but he supposed that it was all right. He hadn’t known how long they would be staying.

Later, when the fever had struck him, she had come every day, bringing food and water. She had cared for him, force-feeding him when the fever was raging at its worst. He had only fragmented memories of those days, but he remembered her face dumbly bending over him while her peasant’s hands fed him or washed his face or applied poultices to his chest. He seemed to remember seeing the child lurking in the background, the huge eyes burning at him from the darkness, but now he wasn’t sure if that were memory or hallucination brought on by the fever. He hadn’t seen the child after he had recovered.

He eased off of the wall and crept back toward the hut, keeping his eyes on the couple working their way up the hill. He reached the door and slipped behind the blanket.

When they had first arrived, the old man had still been able to walk and take an interest in his surroundings. He had worried about the young man’s condition, but like most men who have lived solitary lives, he had difficulty thinking beyond his own problems, and he proved inneffectual when it came to caring for his sick companion. The young man would have died without the woman.

He had met the old man in a bar, trying to beg drinks from the Europeans. The old man had smoked and laughed and seemed oblivious to his condition. Once, he had coughed up some blood, but he had laughed at that also, wiping the blood from his lips with the back of one hand and drawing from a cigar in the other. He had followed the young man, who had bought him some drinks, from the bar and had fallen asleep on the floor of his room. When the young man left town the next day, the old man came with him.

He looked over at the old man lying amongst the bedding. The room was very still. He slipped back outside and around to the side of the hut. He lit another cigarette and threw the empty package to the dust.

The man and woman were closer now. He could hear the man’s boots crunching on the stones. He heard the man slip once and utter a muffled oath.

The young man walked over to the wall and pulled himself up. He dropped to the other side and began to walk carefully down the hill. A stiff evening breeze began to blow as he walked away.
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